

Prodigal Me

by J. T. Ellison, ...

Published: 2008
in »Killer Year«



Women are great crime writers. They always have been, and for a long time now they have set the agenda and driven the genre. All my favorite writers are women. Why? Are they better writers than men? Not exactly, but somehow they develop nuance and context more effortlessly. Check out this story by J.T. Ellison. It's a classic short, with a great payoff twist in the final paragraphs. But watch how J.T. paints the feel, the context, the background, with deft, subtle, unforced strokes. That's not just talent—it's talent plus total self-confidence, which is a truly winning combination.

—Lee Child

He's not speaking to me again.

It's happened before. I think the longest we've ever gone without some sort of verbal communication is two weeks. But that was back when he thought I'd tricked him and let myself get pregnant. I hadn't, but he didn't want to hear that from me. I remember it was two weeks because when I started to bleed, he started talking. Apologies, for the most part. The black eye had faded away by then, too.

So I don't usually become alarmed when he quits conversing. I'm just not sure why I'm getting the silent treatment. I wonder how long it's going to last? It can actually be quite nice, not having to make conversation. We can sit at the kitchen table, each sipping from our respective coffee cups. I have many cups. I decide which to use based on my mood each morning. Today I have one of my favorites, decorated in loops and swirls of color, abstract, joyful. That's how I woke this morning, content, but feeling a bit out of place. This was the perfect chalice to represent my feelings. Yesterday it was the bone white with the geometric triangular handle. All sharp edges and uncomfortable to hold. No elegance there, befitting the dark nastiness that I'd felt when I got up. But today was different. Better. Happy. Even without speech.

I watched him from under my lashes, tasting the bitter brew. He'd made the coffee before I arose. He'd been doing that lately, and it was unusual. Normally I was the first to the kitchen, the coffee was my responsibility. I certainly made a better pot. I wondered if that was why he'd designated the coffee to me in the first place, because his was lousy.

He was snapping the pages of the paper, passing through them so quickly that I knew he wasn't really reading anything. He knew I was watching him, and he heaved a sigh and laid the paper flat on the wood. He looked at me then, finally. His eyes were bloodshot. Not attractive at all. When we'd first met, he'd had the most beautiful blue eyes, a shade that matched the sky on a crisp fall day. Today, they were muddy, a hint of brown in the azure depths. He didn't meet my eye, just stared at my shoulder. I slid my silk dressing gown down just a bit, enough for the smooth white skin above my collarbone to show. He dragged in a breath, swept up his cup and threw it at the kitchen sink. It shattered, and I rolled my eyes. Typical for him, communicating through violence. For a smart man, he was so very stupid.

I glanced at the clock on the stove; it was well past time for him to leave for work. I sat back in my chair, ignoring him. The sooner he was out of here, the sooner I could clean up his mess and start my own day.

He didn't leave right away. He'd walked out of the kitchen right after his temper tantrum, but went into his study instead of heading out the front door. He generally preferred that I stay out of his study. Even our maid, Marie-Cecile, was only allowed in twice a week to vacuum and dust, but she was never allowed to touch the desk proper. Those were his rules, and Marie-Cecile stuck by them faithfully, even while she muttered Haitian curses under her breath. It always gave me joy to see her in there, hexing him for his transgressions.

It struck me that I hadn't noticed Marie-Cecile's car in the drive. She came every day at 9:00 A.M. like clockwork, with Sundays off. With a house this size, you have to have someone to help with the work. Besides, all of our friends had someone come in. Personally, Marie-Cecile was the best of the lot, but perhaps I'm bragging.

Today was Thursday, and it was already 9:30 A.M. Normally, I'd be at the club; my Tuesday/Thursday golf group would be teeing off between seven and nine. I'd slept later than usual, and I wasn't in the mood to play this morning. I'd join them for lunch instead.

I set about making the kitchen right, wondering where Marie-Cecile was. Not like her to be tardy, to miss a day without letting me know in advance she wouldn't be here. She'd only done that about three times in the three years she'd been cleaning for us. Very reliable, was Marie-Cecile. No matter. I was certainly capable of straightening up. The cup had been made of heavy fired clay, and though it had broken into about fourteen pieces, they weren't shards and slivers, but well-formed chunks that made it a cinch to gather. That done, I wandered back to our bedroom.

