

Goebbels' Gun

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At 7:00 AM every morning the reliable GE alarm clock gifted by his parents at his high school graduation propelled Jeff Biggle out of bed and into the bathroom. With bladder relieved and mouth refreshed with Listerine, he checked the mirror as he did every morning to confirm he was still there. And like most mornings, his wife Betty, still in her bathrobe, had already made the coffee and gotten the paper that reliably arrived every day at their front door hours before they awoke.

As with all well-worn marriages that survive years of co-habitation, Jeff and Betty Biggle had rituals between them so ingrained they were on autopilot. Jeff's coffee, black, had already been poured, Betty was at her end of the table with the day's first cigarette and the cross-word puzzle in the local paper syndicated from the New York Times, whereas at Jeff's accustomed place the sports section had already been extracted and put precisely to just the left of where Jeff always put down his bowl and box of Wheaties every morning.

By one of the many unspoken peace treaties that manage to find their way into a marriage and hold, neither spoke until they finished breakfast and their portions of the newspaper.

During this quiet start to the day before the noises and scramblings of the workday would bear down on them once again, each spouse indulged a private habit the other, despite 22 years of marriage, was unaware of. Betty, for example, experienced in the odd verbal ways of the Times' crossword puzzles (having mastered all kinds of three-letter words that surface only in crossword puzzles), sailed through the puzzles in impressive time, rarely needing the dictionary that was a permanent fixture on the breakfast table. But for reasons inexplicable (she just knew?), she never checked today's crossword puzzle to see if she got yesterday's puzzle right. Perhaps for her it was all about the journey, the immediate challenge of the still missing word there in 40 down, then the mountain, once climbed, no longer held her interest. Jeff was aware of none of this.

As for Jeff, his little secret was the double-read of the sports section. First would come a quick scan of all the scores that interested him, then the box score for the local baseball team, what player was up, who was down, and look at that, that lousy pitcher with the giant salary and shitty ERA flubbed another one. Once the world of stats settled in his head, then it was on to the two colorful sports columnists who ranted about this and that. He would read them fast at first, to get the information straight away. But then he would read each column a second time, this time pausing lovingly at favorite paragraphs while taking a spoonful of Wheaties, savoring each word like fine poetry. Another spoonful while hunched over the paper folded in front of him would follow, spilling some of the sugary milk onto the beloved paragraphs. A good sentence could be read five or six times over, like the endless headline banners that flash over Times Square in New York.

So did the first hour of every day gently flow down the river of time for Jeff and Betty Biggle. But not on this particular day, for Betty went to bed the night before with a bee in her bonnet, and it was still there now.

"Damn it, Jeff," she said, putting out her cigarette, "how much longer is it gonna take before Dad and that fancy resort June put him in takes the inheritance and runs it right into the ground? What's Dad get from that, he doesn't need any of that, he wouldn't know the difference if we got him into

something cheaper than that Hilton Hotel of a place. When are you going to do something?"

Betty had started calling her father-in-law Earl Biggle "Dad" when prospects dramatically improved that he might soon die and leave his kids, Jeff and June -- and her -- a decent pile of money and a lakeside cabin Betty had worked herself into thinking her sister-in-law June had no legitimate claim to.

Earl in his dotage enjoyed the new attentions Betty lavished on him. At around this time Betty had also begun a spreadsheet that recorded and updated the latest prices on E-Bay for various items in Earl's cabin "up North" and in the big messy house he lived alone in after his wife died and before he had to move to a place where he could be cared for. The house was empty, dark and haunted by stacks and stacks of old magazines, books and newspapers everywhere, with holes here and there dripping water from the ceiling. Everywhere in the house was the faint smell of urine. June, the detested sister-in-law, had the keys to the house, but Betty and Jeff knew how to get in through a storm door leading to the basement. Earl tenaciously held on to his own set of keys but had no occasion any more to use them.

Jeff was stunned from his sports page reveries by Betty's verbal assault. "Huh? What?"

Betty looked more menacing in curlers, which she happened to have in her hair at the moment. "You heard me, unless you plan to spend the rest of your life listening to people lie to you about whiplash, you need to get off your fat ass and see what you can do about Dad's stuff before it just gets pissed away or June and Bill steal it."

The breach of established morning ritual had caught Jeff off balance.

"Where is this coming from?" he asked, bird with injured wing. "What did I do now?" Through practice, trial and error, Jeff had, most likely subconsciously, learned that a hurt little boy's voice could sometimes disarm Betty when she got in a mood like this.

