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The Things
We Never Say



A Novel

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I

It was the middle of June and the sun all day had kept right on shining with sweet mightiness. “Stay jovial, *please*, Artie! Just promise me that. Please stay your old jovial self!” Flossie MacDonald had wiped her napkin across her weeping eyes and told this to Artie Dam the last time she had seen him, which had been on this spectacular evening in June. And he assured her that he would.

They had gone to Spud’s Bar and Grille, the place near Artie’s house that was right there on the water on the coast of Massachusetts; the bay, seen through the windows, was calm, and many boats sat there quietly, sailboats and fishing boats and boats large enough to sleep eight people. The sun, which was not yet fully headed down, shone against the water with a golden brilliance, and when Artie looked at Flossie her large black-rimmed glasses had sun reflecting off them.

He and Flossie had come here every other Tuesday night since Flossie’s husband died last year; her husband had been a retired math professor, and—to Artie’s way of thinking—a regal-looking, thin, hypercritical man. “He was *such* an asshole,” Flossie would say each time she and Artie were together, wiping her eyes, mascara

dripping down her cheeks. "And I miss him so much!" But this was their last time in the place; Flossie was moving to Ohio to be near her daughter, Sophie. "Oh Artie," Flossie had said, wrapping her arms around him outside by the door as they said goodbye, "I love you." And he had told her the same.

As they left the place together, Artie saw the masts of sailboats in the bay, standing tall, motionless. He did not remember ever seeing the water so calm. "Amazing," he had said to Flossie, and she had said, "What's amazing is you."

ARTIE'S WIFE, EVIE, had never cared for Flossie, saying that she was "too much." And Artie understood, but he loved Flossie for it; he loved her overly made-up face, her too-yellow hair piled on top of her head, the scent of perfume that followed her everywhere, the delicate way she would sit her large body down after waving to him enthusiastically when she came through the heavy wooden door at Spud's. He loved her, but he was not remotely in love with her.

It was that he could be himself with her; he realized this only later.

"HOW WAS POOR old Flossie?" Evie had asked Artie that night; she was sitting in the living room with a newspaper on her lap, and she looked up at him as he walked into the room. Evie was one of the few people Artie knew who still read a real newspaper.

"She misses Reginald," Artie said, sitting down in a chair across from her. "She says it every time. Understandable, I guess. They were married forty-two years." He added, "The water's beautiful tonight. Flat, flat, flat."

Evie said nothing. She folded the paper and put it on the coffee table in front of her.

“But she did say—she says it every time—that he was an asshole.” Artie chuckled, sticking his legs out in front of him.

Still, Evie made no comment.

“Well, he was lucky to go fast, only two months.” Artie said this looking around the room. Through the windows he could see the light on the end of the small wharf down past their lawn. The room they sat in had a high ceiling with rafters far up; theirs was a spacious house, with a newly renovated kitchen that also looked out over the water. In the living room was the grand piano that had been there for years (and which Artie, with no piano lessons to his name, would sit and compose little pieces on). There were different upholstered chairs, and a few small tables on which sat various framed photographs beside many small—tiny—boxes that had been in Evie’s family.

Artie, even having been here for almost thirty years, still could not believe that this was the house he lived in. The house was on a private road right there on the ocean, with two other houses that shared the road, and although Artie had said many times that he did not like the sign declaring it PRIVATE, he had lost that battle years earlier. The house had belonged to his in-laws, and Evie had inherited it long ago when her parents moved to Florida. Both had since died, more than ten years ago now, and Evie’s one sister lived in Colorado, where she had gone, years before, to college.

“Reginald MacDonald,” Artie said, shaking his head slowly. “Poor brilliant man.” He added, “He drank too much, though.”

“He had to, living with Flossie,” Evie said, and Artie let it go.

“She drinks too much herself,” Evie added, and Artie let that go as well; it was true.

THIS WAS NOW the first week of September, a Friday, and the weather was staying warm. The leaves had not yet really started to change, and from his classroom windows on the second floor Artie could see the soccer field and the trees behind it, with only one tree turning red at its very top. It was the last class of the day, and he understood that the students were restless. He leaned back against his desk and said, "Would you folks like to know about venereal disease during the Civil War?"

The students looked up at him, they were interested.

"Whoa, Damn-dam," said one fellow who had shaggy brown hair; his name was Willoughby.

"Topic for Monday," Artie said. "Now get together in your groups." And they shuffled their chairs around until they were sitting in the four separate sections Artie had assigned earlier.

Artie taught history to eleventh graders at the local high school. For years he had also been the assistant coach to the boys' soccer team; he was not a tall man, and he was thick, and while he had always been fit, he had begun to gain weight in his stomach, so he'd had to stop running down the field a few years ago and he became the assistant coach to the baseball team instead. But Coach Clark liked him, as did the soccer and the baseball teams, as did his students and the other faculty.

"Damn-dam, the greatest man," his students would sometimes say to him, their faces shining with affection, and he would laugh, his big chest moving. "Damn-dam," they said, and he would tell them, "Go on, go on, get out of here now," waving his hand and chuckling. He was fifty-seven years old, and he did still love his students.

