

It's Going to Be Another One of Those Days

This morning I am a big fat woman who doesn't want to get out of bed. So I don't. I lie on my back and catalogue the aches in my hips, my knees, my neck, my fingers. My mouth tastes awful, as if I'd eaten a box of chocolate the night before. I can't decide what I want more, a glass of water or another box of chocolates. I rub my eyes but still can't see. Something smells like rotten grapefruit.

I reach out toward the bedside table, knock a bunch of stuff on the floor until I find a pair of glasses – big square frames heavy with lenses. I put them on and am appalled at what I see – at what is not eclipsed by the mound of me. Clothes lay strewn about, sometimes over and sometimes under plates alive with moldering food. Books and magazines are piled everywhere – on the dresser, on the floor, even on the window ledges, stacked so high they block out the light.

I hoist myself up into a semi-sitting position to get a better view of my decrepitude. Does anyone live with me? This is always the first and most important question I ask myself each morning. I've got to be ready with a Mona Lisa smile in case a man comes prancing naked out of the bathroom. But the big bed, the spot where a man might have been, is strewn with books – paperbacks with their covers tightly curled. I pick one up and flatten it out – "A Rogue's Proposal." I look at another, "Man Hunt," and another, "The Tiger Prince."

So I've slept alone. Fully dressed, in bright orange stretch pants and a white button-up blouse. I search the walls for family pictures – for someone – and see nothing, no kids, no grandkids.

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But I resist the urge to close my eyes, go back to sleep, or escape into a trashy novel. If there's one thing I've learned being a different person each day, it's that nothing is gained by staying in bed all morning. Each life, every life, must be plumbed for its secret joy.

I shift my legs around, sit up and pause to catch my breath. Oh, were that it was still yesterday, when I was a strapping young man who leapt out of bed, showered, dressed and was out the door in five minutes, ready to tackle whatever life threw at him. (It was only as I jumped into his pick-up that I realized I had no idea where he was going. So I let his body take over. He drove to Dunkin Donuts for coffee, black with sugar, and three crullers – what a treat – then to a housing development under construction at the edge of town.)

I look at my hands, expecting them to be tan, nicked and callused, but they are pale and spotted and plump, nails chewed to the quick. Then I see a picture frame that has fallen on the floor, face down. But today I am a big old lady who can't bend over far enough to pick something up off the floor. My glasses slide down my nose. I push them back up. I wonder how many times I'll do this today. After a carefully orchestrated series of maneuvers – a push up, a turn, a slow-mo combination bend over-squat and wavering lunge, I grab the frame. A man and a woman, both young, arms around each other, stand under a palm tree and smile in black and white. The man is skinny, handsome, and so am I. I recognize myself by the expression on the woman's face, by the sag of her eyes, a flatness in the lips – an optimism too firmly grasped, as if, already, she knew what she was going to become.

But the man. There once was a man. At least this woman had the pleasure of knowing a man. If it was a pleasure – I jump to conclusions. Was I ever happy with him? Do I lie here at night and lose myself in these books to relive that first embrace, or that first betrayal? All emotions seem possible. Love, anger, desire, despair. I study the man's face for a clue. He has an adamant happiness about him, but perhaps all young men back then looked like this when photographed with their girls. After all, they had been taught not to appear awash with love.

But most of all I feel impatient, which makes no sense. Why would I feel impatient with a dead man, or a man long gone to another, skinnier woman? Maybe this woman is impatient with me and my questions that she could never find answers to. Then I realize that, even though my stomach hurts, I am hungry. I put the photo back on the bedside table, waddle over to the window

and find I'm not up in the air but on the ground. That means no stairs. Already I feel better, lighter. The day is sunny and the trees glow with new leaves, so I toss the stack of books to the floor (there's no point in being tidy now) and open the window. A warm breeze flows over me and reawakens an optimism, a sense that all is still possible. Birds twitter and chirp to remind us that we could too if we wanted. So I do and she does. We surprise each other. She has a wonderful voice. On a day like today, it's easy to be anyone, I decide.

I watch a pick-up truck drive by and think about Barry, the man I was yesterday, and wonder where he is right now. He won't be going back to the construction site. I quit his job. After the first hour, it was clear to me that despite all his enthusiasm, he was miserable. He kept thinking about this woman, Bonnie, in California, who was beautiful and funny and laughed like wind chimes. I fell in love with her immediately, which probably didn't help matters much because Barry kept getting these massive erections, which made it difficult to concentrate on the window we were framing out. We kept cutting the two-by-fours the wrong length. Why don't you go after her? Why haven't I gone after her? Was that thirty-six-and-a-half inches, or thirty-five? Thirty-five, I'd say, and inevitably, I was wrong. When the crew boss complained one too many times, we quit.

"Elsbeth?" a voice calls out. "Are you all right?"

"I've got to go to California," I say before I remember who I am and recognize that it's a man's voice – that there's a man in the house.

"We are in California."

