

## Blind Spot

When June was a girl, she had dreamt of being an actress. Later the dream died, as such dreams often do, but not for the usual reasons. There was no gradual sloughing off of illusion, no begrudging acceptance of her preterition. It was, rather, the introduction of colour that ended her cinematic aspirations. For whatever reason, it made the image much too real; and as a result, she realised that what she had wanted was not to be an actress at all. What she had really wanted was to be a monochrome giant, her skin a blemishless silver, her eyes a sparkling black, moving and speaking with the artificial grace of practiced choreography.

In any case, she did what she realised she had been expecting to do all along, which was marry a well-to-do business acquaintance of her father and live in a comfortable house in a respectable suburb.

George was in something to do with cars. Beyond that she did not enquire, which regrettably did not prevent him from telling her anyway. He was also neat in appearance, with a moustache that required approximately fifteen minutes of cultivation each morning, and a hair-parting that was almost disquieting in its exactitude. He had virtues, of course – she did choose to marry him, after all, and it would not do to focus only on his... particularities. He was attentive to her needs and wants, he worked hard, and he was well-liked within the community. This last is perhaps surprising, and indeed, his charisma often took people by surprise, June included, for George did not immediately strike one as being particularly genial or good-humoured. No, it was a kind of forthrightness of manner, an unshakeable integrity, an absoluteness to his being that made him somehow attractive. Most people are not entirely certain about anything. George exuded certainty.

They were married for four years before things started to go wrong.

First, the pregnancy. June had been pregnant, but she had miscarried; sadly a common enough occurrence, the doctor assured her, and not a cause for concern. Yet the doctor was not June, and nor was he George, both of whom became increasingly concerned as the months passed and June did not conceive again.

Then there was the incident at the company. Something to do with cars became something to do with a substantial unpaid debt and a bank that was looking to recoup its investment. George would frequently come home late, and then spend his evenings poring over the contents of his briefcase. There was a desperation to him that was unfamiliar, although it seemed to augment, rather than dilute, his air of determination. June was pleased to discover that it also did not alter his attitude towards her. She had seen her father direct his displeasure towards her mother, as certain husbands were inclined to do to their wives in that time and in that place. Fortunately, George was not such a man – and though on occasion he seemed a little distant, or was perhaps a little less cheerful (not that cheerfulness had been a defining characteristic beforehand, making this somewhat hard to measure), he remained as courteous and as civil as he had always been.

Finally, there were the Howitzers. Appropriately named, George had said, given the amount of noise they make. This was a rare joke from him, and June had given him her laughter out of affection, although she had not noticed their new neighbours to be particularly loud. They had moved in shortly after June miscarried, and they had seemed perfectly normal, if a little insular. June had to admit to herself that she had deliberately steered clear of Mrs Howitzer, at least at first, since the latter had been preceded everywhere by an unmistakable protuberance that had been rather difficult to contend with after the doctor's visit.

George, however, seemed to actively dislike the Howitzers. Aside from complaining of the noise they made – they were a great distraction in the evenings when he was trying to focus on his work – he also remarked on their lack of decorum, taste, and concern for others' wellbeing. The most frequently cited evidence for all three was Mr Howitzer's car: a brand-new model that had been painted a distressing shade of orange, and which Mr Howitzer was apparently forever washing. June gathered from her husband's declamations that the car was an eyesore, sitting out there on the driveway – although she would have to admit that she was unclear as to whether its colour, its owner, or the fact that it was brand new was most to blame.

June eventually learned that the rest of the community were also not particularly fond of the Howitzers. Some, like George, objected to the presence of the car, while others noted that they were not making much of an effort to integrate – which is to say ingratiate – themselves with those who had perforce become their neighbours. Mrs Howitzer had declined the invitations to coffee from several women, and Mr Howitzer did not golf (the proximity of the green having made this the local pastime). They kept themselves to themselves, which would have been considered selfish had anybody wanted them. They were apparently quite wealthy – the car attested to it – so there was no reason why they could not entertain, even in Mrs Howitzer's condition (she could not yet be halfway through the second trimester). In fact, Mr Howitzer was known to be making something of himself in insurance, or merchant banking, or something of that nature, details understandably being fuzzy when they could not be gathered from the source. Only last week, he had been seen buying a celebratory bottle of champagne on his way home from the office.

Then the community lost interest in the Howitzers, it becoming apparent that they were uninclined to change through indirect censure.

