

Grief

Joan Shaw

SHE HAD BEGUN FALLING ASLEEP AT ODD MOMENTS — not when she was sitting in a chair, reading a book, or anything like that — but rather when she was doing things that ordinarily kept a person awake, like sitting at the desk in the kitchen writing thank-you notes or doing the accounting or even talking to Clayton, her forestry professor husband, at the dinner table.

And the subject could be anything. It could be a twenty-car pileup on I-15 or a spectacular robbery on Fourth Street, right around the block — she'd still fall asleep in the middle of it, in the middle of her own *sentence*, eyes shut, head drooping to the side, oblivious to her husband's voice calling — "Edith? Hey, Edith?" — the dark eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses blank pools of bewilderment over this thing — this soft, intrusive veil that was drifting over his wife of twenty years.

Edith Mott had been the typical, active faculty wife for seventeen of those years — well groomed and self-controlled, amiable, willing to chair one committee after another. And even after these past few months, she still looked the part to perfection — feathery gray-blond hair, body gently rounded by the weight of four decades, given to wearing suits with softly scarved blouses and low-heeled pumps. Falling asleep in the middle of conversations, though — that was new.

The first time she had fallen asleep that way was at the funeral of her son. There she was, standing not ten feet from the casket, with Dale lying stiff and still in the tucked white satin lining, dead so suddenly, so *absurdly*. The bishop had just beckoned for her and Clayton to come up for a last look before the lid was finally closed. She'd started off well enough — with eyes that had not yet

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shed tears but were nevertheless blank, empty, the way eyes come to look after facing such swift, immeasurable absurdities as the loss of an only son to a high school football accident. But suddenly she had faltered, felt faint . . .

. . . no, not faint . . . drowsy, rather . . . hardly able to put one foot in front of the other . . .

Her knees gave way . . .

And her husband, Clayton, had caught her.

Later the doctor seemed to think that these "little spells" were Mrs. Mott's way of avoiding her son's death, of wiping it out of her mind. But Edith had never avoided Dale's death; it was the death's absurdity that she avoided, its hilarious absurdity.

For should she ever really lose control . . . if she had lost control at the closing of the casket . . . if she had actually started *laughing out loud* . . .

At first after the accident she had tried anger, tried it on as though it were a tailored suit in black. How well could her elbows bend in order to cut a person dead, for instance? How easily could she turn contemptuously on her heel in that fitted skirt? While dressed in that tight, black rage could she stare coldly enough to penetrate the soul of her husband, who had always loved football?

For Edith had come to know all about fathers living through their sons. It was a heady thing, that dream of being the star on a high school football team, and what male would turn up his nose at the prospect — cheerleaders in full scream as he raced for a touchdown, cookies slipped surreptitiously into his locker by the pep club girls, trophies grandly handed over to enshrine his courage, his heart, his overwhelming desire to win, his zeal for sacrificing everything — even his life — for his teammates, as though the varsity squad were engaged in an unrelenting war of global proportions.

And then Dale had been Clayton's only son, his only child. Naturally Clayton would want him on the Westville High team after the boy had proved to be such an outstanding athlete, after the coaches had praised him so, packing the ears of father and son with glory. Ah, how it had maddened Edith! — that praise given the players for staggering back into the game, half dead and filthy, knees and knuckles bleeding, ankles taped with elastic bandages. One of Dale's sophomore trophies had been awarded for just that sort of thing — for "courage" — raw, physical, childish, obedient courage; and of course after that he would rather have died than look like a weakling.

Which is just what he did.

And so she had raged for a while at Clayton, and at all men like Clayton — those fathers living through the glorious, causeless victories of their boys — while she looked at her son in his white and gold casket. The mirror on the opened lid reflected a young, squarish face, with a faint sheen of hairspray on the light brown cap of his hair. He had turned seventeen just the August before.