I turn around to see him standing in the doorway – a fine-looking man, just like in the picture but skinnier than ever, and slightly stooped.

"Oh," I say. "Oh, yes. Silly me." I try to look sheepish.

The man walks over and wraps his arm around my shoulders. His touch grounds me, soothes me. I am not alone.

"Maybe you should lie down."

He pulls me gently toward the bed. I stand firm, resort to cheerfulness.

"But I just got up, and I'm singing. How do I sound?"

"Like a big bird."

He says this without smiling. What has happened to this man and me? And how did we get to look so different when we once looked the same? Then I remember how hungry I am, as if the bulk of me is only on the outside, and inside I'm hollow.

"I'm hungry," I say.

"I'll be in the kitchen." The man lets go of me and walks away.

I want to say – I try to say – I love you, but my lips get stuck in that flat position and won't let the words out. I get fatter and hungrier, and want to chop off my arm.

Two days ago I had no arm – lost it in a fishing accident. All morning I sat on a deck overlooking the Gulf, drank beer and smoked cigarettes. But after the third beer, I let that phantom limb rise up and direct a trawler out of the channel, then motion a pelican to dive for a fish and finally, finally, the fisherman smiled. All day long that arm danced in the air and whipped the clouds into frothing towers which in turn stirred up winds and darkened the sea. Then, with a flick of the hand, the clouds melted into the horizon. For a day, the fisherman became the master of the universe he'd always wanted to be.

I hold my flabby arms out before me. What are they still here for? To hug the green-eyed man.

In the bathroom, I wash my face, brush my hair, find an old dried-out lipstick in the medicine cabinet and color my stubborn lips. But then the rest of my face disappears so I pinken my cheeks. I look like a child's drawing with wiry gray hair sticking out all over the place. I scrounge around in the dresser drawer and find a blue scarf. Ten different ways of tying and I finally get it right. Now I look like a waitress at a pancake house.

It's miles to the kitchen so when I finally get there, I collapse into a ripped vinyl chair and put off the hugging plan. My man is wearing a white apron, stands with his back to me and tends to the bacon. He ignores my dramatic entrance. I sip the coffee – it's cold – and almost complain but the bacon smells too good. (I've never been a person who didn't like bacon.) This room is cleaner. The books have been organized in discrete piles that I suspect I am not

responsible for. I've got my work cut out for me and don't know where to begin.

"That smells good, honey," I say.

He grunts.

I guess I've said this type of thing before.

"But just two strips today, I've got to watch my weight."

At this, he twirls around and drops the spatula on the floor. "Elsbeth, what have you done to yourself?"

"I don't know."

He shakes his head then picks the spatula up off the floor. "You look ridiculous."

I start to cry. I hate it when I'm someone who cries. I try to stop but my body keeps jiggling. I look up and my man is standing there, skinny and sad. We all need some cheering up, I decide.

"I'll be Fran and you be Kukla. Let's go find us a dragon," I say, and try to laugh but it comes out more like the cackle of a crazy woman.

He kneels down in front of me, grabs my shoulders and shakes me a little. "I'm Walter. You're Elsbeth. You've got a doctor's appointment at one."

"Walter," I repeat. I like the way the syllables roll off my tongue.

"What?" he says.

"I was just pretending."

"Pretending?"

"You know, trying to have a little fun." A sob wells up in the hollow of me but I don't let it out. I smile and start to tear my paper napkin into little pieces.

"Oh, Elsbeth."

Walter sighs and looks at me as if I've just poured a glass of orange juice over my head. It's always like this. I inject a life with a little fun and everyone automatically assumes that whoever I am has lost her mind.

He calls the doctor. "I think we'd better come in right away."

He wets a paper towel, wipes my cheeks and lips but leaves the scarf. For this I am grateful. Small steps, I remind myself. I purse my lips for a kiss but

now he's too upset to appreciate such a gesture. What hell have I put this poor man through?

Walter eats standing up, tells me to hurry, but I do not want to go to the doctor so I nibble. On two measly slices of bread, buttered and jammed, and a cold pile of scrambled eggs. The bacon burnt. I eat it anyway, all six slices. Then he fusses and paces about, in a hurry to leave. Now I see how he keeps so thin and wonder if it's worth the trouble. I try to calm him down, tell him I'm fine, that I woke up full of sweet dreams, is all. He refuses to listen.

"Let's go for a walk in the park instead," I suggest.

"The park, ha!" He kneels down and ties my shoes. "Yesterday, you didn't even get out of bed."

I'm afraid of doctors. I've had bad experiences. One morning I woke up strapped to a gurney rolling down a maze of white-tiled corridors. Open-heart surgery, they said. Relax, Mr. Winsted, you couldn't be in better hands. But you don't understand, I told them. If he dies, I'm dead. There's no coming back as a ballerina, something I've always wanted to be. They shut me up with a shot of Valium into my I.V. line so I couldn't stop the doctors from operating. I watched them slice me open, fondle my heart like a chunk of beef they were about to throw on the grill, then cut and splice while discussing the price of real estate on Block Island. But I lived, through that day at least.

