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GRACE

I'VE NEVER TOLD THE POLICE—I've never told anyone, not even my husband—but I know the exact moment when Grace Tierney was murdered.

It was a Monday night, an early Tuesday morning actually, and I was wide awake in an instant. This was no foggy middle-of-the-night-where-am-I kind of feeling. No befuddled cursing of a dog or cat or drunken passerby had shaken me out of my sleep. I was overwhelmed with the singularity of the moment. If you'd been there to ask, I could've told you what day and time it was.

I sat in bed, beside my sleeping husband, knees drawn to my chest, waiting for something that I'm still waiting for today, three months after that night: some sign to let me know what happened to her or where she is, as her body has not been found.

That's why I've never told the police. I can just imagine walking into the station and saying, "I know precisely when Grace Tierney was murdered." They'd pull up a chair, offer me a cup of coffee, and urge me to take my time. I'd explain about sitting in bed wide awake, and they'd nod and say, "Oh, yeah. Sure, ma'am. Same as we thought." Then they'd be considerate enough not to slam the door behind me as I was shown out. I know how these things work. I've seen the movies.

Still, I think about that night all the time. I'm so certain about what I sensed, yet not knowing what happened to her—not knowing what it was that jolted me to consciousness—makes me feel a little giddy, like someone whose mind has taken a temporary skip off the rails.

I strain to recall the smallest detail. Once I even considered seeing a hypnotist just in case I had absorbed a detail the instant before I woke up, which this person could help me remember. Sometimes I'm certain that I heard a dog bark, one big yelp, and other times I'm not sure. But it's also a fact that for as long as Grace has been missing her dog Billy has been missing too.

My husband Larry and I teach history at the local high school, which is where we met. We've lived on Blue Nile Drive for four years now, and Grace and her husband Buster moved in next door two years ago. Grace was easy to like; Buster wasn't. This wasn't just my opinion—Buster made everyone uncomfortable. His face was not so bad-looking on its own, but it was like a mask with a fixed wide-eyed stare atop a clown's grin. Once you met him you'd find yourself doing a crab walk to get out of his way whenever you saw him coming. You'd contort your body and sprain your eyeballs to avoid his stare. No matter how far away you were from him at a party, you'd know he was there and you'd know when he was walking towards you through the crowd, bearing down on you like an invading army of inevitability. His physical presence was a toxic tide.

The day they moved in was a suffocating weekend in July—one of those southern Ontario summer days when the mere act of breathing left you stoked like an overworked furnace. It was the kind of weather that made you wish you could take off your skin and hang it on the clothesline to dry.

Larry and I were both on vacation and pretending that our back yard was exactly where we wanted to be, but the truth was that we couldn't afford to be anywhere else. Larry went to the mall and bought one of those children's wading pools. He filled it with icy water from the garden hose, and the two of us were settling into it with our preferred sections of *The Globe and Mail* when a ginger head popped up over the top of the fence.

"Oh boy, that looks refreshing!" he said. "You mind? I'm Buster."

No one's ever gone broke overestimating our need to embrace new neighbours, but as soon as Buster spoke I had a sudden and, at the time, completely unexplainable urge to get up, go inside, and shut the door behind me. It was an irrational yet overwhelming sense of repulsion, although it was several days before I told Larry who, at about the same time, had taken to calling our new neighbour "Bluster."

Despite my sense of foreboding, Buster ended up staying for dinner. I don't know how it happened, but I found myself cooking in our cramped inferno of a kitchen while Larry relaxed in the pool, drinking cold beer and listening to what Buster did best and most, which was talk. With Buster, it didn't matter if you asked questions or not. It was all the same to him. He was going to say what he wanted to say no matter what. The part of the brain identified as "sensibilities" had never developed inside Buster's head—nor had a lot of other things that develop inside most people's heads.