The angled mirror in the casket had been the brainchild of the mortuary owner, unnerving the elderly bishop during his eulogy and giving the whole

ceremony the aura of solemn but spectacular celebrity — complete with standing room only in a stakehouse built to hold a full thousand during stake conference.

She could feel them pressing against the air behind her, the entire Westville student body and a good part of the opposing team's as well — heads upon heads of them reaching far back into the auditorium and up into the choir seats, gathered around the doors, rising from folding chairs in the aisles, all of them unfairly alive, straining to see the reflection in the casket lid that was about to be lowered, as the bishop beckoned the parents to leave their seats . . .

Edith's purse had been lying on the pew beside her, and before going up to the casket she'd reached down to get it. Then Clayton had taken her arm . . .

I'm big, Mom, I'm bigger than anyone on the team, don't worry so much, look, I could pick you up with one arm — Hey Dad, Mommio thinks I'm gonna hurt my bod . . .

Don't worry so much, Edith, thousands of kids play high school football every year and never get hurt . . . A lie, Clayton, a filthy LIE . . . !

. . . and she had stepped into the aisle and shaken Clayton's arm off, roughly, cruelly; she had wanted to hurt him. He'd been so stupid back then. He could never think ahead, could never see things staring him in the face. And then she'd turned to put her arms around him — a tall, loosely strung man in a dark suit, his hair thin and colorless, his eyes reddened and tragic behind his smeared glasses. Appalled at what she had just done, she had held him, hearing his sobs, wondering why she herself stood just as unaccountably dry-eyed as she had remained from the very beginning. Finally she had whispered to him — standing there in the aisle while the bishop waited — by the casket with hands folded in front of him — she had whispered, "Ah . . . it was just a thing that *happened*."

And then, stepping forward with Clayton, she had quietly fallen asleep.

She had awakened, reluctantly, in the cloak room, lying on the sofa next to the hymnbook cupboards, swamped with lassitude. A small man dressed in a gray suit was kneeling beside her — a doctor who had attended the funeral with his son, a member of Westville's junior varsity squad.

The cloakroom doorway had been jammed with high school students, red-eyed, eyebrows contracted in concern. Edith had caught sight of them when her eyes first fluttered open, had felt their affection drift over her like a pall, and had groaned at the weight. She hadn't wanted their affection — still newly dressed in her black wool rage — she had wanted instead their *deaths*. She had wanted them dead because Dale was dead, because . . .

. . . asleep? You say she's ASLEEP?

Ah yes, Professor Mott, I've seen this happen . . . Your wife will be all right . . . I believe it may be a suppression of sorts . . .

Edith . . . are you awake, Edith? Wake up hon . . . Dear? . . . Hey, Edith . . .

But she hadn't wanted to wake up; her eyelids glued themselves shut, blotting them all out — Clayton and the doctor and all those heads. She hated all of the students because they were alive, the quiet ones who read in their rooms at home, and the studious ones who went to the libraries and labs, and the musical ones who practiced with the orchestra and band, but especially the ones in Dale's crowd — the ones who dragged Westville's Main Street on Friday and Saturday nights in their Camaros and Firebirds and TransAms, resplendent with rear spoilers, hood scoops, fender flares, and channel trim; or in Baja pickups with dummy spots across the roof and chrome roll bars in the back, wide tires rolling around on the outside of trimmed fenders like big, black donuts. She wanted them all dead . . . *DEAD* . . .

. . . *usually termed narcolepsy, Professor Mott . . . nothing to worry about . . . it'll fade away after a year, a year or a little more . . . the grief, you see, is buried . . .*

. . . but Edith knew all along that hating Dale's friends didn't make sense, not any sense at all, that nothing made any sense except the absurdity of her son's death, and that instead of sleeping she should be laughing, as surely as Dale himself would be laughing — if he could — into that dark, absurd mirror.

She had said no to Dale, absolutely no. What could football ever lead to except trick knees, arthritis, and back trouble in his thirties? Track was different; track was clean, dignified. Why couldn't he be satisfied with track? She had said no and had stuck to her decision for many weeks while the boy slammed in and out of the house, sulky and bad tempered, missing, as he told her twenty times a day, the chance of a lifetime, and all because of her.

