# What They Didn’t Talk About

3018 words (half of a short story)

Roger Everest’s official New Year’s resolution for 2013 was to lose ten pounds and exercise five times a week. While sincere, this goal was secondary to his secret resolution to leave his wife of 27 years. The only person Roger shared his secret resolution with was Krista Reeves, one of the court reporters his firm used. He’d known Krista casually for years but they’d only shared secrets for six months.

It started in June in the conference room. Roger was deposing Jerry Gruel, the opposition’s accident reconstruction expert, when a strangled sob interrupted. Both Roger and Jerry eyed the door but no one was there. Krista studied her stenotype, fingers flying. It couldn’t be her. She was a well-dressed professional, not some temp agency slacker.

There it was again, a muffled sob and sniffle two-step definitely emanating from Krista. Was he insensitive to ignore it? Wouldn’t it be even more insensitive to call attention to Krista’s meltdown? “I can’t concentrate. I’ll call to reschedule.” Jerry stood and left.

Roger watched Krista gather her things. He believed in holding support staff at reserved distance but something about Krista’s cry resonated. He decided to vacate the conference room, allow Krista her privacy. Instead he moved toward her. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Thank you,” Krista’s voice brimmed with pain.

“If there’s anything I can do.” A sob caught in Krista’s throat stifling her reply. Despite a lifetime surrounded by his wife and two daughters, Roger panicked at female tears. He should’ve escaped with Jerry. Now he had to listen to the whole story punctuated by tears and nose blowing. After breakfast that morning, Krista’s husband wanted to talk. She thought he meant about starting a family but instead he was filing for divorce. He swore there wasn’t another woman but he no longer loved Krista either. He was sorry it ended like this. Roger said appropriate things. It’s all right, you’ll survive, he’s the jerk, not you. Krista stopped crying and looked almost grateful. Roger felt like he made a difference, something he didn’t accomplish often.

Having glimpsed Krista unmasked, Roger paid more attention the next time she transcribed a deposition for the firm. After that, he perked up whenever he saw her. He didn’t expect to miss her when she wasn’t around. When three weeks passed without contact, Roger left a message with Krista’s agency, asking her to call him. When she did, he invited her to lunch. Just lunch. Even if he’d been attracted to her, he had no time or interest in an affair. She was as tall as he was with a penchant for pantsuits and primitive jewelry. She was far from irresistible and not that close to tempting.

He didn’t know how it happened given all the reasons it couldn’t, but over their lunch he fell in love. Every day he discovered delightful new facets of Krista even as he discerned a new man emerging from the shell of his old self. His dilemma came with the realization the new Roger wasn’t viable in the old Roger’s life. One of them needed to be retired, permanently. He knew what he should do; he knew what he wanted to do. On New Year’s Day, he decided what he would do.

He told Krista about his resolve to leave Maggie and be with her in front of the New Non-Fiction rack at Vroman’s Pasadena. “Winter Wonderland” played on the sound system even though it was 80 degrees outside. “It’ll be tough on Maggie at first but in the long run it’s better for her too. She’s as dead as I was before I found you. She deserves more.”

“Have you told her how unhappy you are? I wish Bryan had told me before it was too late.”

They were surrounded by Southern California shoppers in summer clothes exchanging presents or spending gift certificates. That’s what Maggie believed he was doing. No one in the milling throngs suspected he and Krista shared a secret life. “It’s already too late.”

“She deserves to know as soon as possible so she can make decisions.”

“I’m worried it might destroy her. That’s why I’m giving myself a year. Maybe I’ll find a kinder way.”

“There’s no Divorce Fairy. You have to pull the trigger yourself.”

“I just want to make it as painless as possible. Is that so terrible?”

“No, it’s what I love about you.” Krista took his hand, caressing it with little circles that made his skin tingle. “Do you have to go straight home?”

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Roger hated getting dressed to go home after making love in Krista’s bed, but it was almost 4 PM. As usual, he took a long shower even though it never fooled the family dog, Ramon, who went delirious with joy when Roger slunk home from a tryst.

Ramon’s unprecedented enthusiasm for Roger might’ve registered with Maggie early in their marriage but until he fell for Krista he’d been faithful. He disapproved of people who failed to honor their marriage vows. Now that he’d joined their ranks, he realized his prior judgment was too harsh and all-encompassing. Every situation was unique.

“Call me later if you can.” Krista enfolded him, kissed him. He loved the rich scent of Youth Dew on her flushed skin even though that’s what probably tipped off Ramon. If Maggie noticed the spicy smell, he’d explain he cut through Nordstrom’s and got spritzed by a zealous perfumist. Roger spent an inordinate amount of time preparing answers to questions Maggie never asked. An ex-Boy Scout, he believed in being prepared.

Ramon launched himself at Roger the instant he walked through the door, licking and sniffing in lascivious frenzy. “Down, Ramon! Maggie, what are you feeding that dog?”