But the pandemic had been hard on them, he had noticed

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this in the more than three years since. The students had changed. They were anxious, and not argumentative—with him or with one another—as he had known them to be in the past, when there had been lively discussions. It was often difficult now to get them even to talk.

On the first day of every school year Artie would hand out sheets of white lined paper, saying to his students, “Write anything you want. But I need at least two pages. Write about who you can’t stand, what you like, write anything. But write.”

“Why?” a student sometimes asked, and Artie told the truth: “So I get to know you. And so I get to see how you put sentences together.” He was always surprised at the students’ willingness to do this. Some would sit for many minutes and then start to write quickly, others began to write immediately; over the years he had noted that their handwriting had become increasingly bad. He was often very moved at what they wrote. Many lately had written about the pandemic. Two students had started this year with the sentence “I’m scared.” And yet neither of these two had been able to really articulate what it was they were scared about.

Today Artie had put the students in the groups he had assigned on the first day of the school year, only a few days earlier. Each student was to take on the role of a Civil War soldier or a nurse from Massachusetts and discuss this soldier or nurse with the group. They were talking quietly among themselves now, and he heard one of them—a young woman named Tamera, with long red hair—say, “No, he wrote his girlfriend that he enlisted because of slavery. He wrote that in his letter home to her. That he didn’t think people should buy other people.”

“Good for you.” Artie nodded at Tamera as he walked among the groups; he stopped and rapped on a desk. “That’s *exactly* what you should be doing, using their letters home.”

He walked over to the window and saw again the soccer field and the trees behind it, the top of that one tree turning red. Something moved deep inside him, a memory perhaps of his childhood in Revere, where his father had been the super of the three-story wooden apartment building they lived in as well as the two similar buildings right next to it. Artie and his sister and their parents had lived in the basement apartment; today it would be called the garden apartment, but back then it looked like, and pretty much was, a basement apartment. Where was this memory of a red-topped tree coming from? Artie turned back to the class as a memory clicked into place: the state hospital his mother had been sent to two times in his youth, going there with his father and his sister on a weekend to visit her, seeing her slumped on a thin mattress on a metal bed. There might have been such a tree outside her window.

He went and sat down at his desk.

Every year Artie received a few notes—in the far past they had been handwritten—from students saying that he had changed their lives, he was their favorite teacher *ever*, this sort of thing. In recent years, the notes were more apt to be emailed to him, and Artie would print them out and put them with all the other notes in his mother's big jewelry box in the attic. He never understood why the box was so big; his mother had had almost no jewelry, and the few pieces she had were not remotely expensive.

Except for his wife, Evie, Artie told no one about the notes.

“MR. DAM?”

He stood and bowed toward Rhonda Lazarre, who had raised her hand. “Yes?”

“Uhm, could I go to the bathroom?”

“You may indeed.” He nodded at her gently. The poor girl was

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unfortunate-looking, Artie had had her in a study hall last year, and he had a special place in his heart for her. She was short, her neck was short, her glasses were always skewed; it's just who she was. Her mouth was often open, and she walked with her arms out. ("I don't understand much," she had written in her first-day essay, "and sometimes I get mad at God.")

Rhonda smiled shyly, looking down, covering her mouth with her hand. "Thank you," she said, and she left the room.

WHEN SHE RETURNED a few minutes later, Artie saw Danny Marino rise up halfway in his chair and do an imitation of the way Rhonda walked, swinging his arms out, his mouth open, and Artie knew, as the students who saw this knew, that he was making fun of Rhonda.

An unexpected fury rose within Artie, and he stood up from his desk and said, "I just now saw that one of you thought you were better than someone else in this class." He did not look at Danny Marino or at Rhonda Lazarre. Artie could feel his face getting red, his face was hot—hot!—and he said, "Do not *ever* feel that you are superior to someone else. Because you are not." He sat down. He held out his finger to the whole class and shook it. "No one is superior to anyone else in this world."

He glanced fleetingly at Danny Marino and saw that Danny—and the fellow next to him—understood that he was the one being spoken about; Danny looked down at the floor. But as Artie finished with a final admonition—"Don't you *ever* think you are better than anyone else here on God's Earth!"—he allowed himself a quick look at Rhonda and saw that she had no idea that she was the one who had provoked this reaction in him. And so that was good; she did not know that she had been made fun of.

A few minutes later the bell rang, and Danny Marino left the

room right away, but the rest of the students walked out quietly, almost sheepishly. Lockers in the hallway could be heard slamming shut, and then it was silent. For many moments Artie remained sitting at his desk, staring out the window. Finally, he roused himself and went down the hall to the teachers room, where Carl LeBlanc said to him, "You going to take a sail this weekend?" And Artie said, "You bet, the weather's supposed to hold." People understood that Artie loved sailing; his modest sailboat sat in the center of the small harbor, and he was often seen getting out of his dinghy and into the sailboat, and then off he would go. Evie did not like boats, she never had. But that was all right, he still went out when the wind was right.

