

## *Andrew Coburn*

### **Spouses**

Wyatt and Fay Eklund sipped drinks on the veranda of a small resort hotel on the Cape. Fay, lustrous and conspicuous in an open shirt over a brief bathing suit, drew covert glances from other tables, but she was used to that and would have been mildly dismayed had she sat unnoticed. Wyatt's attention was on the beach, where the lone figure of a man was following the surf. Wyatt abruptly rose from his chair. In yachting cap, royal-blue jersey, and white ducks, he had the stance and swagger of a reserve naval officer on active duty. "I think I know that guy," he said, shading his eyes.

Fay said, "How can you tell from here?"

He strode to a table where an elderly couple, the Boyds, sat, regular summer guests at the hotel, and snatched up Mr. Boyd's binoculars, training them on the man he thought he had recognized. Mr. Boyd, whose jowls wobbled his face, said, "Is that someone you know?"

"Could be. Could very well be."

Mrs. Boyd, her face dense with makeup, said, "You have a lovely wife."

Wyatt returned the binoculars and, with a knowing smile, rejoined Fay. "God damn," he said. "If that's who I think it is, he was one of my professors at Dartmouth. That was about ten years before he killed his wife."

Fay shuddered. "Why isn't he in prison?"

Wyatt sipped his martini while his free hand grazed his wife's knee. "Two mistrials. They let him go."

The Boyds were on their feet. Mrs. Boyd's permed hair was the yellowish pink of a tea rose. Mr. Boyd, a retired marketing executive for Nabisco's cookie and biscuit division, had protruding eyes that cast an air of aggression. He smiled at Fay and said to Wyatt, "Would you two like to dine with us this evening?"

"Can't," Wyatt said. "A friend of mine has shown up out of the blue."

"The fellow on the beach?"

The beach was now deserted. The sail of a distant boat looked like a gull's feather stuck in the sea. "That's the one."

Mrs. Boyd said, "Then bring him along, by all means"

"Not a good idea," Wyatt said. "He's a murderer."

Late afternoon, Wyatt let himself into the room. Fay was stretched out on the bed, her sprawled legs of superb shape and length. Huskiness gave her more value to the pound. He enjoyed gazing at her, as if she were prime stock. She opened her eyes.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"He's not staying at the hotel. He's probably at a bed-and-breakfast. I mean, if he's anywhere."

"Why is it important you see him?"

"I never said it was."

Fay used an elbow to prop herself, auburn hair falling across her brow. "Why did he kill his wife?"

"The papers said she had a lover. Or a bunch of lovers. Or maybe somebody told me that. You hear a lot of stories."

"People love stories. Adds spice to their lives. Was he a good teacher?"

"He was a hard marker. Unfair, most people said. Shoved Pound and Joyce down our throats."

"He made you work."

"He was too damn tough," Wyatt said distractedly, as if feeding on the memory. He plunked

himself down on the bed's edge and vaguely caressed the solidness of her calf. "His wife had red hair. Redder than yours."

"Mine's not all that red."

"That's what I mean."

Fay was curious. "Did you know her?"

"I talked to her once at a student-faculty luncheon." Wyatt cupped his wife's knee. "Her name was Rita. She was a beauty, like you."

Fay hiked beyond the bend of the beach to partial privacy, where she spread a towel on sand and shed her bikini top. Arms tight at her sides and legs stretched to the full, she lay in the midday sun and let the shadows of gulls glide over her. She enjoyed breezes on her body and salt air in her hair. As a child she had relished rain on her face and had run barefoot in the summer. In adolescence she had welcomed the boldness of her body and the mystery of her looks. She'd been a by-blow: she knew her mother, not her father.

She lifted her head when faint voices wafted in from a point where beach plum decorated dunes. At the margin of her vision she discerned Mr. Boyd in a breach of manners with his binoculars, which annoyed only a little. Mrs. Boyd led him away.

Evident from a half-mile away was a salt marsh's brackish smell, always tantalizing to her, and she wondered if it had winged the distance solely to intrigue her, to mark her as special. One of the few times she had not felt special was at a party with Wyatt and his friends. Listening to their reminiscences of boarding schools and European jaunts, she had felt doubly misbegotten. Another time was her first visit to Wyatt's family home south of Boston. His father, notably patrician, spoke in an easy voice that suggested the finer things in life, his mother was a preserved length of perfect manners and charm, and his sister had dazzling teeth that exaggerated an insincere smile.

Fay lay with the sun a lazy weight on her face. Eyes closed, she sensed a presence near the surf. Warily sitting up, she rapidly reattached her bikini top and made out the figure of the man glimpsed earlier, this time his face discernible, not at all what she had expected of a murderer.

"I didn't mean to intrude," he said from the short distance. His face was pleasant and agreeable, with distinct planes and a dry exactitude significant enough to be remembered.

"But here you are," she said. His graying hair seemed in the process of falling into place.

Dressed in T-shirt and khaki shorts, he cut a reasonable figure. Suddenly he started to move on.

"Please," she said, rising. "Wait." With a leap and a skip, long legs flashing, she joined him and fell in step. Following the surf, they left tracks on a long wet carpet of sand. Waves rousting pebbles spoke a language she strained to comprehend. "My name's Fay. What's yours?"

His glance was oblique. "Manning."

"I understand you taught at Dartmouth. My husband was in one of your classes. Wyatt Eklund."

Manning shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"I'm sure you'd remember him if you saw him. Tall, exceedingly handsome. He wanted to be a writer, then a painter, but neither worked out."

"Some artists fail to defy gravity. Words, colors fall flat. Your husband could do what I did and teach." Manning shifted his eyes to the orderly arrival of waves, pebbles chattering, the wash ruffling the sand's edge. "So what does he do now?"

"He doesn't have to do anything. He comes from money."

They slowed their step and stopped. A whale-watching boat was plowing a path in from deep waters. Manning placed his face in a breeze while Fay wondered whether his murdered wife terrorized his dreams.

"He's been looking for you," Fay said. "He'd like you to dine with us at the hotel."

"I think not," Manning said, without explanation. His gaze trailed a gull shaving the surf.

"Wyatt will be disappointed."

"Then don't tell him you've seen me."

“That would be a sin of omission.”

“Many sins are.”

Fay found herself looking into calm eyes that divulged nothing. The only other killer she knew was Ray Hughson from her hometown in upstate New York. A month on the police force, Ray had responded to a call from the public library, where an eccentric old woman, Hattie Bragg, was causing a ruckus. When Hattie threatened Ray with her cane, he drew his service revolver and shot her dead. Ray was a clod. This fellow Manning was not.

Manning said, “Why are you staring?”

“Am I? I’m sorry,” Fay said, and they resumed walking, sidestepping washed-up weed and wading through a hollow of warmish tidal water. The whale-watching boat, surrounded by swooping and squawking gulls, was curving away. In a careful voice, Fay said, “Wyatt read about you in the papers.”

“So you know about that,” he said without inflection. They were walking now where the sand was stiff, like asphalt.

“Should I be afraid of you?”

“That’s up to you.”

The afternoon was wearing down, accepting shadows in the dunes, which made Fay leery of walking much farther from the hotel with him. He was a sealed document, contents unknown. “I’d better turn back now.” she said.

“I’ll keep going.” Turning away, he slowly glanced back. “What’s your husband’s name again?”

“Wyatt. Wyatt Ecklund.”

“Wanted to be a writer, did he?”

“For a while.”

“Couldn’t have shown a great deal of promise. I’d have remembered.”

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