

THE CRUNCH

Having run to fat earlier in his thirties, Gordy had resigned himself to “portly.” “Portly” was good. “Portly” imbued a lawyer with a certain trustworthiness. “Portly” swirled May morning air up the flap of the Saturday polo shirt hanging over Gordy’s belly.

To a curbside musician’s gravelly blues, the throng churned clockwise around the parking-lot farmers’ market. Gordy sipped his coffee and watched Carla toss a few coins into the guitarist’s tattered case. Whatever she said made the musician’s rheumy eyes smile. She never looked at Gordy.

Gordy had noticed that about divorced women — their independence. Carla’s, he had to admit, bordered on total indifference. But then, Carla had skipped the marriage and divorce business altogether, and proceeded directly to child support.

Gordy followed her process-tortured hair poking out of the back of a baseball cap. She took a bag of onions with the care she’d reach for an infant from a lowering lifeboat. She was the most focused woman Gordy had ever known. The way concentration condensed her little frame at baseball games. Her precision when she chopped vegetables. Even her sleeping was intense.

About the only thing Carla seemed casual about was himself. Sometimes Gordy thought she only saw him when they were going to bed; she would glance up from brushing that tangle of hair and look surprised, as if to say, “Oh, it’s you! Well, hi there!” In the space of dresser to bed, Carla’s eyes could shoot a million messages, not the least of which was something obdurate and absolute — “I don’t trust you to stay.” Even at baseball games she was wary, telling her little girl, “Abby, say ‘Thank you’ to Mr. Gordy for the cotton candy.” And it was a standing joke between them that not Gordy, but Unitas, his woeful hound, bought the expensive steaks Gordy sometimes grilled in her sliver of a back yard.

Snow had brought them together. The office closing early, hushed in the backdraft of departure. But he, working on a big case, needed the best paralegal in the firm, only she couldn’t stay; she had to get her little girl. And him saying out of the blue, “I can drive you. Take a laptop” — her oversized sweater and tights pushing the limits of office casual, her face a gnarl of worry. “I’ll want at least time and a half. And don’t expect much in the way of dinner. Chef Boyardee and me, we have a thing goin’ on.”

And so it went, over Christmas, bumping into Valentine’s Day, and the awkwardness of not knowing what their gifts were supposed to signify until a mutual flu made that particular discomfort seem as graceful as a *pas de deux*. And discovering she really could cook, especially stew, if she wanted to, and that they both loved mysteries and the surprise of the daffodils she coaxed from that sliver of a yard of hers, and the heartbreak of Abby’s ankles in lace-trimmed Easter socks. And then the opening day game they had tickets for, but found they had something much better to do. And here it was, nearly Memorial Day, and Gordy was no closer to knowing why he was with her than that evening he had taken his snowy shoes and socks off in her living room and smelled ravioli.

Still, after six months, you’d think she’d trust him enough to at least let him help her with those bags. A summoning look would have done it. She was beside a long boned woman in khaki shorts and a curtain of blond draping her face. When Gordy inserted himself between them, the woman lifted her hair. “Gordon? Gordy Hanson! Well, well. What is this? Old home week?” Meredith

Cottman's hand was as soft as a pillow. "So Gordon, what brings you out this fine morning? Is it the apples or the oranges?"

A baseball cap nudged his arm. When he introduced her, Carla freed a hand from her bags in an eternity of awkwardness. She herself rescued them: "I'm going to get Abby some strawberries, Gordy. I'll meet you at the car," abandoning him to the wonder of blond that had distracted him so many years ago when he played prep school lacrosse with her brother Bruce. He and Meredith Cottman fell into those old familiar rhythms of well-bred wit and followed the clockwise churn: Who would have guessed it, old Bruce Cottman in bonds down in Houston? ... helluva lacrosse player, old Brucie ... and Meredith wasn't a "little" sister any more, was she? They both had mastered it many years ago, that high-style banter skirting flirtation. Little Meredith Cottman, her two vocabularies: English and French and neither of them having a word for "zit." They played catch-up: his career moves, hers; his family, hers. Their eyes tossing the hot-potato question: Why neither of them was married. Some disappointment had seasoned her, made her more beautiful. There was no denying it, after six months, there was something to be said for being the man beside the woman other men noticed.

When he reached her, Carla was leaning against his SUV with her phone. "We have to get Abby, my mother's new blood pressure medicine is acting up. She can't take Abby to T-ball. The cup holder might have been a country club chaise for the comfortable way the essence of Meredith settled itself between them. "Come on, Carla. She was just somebody I knew."

But he knew that Carla knew the truth: that the people he knew and the people she knew, would never know each other. Even the streets testified to it: Inch by inch, the sidewalks, the row house yards, their valiant little shrubs, all shrunk.

"The game starts at eleven."

"I played lacrosse with her brother, for God sakes, Carla."

"I wasn't thinking of her, Gordy. I'm worried about my mother."

It was the natural time for a break. Her damned way of keeping him at arm's length. Never allowing him to sleep over unless her daughter was at the child's grandmother's, so what was he supposed to do? Spend Saturday nights alone watching videos with Unitas? She would know it for what it was, the six-month equinox: the time in a relationship cycle when the forces you've kept at bay hoping something would take root, converge. All the elements were aligned: Abby's coming home; the unexpectedness of Meredith. It was time: he would tell her after getting Abby at her mother's.