How can you be so stubborn? he'd said. How can you be so *mean*? Do you have something against me, do you hate me or something? he'd said. The coaches had come to *him*, they'd thought him that good. He hadn't even signed up for varsity, but Coach Schmidt had seen him run during the track meets and one day had taken Dale, along with Bahler, the line coach, to the weight room where the two men had practically begged the boy to try out anyway.

And he'd *only been a ninth grader* . . . though his voice had already changed by then, he was growing a small patch of chest hair, and Edith sometimes thought her son had left and a character out of *Hollowe'en Howl* had come to take his place.

She could close her eyes and still see him sitting on the bean bag in his bedroom, somnolent, the walls around him resonating with the stereo sounds of Motley Crüe, Quiet Riot, Iron Maiden . . .

. . . or lying on his bed, awash in that libidinous beat, engrossed in *Muscle and Fitness* and *Pumping Iron*, covers spread with gleaming bodies rippling with bronze, bulging muscle, satin G-strings holding it all together . . .

And the girls were always hanging around by then, too; eyes staring out of faces rouged so heavily on the sides that they looked sick with fever; eyelids green and fringed with black; blonde hair springing from their heads like

mattress stuffing or else hacked short on top with the sides slicked back. They'd come to the door, or they'd call on the telephone: Is Dale around? Is Dale up yet?

And Edith would yell up the stairs: Dale! Dale! Are you going to sleep all day? She'd go into his darkened bedroom and pull open the drapes. What do you want, he'd mumble. It's Saturday; I have to get up all week for school, and I'm tired, *physically dead*. I did a hundred and fifty pushups yesterday, my biceps . . . my deltoids . . . my hamstrings . . .

Where's the protein in this breakfast? he'd say later. I need a hundred grams of protein a day. And still later he'd say, I'll be home when you see me; and the next morning he'd say, What do you mean sacrament meeting, who goes to sacrament meeting . . . ?

His voice had become hoarse, unfinished, a foghorn of complaint: some jock-hating paranoid had given him a D in English, his blue pullover had been put in the dryer and now it was too tight, where were his Van Halen tapes, who took his gym bag, somebody stole his new sweats, how was he supposed to know where the big green towel was — he didn't watch his towel like a hawk at the gym — he had other things to do: his bench presses, his leg curls, his deep squats, his dead lifts. . . .

His neck over the past year and a half had changed into a sinewy superstructure rising like a stump of an oak from his shoulders. It was wider than his head and had taken hours upon hours to develop . . .

Is Dale around? Is Dale up yet. . . ?

The stereo shook the house; the background bass, the drum, the animal beat, the carnality pulsed through her brain, her sinuses. The very capillaries lining the skin underneath her forehead throbbed and made her eyes ache. Dale! Dale! she'd cry. Turn that thing *DOWN*. . . . Someone wants you on the *PHONE*!

Who is it . . . who wants me?

I don't know, a couple of girls . . .

He'd been taken away at the *wrong time*, at the peak of that purgatory that mothers and sons so often go through, circling each other warily like two strange dogs. She'd known that in time they would get through it, reborn and healed. It would only take time. But there had been *no time*.

Dale had been struck solidly in the chest by one of those bulbous football helmets: a boy from the other team, a big senior, had run straight into him. It happened during the homecoming game; the other team was a longtime rival — the Red Rocks, from out in the county. It had been important that Dale's team win this game. The coaches had harangued them on this point with gut-wrenching earnestness. This was an important game; a win would set the tone, you see, for the rest of the season.

