

Better

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Homer's brain: "Don't say revenge. Don't say revenge."

They say if you don't have kids you remain kids, and I think that is true of Leo and me. After fifteen years of marriage, we only have a cat, which is not even a dog. We are insecure, and fight about small things.

"It is an undeniable *fact* that in nature, rapidly senescing post-reproductive organisms just give themselves up to die," I tell Leo. "Female Pacific salmon, for example, voluntarily flop up on the shore to be eaten by seagulls. I've seen it happen, seriously, on the Discovery Channel."

Leo is a philosophy professor specializing in bioethics, so he thinks me an uninformed tourist in this area. To him, humans are so far advanced we have figured out a way to be compassionate to the evolutionarily redundant. "Many animals live beyond their fertile years," he keeps saying. "Intelligent ones. Baboons. It's called the grandmother effect."

I cross him by saying that one needs to be a mother before one can lapse into grandmotherhood. He gets annoyed, fills his bags with books, prepares to leave.

"Honey, I think, rather, you are like the stinking corpse flower; marvelous, but with a horrible sense of timing. Nobody can help you there."

Since the news Leo has been spending too much time at the university library. He says he is undergoing the necessary and painful process of digitizing his archive. Every day, he pages through clunky, elusive materials, makes photocopies from books nobody else checks out, and brings them home to scan on our antique scanner, the one we bought for full price in 1999.

I am also a professor. I teach contemporary French literature with an emphasis in diasporic Asian novels written in French. I usually spend the day in the tub, rereading and making notes in the margins, notes like: “leg. autofictive self-dissemination?” “ex. post-colonial post-semiotic trauma?” “make joke about Habermas here?” “etc.?” All the books I teach out of have long since lost their binding: They are kept together with color-coded rubber bands.

In the morning, we both get ready—that is, I put together a creative iteration of pajamas, Leo goes to the library, I walk outside to buy coffee, and when he is a far enough away, I hop into the tub, doze off, jerk awake when I hear him coming through the door, reposition, pretend to read. At this point in my life, I figure, who cares. One can never be sure whether one is glad to live or gladder to be dying soon. I think about this often, and also about dust; whether we are already disappearing; slowly, in specks of dead skin and dandruff, brushing ourselves off in oblivious, serene little snowflakes, one minute floating in an afternoon sunbeam and the next minute, gone.

Let me start over, actually. I want to try to tell this better. This is what happened: Last year, I turned forty-four. In Chinese, forty-four is a homophonic translation for “Die Die.” As it goes, my grandmother had been especially vigilant about warning me against suggestions of death: never wear white or black, never stick chopsticks upright in your rice, never leave your slippers facing in because ghosts will step into them, never have anything to do with the number four. Brainwashed at an early age, I’ve always had a horrible relationship with the number four, like, never eating four meatballs, only three or most of the time five, never agreeing to visit anyone who lived on a fourth floor, staying away from doctors with fours in their phone numbers. And yet, it was when I turned forty-four that my doctor without fours in his phone number told me that I would no longer be able to have children. “What the fuck,” I said, sitting there in my paper gown. “I’m only forty-four. My grandmother had my father when

she had no teeth.” The news was unreal. A gag. “It’s too late, Ms. Yee. I’m very sorry,” Dr. Patel said, as if I should have felt sorry for him, all slouchy and effeminate, having to put up with the wrath of so many menopausal women. But god, even that word—*menopause*. I wanted to throw myself against a doorknob. Did it even matter that Leo and I had gotten tenure-track positions at a very prestigious undergraduate establishment, one so important it is often lovingly referred to as a Little Ivy?

“I’ve never heard that before,” my father said. “But okay, if you say so.” He was on his death bed and needed something to be proud of. I told him the school was between Harvard and Yale—geographically—and this at least put a smile on his face.

Now he was dead and my womb was dead and when I die, my genes will disappear off the face of the planet as if I never existed. I should have listened to mother. “When you get to be a certain age you will feel a stirring inside you like a small seed that wants to bloom,” she said. I said: “I am not a tulip, I will bloom when I want to.” She said: “Be careful. Pay attention to yourself.” I said: “I have no time, Ma. My career.” She was sad, and we became distant. My dad wanted the credentials but she wanted the grandkid. I thought: “Success requires sacrifice.” Nobody told me time was always draining out of an hourglass and that one day it would be piled up in a heap, out from between my legs.

