

# The Flight or Fight Effect

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*You'll catch your death.* That's what my grandmother used to tell me constantly growing up. When I walked outside without drying my hair properly after a shower. The times I crossed the street without looking both ways. When I'd ride my bike like a convict on the run from the law, wheeling this way and that, often crashing headlong into the bushes lining the sidewalk. *June Cassady, you will catch your death.* Such an antiquated saying, and one I don't understand to this day. In my experience, people don't have to catch death. It catches us all on its own. All it takes is one wrong decision, a moment we can't take back, and that's it—caught.

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The sun is too bright today. It lurks around the edges of my blinds, sneaking its greedy fingers into the slats and illuminating the dust motes in the air, floating dreamlike and outnumbering me a billion to one. I stomp forward and plunge the fluffy plume of a Swiffer duster into the cracks, jabbing into the crevices and assaulting the wooden frame. No trace of dust. That just leaves the air. One prod to the thermostat and the air conditioner kicks on, blasting the air with frigid whirring.

It drowns out the noise of the yipping Morrow children across the street, which suits me fine. Through the minute gaps in the blinds, I can see the twins—Eli and Ellie Morrow, the two stupidest names their parents could have possibly selected. They're always out there, in their yard with the overrun and withered hydrangea bushes, the grass a shade of a yellowed bruise. I imagine it

cracks and crinkles underfoot, brittle. Ellie sits in the grass, blowing bubbles with careful gusts, her mouth a tiny O. The wand is balanced in soapy fingers, her brow furrowed as if she's calculating how to make magic come from the wand. Eli bounces a rubber ball patterned with Disney characters, every so often hurling it at his sister and letting it bounce off her head. She squawks at him, they argue, they giggle, and they return to their scheduled programming. They're both five years old, I would estimate. They have matching dishwater blond bobs hanging over faint eyebrows and dark eyes. I know all this, but I have never met them, never heard their voices or beheld their sticky-cheeked smiles.

For just a moment, I'm seized by the urge to feel the sunlight from outside warm my face. To feel UV rays like old times and not feel afraid of what might be in them. But the warmth makes me think of him—tromping around the muddy terrarium of the jungle, slapping aside fronds and feeling sweat drip down his temples. In my dreams, he wears tightly laced and heavy-heeled work boots. His jeans have a hole over his right kneecap, but his white, button-up shirt is pristine. In my dreams, a backpack is astride his shoulders, but he doesn't feel burdened by it. He brushes his glasses up his nose, feels the burn of his muscles working to propel him across the village, and he smiles and enjoys the grit of it all. In my dreams, he is never sick.

But what the hell good comes from dreams, anyways.

The sun is vanquished for now. I crank up the television and it blares a documentary about the

desert. Pass. I switch from a true-crime drama (too dark; people are dreadful) to a basketball game (too crowded, watching them all packed in together and breathing the same stifling air) to some morons hunting for a sasquatch in the forests of Oregon (how has Darwinism not wiped us all out?) and finally I settle on a cooking program. Rachel Ray wears a pristine apron, and she is blissfully alone and indoors. It is just her, her gleaming pots and pans, and a meal she will take a few nibbles from. She'll enthusiastically blather for us bored housewives at home about how delectable her risotto is, wait until the cameras stop rolling, throw out the rest of the dish, and jump on the treadmill in her personal gym.

But most importantly, Rachel Ray has reminded me that I was in the middle of unpacking my groceries before the mote-soaked sunlight distracted me.

I tread to the kitchen, my stockinged feet whispering along the hardwood floor. Everything has its place. I lift the bill from Blue Apron—a company who sends me groceries and tells me precisely how to prepare them—and settle it into my mail tray. I organize the boxes of whole-grain pasta according to height and nestle them into their designated cupboard. The milk claims its home next to one of my Brita water pitchers in the fridge—I filter twice—and the greens mark their territory in the crisper. I fold the empty packages and bags into crisp rectangles and deposit them in the garbage, which Leland will pick up for me this evening. I pay extra for him to take the garbage twice a day, knocking on the back door, entering to grab the bags, and retreating wordlessly. I imagine there's a small smile on his face behind the medical grade mask he wears, his gloved fingers issuing me a passing wave as he murmurs, "Hi there, Miss June." Yes, I imagine it's a weary smile, as if he's

afraid my crazy may rub off on him if he lingers too long. But he knew Theo, and he understands.

In the last bag, a sweating pint of Chunky Monkey ice cream awaits me. I drop the frosty tub onto the countertop, suddenly unable to breathe. My hands fold into claws that clench my hipbones. Damn it.