Grace was also there that evening, her slim legs crossed at her ankles and her long-fingered hands clutching the one glass of wine that she nursed all night and never even finished. She had cropped blonde hair, the longest piece not more than an inch. The haircut made her china-blue eyes seem enormous, which reminded me of Princess Diana. She also had the same assured calmness—a regal presence that never allowed you to doubt for a moment anything she said. And by her side, as always, was Billy, her Golden Lab—a model of canine fidelity and concern.

“What’s she doing with that goof, Buster, anyways?” I asked Larry later. He never answered.

After this initial introduction Larry and I became like quarry on a game farm. One sniff of the hunter from next door and we’d scatter—through the back door if our timing was good or around the side of the house to the front door if we remembered our keys. We’d sit inside, waiting for the sound of Buster’s car leaving his driveway, then make a dash for the back yard and settle back into the pool, nervously anticipating his return. Any hope of Buster keeping regular work hours in some downtown office dissolved when we learned that he was a “freelance inventor.”

“Basement’s all set up,” he said. “Great tools. Drop by and see it anytime.”

After a few weeks of this cat-and-mouse routine Buster knocked on our door one day and said, “Since you guys aren’t using that pool anymore, how about I put it in my yard? Visit any time you want.” Larry helped him empty it and carry it next door.

After that, Larry filled the bathtub with cold water every morning and sat there in his swim trunks for most of the day.

Grace was a teacher, like Larry and me, who taught music to students in grades one through eight. She was modest about her own piano playing, claiming to have a limited repertoire of minor pieces, but she once played what she said was a Chopin *étude* that brought tears to the eyes of a gym teacher. Whenever she played a sort of divine trance came over her that made conversation seem like sacrilege. Even Buster’s volubility was humbled for a time.

Grace’s favourite topics, in descending order, were Buster, her dog Billy, and school. She didn’t read newspapers, and although they owned a television set she claimed that she never watched it. I never saw her reading; I never even saw a book in their house. I asked her once what she did

to pass the time when she wasn't at school, and she said, with an astonished look on her face, "I look after Buster, of course." I also asked her where she and Buster met, and she smiled and said, "Oh, here." She had a way with obfuscation that went beyond mere diversion all the way to blackout.

"They probably met in the nuthouse," Larry said. "She's embarrassed to tell you."

After eight years of marriage and no children there came a time when I didn't feel very close to my husband. I think there's a moment in every marriage when you realize that passion no longer hangs like ripe fruit on the tree, tempting, begging to be plucked. You find that it's gone from being a raw and renewable resource to a manufactured confection, and whatever hope you had of a delicious feast crumbles into so much useless powder. The day Larry made the nuthouse remark is when I started to feel that way about him. I resented the glibness of his comment and its unfairness to Grace. If what he'd meant was that similar types are drawn to each other, then what did it say about me that I'd ended up with him? I wanted to put him in the cupboard along with the vases we'd received as wedding presents. I couldn't summon any more nostalgia for him than that.

It took me a while to realize that when Grace talked about Buster, she wasn't *really* talking about him. She recounted what Buster did, not how he did it. She told me what Buster said, never explaining what he meant. It was like wanting to read a novel, any novel, and having only a telephone book.

Whatever Grace said about him, though, was spoken with a kind of awe—an unshakeable sense of respect. In one of the few personal remarks I ever remember her making about him, she said, "I knew Buster years before I met him. That's how I felt the second I saw him, and I've never changed my mind about that. I'd rather die than live apart from him." She was capable of great melodramatic remarks, and unlike a lot of people she didn't have to be drinking to make them.

She made that remark to me one sleepless night this past summer when I was sure it was safe to step outside without being confronted by Buster. I'd opened the back door and stood on the steps, silent and alone, or so I thought. The hour was late—way past midnight—and it was a dark night with a clear sky and the kind of warm breeze that leaves you wide awake and twitchy. Still, the air was fresh and it felt good moving across my skin. I stayed like that, breathing in the air that never managed to breach the

open windows of the house, staring at a tree in Grace and Buster's back yard, when I realized that no such tree existed in the daytime. It was Grace, planted immobile, face tilted towards the starry sky. I called to her softly, remorseless in my efforts not to do anything that might attract Buster's attention. She turned her head slowly, as if in a dream state, and looked at me.