“He was fine till you got home.” Maggie still wore the bathrobe and nightgown she had on when he left that morning. Her snowy hair looked dirty and haphazardly attached to her head. Very few people were blessed with symmetrical skulls. Maggie was not among their number. Three years earlier, when her older sister Patricia lost her hair undergoing chemo, Maggie chopped her own hair off at its colorless roots. Eventually it grew out but she never dyed it again. Roger thought white hair added ten years, but he knew better than to offer his unsolicited opinion.

“Is everything okay?” Roger asked.

“Yeah, I got a lot done,” she said.

He couldn’t prove it with evidence. Everything looked the same as it did when he left. Probably she’d wasted another day dressing dolls or arranging miniature furniture. Maybe she took down the tiny Christmas tree in her dollhouse. Before the dolls moved in and everything went to hell, Maggie was a dynamo. She worked out at “Curves” five days a week, swam in their pool year round, and ran 10Ks and marathons. She was bronzed, toned and radiant with energy. She’d sacrificed sunlight and swimming when Patricia was diagnosed with skin cancer. In hindsight Roger marked this as the first in a cluster of setbacks from which Maggie failed to recover.

Shortly after Patricia’s death, Maggie sprained her ankle running the L.A. Marathon. Roger bore some guilt because he encouraged her to push harder on the theory it would speed the mourning process. She went down four miles into the race. A week later, when she hobbled back into work on crutches, her accounting firm strong-armed her into accepting early retirement at 52.

At first Maggie pretended it was a golden opportunity to contemplate the next act of her life. She didn’t need to work. They could live on his salary and her severance package since their daughters Paige and Brittany finally finished college. Roger pictured her organizing his law firm’s social events, maybe chairing a social committee or writing articles for the newsletter. She could accompany him out of town for depositions. Back in college, where they’d met, she had been a hell of a researcher. If she found his cases fascinating, maybe she’d volunteer to be his quasi-paralegal.

Instead she withdrew, dropped out, and gave up. She stayed home. Retired. That was bad enough, but she topped it with a hard left into loco-land. It began innocuously. Her sister Patricia left her large doll collection to Maggie. Roger expected Maggie to sell it and was dismayed to discover them on display around the house. He was even more horrified when she added to the collection.

“Have you lost your mind? You never gave a damn about dolls. Just because Patricia loved them doesn’t mean you have to.”

“When we were little girls, we slept in the same room. The last thing we said to each other at night was Think Adventures, Midnight Party. It meant making up exotic stories as we drifted off to sleep and waking up at midnight when our dolls came to life for a party.”

“That was just as cute as the first thousand times you told me that story.”

“My point is they’re not just dolls.”

“Yes, they are, Maggie. They’re vinyl and porcelain, dead useless objects. Patricia won’t pop out at midnight no matter how much you miss her.”

“She left them to me because I’d take care of them.”

Take care of them she did. Was there anything sadder than a woman in her fifties fastening a tiny faux diamond necklace around a doll’s vinyl neck? Their number multiplied so rapidly he would’ve thought they were procreating if he believed they came to life at midnight.

“Roger? What are you thinking about?” Maggie asked.

He caught a flash of the girl he married. She asked like she wanted a real answer, as if they could still talk about everything. What was so hard about telling her he was unhappy?

“Is this today’s mail?” She nodded and he rifled through it, rehearsing ways to ease into the subject of divorce.

A flier advertising the upcoming American Board of Trial Attorneys convention, a mere two weeks away in Washington D.C., caught his eye. What a perfect chance for quality time with Krista. Although he and Krista had been lovers for six months, they’d only spent one night together when she accompanied him to San Diego for an early court appearance. They stayed at the Grant, within walking distance of the courthouse, on his law firm’s dime. He won his motion despite staying up till four in the morning, sharing his hopes and dreams with Krista. Their post-coital conversations were almost as stimulating as sex. He couldn’t recall the last time he and Maggie lay awake talking after making love – not surprising since they hadn’t been intimate for months. They’d fallen out of the habit of kissing and other things just followed.

As a precaution, he invited Maggie to the ABOTA Convention first. There was a time she enjoyed travelling with him and he had photos to prove it. Lately, though, she rarely left the house. She claimed she could find anything she needed on the internet for less.

As expected, Maggie begged off D.C. Roger took his cell phone on his nightly walk with Ramon. Halfway around the block, at Ramon’s favorite shrub, he called Krista and extended the same invitation.

Krista was ecstatic about three nights and four days together but wavered. “Isn’t it crazy for us to be together where so many people know us?”

“Why? We could both be there on business. No one has to know we’re sharing a room.”

“I don’t want to look over our shoulders or give them something to gossip about. Not that I care what they say about me, I’m divorced, but people revere you. Your integrity is your identity. That’s lost if people find out you cheat on your wife.”

Her concern touched him. “We could reserve two rooms just in case.”

“How about if you pretend you’re going to D.C. but we’ll actually go someplace else where we’ll never run into anyone?” From there it was a short leap to Palm Springs. Roger told his office he was taking vacation time and told Maggie he was going to ABOTA. Despite some qualms about this subterfuge - a lingering belief in Murphy’s Law - nothing went wrong.