Inhale, exhale. Inhale...as my sparrow-boned frame indicates, I do not order dessert. I wear limp gray sweatpants, white men's crew socks, and a black, ratty Dartmouth sweatshirt that I sometimes pretend still smells like him. I plan my meals accordingly online, Blue Apron sends me only what I need, and *I didn't order any ice cream*. This isn't right. It isn't. The mail truck is gone, and I cannot send the pint back. Nor can I put it in the freezer like nothing is wrong. I can't just have my dead husband's favorite flavor of ice cream cluttering up my freezer like everything is normal. And I can't take it to the store. The store's outside, a place I haven't gone in two years.

Oh God. Exhale. Forgot that part. I let my breath out in a giant whoosh and stare at the pint, running a quick hand through my blonde bob and whipping my hair away from my face.

I want to call the makers of Ben and Jerry and utter every curse word I know. *Why is this here?* I didn't order it. The last time I saw Chunky Monkey, I brought it to him in the hospital. He savored every bite and gave me a brave smile. The breath in his lungs rattled noisily and his lips remained tinged with a bruised blue shade I hated. Countless IVs beeped and whirred, pumping him with last-ditch efforts. And later that night, his body quit anyway. His cold hand dry and limp in mine. My face buried in the scratchy fabric of hospital sheets. A nurse gripping my shoulders as I screamed. A team of faceless people wheeling him away. My knees on cold, white tile. Eyes swollen

shut in grief and the inability to catch my breath. A nervous orderly asking if they could call anyone.

There was no one to call. I went home. I planned a funeral. I attended a funeral. I put him in the ground. I went home again. And I never left.

And now there's a goddamn pint of Theo's stupid, beloved banana ice cream leaving a wet ring on my granite countertop.

He'd still be enjoying that ice cream if I hadn't let him go.

*"Babe, what are you so worried about?" he'd demanded. Theo reclined in his favorite chair in the living room, feet propped forward on the coffee table. "It's only for two months. I'll be back before you know it."*

*I frowned, picked at a cuticle on my left thumb, and gave a noncommittal shrug of my shoulders. "It's just...you hear what's going on in the news. I can't understand why you would want to go there. Mass genocide, diseases running rampant, starving children... why Ghana?"*

*"Well, you're also forgetting the fact they have no electricity in the more remote villages and it's a quick three-mile jaunt for water." He gave me a crooked smile, his tone light and driving me crazy.*

*I spun my wedding ring in fast loops around my finger, watching the diamond disappear and return again and again. I didn't return Theo's smile.*

*"June."*

*No.*

*"June."*

*I finally looked up as Theo coiled his index finger in invitation.*

*I uncrossed my legs and slid into his lap. His arms circled my back, and he tugged on a lock of my hair, watching the light catch the white-blond strands. I settled into him, leaning my head on his shoulder. I breathed in his scent, Stetson cologne and Zest soap, and closed my eyes. His heartbeat was in my ears. I radiated worry, and he could feel it.*

*"I know you don't like it." I snorted in response, eyes still closed. "I know, but I have to do this. They need help over there. I'll be safe as houses, in a church, doling out vaccines and keeping my nose clean. It's not long, and it looks damn good on a resumé. You know I need all the brownie points I can get to get into Mayo."*

*"I could go with you," I offered in a trailing voice, not meaning a word of it. My eyes fluttered open. We'd been trying for a baby and flying to a third-world country where malaria and water-borne illnesses ran rampant was not conducive to that. No travel advised if there was even a chance the visitor was pregnant.*

*Theo offered me a soft smile and shook his head, eyes crinkling. I just stared back at him and shook my head in return. We both knew why I couldn't go.*

*"Fine," I said in mock defeat. "You jet off and save the world tomorrow. I'll stay here and work on growing us a baby."*

*He chuckled and kissed me, light and quick. "Well, that's big of you."*

*I rolled my eyes in response. "You're impossible, and I hate you."*

*"The only impossible person in this room is the one on my lap. C'mon, the money from Mayo will be great, and this gives me an edge to land the residency position. I always said I'd go to the ends of the earth for you."*

*"Yeah? What's it take for you to stay here for me?" My tone was light and joking at that point, but God forgive me, I should have put my foot down.*

*Playful as ever, he kissed me in rapid fire, planting pecks on my left cheek, my right cheek, my forehead, the tip of my chin, my nose, until I was shrieking with laughter and squirming in his lap.*

*"Okay, okay, okay. Get lost, then. See if I care!"*

*I cared so much it nearly killed me. I care so much I haven't breathed fresh air in years.*