"It's what you *don't* do that is really pissing me off, Jeff. Here we are in the boonies miles away from Milwaukee, and June and Bill see Dad every day and are doing who knows what with his money and stuff. Last time I was in the house the expensive china was missing, wonder where that went. June says it was packed up, yeah, like we should believe that. Packed up where? You need to do something now, you cannot expect me to do everything." Betty started taking the curlers out of her hair and landing them down hard on the table, one at a time.

"She's *your* sister, after all, Jeff. Think of something."

Jeff knew this tempest was not going to go away until he promised something he would do soon, and if could just think of something he might be lucky to get out the door and off to work before this got any worse.

He pushed himself back from the table and straightened up to face her, looking directly at her and assuming the pose of a Take Charge Man. "Well, OK, then," he said like a man with a plan. But he couldn't think of what to say next.

"OK, what?"

Then as if by miracle an inspiration hit him. "Didn't you say last week Dad's World War Two German Luger was worth something? What...a thousand bucks?"

"Nope, try \$2,450, Jeff. Two thousand four hundred and fifty bucks. What of it?"

"Well, on Saturday I am going down there anyway to meet with the lawyer to see what I can do about getting out of this crazy deal where June and I are his joint guardians. That idiot lawyer put us all in a bind. Jesus, if we don't agree together on something then it doesn't get done, and we agree on nothing!"

"Like I don't know that, Shylock," and blam! the last curler hits the table and Betty starts fluffing her hair with her hands. Soon she will need to get up to get her hairbrush, a window for an escape.

"So what I do, see," says Jeff, "I go see Earl, tell him I want him to help me find his Luger, and not only do I get the gun and you sell it for the two grand or what, he also gets to see his house again and he will want to go back there again to live once he sees it and maybe we get one of those cheap Somali grandmas to feed and bathe him and we get him out of that Sunnyfarm of whatever the fuck it's called and we maybe use he wants back in the house to go to court and undo the two-guardian crap at the same time. That sound like a plan?"

All the while Jeff was saying all this he made the maneuvers necessary to get up and leave the house: coat, yup, car keys, hat or no hat today? No hat.

"OK, well that's more like it," Betty calls back from the bathroom and her hair, "getting some direction going the way we want it. OK! So... is it "Ruger" or "Luger", I can never remember?"

But Jeff was already gone.

A sense of relief overcame Jeff; he had a plan with a Betty approval, even if a small one within the Bigger Picture. You want something in life, you gotta go take it, he thought as he slipped into his pickup truck.

He always wanted to have that gun, even if now it would be only for a few days until sold off to some Nazi memorabilia nut shopping online.

Yes, there would be some hassles getting Earl out of Droolsville Home without a bunch of paperwork and nosey people in blue nurses outfits, but he knew Earl would tear up when he saw his beloved old home again and want to stay, and Earl would help his son find the pistol wherever he had hidden it, the pistol Earl had taken off a *Wehrmacht* officer who must have been dead for several days. And with some of the dough Betty might give him from the sale he could make that overdue payment on the snowmobile. Being behind on the payments was another little secret Jeff kept from Betty.

And yes, somehow he'd have to be in and out of Milwaukee without June or her husband Bill ever getting wind of it.

Jeff moved his pickup onto the street and towards the little city's local State Farm office where

he had to listen all day to people complaining about the status of their automobile accident claims. His only relief came at 2 PM every day when during a coffee break he could go to the men's room and take a swig of Jack Daniels from a pocket flask and masturbate. He didn't have to fear any embarrassing interruptions, since his only co-worker was a middle-aged woman who made fun of people she just hung up on, pretending they were still on the phone. When Jeff first came to work there, he thought he had to act the part of an appreciative audience, but to his relief it was something she did just for her own amusement.

As Jeff's father started his slow spiral towards senility and the inevitable end, Jeff had taken to calling him Earl in his mind and somehow felt better for it. It had never been easy being Earl's son.

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With Jeff about 30 miles from Milwaukee where his father was housed in an above-average "assisted living" old folks home, Betty had already set to work in her home office, getting the E-Bay ad ready.

She googled "Luger" and found a photo of a gun she figured would be close enough. She knew some kind of story attached to an item sold online could enhance its value. She posted the photo on E-Bay, and wrote in a text box underneath it, "This gun was found at the end of World War II next to the body of Josef Goebbels, Hitler's Minister for Propaganda. Mint condition, few of this model type have survived. \$4,500." Click, and now there it was live on the screen; start bidding, world.

