

Declarative Sentences

by Jared Ward

My wife is a goldfinch.

We have three feeders on our deck. Suet for the orioles and woodpeckers, sunflower seeds for the cardinals and grosbeaks. Thistle for the finches and indigo buntings. Evenings are best, drinking coffee and talking. Watching. We get all kinds of birds, but the most of any, by far, is the goldfinch.

Last week all twenty pegs were full. I marked the date in the notebook we use to record what's been in our yard. The lines above listed the most we had seen at once — Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker, Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Indigo Bunting, and Goldfinch. Seven different birds at one time.

Twenty of the same was a new record, though. They fluttered in, four and five at a time, until for about three seconds every spot was taken. Their yellow bodies iridescent beside the tall green feeder. Wings a brilliant black on their bodies.

Without thinking, I called my wife.

She, of course, didn't hear. They, of course, did.

As they dispersed to the trees, beating the air with their wings, I realized that for the first time in months I'd been excited by finches. They are as yellow as a tanager is red, an oriole is orange, and the bunting is blue, but there are ten times more. When the bravest came swooping back, I grabbed the binoculars and watched them peck at the thistle. I'd seen them everyday for six years, but for the first time I noticed the white feathers that outlined the black of their wings. They were vivid and, in their own way, spectacular.

My wife is a goldfinch, I thought to myself.

And this is what I'm supposed to be doing. Word associating. Simple declarative sentences that reveal the inner workings of my mind. *Just let it out*, says Dr. Carter, the shrink whose first name I don't know. *Everything is inside, waiting to come*

out, he says, which sounds like a bunch of mental voodoo to me, but what the hell. I'm giving it a shot.

My wife is a bitch.

Sometimes in the morning I want to hide in the basement with some Spam and a box of twinkies. People love her, say she's the sweetest, and I always tell them to come over around eight every morning. She punches my shoulder and everyone laughs, but I'm not fucking around. Not completely. *Wake me when you get up*, became one of my least favorite phrases.

I shouldn't complain. She puts up with my shit, and that can't be easy. She's short, blonde, and beautiful. She's funny and smart and cries to commercials. If I let her, we'd own every stray kitten in a four state radius.

Sure, some things drive me crazy. At night she wants to snuggle, and I'm almost positive she's implanted magnets in her knees and my groin. She hates to be the first one up, and on those rare occasions the drawers open louder, doors slam shut, and every light in the room goes on. And speaking of lights, the woman graduated college in four years easy, but somehow never learned how to flick a lightswitch down, close a cabinet, or work the damn off button on the remote. You walk through our house and it's like a scene from *Poltergeist*.

It's those little things I can't stand. She dries off in the bedroom after showers. Seven years together, and one day I start noticing big puddles on the bathroom floor.

I like to dry while I'm picking out clothes, she said.

That's fine, I said, *but could you throw a towel on the floor or something?*

Alright already, she said. But weeks went by and the floor was always wet and slick and it was only a few days before she slipped when I said, *I'm gonna laugh when you bust your ass*.

Still, I can't stay mad. She knows if I am, and she'll walk through the house singing loud and goofy until I laugh and call her a dumbass. If that doesn't work, or if I press the issue, she smiles and

says, *I'm sorry... I'm not sorry!* and runs away laughing like a maniac. I can never remember what movie that's from.

Dr. Carter isn't any help on this one, and I wonder for the ten millionth time what good any of this does.

I mean, I know why I'm here. I need to keep my job, and this is the particular hoop I have to jump through. My performance is slipping, according to my boss, Mr. Anderson.

We just want what's best for both you and the company, he said. *We want you to know we're here for you, we understand what you're going through.*

I wonder which managerial pamphlet he read that one in. It reminded me of Louise, the office secretary and possibly the nicest person I've ever met, when she said not two days before, *You sure you're alright? I know things are tough.*

You don't know dick, I said, and I'm pretty sure that was the straw that broke the sympathy camel's back and sent me for shrinking.

Did you? asks Dr. Carter.

Did I what?

Did you laugh when she slipped?

I look at him and wonder if he's fucking retarded.

No, I say. *I didn't.*

My wife is pregnant.

She's not, it's just what I said once when she was acting like it. If you've ever been around a pregnant woman in her first trimester, you know exactly what I mean. And it's all over little things, like putting the laundry away or switching out the empty toilet paper roll or taking care of the cat litter when you hate fucking cats and never wanted them to start with.

So it's six months ago and she's pissed at me for not putting the dishes in the dishwasher. I'm biting back a comment how she's the one who usually leaves them. When I get to the sink, only one is mine, the rest is from the stir fry she made the night before,

which I didn't eat because it was ninety percent tofu and I can hardly swallow that shit.

I say, *Look, I'll clean this up, but I only got one plate in here*, to which she doesn't answer. Just shakes her head and stomps away, and I'm wondering what's up her ass when something brilliant pops in my head.

When were you going to tell me? I ask.

Her look says she knows it's an ambush when she asks, *Tell you what?*

The good news, I say, and when she doesn't reply I say, *I figured you were pregnant, you haven't been this big a bitch in over a year.*

She flinched like I tried to hit her, and it was over. Except for the bedroom door slamming. And the muffled sobs crawling through the sliver of space between wood and carpet. Except for the water still running in the sink and the sorry sticking in my throat like a half-chewed hunk of steak.