Sunlight spilled through the windowpane, enhancing the patina on the buttery walls. I'd designed this room myself. The decorator had commandeered the house, overloading the rooms with her personal touches, but I wanted one small place that I knew was mine, and mine alone. Guests didn't get to venture into this part of the house anyway. It was my own little refuge, even more so now that he was sleeping in his study. Eight bedrooms, and he chooses a hobnailed leather sofa. To each his own.

The bed wasn't made, which was odd. I knew I'd put it together before I made my way downstairs this morning. I always do. It's the first thing that happens when I wake up. I slide out the right edge, pull the covers up, and make the bed. Maybe he had come back into the room after I went downstairs, pulled the covers back to tick me off. Typical.

I made up the bed, humming to myself. That's when I found the hair. It was his, there was no question about it. I must have had too much to drink last night. He'd slept in the bed with me, and I didn't even remember. Perhaps that was the cause of his silence. Things hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped?

It's hard to explain, but he does come to me, in the night. I let him, mostly because it's my duty to perform, but also in remembrance of a time when I welcomed him without thought, joyful that he'd chosen to be with me. It wasn't that long ago, after all.

Bed made, I showered and dressed in khaki slacks and a long-sleeved Polo shirt. I threw a button-down over my shoulders in case it was still cool out. Layers for my comfort, layers for their perception of how I should look when I walked into the club. The official dress code was undiluted preppy.

He was gone when I passed the study on my way to the front foyer.

It was not meant to be my morning. My Jag wouldn't start. And Marie-Cecile was nowhere to be found, so I didn't have a ride. We lived on the golf course though, so I detoured through the fourteenth fairway and wandered up the cart path on the eighteenth. We're not supposed to do that, but I timed it well—after the ladies' group had finished and before the seniors' group made the first turn.

I arrived at the front doors a little breathless, more from the chill than the exercise. I'm in good shape. As his wife, I have to be. It's expected. Not much of a challenge for me, I'm naturally tall and willowy, but I still work with a trainer three times a week. Like I said, it's expected.

My friends and I have a standing luncheon on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After our round, we gather in the Grill Room, settle our bets, eat some salad, and gossip. Some of the older ladies play bridge. I've always wanted to learn, I just haven't gotten around to it. There is something so lonely about them, sitting in their Lilly Pulitzer capris, their visors still pulled low, shading their eyes from the glare of the multitudes of sixty-watt bulbs. Sad.

My usual foursome was sitting along the back wall today. Bunny (that's actually her name, I've seen the birth certificate) had the farthest spot, the place of honor. Back to the wall, viewable by the whole room. My spot. She lounged against the arm of the chair, her feet propped on the empty seat facing the window. My punishment for missing the round this morning, I suppose. Bunny glistened with the faint flush of exertion. She always looked like she'd just rolled out of bed, freshly plucked and glowing. No wonder there, she was sleeping with half the married men in the club, as well as most of the tennis and golf pros. Probably a couple of the high school caddies and college kids, too.

Tally and Kim rounded out the threesome, both looking a little peaked. Tally was short and brunette, a striking contrast to Bunny's wholesome blondness. Kim was blond, a little dishwater, but since she'd moved to Bunny's hairdresser, she'd been getting some subtle highlights that worked for her complexion. Kim was fiddling with her scorecard, probably erasing a couple of shots. We all knew she cheated. We let her.

Tally sat with her back barely touching the chair, ramrod straight. Uncharacteristic for her, she usually slouched and sprawled like the rest of us. The chairs were suede-lined and double width for our comfort, and they served their purpose well.

I approached the table, expecting Bunny to see me and drop her feet off my newly assigned chair. Instead, she was talking about me. I stopped, indignant. They hadn't even noticed I came in. She was so caught up with whatever maliciousness she'd intended for the day that she didn't realize I was standing barely five feet away. I could hear her clearly. Talking about me. Gossiping about me. That little bitch. I started for her, then stopped. Maybe I'd eavesdrop a little more, see what I could use against them later.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not naive enough to think that a group of women friends aren't going to talk to one another about the missing person. But there's a big difference between talking about a friend who's absent and publicly dissecting that friend's life. We're all somebody, the four of us. Which means that there are multitudes of fodder, plenty of grist for the communal mill. There are some things that are sacred, though, and an open discussion of my disastrous marriage is one of them. You just don't do that.

I started toward the table again, ready to give Miss Bunny a walloping with the side of my tongue. A short frizzled blonde with mismatched socks beat me. Damn. Shirley.

