

Broken Boys

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“Can we move down?” Maggie says in that voice and she tugs on his arm. “Doesn’t that cigar bother you?”

Gordon Morehouse turns his head and looks down at his wife. Sometimes she annoys the hell out of him and this is one of those times. He starts to explain why he doesn’t want to move, but she gives him a dismissive smile and says “Never mind” and turns back to the parade. He does too.

Or rather he goes back to watching Lindy Pearson across the street. The street isn’t all that wide and she is directly across from him. She has on tight ivory slacks and those thick boots that all the rich girls at his school wear. Her wool coat is cherry red, her long, curly hair white-blond against it. Her lips in her pale face are as red as the coat. Despite the chill, her coat is open and her sweater low-cut. Plenty for his imagination to work with. He blushes thinking of that and looks over at Maggie but she isn’t there.

He looks over at Lindy again and this time she sees him and waves and gives him the same big smile she does when they pass in the neighborhood. She sells real estate and he’s fantasized about meeting with her to talk about selling their house. But they aren’t selling their house.

Lindy has her Golden with her. He sits patiently at her side and she leans down to pet him and give him treats. For a minute Gordon

wishes he were that dog. But he wouldn't sit quietly. He'd be jumping all over her.

Gordon gets jostled and he realizes the sidewalk crowd has gotten a lot bigger. A tall kid about Ben's age has come to stand beside him. There's a curly-haired toddler on his shoulders. Gordon looks over at Lindy again and now there's a big guy standing next to her. The guy has brought two coffees in a cardboard carrier, and he offers her one. The man bends down and speaks into her ear and she laughs. A stab of jealousy hits Gordon's chest and he lets it ride.

The marching band from Ben's high school goes. Gordon looks for Ben with the trombones but of course he isn't there. He's in Oregon. He remembers the proud smile Ben flashed him sophomore year, the first year he marched. They were both proud, he and his son. He closes his eyes a second, feels that little boy from long ago on his own shoulders. Sometimes he misses that.

The music brings him back. Not the marching band, they've turned the corner and gone on. But the syncopated percussion of the 8th-grade beat box singers. Four groups of them with some kind of remote microphones doing rap a capella choral work with a Christmas carol. Between the four groups come much younger kids dancing along haphazardly, some with their dogs, one girl pulling a very fat Persian cat in a red wagon. The crowd cheers them on. In the third group of rappers are Kyle and Morgan, two of Gordon's current students. He waves at them and hoots their names as they go by. They turn his way but they don't seem to see him. When he turns back and looks across the street, Lindy and the big guy are gone. Something sinks inside him.

The parade goes on another 30 minutes. He stays because the crowd stays, because he doesn't want to hassle everybody by pushing

his way through the tight knot of watchers that has formed around him. But he mostly stays so he can think about Lindy and not have to find Maggie and go home with her.

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Something bright yellow catches Gordon's eye as he rolls into the driveway four days later and parks next to the kitchen door. It's crime scene tape and the whole backyard is festooned with it. That gang of little shits from fifth period. They hate him. A wave of exhaustion pins him to the concrete. He can't even get very angry. There have been so many feelings in the last days. Too many. He's empty now.

The kids in his classes made a big deal of his little drama at first. They're 12 and 13, and gossip is their life blood. But by the second day, their battles with their hormones and their archaic parents and the cliques at school resumed its hold on them. His fellow teachers are another story. Whatever congenial respect they've all shared seems gone in the face of what's happened to him. They either pity him or deride him. He's not sure which is worse. All he knows is that everyone stops talking when he comes into the faculty lounge on his prep period.

He hauls himself out of the car finally and heads into the house. The mess in the yard will have to wait for the weekend.

The refrigerator hums the only greeting. He puts down his briefcase and cleans out his thermal lunch bag. Carefully washes out the plastic zip bags that held his sandwich, his sliced apple, the twelve corn chips. Rinses out the thermos and stands it in the dish drainer. Climbs the stairs to their bedroom, changes into his running clothes, puts his trainers on at the kitchen door, and heads out.

His pace is slow, and he slogs through the first mile. Marilyn, the nurse at school, says he's depressed, grieving even, but he doesn't know if that's true. What he does know is that he can't think of Maggie when he's in the house. That seems odd to him. It is so much her house. It has her colors on the walls, her arrangements of the living room furniture, even the direction their bed pointed. All that feng shui stuff. A hint of her rose-scented lotion lingers in their bathroom if he happens to go in there, but he thinks only "lotion," not "Maggie." He doesn't use that bathroom. He doesn't use their bedroom either. He's moved into Ben's old room, sleeps in his son's bed, and when he falls into it, done in by another day, he thinks only "sleep" or "oblivion," not "Maggie."

But when he runs, he thinks about her. He tries to find the signs, the signals he missed. He replays the last morning, the evening before, the yesterday, the day before that, all that week. He sees himself at the parade, hears her comment about the cigar. When it's over and the crowd clears, she's not there. He sees himself going into Kathy's Kafé, asking about Maggie. Kathy's nonsense about this guy, this Scully, who said he was Maggie's brother. When Gordon told her Maggie only had a sister and she lived in Vermont, a look came across Kathy's face. But what the look meant he couldn't have said. Not then.

He sees himself coming home afterwards. The house was just as they'd left it. Maggie's clothes all seemed to be there. He couldn't really tell though, for she has so many. He'd thought he might find her side of the closet cleaned out the way you see in the movies, but it looked the same to him. If she'd run away, wouldn't they be gone?

Her books were still on the night stand. Her jewelry was still in the box. At least he thought it was. He couldn't see that anything was missing. He doesn't pay that much attention.

He called the police Sunday afternoon, when it'd been 24 hours and she was an official missing person. The man on the phone was not very helpful. Talked about spousal arguments and partners who took off for a day or two to cool down. He wanted to tell him that he and Maggie weren't like that. They never fought. He was offended about being lumped into a national statistic. He'd expected more concern from the local police. Wasn't that why they'd moved to Greensburg, to have community, to be known and cared about? He almost said so but didn't. Instead, he reined in his indignation and said he needed help. In the end, the man agreed to send someone out to talk to him.

Two uniformed officers showed up. Both men were young, barely 30. They were polite but hurried. Gordon's problem was clearly a waste of their time. The big Polish guy asked the questions. Had they quarreled recently? Was his wife unhappy? Had she had affairs before? Had he ever hit her? The litany sounded like it came from a textbook on domestic issues.

Gordon's string of "no's" began to sound like a broken record, like evasion, even to him. And his indignation returned. Why was he the one in trouble? He had done nothing but watch a parade. Well, and Lindy Pearson. A small wave of guilt washed over him, but he didn't need to talk about that.

The smaller officer spoke for the first time. "Tell us again what you found when you got home."

Gordon told them again. The half-dozen apples missing from the fruit bowl. His wife's travel mug on the counter. She'd had it with her at

the parade. No, no clothes were missing. Not that he could tell. His wife had so many. He told it as a joke but neither officer laughed.

The cop listened and then said, “Sir, we see no signs of a crime. You know—and we know—that your wife was with a man at the café, and Kathy at the café said they were smiling and talking with each other as if they were old friends. And if nothing’s missing here...well, I’m sorry but there isn’t anything more we can do. Maybe she’ll come back. They do that.”

And they left him, just like that, to himself and all his feelings. And he shut those down, boxed them up, and kept himself busy not thinking. But now that he’s running, the confusion and the hurt and the loss flood him and goad him on and he runs faster and slaps his feet hard on the pavement. He pushes and pushes himself, block after block, until he is gasping for air and he has to stop. On the walk back, his mind is mercifully blank again.