Dale had taken the blow during a kickoff, but he'd continued to play until the final quarter, when the coach, suddenly aware that his prodigy was gasping and heaving for breath, took him out of the game. The win was in the bag by then anyway, thanks to this sophomore wonder, this boy Dale; thanks to his

courage, to his heart, or rather to those blood vessels in his heart, ruptured in three places by that ramrod shock to his chest and sending by then steady, inexorable jets of blood into his lungs, slowly filling them, until it was too late, *too late . . .*

. . . Oh, your boy had courage, Mrs. Mott, real team spirit — he cared so much. Why don't the others care as much as I do? he asked me last year. I can still see him, standing on the sidelines dressed in his pads, mud from head to toe. We were losing badly, what a season, a tragedy, and he said to me, Why don't the others . . . ?

Edith had looked at the coach, speaking his passionate eulogy in her living room the day before the funeral, and had wondered just what he'd expected of her. Am I supposed to be proud? she'd wondered. Am I supposed to be comforted? He realized, surely, that she'd never gone to the games. She'd told Dale — after finally caving in under the psychological warfare and letting him join the varsity squad in the ninth grade — that she'd never watch him play. She'd seen snatches of the game — during her own high school years and on television and in the neighborhood schoolyards — reverberating with the hoarse, acrimonious cries of the players. She would keep this one last pledge; she would never watch her son play football.

"Am I supposed to thank you?" she was ready to say. "Get out of my sight before I . . ."

But no, she'd never said anything like that. It had boiled up from her insides like lava inside a volcano and had gotten to the tip of her tongue. Then she'd swallowed it back, far back inside, where she'd crammed and condensed the laughter that threatened every minute to engulf her and everything and everyone around her.

The man who'd talked to Edith was actually the athletic director, Coach Schmidt — a large, solemn man, smooth-shaven, with a brush haircut, stomach curved outward over an oval belt buckle. It was Coach Schmidt who had finally arranged for Dale to go to the hospital — but not until the boys had showered and changed, hitting each other on the back, drunk with euphoria. Dale's chest pains had begun then, doubling him up in agony, and Coach Schmidt, alarmed at the pain, at the bluish tinge around Dale's mouth, called an ambulance.

And so they had taken Edith's son to the hospital . . .

. . . and he had died in the emergency room, shortly before midnight.

The doctor who'd treated her at the stakehouse had insisted that Edith go directly home after the graveside ceremonies, take the medication he'd prescribed, and sleep. *Sleep!* How much of that was she to do in the nearly twelve months that had passed since Dale's funeral? How many strange, dreamless waves of sleep had washed over her, erasing as much as an entire afternoon from her life? And at last she would wake to see standing before her in her imagination the boy who had broken, literally broken, Dale's heart —

abashed but nevertheless living, his glossy blond hair cut short on the sides, high and wavy on top, his face pale, just as it had been when he stood among the Red Rock varsity squad, his teammates surrounding him, aggressively protective, even in the rites of mourning.

He wasn't to be blamed, you see; Dale wouldn't want that at all. No matter that spearing an opponent with your helmet had been outlawed years before, was not ever supposed to happen in high school football. It was all so absurd, so impossibly absurd.

Perhaps it hadn't happened. Perhaps it was just something she'd dreamed about in one of those lost afternoons — a nightmare born from her deep-ingrained fear of the game. And she, groggy still from her deep, unnatural sleep at these times, would half expect to find Dale in the house somewhere, waiting impatiently for her to get him something. She'd find herself looking around, dry-eyed as always, watching, listening, intent for some clue as to where the boy was, what he wanted.

But the house remained always quiet, dead quiet; or perhaps rustling slightly with Clayton's footsteps as he moved around the kitchen, pouring out a glass of orange juice or milk and padding quietly with it up the carpeted hallway in his slippers, the eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses dark and troubled and slightly bemused.

Edith . . . ? Her husband stood one night in the living room doorway, absently rubbing a finger around the top of the glass he was holding while he looked in at his wife, waiting. It had been eleven months and twelve days since the death of their son, and Clayton wondered when, as the doctor had predicted, those unaccountable naps would fade away. Edith? he said. Are you awake . . . ?

Edith . . . ?