Because sometimes, and that was one of those times, sorry won't cut it.

It was true, that was how she had been, but once you lose a baby that kind of comment is way below the belt. Tears like that aren't faked, they come from the memory of a missing prenatal heartbeat. From a waiting room conversation where she said, *We have to name it soon. It isn't really alive until it has a name.*

Did it ever get a name? asks Dr. Carter, and I wonder if he's even listening.

No, doc.

How did that make you feel? he asks, and I swear I'm going to punch him. None of this is making me feel any better. Not the simple declarative sentences, not the asinine follow-up questions, and sure as hell not remembering my dead baby.

I'm sitting on a two thousand dollar leather couch while the company shells out eighty bucks an hour for this two-bit quack to practice the art of contemplation. And for what? Because my stubborn wife couldn't dry off in the shower. Because we had to have

granite counters in the bathroom. Because granite's harder than the human skull.

I run my hand over the expensive brown leather and wish my wife was here.

Again.

Bad, doc. It made me feel bad.

My wife is an angel.

When I was a kid, that's what we believed dead people were. Sitting on a cloud with a halo and a harp. We learned it from cartoons, but I think I've heard angels are supposed to be their own order, like you have to be born one, you can't become one.

I like *Tom and Jerry's* version better.

That was my answer to the *How Well Do You Know Your Spouse?* quiz we took on our yearly trip to Colorado.

His favorite cartoon? *Tom and Jerry*.

Can he touch his elbows together behind his back? No.

Since the age of eighteen, has he thrown water on a fully clothed person? Yes.

If you died tomorrow, how soon would he get in another relationship?

The choices were:

a) right away,

b) in a while, and

c) never.

I said *in a while*, and she got it right, but we both agreed it was a shitty question and moved on to *does he have tonsils?*

In a while.

It was supposed to stay a shitty question, lost in a wheatfield two hours west of Salina. It was never really supposed to happen, so by the time I found the quiz buried in a box of her stuff, I'd forgotten all about it. It caught me off-guard, turning into a shitty question all over again.

I flipped through the pages, filled with likes and dislikes, desires and dreams. Hers. Mine. Ours.

Does she close the bathroom door when no one else is home? No.

What would she drink at a picnic? Beer.

Out of large and formal, small and informal, or none, what style of funeral would she like? Scratched to the side was a note, *scatter my ashes in a river*, with a smiley face drawn at the end.

But it was the next day and plans were made. Hundreds were coming and since the counter had barely broken the skin, everyone would see her one last time. The coffin was huge. Oak on the outside. Hard. White satin inside. Plush.

I held the picture of us at our wedding, feet dangling in the little pool at the inn, the one her dad finally jumped in when my friends wouldn't push him. Her simple white dress. Her grandmother's pearls. The ringlet of flowers circling her head.

I'm sorry, I whispered. *They wanted to see you*.

She smiled at me and I touched her cheek, my thumbprint smudging.

I'm sorry... I'm not sorry, I said, and we smiled beneath the glass.

How long is a while?

How long do you think it is? asks Dr. Carter.

It's the first good question he's asked and I want to congratulate him for finally earning his check. The answer is easy — til death do us part means we're both dead — but how long does it take to move on with a life?

Good, says Dr. Carter, *go on*.

Five months isn't enough, I know that much. Can't sleep through the night and I still talk to the walls, though I'm not as bad as some. My friend's dad used to lay out his mother's clothes on the bed, one empty sleeve caressing his neck while he slept. Did that for years until his liver gave out. I'm not that bad.

But I'm starting to feel it. Time to move on, time to pick up the pieces of a broken life and paste them back together like some kindergarten art project where you smile and pat the kid's head and

say what a good job they did when you really have no clue what you're looking at.

I know that look, it's in the eyes of old friends and coworkers and my boss Mr. Anderson. Mr. Anderson, whose name is John. Who every time I'm forced to call him Mr. Anderson I feel like he's patting my head. Saying good job when really he has no clue.

I've got my pieces in a basket, and I'm pasting them together with simple declarative sentences.

Very good, says Dr. Carter. *You're making excellent progress.*

My wife is alive.

But our baby isn't, and this is the third time I've lost it.

Who loses the same baby twice? Three times?

The first time everyone knows. Send you cards and crucifixes.

The second time it's just the two of you and you rarely talk about it. Maybe once in bed, when you've turned out the lights on a really great night. From the nowhere of the dark she asks, *do you still think about him?* and you reply, *not as often*, and she reaches for your hand while you pull her close, knowing you have each other but you're losing him again.

The third time you're alone. You're sitting in the living room with the television off, going through old pictures for the fifth time that week. Thinking, *my wife is alive*, because you've got pictures of her face next to yours, and if you stare at it long enough and close your eyes it stays burned in your mind. You can feel her warm breath on your cheek and her fingers locked into yours.

You can whisper *Elizabeth* and know who you mean, because there was a face and breath and a beating heart that went with the name.

But there are no pictures of the baby. It never had a name.

And even as I sit here, on the deck watching the goldfinch perch, saying *Elizabethelizabethelizabeth*, I know the second time

for her is coming. Has already begun. I should probably think about moving her clothes from the bedroom.

Healing is a process, says Dr. Carter. You're going to be fine.