"What are you doing?" I hissed at her. "Are you alright?"

She beckoned to me with her right hand, and as I approached the fence she pointed up towards something. I wasn't sure if it was the stars, the sky, or the moon.

"There it is," she said. "Right there. Do you see it, too?"

I could just make out the features of her face in the darkness, and she was smiling.

"What is it? What are you pointing at?"

That's when she told me she'd known Buster for years before they met, and that's when, with an invisible shrug of resignation, I thought that there might be some truth to Larry's crack about the nuthouse.

The warm night breeze, which had been such a relief to me only moments before, made me jumpy and feeling something else, which might have been dread.

"Are you alright?" I asked again, wondering, not for the first time, if living with Buster was the healthiest place for her to be. "Do you need help?"

She laughed—a light, trilling sound—and walked towards me. She reached over the fence and placed her lovely, long-fingered, Chopin-playing hands on my shoulders.

"Ellen, I know what people say. But you can't possibly understand. Don't think I'm crazy. I'm quite okay. Whatever happens, I'll be fine. Always." And she laughed again, like a teacher who knows that there's no point trying to explain the unexplainable to a dunce like me. I was reminded of how much I liked her, even though I would probably never understand her, and I got angry at Larry all over again for the nuthouse thing.

"I have to go now," she said and took her hands away. "I don't like to leave Buster alone for too long."

She moved towards her house, but after a few steps she turned back to look at me.

"You have to understand something, Ellen. Things just happen—even when there's no reasonable explanation. You just have to accept them."

She turned back to the house and left me standing at the fence, more nervous than ever about being alone in the dark. I had a sudden and urgent need to tell her not to go into the house, but that would be a crazy thing to say, so instead I blurted out, "Where's Billy?"

By this time she was too far away for me to read the expression on her face. She hesitated for several seconds before she replied, "Billy's fine. He's with Buster." Then she was gone.

I waited for several minutes and watched the lights in her house go out, one by one. I tried to think of an excuse to ring their doorbell so late at night. I needed reassurance that she really was okay, but I couldn't think of anything to say that was worth waking two people and a dog, so I returned to bed and laid down beside Larry.

He was lying on his side, turned away from me. My husband didn't snore or thrash about when he slept—virtues to recommend him as a sleeping companion. I watched the rhythmic movement of his breathing and wished that I had the same certainty about him that Grace had about her husband.

That was the night I woke up with my sense of foreboding. No one ever saw Grace again.

Buster still lives next door to us and still works as an inventor in his basement. He never reported Grace's disappearance to the police—her school did that. His story was that he woke up one morning and she was just gone along with Billy. "She'd been acting strange lately," he'd say to anyone who would listen. "She didn't even pack a suitcase." He'd say that over and over. He wanted everyone to know—everyone who asked or didn't ask.

Last week a guy who lives down the street and works as a Crown attorney got a little loose-lipped at a cocktail party and told me that the police are "that far away" (he held his thumb and index finger less than a quarter of an inch apart) from charging Buster with murder even though Grace's body still hasn't been found. "Lots you don't know about this story," he added. "Yard's gonna be dug up any day now, but..." Then he made a gesture with his hand beside his mouth, as if turning a lock and throwing away the key.

I didn't say what I really thought, which was that the arrival of the Crown's backhoe on our quiet residential street might be Buster's first tip-off. I offered a complicit nod instead, and he winked in reply.

Larry and I try to avoid the back yard during daylight hours, but a few

nights ago I couldn't sleep and crept downstairs. I opened the back door and, as always, peeked into the neighbouring yard. There was Buster, face tilted skywards, transfixed. I closed the door and went back upstairs. I sat in a chair by the bedroom window, waiting and watching like a woman scanning the horizon after a violent storm for a sign of her seafaring husband. I listened to the sounds of our nighttime house and, through the open window, the dead leaves falling from tree limbs onto dry ground.