*"Love you, too!" he laughed.*

*He went to Ghana. He vaccinated over three hundred children in his brief stay. He wrote me letters that returned after he did: detailing the jungles with*

*their rain-soaked leaves and loamy soil, the unforgiving heat and the culture that still lived in a way the rest of the world had forgotten – off the land. He loved every minute of it. But he was only gone for one month instead of two. A sudden lung infection, coupled with typhoid fever from the local water supply. Theo returned and, ironically, lived out his last in the hospital he had so hoped to gain a position in. I sat there next to him the whole time, perfectly healthy after abstaining from his trip in deference to a baby we didn't have.*

And now, the Chunky Monkey. It's likely melted by now, but I can't touch it. The deadbolt on the front door is still in place, the Matelock swivel lock still secure, and I run my fingertips over them. The whispering hiss of the deadbolt sliding across the track calms me, if only a little. It's just ice cream; it isn't a monster. But it is Theo, and I don't keep relics of him. That's my rule. No houseplants, depending on me for life and reminding me of the jungle. No interaction with outsiders, aside from Leland when he takes out the garbage at 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., and Nicole, the woman who trims my hair every six weeks on the dot. Theo liked my hair long, feeling the white-blond strands filter through his hands, laughing about how I could be a Pantene commercial. I wear it short now, a crisp bob that tucks under my chin. Theo's June died with him.

Cleaning. Cleaning will help. I will clean, and by the time I am done I will know what to do with the ice cream. Because there's no way I'm keeping it. Rubber gloves smother my arms up to my elbows. Dishes spic and span. The whirl of the vacuum. Steaming the curtains, the hot air gathering sweat at my temples. Dusting the mahogany blades of the ceiling fan, though they are already immaculate because I did this yesterday.

We used to have ceiling fan blades that resembled fat jungle fronds in an absurd shade of sage, Theo's pick. After the funeral, I assaulted the

blades with a hammer, pounding against them and cheering as they fell to the carpet. The replacements are Ikea.

Refolding the blankets that linger in the basket by the couch, ready and waiting to comfort the guests I don't have. Friends abandoned their attempts to visit after the first year or so.

Sanitizing the countertops and sinks. I dangle my rubber gloves under the stream of the kitchen sink and let the hot water scour them, boiling away the imperfections. I shut the tap off and – no. My head snaps up and I whip around quickly enough to strain my neck. My ears are assaulted, and a voice floats in from the living room.

*"...That I might be gone a long time, and it's only that I'm askin'. Is there something I can send you to remember me by? To make your time more easy passin'..."*

I never leave the TV set to the music channel, because I'm not an idiot and there's only so much pain a woman can take on a daily basis. The first time I heard some indie-pop bimbette crooning about her lost love, I wanted to throttle the sound waves spouting from my radio. But some movie is playing on the television and Bob Dylan warbles at me.

*"...Oh how, oh how, can you ask me again. It only brings me sorrow..."*

I drop the glove and it leaves a sloppy wet handprint across the dark floorboards, splashing my toes. I dash to the living room and where the hell is the remote? I always leave it on the arm of Theo's recliner and it is not on the arm of Theo's recliner and what fresh hell have I woken up to today? A strange and hoarse noise fills the room, and it is me. It is air clawing its way into my lungs in desperate strides. It is my mouth going dry and my hands balling into fists.

*"...Saying I don't know when I'll be comin' back again. It depends on how I'm a-feelin'..."*

"No!" I growl. It is the first word I've spoken today. It might be the only word I speak today, but I mean it. Because today of all days, I cannot hear our song. I sink to the floor, but I don't wrap my arms around my knees and hyperventilate like I want to. Instead, I clamber across the floor and lay on my stomach in front of the entertainment center. My fingers scrabble along the baseboards until they land on the power strip, and I yank its cord from the wall as hard as I can. A spark flashes in front of my eyes as the cord pops from the socket, and the room goes blissfully silent.

Relief escapes me in whimpers. My entire day, my entire life, crippled by a dairy product. This isn't me. This is not the June I fashioned, the calm one with steady blood pressure and the quiet nobility of a rigid schedule. The one who will not bend to grief. Screw Ben and Jerry's, and screw Bob Dylan.

To be normal, I must do normal things, like work. I work from home (obviously), freelance editing documents and selling essays to college students, all transactions conducted online. They dread writing papers; I have nothing but time to research and draft. I use generic email addresses, use a Pay-Pal account, and there's a good chance I'm the last person in this first-world country of ours to abstain from social media. I rise from the floor and pace steadily to my office, settling into my desk chair and waking up my computer monitor. A lofty pile of proofreading is just what I need right now. I won't think of him. I will lose myself in parsing, in trimming thesis sentences, in double-checking to ensure that my little punk clients didn't alter their punctuation sizes to make the essays longer.

