

GINNIFER

By far the best part of being convicted of first-degree murder was Ginnifer. Her aqua eyes, good eyes, followed my path when the deputies escorted me through the courtroom; she'd twist her head toward me sympathetically when they were walking me out back to isolation, even in those early days before my defense attorney got the ugly chains removed from my wrists and ankles when I still looked like some monster. Most people in the gallery—the reporters, rubberneckers and the extended angry family of my late wife—the same relatives who thumbs-upped and high-fived me on the dance floor at our wedding—said by their faces that I was the devil. Not her, not Ginnifer, not in those good eyes. Even before we had spoken, Ginnifer had soothed me. Kept me going when I had nothing to live for.

When you are charged with a high-profile murder, you receive more letters than you'd have ever guessed—more letters than any civilian, maybe more than your average corporate CEO. The hate and the accusations outnumber any generosity and support 50:1. Ginnifer's was a six-pager received early in the trial, describing so eloquently her absolute and pure unbroken belief in my profession of innocence and promising to be in court every day to support me. She sent her photo to me so I could look to her, in her words, whenever I needed a pickmeup. But I didn't see her when I first searched for her. The court was crowded and warm and the chains allowed me little range of movement. And yet I knew her at last, somehow, even though the picture she had

sent had been small and outdated. She was thicker and rounder at the hips and shoulders in person, and her brown cheeks puffed into a pear shape. To see her was to be nurtured.

People have asked how I could marry again after what happened, and how I could marry from behind bars. Paul Brackett (my cellmate, a double murderer) as witness to the marriage. Our two wedding photos taken by the warden in the courtyard of the prison. Ginnifer and I had started as friends and I had no intention of anything more, I never imagined anyone being my wife but Caroline. Wife = Caroline. I loved my wife and child; Jesus, I had known Caroline since we were both sixteen and dreaming of living as artists on our own artists' colony! I was distraught constantly after her death, as devastated by her loss as I was fearful of my own undeserved fate.

Ginnifer was one of the few people who seemed to understand my fear without cynicism or suspicion. I needed a friend more than anything. My father always had told me I was born happy but not clever and I think clever people might not need friends, but happy ones absolutely do. I'll repeat myself. I needed a friend like you would never believe anyone ever needed one, and, frankly, Ginnifer was it. The only taker.

I guess it was love at first sight, in a way, though we had different first sights of each other. Mine you've heard about in the courtroom. Ginnifer had first seen me on a segment of a late night network newsmagazine profiling the case in depth. It was an "exclusive" interview with me from behind bars. I did not understand what was exclusive, to be honest, I'd done interviews with anyone who was willing, desperate to get out the word of my innocence. The warden had

agreed to allow a sweater over my jumpsuit to project a more dignified appearance.

"Did you kill her? Why did you kill your wife and baby?" the plastic-face television journalist asked me in a hollow voice as though it were Judgment Day and he held the gates closed.

The irony of being declared a horrible, ruthless murderer and thrown behind bars is that everyone will bully you like you're the weakling at recess, even a hollow-voiced, plastic-face television journalist.

"What about your *DNA*? How do you *explain* your DNA on the kitchen knife? How do you *live* with yourself knowing that so many people around the world are convinced of your guilt?"

"How do I explain it?" I asked back. "It was my house. I had used that knife—I did the cooking. Why should I have to explain anyway, if I didn't do anything? Let the district attorney explain it. I know I didn't do it."

"You mean in your heart you know you're innocent?"

"What does that mean, in my heart? I didn't kill anyone, could never ever harm my family. That's what I have to know. We'll prove that, too. That's what the legal system is for. Isn't it? We have received real support from those in the community who know me, neighbors and friends, who know I wouldn't do what I've been accused of and I will never be convicted, not ever, ever, ever, so let's leave it at that."

Then it did happen—the conviction, I mean. The jury only took three hours to come back with the verdict. How could I blame the rest of the world for thinking me a monster, when the jury proclaimed it?

That was what made Ginnifer all the more important, even alluring. In her eyes I was the honest and innocent person I (alone) knew myself to be. Ginnifer was so remarkable: so remarkable that even the dreariness of the prison did not dim her cheer and light humor in her visits. Even when people warned her with their pop-psychology expertise: that if I killed one wife, I'd try to kill another if I ever had the chance.

Some people said that my relationship with Ginnifer proved even more than the court verdict that I never loved Caroline, and that I must have killed her. All wrong. In fact, my desire for Ginnifer came from the opposite place. Ginnifer was the only one left who still *believed* I had loved Caroline and hadn't slaughtered her; it was *because* of my love of Caroline and the desire to keep that sacred that I now could dedicate my life to Ginnifer.