After, I had a difficult time with things: the telephone cord, kitchen utensils. Trees were there to be kicked. Oxygen made me angry. *You get too much you get too high / Not enough and you’re gonna die.* Where was the middle ground? In particular, I fought with Leo, because he didn’t care. If he wanted to, he could still have a mini-him. *Was it because I spent too many hours typing with the laptop in my lap? Maybe somehow the wifi radiated my ova?* Leo shrugged. We fought after watching a documentary on Stan Brakhage because in the last scene, white-haired Stan is sitting there with his new young wife and kids, very *déjeuner sur l’herbe*, watching fireworks. That’s

going to be you, and that's going to be me, I said to Leo, pointing first to Stan, then to the fireworks. You, dad. Me, brilliant combustible nobody.

Leo demanded that we go to couple's therapy. "Whatever," I think I said. We sat next to each other on this lip-shaped couch, sinking into its red folds, never looking at the doctor or at one another, just off into space somewhere. I watched the foliage rustle outside the window. Leo crossed and recrossed his legs, rubbed his hands on his thighs, taken with blind, repetitive movement like some caged beast at the zoo. I stayed still and answered with annoyance and determination, because talking about one's feelings was not in my upbringing. In my family we dealt with things through action. That was our grieving process. Leo complained to the doctor that I was manic, irrational, that I talked daily of adoption though it was evident I was too emotionally unstable to be anyone's mother. He wanted kids, sure, but not while the pain was so new. I was shoving the hurt in his face. It was something he didn't want to see, something rummaged out of the garbage.

I spent more and more of my waking hours in the bath, trying to feel the soupy, umbilical gentleness of it. I began neglecting my duties to my students. I cancelled office hours without notice. My lectures became sentimental and hurried. During the last class I made a reference to the episode in *Swann's Way* when the narrator is waiting for his mother's kiss, and I began sniffing. Students handed me tissues, looked troubled. At committee meetings I didn't talk to anyone but gorged on the free goat-cheese salads. I let my hair get weird. The once copious chili peppers on my ratemyprofessor.com rating dwindled to a sparse bouquet. One day, I went to class without really preparing anything and just asked the students what *they* thought about the reading. What did they make of Theresa Cha's invoking of the muses in each chapter? What about the use of photographs and inscriptions? And her relationship with the French language? They looked at me emptily, like mean sheep, with a hint of disdain, and I wondered if I had worked so hard and come

all this way to be silently criticized by teenagers. To them, I was just an old clown with a colorful hat on. They knew nothing of my critical success. They weren't there to see how certain people practically cowered in my presence at literature conventions. None of them had read my writing; none of them cared, they wanted their head petted while I spoon-fed them memorable quotes and told a few jokes. That afternoon I decided to go to the chair to see if I could take medical leave. "What's wrong," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. "Nothing," I said. "Exhaustion, I guess." He frowned and fiddled with his pencil for a while by putting it in perpendicular angles against the wood's grain. "You don't seem very sure," he said. "You know we need you this semester." That was my stuck cog. I was never going to change. I could never call in sick to school if I didn't really mean it. "Alright," I said. "Forget I even brought it up."

I had been pretending to read *Lost Illusions* (in the bath) when

Leo came in without knocking, desperate for a piece of toilet paper to wipe his runny nose with. "Cold out?" I asked without looking up, feigning a helpless immersion in the magical prose of Balzac. I could feel the cold he brought in with him, clinging like an aura to his clothes, his beard, which was now spotted with gray hairs. It almost had a smell—the cold; like damp wool. "Have you been in the snow?" I asked, noticing melting patterns on his parka. "I hope you found a clean patch."

"Yep," he said, fidgeting. "Threw some snowballs."

"What were you doing throwing snowballs?" I said. He picked at a sticky spot on his pants, tensing.

"I don't know," he said. "I felt like it."

I couldn't remember doing anything enjoyable in the snow since that day a couple years ago, when we both got the news that we were finally going to get tenure. The period before that had been horrific, completely devoid of fun. We were both stressed and emaciated, smoking too much. He was finalizing his book and using the last of his grant money to pay for this expensive German proofreader—Olaf, I

think his name was. When I asked Leo of the necessity of that expenditure, he said: “It *has* to be absolutely perfect, otherwise I can’t put my name on it, do you understand?” I was teaching, working on my book, and my father was dying. It’s hard to think about that time and imagine what it must have been like, because we never think we are capable of suffering until we do. I developed a temporary gluten allergy, having eaten spaghetti and donuts for every meal and then endless amounts of coffee. I remember battling some vicious adult acne. The dermatologist told me the problem was stress and hormones. “You can either have a child, or start taking birth control,” he said. “Either one will fix your skin.” I don’t think I thought twice which option I would take.