Yet George did not lose interest. His disdain for the Howitzers remained strong in the face of others' apathy. It came to a head, as such things do, over a relatively trivial matter.

The hedge that separated the back gardens of the two houses had, it transpired, been planted by a somewhat inexperienced gardener, since when at last it grew to its full potential it quite obviously bowed inwards (or outwards, from the Howitzer's perspective), taking up at least two feet of the back lawn. One evening, a week after having lost his job at the car company, George set to remedy this state of affairs. His attempts to replant the hedge were unfortunately met with resistance from Mr Howitzer, who had been enjoying a drink in the garden with Mrs Howitzer at the time, and after the exchange of

some unpleasantries, George had climbed over the hedge and threatened Mr Howitzer with a shovel. Mr and Mrs Howitzer had then retreated inside and telephoned for the police, while George set about trying to replant the hedge unimpeded.

After the ignominy of the ride to and from the station, George's attitude towards the Howitzers was not much improved. They were a thorn in his side, he told June. They disrupted his focus. They drained his strength.

June had to admit this did appear to be so. George did seem to put an awful lot of effort into disliking the Howitzers, although whether this were to blame for his difficulty in finding a new job she did not venture to suggest. Certainly, George also put a great deal of effort into looking for a new job – that could not be denied – but how exactly the Howitzers were involved she could not say. Instead she suggested moving, but George would not hear of it. They had settled here first. They belonged here.

One evening Mr Howitzer returned home brandishing another bottle of champagne. On seeing this, George announced that he needed to go for a walk. He was obviously quite out of sorts, but June was once again grateful that she had married a man who could hold his temper.

After she had gone to bed alone (she often went to bed alone, since George liked to keep much later hours), she heard a glass breaking next door. Presumably Mr Howitzer had drunk too much of his champagne – he had, after all, had the bottle all to himself, given Mrs Howitzer's condition. June allowed herself to doze, although she expected George would be back soon.

Some time later, as she had wavered in and out of consciousness, she heard the sounds of scraping coming from the garden. No doubt this had been the final straw: George had decided to replant the hedge once and for all. Well, Mr Howitzer was unlikely to trouble him this time, sleeping off a whole bottle of champagne. Perhaps, with the hedge properly replanted, George would at last be able to ignore the Howitzers altogether.

At some point in the night she woke up to the sound of running water. George was in the bathroom, no doubt cleaning himself up after his efforts in the garden. He was taking an awfully long time, but that was not out of the ordinary. She drifted back to sleep, dimly aware of George later settling in beside her and kissing her on the cheek.

Mr Howitzer did not drive to work the following morning. The bright orange car greeted June as she opened the curtains to let in the sunlight. She nodded, her expectations confirmed: Mr Howitzer was sleeping off his hangover.

To her surprise, however, she discovered that George had not replanted the hedge at all. Instead, he had replanted the little pear tree they had been growing in a pot behind the kitchen door. It now nestled in the corner of the lawn, solitary and somewhat out of place. She commented on it to George, who apologised that he had not thought of a better place for it. He had come home, he said, feeling rather useless, and seeing a job to be done, he had done it. Admittedly, he had not done it well, but he did not think it would be good for the tree to replant it a second time. June agreed, as much to maintain

George's spirits as anything else, which seemed to have been greatly uplifted by the completion of this small task.

Over the following week, June noticed that she had not seen the Howitzers as often as she had been accustomed to. It took her a while to realise it – she was not, after all, looking for them – but the absence of small things, like the sound of the orange car pulling in of an evening, began to register. The orange car was still there, just... unused.

George suggested that the Howitzers must have gone on holiday, to cap off their celebration. They would have taken a taxi to the station, or the airport, even, if Mr Howitzer's success had been up to it. That made sense, of course. The car would stay here.

Two weeks later, George had found himself a new job. A week after that, and June discovered that she was pregnant. The Howitzers had apparently had enough good fortune to go around. Perhaps Mrs Howitzer had gone into labour while they were away? That would, at least, explain why they were still on holiday.

A month passed. The pears on the tree began to ripen. June found that she did not like to look at those pears. For some reason, they seemed to create in her the feeling of trying to remember a word, or a tune – something on the tip of the tongue – but magnified to the point at which it turned her stomach. That could be the baby, of course.

Everything seemed to be going well. Everything had an explanation. There was nothing to be worried about.

When, at last, the police came calling, she was forced to ask herself: how much had she known? And the truth of it was, she simply couldn't say.