Shirley was one of those people. You know the ones I mean. Not to be mean, but they drift around the periphery of any tight-knit group, waiting like a dog for the table scraps. Shirley wanted to be a part of our group, but that would never happen. She was just too annoying. Yet Bunny's face lit up when she saw the diminutive disaster headed to the table. She swung her feet off the chair, rose like

Amphitrite from the depths, and hugged Shirley. Physical contact with a barnacle? That was well known to be strictly forbidden. What in the hell was going on today?

I had become persona non grata without a clue as to why. No one would look at me, each woman kept her eyes from mine. Busboys and waiters wandered right past me, no one asking to help me, no one offering me a refreshment. After my long walk to the clubhouse, I could have used a nice Chardonnay. That was it. It was time I let my presence be known to my so-called friends.

I glided to the table, mouth slightly open, deciding which opening I'd use. Hello girls, waiting for me? You lousy bitches, how dare you speak about me behind my back? Bunny, you look divine today—whose sperm are you carrying? Kim, I think you need a quick trip to Alberto's. And Tally, darling, do try to sit back, you look like you've got a pole stuck up your ass.

But all my words died in my throat when I saw what Shirley had brought as an offering to my group of friends. The newspaper unfurled, bearing a special edition logo, the headline seventy point. GUILTY, it screamed.

I stormed through the house, looking. How dare he. How could he do it? What was he thinking?

I wasn't finding what I was looking for. I needed to stop and think. I was in a black rage, I couldn't even see straight when I was this worked up. So I sat on the bottom step and took a few breaths. That helped.

My husband was not a foolish man. He wouldn't have left a trail, or a bunch of clues. I had all night to search. The rest of my life, if it was necessary. I'd start in the obvious place. The basement.

I'd had a very difficult time reading the article Shirley had brought to my friends in gleeful attribution. She was a lawyer, one of the few women in our circle that actually worked for a living. A prosecutor, at that. Assistant District Attorney Shirley Kleebel. She paid her dues, if you know what I mean. She wasn't married to or aligned with a man of the club. She was the member, one of the few singles to join. That's part of the reason she'd never make it into the right circles. We had nothing to gain by being around her. Really, even meek and mild Tally had her signature on the checking account of the largest footwear mogul in the country. Shirley had nothing, except her name.

So I'd been a bit skeptical when I'd read the article. If I'm being totally honest, I didn't believe it. Not that it was outside the realm of possibility. My husband could be vicious when he chose.

It lauded Shirley as a genius, having resurrected a trial that was not only lost before it began, but achieving a guilty plea from the jury. I ran the article over and over in my head as I searched. According to the reporter, this had been done already. Several fruitless times, in fact.

But it's a big house. There are places no one would think to look simply because they wouldn't know they were there. Passages between floors with unseen staircases, a tunnel in the basement that accessed the freestanding garage. Escape routes. I thought them charming when we'd bought the house, then put them out of my mind. Now, I needed to comb through them, because I knew I'd find the truth in one of those dark, dank places.

Either way, he won't be coming home tonight. There won't be any more arguments, no broken coffee cups, no unmade beds. The bed. He'd slept in the bed last night. And he'd cried. I remember that now. He sobbed winningly, and told me how sorry he was. That he'd never meant for it to go so far. That he loved me, he truly did. He'd cried himself to sleep, then gotten up in the middle of the night and wandered away. I hadn't understood last night. Now, I think I did. But I'd have to see for myself.

The basement reeked pleasantly of cool and damp. I sensed nothing unusual, no odors, no sights that gave me cause for alarm. I crept around the corner, slipping silently through the gloom. If what the article said were true, if my friends' gossip was accurate, I'd have ages to find all of the little passageways in this house. I think there's one that goes all the way up to the clubhouse, but I've never found it.

The one I did know about was just ahead. A false wall, easily misleading without the exact knowledge of where it should be. If you looked closely, you could see a crack in the foundation, like the floor was settling. The fracture ran up the wall, and if you pushed just the right brick...

There, the wall swung open to reveal a small passageway. When the house was built, over two hundred years ago, the original owner wanted to be buried in the house. That's right, in the house. The crypt was the logical place to look.

I couldn't describe the emotions I felt when I saw it. It had been a sloppy job. He knew no one would ever find their way in here by accident. He thought he was safe.

So pale. I'd always loved my hands, long-fingered, smooth-skinned. Sticking up out of the dirt, though, they didn't look quite as nice.

The article said it was Marie-Cecile that testified against him. She'd seen it all. Seen his hands around my throat. I wonder why I didn't remember that part.

Son of a bitch. I hope he rots in jail.

Maybe I'll go visit him.