At the little kitchen table Gordy dissolved his second doughnut in black tar coffee and listened to Carla and her mother murmur in the living room. Could be Meredith they were talking about ... could be Shirley's new medication.

He had always taken Carla's mother, with her Teddy bear sweat shirts, for a good-hearted soul, the sort of woman who ministers to the moment. Something like Carla, only with kindness. But now he wasn't sure. If he were a cynic, he would have considered Shirley's acid-roasted coffee a preemptive strike for his anticipated breakup with her daughter. Maybe Carla's mother had calculated, come up with her own relationship astronomy — mothers could do that.

Whatever, he was well out of it. All about him was evidence of what a life with Carla would be. The rooster and chicken salt and pepper shakers, a menagerie of refrigerator magnets, a clutter of coupons. Across from him Carla's little

girl ate a bowl of cereal. "I got a loose tooth."

"What?"

"I got a loose tooth."

"You do?"

"Want to see?" And then she was before him, giving him no choice but to peer into her milk-sloped mouth, and watch her tongue wiggle the incisor back and forth in a susurrus squish while a trickle of blood stewed with

flecks of cereal. What was she trying to do? Gross him out? Did they know to do that? At six? The child adjusted her glasses and looked at him expectantly.

“Does it hurt?”

“Only when I crunch my cereal.”

“Well, the crunch can kill ya.”

“Yeah, it can.”

“Want the rest of my doughnut instead?” Before she had taken three bites, she put it down: “Mr. Gordy?”

“What?”

“Thank you for the doughnut.”

The tooth fairy was just on the tip of Gordy’s tongue when Carla came in: they had to get going. It was getting late: the game started at eleven. Gordy countered with Unitas — he had been alone since last night, for God’s sakes. Just imagine the mess he could make.

And he had. So there was cleaning that up and getting to the T- ball game just in time. And Abby actually making a catch — her first ever — and jumping up and down instead of throwing the ball. And Carla screaming from the bleachers, “Throw the damned ball, Abby!” And she did. So, of course he couldn’t break up with her then, could he?

And not at McDonald’s when Abby bit into her hamburger and her face puckered in consternation and pride: her tooth was out. And him watching Carla cup her hand under the little chin to catch the muck of burger and fries and plucking from it a dazzle of white that Gordy could only take as evidence of Mother Nature’s profligacy. Why else replace what already was perfect?

And then they all were winding through the Saturday afternoon streets: Gordy, Carla, Abby, Unitas, and that other one, that long-boned homunculus lounging in the cup holder. He would do it, he told himself, as soon as they got to her house. He’d let Abby take Unitas for a walk — she was always asking to — and then he would do it.

It was more dangerous than he had expected — Carla started slicing the strawberries at the sink. Her index finger extended along the dull edge of the blade for better leverage. But what the heck, it wasn’t like he hadn’t done it dozens of times before.

“Carla, I’ve been thinking.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I better be going.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been thinking, Carla.”

“You said that, Gordy.”

“Well we ... “

“Why don’t you just come out with it, Gordy?”

“What?”

“Apples and oranges, right?”

He needed to regain the initiative but could only think of “What?”

“Us, Gordy ... you and me. Apples and oranges. Just like what’s-her-name said. But we’ve always known that, haven’t we? At least I did. It’s not like I didn’t know what you were going to say, Gordy.” She kept slicing.

Gordy felt in his pocket for his keys. He wanted to say something significant. After all, it had been six months. And they certainly had had some good times. He couldn’t deny it. And no one could say she had asked anything of him. She continued at the strawberries as if she had been preparing for this moment from the very beginning.

Funny, how small women sometimes were the bravest. A man could feel diminished by it. Gordy felt for his keys, but his fingers found instead the napkin holding Abby’s tooth. Somehow he couldn’t bring it into the

open just yet. How astonishing that the tiny piece of perfection in his fingers had its origins, not in a little girl walking his dog, but in the woman before him at the sink. And in her mother before her.

He tried to imagine Meredith at a sink. There would have to be imported tiles, an Italian faucet, a restaurant-grade range and custom cabinetry — his partners would be coming for dinner — again. And all signifying some domestic perfection impossible to attain, at least by himself, but that wouldn't stop Meredith from a lifetime of making him try. All those holidays, those Christmases and christenings at her parents' on St. Bart's Way.

“Deal, Carla.”

“What?”

“Deal?”

“You mean like a plea bargain?”

“If you want to call it that.”

“What have you got in mind?”

“Your knife for Abby's tooth.”

“I'd be nuts to take a deal like that, Gordy.”

“Why?”

“You know for a lawyer, you've got lousy criminal instincts. A knife, I can throw, can't I? Then I'd have the tooth plus anything else I want. But what are you going to do with a tooth, Gordy? Send in the fairy? Get real.”

Her eyes could shoot a million messages: it could take a man a lifetime to read them all. “Put the knife down, Carla,” Gordy said. “And look at me.” Even without the knife, her hands were blood red. But they smelled so sweet.