I am researching the Norman invasion of England in 1066, and then I am staring at the wall, and then my eyes glaze over, and I'm not really here anymore.

My mother couldn't understand why "Boots of Spanish Leather" was our song, why Theo and I would dance to such a morose tune at our wedding. *It's just not a romantic song, June-bug, she'd* protested uneasily. I'd shaken my head in response, the picture of content. *It's romantic to us, Mom, I'd* explained serenely. It was about yearning, and to us, about not letting distance diminish love. The naiveté – distance hadn't diminished Theo and me; it'd decimated us.

The song is over, though, and I've been clutching a half ream of paper so tightly that my palms have sweated and made the ink run.

*THWACK.* A rubber ball with Buzz Lightyear's face stamped on it pounds against my office window, rattling the panes. My heart leaps so painfully in my chest that I survey the floor to see if it's flopped at my feet. A careless "sorry" wavers on the breeze.

"What the *hell?*"

And then I'm in the kitchen, electrified with rage. The Chunky Monkey pint is still cold, but limp and soggy on the sides. I pick it up and squeeze so tightly my knuckles turn white. I charge to my front door and begin – a twist to the Matelock, wrench away the top deadbolt, an assault on the second Matelock, slide the middle deadbolt loud enough to hear the chain clink, kick the door's base twice, and to hell with looking out the peephole.

The door is open, and I allow myself one deep breath of fresh air before I hurl the ice cream with all my might and a shriek, watching the front label spiral like a football as it soars. It splats open on the Morrrows' lawn, the lid flying off and exposing the off-white slop within. Eli and Ellie halt their giggling and look at me, frozen. Ellie's bottle of bubble soap tips over in the grass, but neither of the twins break their stare. And what do they see? A hollow frame draped in terrycloth, wild

and flyaway blond hair, and skin so pale it is translucent. Squinting eyes with leaking tears. A white blur, appearing at the front stoop for a quick haunting before slinking back into the recesses of the doorway. Perhaps they think they've seen a ghost. Perhaps they have.

Life is so stupid. You're fine, going about your business, the past firmly in place behind you, and then you're throwing ice cream at children.

Without turning my back on the street, I ease back into the house and close the door slowly behind me, the picture of normalcy. The latch clicks quietly into place, and I twist the locks with the lightest of grazes. My pinky finger pokes out like a schoolgirl's at a tea party as I guide the chain back into its track. Perhaps if Theo and I had had a daughter, we would have held tea parties. We would have worn feather boas around our necks and ate sandwiches cut into triangles. I wouldn't be alone. I wouldn't be this.

The countertop's under my hands, and I don't know how it got here. This happens from time to time, much like when a Netflix video is streaming and stutters in its path, frozen for a moment before dropping the viewer a few seconds further than where they'd been. I'm one place, and then I'm another. But then again, I'm always somewhere in my house. A brief hunt for clues reveals a Lysol wipe dripping in my palm. Of course. The Chunky Monkey would have left traces behind. After another two Lysol wipes, my nose burns with the scent of lemon and the granite counter gleams spotless.

I was rude to the children; the churning in my gut tells me so. What if they eat the ice cream, blades of dry grass intermingling with the walnuts? What if they went into their house and told their mother about my outburst? What if she called the police? They may be on their way now.

Four locks later, I crack open the front door and

poke my head outside. The air smells incredible, nothing like the "Spring Breeze" scented detergents and air fresheners I buy to placate my nose. I blink away the glare of the sun, and peer across the street. Only a glimpse of the Morrrows' hunter-green house greets me. I cannot see the children, as a van has parked on the curb and blocked them from view.

I panic for a moment, but of course the police would not drive a vehicle like this. Sleek and black, shining and expensive looking, with plenty of seating and windows. There is only the driver in the car. He has no passengers.

A soccer dad, no doubt. I've seen Eli and Ellie passing a ball lately, stretching their legs before launching a single foot forward with a resounding thud. The ball usually only glides ten feet or so, but they holler and whoop as if the World Cup will soon be theirs.

The twins have risen from their perch in the grass. I can see their faces through the medium tint of the van's windows. There's a smudge of something dark on Eli's cheek and Ellie wears a slight frown. Perhaps they've forgotten their gear. Typical.

Nonetheless, I'm in the clear. I shut the door and tell myself aloud that it's the last time that front door will open today. A mug of herbal tea may be in order to soothe my nerves. Chamomile or orange pekoe, I think.