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I would often spend hours in my cell attempting to express my feelings about Ginnifer to Mr. Brackett.

"My bitch left me second I was busted," Brackett said from the top bunk (I had requested the top initially, but he said he would shiv me in my sleep if I tried to take it, and we had gotten along since). "Dirty hooch said I should shove my 'rehabilitation' up my ass and twist."

"Didn't even give you a chance."

"What chance?"

"A chance to show your innocence, Paul."

"Innocent?" Paul chortled and coughed as though he had swallowed wrong. "I think your new wife likes you being locked up in here."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Danger, man! That's what dirty bitches *want*, till it burns them, man. I saw that look in your gal's eyes at your crappy little wedding. Yeah bro, I'm as innocent as you are."

He would not change his opinion on Ginnifer, and I reminded myself how hard Mr. Brackett's circumstances had been in life. Of course, he was misguided. Ginnifer wanted only what I wanted—my freedom, and a reversal of the terrible mistake made by a depraved justice system out for blood.

"It will happen, my dear," Ginnifer would say. "The Lord will see to it, sweets. The Lord will see to all of it from here because of our love for each other is His beacon."

"You know," I said, slipping into one of my gloomier moods, "the rate of divorce for a married couple where one spouse is incarcerated for a year or longer is eighty-five percent."

"Not us. Not me. I'm different, sweets. So are you."

Rescuetheinnocent.com. Look it up. This was the webpage Ginnifer built for me to encourage support for reopening my case. Ginnifer had taught herself how to design and implement code on the internet. Just for me! The results were instantaneous. Emails poured in wanting to know more about my case and the travesties perpetrated by the overzealous district attorney looking for a big score. There were new investigative articles revisiting my case for the first time since the conviction, stirring up more interest and thousands of hits on the site and donations for our defense fund.

It all seemed like a small miracle about to happen.

Twelve years passed after that. You might think the heartache of a husband behind bars would have worn Ginnifer down. Not the case! Every week, she'd drive one-hundred-and-four miles to visit me in prison. Her visits never lagged, her efforts never slowed, her commitment to me and my freedom stronger than ever. She gave lectures to criminology schools, spoke at lunches for support groups of prisoners' families, appeared on cable news on the anniversaries of my wife's murder. She continued to write her letters to the district attorney, the parole board, the governor, and various prominent defense attorneys to try to persuade them to loan their help.

Despite her unflagging energy, I was not immune to hopelessness. Bleak days shook me, nights that were sleepless and tortured while the world around me tossed and turned. Wardens removed for abuse or incompetence; cellmates changed or were released or, like Brackett, transferred to higher-security compounds after getting into violent prison yard scuffles; and there I remained, the same man. Through a haze of shame, sometimes I'd direct anger at Ginnifer, because she was the only one who'd take it. The curse of the fallen is to drive away the ones who care about them. But Ginnifer would not be driven away, however much my insides rotted.

"You just need a pickmeup, sweets," she'd say on these visits. "I'll write you twice as many letters next week, my dear boy."

"Do you have enough time for that?"

"What do you mean?" She blinked and smiled.

"I'm sure you're quite busy with your friend Will," I'd say.
"Careful, Ginnifer, remember an affair was why I killed Caroline,
according to that D.A."

Even this dark taunting melted her soft dimpled smiles, the dough
of an old fashioned home-baked pie.

I could do nothing to help support her from behind bars so
Ginnifer had started a small day care center that was financed by her
old family friend, William Hurdle, a meek and mumbling divorced man
with a half-bald head and gentle demeanor. Between the day care, her
visits to me, and her tireless efforts on my case, Ginnifer could not
have been blamed for abandoning me. To my shame, I expected that day to
come any moment. For her to run into the visiting room, pick up the
phone and say, Guess what? It's over! Our sham marriage is through, you
damned killer!

"Guess what? Big news!" she said one afternoon.

"Our marriage is over?" I muttered.

"No!" She laughed her crackling vinyl record laugh. "No! A new
witness has come forward. She's sick-dying, her doctors say. It's
because of our website that we found her. She saw the website, and she
can corroborate part of your story about seeing an intruder running
from the complex where you lived with Caroline."

I was soon in five-hour-long meetings with our defense team who
were suddenly upbeat and serious, reviewing every bit of testimony I
had ever given. Evidentiary hearings; a new trial; and after two more
years that felt like two minutes propelled by that unlikely hope and
confidence on the part of one woman named Ginnifer—I was a free man
again. Eighteen years after my arrest.