Maggie called his cell twice over the long weekend. She didn’t ask for his hotel phone number or what the weather was like in Washington although Roger obtained answers from the internet just in case. It was nerve-wracking talking to Maggie by phone with Krista in bed beside him but Maggie seemed oblivious to his discomfort. She told him everything was fine, and then expressed concern about Ramon’s stools in far more detail than warranted.

He and Krista discussed loftier things. They shared their deepest feelings in exquisite detail that enhanced every emotion. They pondered the state of the world and the origin of life of earth. Much time was devoted to how much they loved and needed each other. They analyzed his cases for hours. Her eyes didn’t glaze over when he detailed tire manufacture and defects because she understood how cleverly he’d use those details to prove liability. She made him feel like the lawyer he wanted to be.

Before the trip, Roger renewed his Viagra prescription. At thirty-eight, Krista was in her sexual prime. Even on their honeymoon, Maggie had never been like that. In fairness, Krista came of age in a different sexual landscape. Her enthusiasm ignited passions Roger believed expired years earlier.

Three nights and four days weren’t enough to satisfy, only to illustrate how vastly his life would improve with Krista. It no longer seemed so crucial to break it to Maggie gently over the course of a year. Why not make the deadline a month? Wasn’t his freedom worth fighting for despite inevitable collateral damage? Part of him clung to the notion a good man with integrity would never abandon his aging wife. But precisely who was he striving to be good for and why?

Ramon went into deliriums of joy at the sight and smell of Roger’s return. “Down, Ramon, down! Maggie, do something about this dog!”

“Such as? He can’t be neutered twice.”

Roger followed her voice to the family room, trailed by a slobbering Ramon. A Lakers game was in progress on the wall-mounted flat screen they bought the year before last. Maggie was planted on the sofa, guzzling diet Coke and inhaling pizza off a greasy paper plate. Two extra-large Domino’s boxes sat on the coffee table. “You’ve got enough pizza for a family of four.”

“They ran a two for one special. I thought you’d be hungry since planes stopped serving meals.”

“It wouldn’t kill either of us to skip a meal.”

“Suit yourself. More for me.” She finished her slice in a single bite but an oily island of cheese caught in the corner of her lips. She flicked it inside with her tongue like a lizard.

“Silly me. I thought maybe you’d say you’re glad I’m home and you missed me.” He hadn’t been thinking that at all but enjoyed the implication she was wounding him with her indifference.

“Amazing. I had the same thought about you.”

“I’m not afraid to say it. I missed you, I’m glad I’m home.” The opposite of the message he wanted to deliver.

“Me, too.” She leaned forward to extract another slice of pizza from the box, then swiveled her head to view the game.

He was tempted to mention her New Year’s resolution to eat healthy and exercise but resisted. Maggie would interpret it as negative and critical rather than positive encouragement.

“Remember Julianne’s Bistro?” he said instead.

It was a tiny French restaurant they discovered decades earlier. In the nineties they dined there once a week. Julianne’s husband Remy was the chef. Julianne would insist they sample Remy’s special, implying he created it for their pleasure. When they pronounced it magnificent, as they always did, Remy left the kitchen and drew up a chair beside their table as if they were celebrities. Their friends raved about the cuisine and ambiance. The fact they found it made it theirs and they exulted in their excellent taste.

Maggie looked wistful. “We haven’t been there in ages.”

“Let’s have dinner there tomorrow.”

“Do you think they’re still in business?”

“I’ll call and make sure.” Was it cruel to take her to their favorite restaurant to say he wanted out? The invitation arose from a genuine impulse to be kind, but when Maggie accepted he wasn’t so sure. Maybe it was a mistake.

After work the next day Roger drove home to pick up Maggie. She wore what was his favorite dress a decade ago. The teal silk had highlighted her green eyes and brought out the rosy peach tones in her skin while the way it draped and swung when she moved left him undone by the beauty of her body.

Now the fabric strained to contain fifteen extra pounds, showcasing every ripple of belly fat. The color did no favors for her pale complexion. Roger tried to hide his dismay but he wasn’t quick enough; he never had been. Maggie gave a dismissive, self-deprecating wave. “Joke! For old time’s sake. How lame can I get?”

He ached at how hard she was trying and forced a smile. “You look groovy, babe.”

“Any special reason you wanted to go out tonight?” she asked as they sped toward Encino.

Did she suspect something? She didn’t rub her eyes, clench her jaw or tap her foot, the usual ways she manifested anxiety. Unless he read her wrong, she was in a good mood, optimistic, relaxed. No point ruining the night until he absolutely had to. His bullet points about the divorce could be broached after dinner, when Julianne presented the bill. “We haven’t done it in a long time,” he said.

“Maybe I’ll surprise you and make it a special occasion,” she said. This was his cue to grovel for details; at the very least, he was expected to feign interest. He fiddled with the radio and tuned in the Lakers. Maggie focused on passing cars.