Anyway, that day we got tenure, we were both out of the house for some reason or another, which is rare for us. We had an answering machine because we were still in that period of not believing in cell phones. Our message greeting went: “Hello, you have reached Leo Farber and Diane Yee. If this is an important call, please leave a detailed message. Otherwise, give us at least two weeks to call you back. We apologize for the delay. Thank you.” Leo got home first and listened to both messages. The first one went: “Hi Leo, this is Andy. Boy, are you and Diane a couple of hardasses! Lucky for you we like people who are willing. Yup, that’s right, you got it! Congratulations buddy...” And the next message was a call for me, very much the same. “Can you believe it?” Leo shouted over and over. “This never happens!” We didn’t know what to do with ourselves. We just sat at home, trying to contain the news with calmness, and dignity, and a little bit of tea. Then Leo stood up and dug the keys of our old Volvo out of the change bowl. I smiled. We shoveled the car out and drove to the beach, the same one we used to go to the summer we first moved here, when everything was green and humid and we were reading *Bonjour Tristesse* (in the middle of an ironic Françoise Sagan kick), and there were smacks of jellyfish patrolling the shallow Atlantic shore. Since we were still brave, we jumped in anyway and swam like nothing could really hurt us as long as we believed it, and

it was true, nothing did. So when we got to the beach and found it half-blanketed with snow we kind of just stood there, dumbfounded, like we just woke up from a long dream, and Leo got down and laid on the snow, and I did too, and listened to the surf, which still sounded the same. We went to a nearby restaurant and ate. It was winter but I don’t remember it being white or bleak. I remember it being clean.

“Hey, stop it,” I said, as Leo bent down for a kiss, groping for one half-submerged boob. “Stop, I’m trying to concentrate on this,”

“Ooph,” he said, making a face. “Scalding bath.” This was not true, my bath was quite lukewarm, maybe even room temperature. He eased himself up from the tub’s rim, slow and aching, and went to take off his muddy shoes.

I guess I forgot to mention that Leo and I haven’t had sex for a whole year.

When I finally came out of the bath Leo was slumped in front of his laptop, scrolling through yet another gossip blog with a bored, disgusted expression, like a chaperone at a middle-school dance. “Done with work?” I asked, drying the ends of hair around my neck. “You have a minute to talk?”

“Nope. Horrible day. Dead-ended in the library,” he said. “Paged another volume of books and they forgot to include the index—again. They’re impossible.”

“What are you doing paging another volume of books?” I said. “Do you even read what’s inside the books?” I was leaning against the counter, arms crossed, thin, accusatory. Remembering everything made me feel hostile; I wanted an explanation, or I wanted Leo to make me feel better, but, well. “Look, forget it. I think we need to finish our conversation about the adoption thing,” I said.

“Don’t have time for it, sorry.”

“Leo. Please.”

“Don’t want to get into it with you anymore.”

“Why?”

"You know why."

"Because you're mentally ill? Because you have the emotional maturity of a twelve year old?"

"Damn it, Diane," Leo said, "If you say that again I'm going to have to never come home. I mean it about moving out."

"Go ahead, get a brand new empty apartment to hoard your photocopies in. Have your cute philosophical orgies with Olaf. I don't care."

"What do you want me to do? Not research? Not publish? Stay home all day and be miserable with you?"

"When was the last time you wrote something? You're doing enough research for five books at least. I think you're procrastinating, or lost. My colleagues can write books with a dozen books on their own shelves. Do you think Harold Bloom goes and pages a volume of books every day?"

"Right, because I respect what your colleagues do."

"And what's your book going to be about? Philosophical blah blah blah blah. Are you still going to use that episode of *The Simpsons* in your prologue? Oh, Professor! You are breaking so many rules!"

"You're pathetic, Diane."

"Don't you love me? Aren't you supposed to tell me to snap out of it? Help. Please. Or are you too self-absorbed to think about me?"

"You know what, I'm leaving. I don't need this right now, and you're hysterical."

Leo closed his laptop, unplugged it, and began rolling the computer charger into a tight ball. He picked out several books and put them in a duffel bag. A very bad feeling hit my gut, a very deep, bad feeling like being sucked down a drain.

"Who were you throwing snowballs with?" I asked, desperate.

"Nobody," he said.

"Come on," I snorted. "You walked Richard's kid home again, didn't you."

"So what."

"That means you're ready! You're ready, honey!"

"Diane, please."

"What are we waiting for? Haven't we gotten where we want to be?"

"I'm sorry. I can't. Too fast, too much, too soon."

"We're not going to live forever," I said.

"Thank God for that," he said.

This is when I think I rammed my head as hard as I could into the refrigerator handle.