If Jeff brings back something different from this, I'll just take a picture and make the switch, she thought.

Tonight when Jeff gets back, there'll be T-bone for dinner and that wine he likes, dang, what is that fancy French name. Hell, I'll recognize the label at Freddy's, has a hill and a castle on it.

"Hey, cowboy, how's the weather up there?" Old joke of Earl's about how tall his boy Jeff is. Growing up, Jeff always struggled for cute answers, but for years now he just got to business.

"Look, Dad, I am going to give you a real treat today! We're going to see the house, *your* house, how would you like that!" Jeff felt a little embarrassed at his forced enthusiasm, like promising to take a kid to see the circus "some day."

Earl was looking better than the last time Jeff saw him, more color in his face, a little more alert and energetic than usual, probably the good food instead of the TV dinners he used to eat before coming here. Jeff again ashamed with himself for first thinking his father's improved health wasn't good news. *Please God, I didn't mean it.*

"So how's Roofer?"

Damn, that again. The dog's name was Rufus, and each time Jeff visited he had to break the bad news to his dad all over again, and every time it was tears and reproaches hurled at Jeff for letting Earl's beloved Dalmatian die. Earl never minded the old dog's scabs and endless foul sulphuric farts

"Oh, he's fine, the dog's same as ever, loves his ball."

"What are you feeding him?"

Damn, this was the other inevitability, the lies that would have to follow the lies to compound the evil bile in his stomach as the truth about Rufus increasingly disappeared from view. Changing the subject wouldn't work. Action had to be taken.

"Come on, Dad, get your jacket on, we're going?"

"Going where? We going to go get the Roofster?"

"No, we're going to the house, I want you to help me find something. Let's go." To start some momentum going, Jeff took Earl by the arm and helped him maybe too forcefully out of his chair.

"Well, no, I want to see Roomer." Earl was not to be distracted.

"We will, Dad, he's at your house."

And off they went, after one short and strangely thrilling moment for Jeff. The young woman at the desk with a clipboard and a buzzer to open the door that would lead to another door to the outside world had been easily bribed.

Assuming the shadowy character from a spy movie he saw last week, Jeff asked, "You know who I am?", to which she answered, "Sure I do, Mr. Biggle, you're Earl's son come to make a visit." And then Jeff just dove into it. "I am in a big hurry to get to a family dinner with my dad we're late for, can I talk you into filling out all the paperwork and just sign my name, and this \$20 bill is my tip for the extra service?"

The girl said, "Hey, sure!" and they were out of there.

Jeff turned on the radio in the hope it would keep Earl quiet or at least drown him out.

The streets of this section of old residential Milwaukee were a mixed bag. Stately old homes with some mild disrepair were respectfully kept up for appearance's sake, other blocks were part of the kind of urban blight that comes with drugs, runaways and gang wars.

Back when Earl still lived in his house alone, Jeff barely missed death from bullets flying back and forth from opposites sides of the street he was driving down. The bee-buzz sound a bullet makes as it whizzes past your head is a sound you never forget.

With 1980s music from KDEX as his soundtrack, Earl read the signs on the buildings as they drove by. "Jamie's Hair Salon, Wednesday Night Ladies Specials at Bargain Prices"; "Al's Wines and Spirits"; "Slow School Ahead". He seemed happy to be out in Jeff's pickup truck and able to recognize the old neighborhood.

"The lady who owned that house right there is dead now. I remember her dog, a poodle it was, black one all curly, Rufus liked to sniff him and roughhouse." He now even got the dog's name right. Oh oh, *damn*, the dog. Have to talk fast to get around the dog.

June and Jeff and Betty always got in fights about what to do about all the junk in Earl's house while he was still living there. The place was a firetrap with all the magazines and newspapers everywhere, piled so high and wide that in the old dining room there was but one narrow corridor to pass through the canyons of paper. And the old fart smoked a pipe and threw the matches, sometimes still lit, onto the floor.

Earl would sit in a worn old chair in the living room and smoke his pipe, water dripping down from open leaks in the ceiling and landing right next to him on copies of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* dating back to 1987. Urged by his kids to fix the house and get a cleaning crew in there, Earl had one of two standard replies at the ready: "Costs too damn much money and I think it's just fine the way it is," or, "Who knows who they might send, I don't need any niggers in here."