* * *

AS MANY PEOPLE DO, Artie and Evie had suffered a tragedy. Ten years earlier, when their only son was seventeen years old, he had been driving at night with his girlfriend and the car crashed and his girlfriend had been killed. Her name was Heather Morrison, and her family had—naturally enough—gone crazy with grief, and they tried for more than a year to sue Rob Dam, meaning his parents. The case was eventually settled; the Morrisons moved out of town. But Rob had never been the same.

Artie had sat at the conference room table in the law office with his son during depositions, and this is what he remembered: Rob sitting, pale, while he was questioned by lawyers. A woman lawyer had said, "Was there any sexual activity that preceded this crash?" Rob hesitated, his lips were without color, and he said, "No." And then he glanced at his father. And it was that glance that made Artie understand.

When the police had arrived at the crash scene, Rob had been

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found with the belt buckle of his jeans open. Heather had not been wearing a seatbelt and she had been crushed beneath the steering wheel. Rob had been saved by the airbags.

The accident, of course, had changed not just Rob but the family. It was as though the three of them had been walking on their lawn down by the water, peacefully, unknowingly, happily, and then the ocean itself had suddenly risen up, the whole world became an ocean overwhelming them with huge waves that swept over them and pulled them under, and they were all gasping and choking in the water. Within a year Evie started classes to become a family therapist—"I have to do something!"—and to Artie his wife became far more officious than she had been before the accident occurred; in his mind she had been a warmer person preceding this terrible event. It took years for them to reconfigure themselves, and they had.

But as these years went by, Rob—who had graduated from high school one month before the accident occurred—became a different person. Once a happy child filled with energy (he had often gone out on the sailboat with Artie), he had turned quiet, and at college in Cambridge—he had gone to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—he had not made many friends. He lived now in Somerville, about an hour away from his parents, working as a software engineer for a company that had contracts with the Department of Defense, and he made more than twice as much money as Artie made. Two years ago, he had married a woman named Francesca, a concert pianist who played throughout Europe; she was nine years his senior. While Evie loved their daughter-in-law, Artie found her to be a slightly odd woman, somehow unknowable, and his son, he thought, had become a person who remained deeply inside himself. But for Artie the worst thing of all had happened and it was this: Rob had distanced himself increasingly from his

father. Artie kept trying to think when this had happened, and he felt that it was far more acute this past year. And all Artie could think of was the funny, happy child Rob had been.

Not a day went by that Artie did not think about this situation with his son. Was this an ongoing aftermath of the accident? Was it Rob's marriage? What had caused this distance to increase? Artie was thinking about this now as he drove home from school. The streets had odd angles and there were many streetlights as he passed by large old wooden houses painted deep blue or maroon or off-white; these houses sat very close to the old sidewalks. He stopped at a stop sign in a neighborhood lined with smaller wooden houses, and then he carefully pulled out. He had a real fear of hitting a child coming home from school.

"YELLED AT THE class today," he told his wife when she got home from work; she was a full-time family therapist these days. She took her coat off and looked at him with surprise. "You *did*?"

Evie had a beautiful head of white hair—it had turned white early because she had been a redhead, and it fell to the top of her shoulders, dipping down now slightly in the back as she reached into the closet for a hanger.

He told her about Danny Marino making fun of Rhonda Lazzarre. Evie didn't say anything at first, but then she smoothed down her pale green sweater and said, "Well, that's good, Artie. I hope this Danny Marino fellow remembers it for the rest of his life."

Artie sighed as he sat down in the living room. "I don't know," he said.

"What don't you know?" Evie had followed him and sat now across from him in an old dark brown velvet chair.

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“I never yell at the class. But it seemed—I don’t know—like I should. I couldn’t help it. That poor Rhonda.”

“Well, I support you.” Evie gave a nod and then told him about her last client, how the mother was impossible with her adolescent child. Artie nodded just slightly as he listened. Evie took her work very seriously, and he admired her for that. The tales of woe she often brought home seemed to him to require a distance that apparently came naturally to Evie. She was a professional, after all.

THAT SAME NIGHT, Friday, there was a party at the Merrills’. Anne Merrill had taught with Artie for many years, and her husband was a lawyer in town. As he and Evie got ready, Artie recognized within himself a sense of almost-anticipation, these were his old friends, after all, who would be there. “Ready?” Evie asked, putting on her black coat, and he said he was, holding up the car key. Evie had the figure of a slim teenage girl, meaning her stomach was flat and she was small. She did this with yoga and a good diet, and also her skin was remarkable, it had a glow to it at all times, and she applied her various creams with a religiosity that amazed Artie. This was clearly not going to be the story with Artie, whose face (he thought) had become just one more old man’s face lacking any distinguishing features behind his large wire-framed glasses. Although he, like Evie, still had a full head of hair.

Rob had begun to lose his hair about a year after the accident, and now he shaved his head completely, and he was tall, and every time Artie saw him, Artie’s heart broke a little more. The boy had gotten his height from Evie’s father, who had been a tall man as well, though not as tall as Rob had turned out to be.