Pure bliss followed. After a civil settlement with the state, Ginnifer and I had the money to buy a house in a peaceful, quaint town on the outskirts of nowhere. It was like waking up in the middle of a nightmare to find yourself back in a normal life. All that darkness, that damnation, poor Caroline's death, it was all behind me.

The best part wasn't even the freedom. Really! It was the fact that people had to admit I was innocent. It was proven beyond a doubt, even the ladies and gentlemen of the jury who put me in prison acknowledged on that same newsmagazine show (which revisited the case on the next anniversary) that they had been wrong, tragically wrong. And for that admission, I forgave the courts, I forgave the jurors, the world.

There was only one problem through all this.

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Ginnifer. As I was coming out of my black hole, she was going through her own crisis and, this time, I was determined to be there for her. She had begun to change before my eyes. She was crying on a dime. She had begun to seem shy, and exhibited signs of severely low self esteem. She was nervous and distracted.

"Ginnifer, I know we could talk this through," I would say. "You know how many self-help books I read in prison. If we could get through what we've been through, why, we could get through *anything*. Please, don't cry. I love you."

She would cry more.

"Ginnifer, what if you talk to someone? A professional, or a priest. I worry about it when you start throwing things around the house. We could go in together."

She would throw more.

She would not go with me, so I went to see our priest on my own. In confidence, I explained the situation and all that she had done for me.

"Why would she act like that, Father?"

"Well, it's not as surprising as it might seem. Think along these lines. Her whole life became about supporting you in your trouble. For fifteen long, painful years. As trying as it was, that became the work and purpose of her soul."

"And now it's gone."

"Yes. As much as she wanted justice for you with all her heart, emotionally she might not have been ready for her routine, her purpose, to be stripped away."

"What can I do? Go back to prison? Sorry, Father. I don't mean to make light of it."

"I understand you have a great deal of frustration."

I confess! I had a whole heap of frustration! Here I was, in the light of the day, the world at my fingertips and freedom spread out before me, and my wife was falling apart at the seams. Her emotional breakdown became a prison of itself.

Yet, I owed her everything. Without her, I'd be rotting away, or dead by my own hand. My insides felt they were pulled apart in all directions.

"I do. I do, Father," I said in my next visit to his office hours. "I still feel very frustrated, but I love her dearly."

"Then you *must* be there for her—and you will get through this."

I did all a good husband could be expected to do, yet still things only got worse. She began insisting her toes were always aching despite the fact that not one of the twenty-three specialists she saw found any problem. She begged them to amputate her toes—not one or two, but all of them!

My patience could not last forever. Understand, I would never leave Ginnifer, I would never even think of it. She was the angel who had freed me from the pits of hell. But I could not hide my feelings over time. I'd yell at her to pull herself together. To snap out of it. To stop imagining that she was sick or that I was cheating on her, of all things. We had shouting matches. Actually, I would shout, she would whisper and whimper in response which made my shouts seem fiercer. We began sleeping in separate rooms—sometimes I would go to a hotel.

"I know you don't love me anymore."

"How could you say that? I love you more than earth and heaven! What is it, Ginnifer?" I'd say as she broke down into tears.

"What do you think?" she'd say through weeping.

"I think you were happier when I was in prison, that's what I think."

"I devoted my life to getting you out! You needed me and I was there. But why? Why did I do it at all?"

It was impossible to argue with because, factually, it was all true, and none of it added up to the crash and burn of our marriage. Yet, it was happening.

I only vaguely remember the dinner. At the time it seemed like an ordinary meal. We avoided saying anything to each other, as every word and inflection was a land mine of meaning and allegation. I didn't know, of course, that she had poisoned it. Not just my chicken linguini, but my wine and the mashed potatoes, too. Ginnifer was thorough.

I do not really remember anything after that. Being in a coma, existence replaces memory. As with the other patients in vegetative states, they'd leave the teevee on for company. In the parts of my brain still awake, I saw flashes of reports of her arrest. Her trial, all the talking heads analyzing her over footage of her strangely satisfied expressions at the hearings, the winking of her dimples.

Who knew that the same lawyers who got me off, would successfully use a self defense justification for Ginnifer? Would argue that I was becoming increasingly violent, having been hardened and desensitized by my years as a prisoner? Neighbors served as witnesses to my shouting. I was an eerily convincing monster.

Now that she has been acquitted, she is on Oprah and weeps as she told her story. The unceasing teevee in my hospital room is on that channel. There are the apple-pie dimples and those darn good eyes of Ginnifer as she thanks Oprah and her audience for their support to help her start a new life. Now what does it say about the kind of husband I am, that I like so much to see her this happy.

THE END