Was it because deep down, I knew I would never be able to have a child? Maybe this is why we were attracted to one another in the first place. Maybe this was the kind of life we wanted all along. Leo thinks the decision to have a kid has to be like adopting a dog. Only impulsive people go to the pound, the pet store, think: that is adorable, I would love one of those, and actually gets the dog. Rational people have to do a lot of pro and con reasoning, a lot of list making before they can be really sure it's going to work out with positive returns. He has probably come up with a formula that tells him exactly what the ratios are, like, a number that quantifies the quality of the kid's life over the success of dad's career, set greater than or equal to one. All he can afford to do right now is walk a friend's kid home, have an intermittent snowball fight, and pretend that is enough.

What can I say to get Leo to understand that everything feels pointless right now and that I want to die? It was a pesky command: Die. Die. I've passed my prime.

Here are two funny stories. The first one is about how I decided that it would be okay to be an academic. The second is about Leo. My story happened in a bar. There were two men sitting next to me: One was reading the paper and the other was watching baseball on the television above us. The man reading the paper had seen something he liked, so he nudged the man watching the game and pointed at a photograph of a woman. "Hot?" he asked. The man watching

baseball glanced quickly and said, “Yeah. Sure.” “She’s a writer,” the first man said. “Heard of her?” “No.” I lifted my head because I thought maybe they were going to ask for my opinion. They didn’t, obviously, but left the paper when they got up. I slid over into their seats and looked at the woman in the photograph. It was Susan Sontag. In the picture, she looks young. She stares defiantly at the camera with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, wearing a heavily starched collared shirt. There were serious creases in her brow, and her hair was jet black and wiry, like mine. I decided that if I could help it, I would become like that woman in the picture. When Susan Sontag died in 2004, I was surprised because she never seemed like someone capable of dying. She was never a real person, she was only an idea, a photograph. I didn’t mourn her at all.

When Leo was still a pimply Eeks major—electrical engineering and computer sciences—not yet a philosopher, he went to a talk by James Watson, one-half of Watson and Crick. Leo couldn’t remember much about the talk, but afterward, he bumped into Watson buying a frozen yogurt at the student deli. Watson was already quite into middle-age. Leo told him he had just been to his talk and did he have any advice for him? Watson cackled and put his pale hands on him and said, “Plastic surgery, son. See my face? How smooth the area around the eyes is? That is what science is for.” For Leo, what this meant was: In addition to being a world-class scientist, Watson was also a great joker. For me, what this meant was: Even this man who half-discovered fucking DNA, whose name was forever going to be in science textbooks, was still going to be obsessed with something as dumb and shallow as plastic surgery because he was afraid to die. In the end, dying is dying. Dying is oblivion. The dying person is not going to know that the world remembers him. Because he will be dead.

But I am being melodramatic, I know. This is definitely what Leo thinks, even though he is crouched down on the floor and holding me while I cry, putting ice on my bloated forehead. Life is such

a bet, I am saying. You only have so many years that you can put on the table and hope that you win something. If you haven’t lost everything then maybe you can consider yourself lucky. Leo is holding me and telling me not to worry, that everything will be okay in the end. He promises that he will think about adoption. He says he will think hard about it and this gives me some hope.

When I stop crying, I look at the clock and see that I have wasted more than an hour freaking out. I feel nervous, like that was too much time. “Do you want to go for a walk or something?” Leo says.

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

“Okay, but we need a destination or I won’t enjoy it. I might have a panic attack.”

“So make an arbitrary one. Anything. The ATM. The library. No. Um, cookies.”

“Cookies?”

“Sure.”

“Oh, God.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Leo waits. I am putting on clothes and a coat and a purple scarf and a hat I knitted that’s too small for my head. I am tying the laces to my boots. *What’s going to happen*, I want to ask Leo, just to get his honest opinion, so I won’t feel so confused, like a pear that’s been gouged out, all hollow in the middle and slowly collapsing inward, unknown to anyone. *I can accept that I’ve failed at something*, I want to say. *It’s okay that you’re not going to happen*.

Right now I am putting on gloves. I am walking down familiar steps, old marble steps that are indented in the middle, where decades of feet have trod. I hear Mr. Genovese, he is playing Satie. I am sensing a change in the air. In the park, there is evidence of change.

Bike tracks. Old leaves. Soggy ground. Glossy newspaper inserts blowing along in the sidewalk gutter. Small green shoots dotting the branches.

“Hey.”

“What?”

And when he says nothing, I know there’s no point elaborating. We’ve already had all our conversations and will continue to have the same conversations forever. And it is comforting, enough.

“What’s going to last longer,” I am saying, “the really weird shirt at Goodwill or the one everyone buys in the moment?”

“The weird shirt.”

“Lucien or ... d’Arthez?”

“Balzac.”

“Now or later?”

“Now,” he says. “Now.”