Another little fast-forward. They come more frequently on the ill-begotten days where I can't seem to shake Theo, but this one only seems to have lasted a few seconds. The kettle's on the stove, though the burner isn't on. Damn my distraction. I flip on the burner and move to the back door to prepare the garbage bags for Leland, adding the empty tea box. Buzz Lightyear's face peers in the glass back door. Eli and Ellie have been rude enough to not only interrupt my work, but didn't

even bother retrieving their ball.

Unless they never crossed the street to get it.  
Unless the black van distracted them.

I'm tripping over my crew-socked feet and racing to the front door, eyelashes tickling the peephole. I have not driven a car in so long, but God forgive me, I should have realized when one was on the wrong side of the road. And it's still there.

The silhouette of the man in the van wears a baseball cap, his face swarthy and cloaked in a dark beard. His elbow is propped out the open window, and he never glances away from Eli and Ellie. But he doesn't have to. It's only a moment—one blink and it would have escaped my notice—but a head bobs into view in the backseat. Up for a moment and down again in a flash.

I am paranoid. I have to be. Surely such clichés do not exist in real life. Surely there aren't kidnappers out there stupid enough to drive a kidnapper van.

The teakettle begins a soprano solo on the stovetop, setting my teeth on edge, but I don't move from the door. The kids are inching closer to the car now, and Eli smiles at something the driver says, nodding. Ellie clings to her brother's side, but she matches him step for step.

*Stop him, June.* Theo's voice echoes in my ears. The flash-forwards are old news; this is something different altogether.

My thoughts are not my own. My lungs feel as if there's a hand on either end of them, squeezing them like the bellows of an accordion and eliciting wheezes from my throat.

You see horror stories on the news, of course, though I don't like to watch them. But even in my secluded bubble of the world, I know Milwaukee is not a crime-free area, by any means. My mind conjures up a shared AMBER Alert for the Morrow twins, Eli and Ellie's faces grinning out at me from

milk cartons and the evening news and flyers on telephone poles.

It can't be. I'm paranoid.

*You're not,* he tells me.

Eli looks back at his house, glancing over his shoulder, and the man's mouth opens to bark something monosyllabic. Eli turns back around and faces the driver, nodding again. Where are the parents?

*June, get out there.*

"I can't," I tell him aloud. I always listened to him. I can't anymore.

The Morrow house is unchanging. No flicker of the curtains, no concerned mother leaning out the front door to call her twins in for dinner. Mr. Morrow works for the power company, I believe, and Mrs. Morrow works late shifts at the E.R. Her cornflower blue scrubs are a dead giveaway, of course. But she mentioned it the last time the twins left stray toys, a Big Wheels tricycle with a rusted wheel and a faded, red jump rope coiled in an abstract twirl, cluttered in my front yard. My yard was bigger than theirs and the twins liked to sneak across the road and play here. Mrs. Morrow had apologized via phone, explaining she slept most afternoons and couldn't always stay awake with the children. That woman better wake the hell up now.

Eli and Ellie are five feet from the van now at best, no longer lingering near their house like it's base in a game of tag. Ellie giggles at something the driver said and damn my inability to read lips. I see his lips curl back in response, a glare masquerading as a smile.

*You're not wrong, June.*

"I can't," I whimper. My hands are throttling one another. They fight the urge to grip the doorknob. Theo told me once about the children he encountered in the village during his stay, often wrenched from their beds, trafficked into a lifestyle

no one deserved.

The head in the backseat bobs into view again, but Eli and Ellie pay no notice. Eli tosses his soccer ball aside, as if to leave it behind.

Those men could have guns. They could have drugs. They could be the scum of the earth. Or as a highly unlikely alternative, they could be model citizens. But how? I wrack my brain for an explanation. Why two men, one hiding, would park a van the wrong direction on a one-way street and talk and joke with two five-year-olds for five minutes now. In broad daylight. Where anyone could see them, but for some accursed reason only I am.

*You have to, June.*

"I can't, Theo," I whisper.

But Theo's June would.

I ball my hands into fists and allow myself a single deep breath. Because safe wasn't always good. Because contained wasn't always content. Eli and Ellie are a foot away from the van's back door now. It slides open, and I watch two sets of brown eyes widen in surprise. There's no time.

*For me, he insists.*

I'm through the door, flinging it aside. I vault off of my front step, cold concrete underfoot, and sprint forward, a ghost no more. I sail across the street, a shriek tearing from my chest, and I bare my teeth in a roar. I hurl myself at the van.

For him.