June's husband Bill tried to stay miles away from all the discord. He'd say, "Let him live the way he wants to live, and if he dies that way, what's wrong with that? He keeps his dignity." But nobody including his wife wanted to hear any of that, so in time he did what he always did to ensure a fairly happy marriage: he kept his mouth shut.

Jeff pulled into the driveway where he and his father had played catch so many times, Earl firing fastballs into Jeff's catcher's mitt so hard his hand would be sore long after, but he wasn't going to look wimpy to his dad and complain, no way. In fact, playing catch in that driveway always made Jeff happy because he knew it made Earl happy. Ker-thwap! Ker-thwap!

Earl recognized where he was, all right. "Holy cow, this place needs some paint! Let's go get some paint! Why isn't that kid doing a better job on the lawn, fer chrissakes, who's in charge around here?"

Jeff was afraid that as soon as they got inside there would be all the questions about Rufus all over again. Stepping out of the pickup, Earl asked, "What are we doing here?"

OK, Jeff figured, now a good time as any. "We're here to get your Luger, Dad. Remember you always promised me you would give it to me? Now I just want to find it so I know where it is."

"Yeah, well I ain't dead yet, son, I said you'd get it when I die and I am not dead yet, last time I looked." Sarcasm never left the man. "Took that thing off a Nazi," pronounced *Nazzy*, "he didn't have much use for it any more. Ha ha!"

"I just want to know where you hid it, Dad, so when you kick the bucket we don't have to look around everywhere for it." Again the self-embarrassment for having said "kick the bucket." *What's wrong with me.*

But any further conversation about Lugers or dead dogs was preempted by Earl's standing suddenly cold frozen in shock once in the house after his eyes got used to the dark and damp interior. For a brief panicked moment Jeff thought Earl was having a stroke right in front of him, but then Earl

managed to stammer his amazement.

"What. In. Sam. Hell!" The words built in steady crescendo. And louder still: "*What have you done to my house! How did you let all this crap in here! The place is a wreck!*" And again: "*What the hell have you done! You have vandalized my house!*"

"Dad, Dad, I didn't do a damn thing. This is how you left the house."

"No fucking way, boy! Your Mom kept this place up."

"Dad, let's get the Luger and go, OK? I got to get you home and get back to Betty before it gets dark."

"I have no idea where the Luger is. Why did you do this to my house, it looks like shit! Who else has been living here? Look at all these magazines and newspapers, how did all that get in here? Does June know about any of this?"

Hoping dragging the old man into the basement might change the subject, Jeff frog-marched Earl to the door to the basement and down the stairs. "Come on, look around, Dad, could the gun be over here?", as Jeff opened several bins and cupboards full of old turpentine cans, dolls, some life preservers from ancient sailboat days, stacks of old 78 records, clothes in cobwebs and more stacks of magazines, books, old textbooks and canned peaches.

Slightly frantic now, Jeff shouts, "Come on, Dad, help me out here! Is the Luger down here in this stuff somewhere?"

To this question, asked again in other rooms, Earl stayed with the answer he seemed to have become fond of: "How in the hell should I know?" And finally, this: "That war was a long time ago. A lot of my buddies didn't make it back," and his eyes watered.

It was time to get out of there before Earl would wind up and start all over again about how his son ruined his house, or killed his dog. Which latter matter was actually true, there was no way Jeff and Betty could keep that scabrous smelly old dog in their house any longer, so Jeff and Rufus took a little trip to the woods, shall we say, and no more need be said about that.

On the way home, Jeff's cell phone rang. He would not have answered if he knew the caller was the dreaded sister June, but since he was driving he could not take his eyes off the road to see the LCD readout of who wanted to talk to him. If it was Betty and he did not pick up, he would get the well-known tirade for that when he got home.

June gave him an earful. What was he doing with Dad, why wasn't Dad listed as checked out at Springdale, what's this about a gun, why did he make Dad think she had vandalized his home, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Jeff thought fuck this and hung up.

Oh boy, what a day. I hope I am not too late for dinner. God, I hope there's dinner.

How to break the news to Betty. Brace for it. There she is at the door, all dolled up. OK, here we go.

"Welcome home, my hero!", and Betty gives him a big kiss, kind of a sexy one, too, whoa, that's been a while. "We celebrate tonight, my darlin', steak and all the fixings and that frog wine you like, 'cause guess what, honey, guess what!"

"What?", Jeff asks.

"I got \$3,500 for the Luger on E-Bay! Whooo-ee!"

"Hey, that's terrific."

"It damn sure `is! So where is it?"