"Walter," I say. "Look at me."

He does. I cradle his head in my hands.

"How long have we been married?"

"Elsbeth." He pushes my hands away. His voice is flat, stern like a schoolmaster. "I am Walter, your brother. I married Kate. She's dead. You never married." His eyes fill with tears so he stands, turns his back, takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and blows his nose.

Words of love freeze on my lips and fall away like old paint. How could I have gotten everything so wrong? Sure, there's always some confusion at first, but I've never misjudged things so. After an hour in a body, I usually find my bearings but Elsbeth's world has no distinct boundaries or reference points. Possibilities shimmer out of focus, and out of reach. She is a mass of yearning

flesh, like a newborn child, wanting everything, having nothing. I do not know how to be except to eat and dream. This is the most difficult life I have ever lived.

Walter drives slow and I am thrilled to be moving. So is he. He's suddenly a new man, and talks a blue streak. We live in a condominium complex where everybody keeps to themselves, which is the way Walter likes it. I have a friend Pat but she's visiting her grandchildren in Indiana. He's glad she's away. He says she talks too much. She's coming home next week. Too late for me. Walter has a meeting at three-thirty with his lawyer. Somebody owes him twenty thousand dollars. I am impressed.

We drive by a man walking his dog. He's got a charming spring to his step and his thick white hair glows in the sun. I roll down my window and call out, "Hello, isn't it a gorgeous day?" The man looks up alarmed, then nods a cautious hello. "Call me Elsie," I say, and wink. I envision a dalliance. But Walter steps on the gas so the last I see of the man is him standing there with his mouth open, about to say something. I am furious, of course. Who knows what might have happened? But I don't say anything. I clamp my lips between my teeth, push my glasses up my nose and stare straight ahead. I remind myself that the day is still young and full of opportunities. My stomach growls.

We turn onto the main road. I want to stop at every store. There's so much I need. A cinnamon Danish, a Coke, some gum. The latest "People," "LIFE" and "Entertainment Weekly." A couple of cats – a woman like me should have cats. Walter ignores my pleas until we drive by a fruit stand. He has a weakness for strawberries. So do I. Strawberries, bananas, pineapples, grapefruit, mangos and green beans.

We sit at a table under an umbrella and eat them raw – the green beans, I do, that is. I'm surprised at how sweet they are. Cars pull in and out, people leave with armloads of fruit. There is a lesson here. All people love fruit. Suddenly I yearn to be the hardy woman behind the cash register. I want to stick a pen behind my ear and stand in the shade of the yellow-and-white-striped awning. I want to chat with all the fruit lovers while my earth-stained hands

make change. I don't want to go back to that smelly bedroom. I want to meet a widower with a thousand grapefruit trees and live in his farmhouse and get up at the crack of dawn and make him breakfast. I am somebody who could be anybody who has been nobody. I am overwhelmed by the familiarity of Elsbeth's world, and for brief second, I feel at home in her body. It's like being shot full of joy.

"Wouldn't it be fun to own a fruit stand?"

Walter's lips are red from the strawberries. He looks like a clown. "Yep," he says.

"You stack and I'll sell."

"Great idea. I don't know why we didn't think of it sooner."

I want to stay here forever.

A mother helps her two young daughters out of the car. The girls skip and hop and bubble over with life. Just like I do. "Then can we have an ice cream cone?" one of them asks.

"Yes," the mom says.

"I want one too," I say. The mom scowls at me, corrals her girls and hurries away. Inside me a balloon pops. I am a thing to be hurried away from.

"I have to get my hair done," I say.

"Your hair looks fine."

We are on the highway and stuck in a long line of cars going nowhere. Rivulets of sweat drip down all sides of me. I am melting. People stare. They are all young and beautiful and happy and drive convertibles and listen to angry music. They dart in and out. Honk at us. I want to go home, to go back to bed. The world is too much for me. I've eaten too many green beans. The doctor will mistakenly diagnose a rare disease.

The traffic picks up speed and Walter turns on the radio. He hums along to Ella and I can't help but sing. Soon we are harmonizing and our voices sound good together – "You'd be sooo nice to come home to, you'd be sooo nice by the fire...." I feel twenty again, just like in the photograph, and we could be headed anywhere, to the beach, to the airport, to a secret rendezvous.

Highways are like this. While you are cruising along, you could be anyone going anywhere. You don't have to get off to go see the doctor, or go back to your dingy old condo – you can drive all the way to Mexico if you want to. Most people, past a certain age, forget about this. But Elsbeth hasn't. I've never been anyone who thinks so much like I do.

The exit for the doctor is coming up. I picture myself sitting in the waiting room with all the sick people. I don't belong with them. I know what is wrong with Elsbeth. She doesn't get out enough, she eats too much, she reads too many books. And she has been listening to Walter for too long. Simple mistakes. Easily corrected.

Ella is scatting now – ew shoobee doobee, ew, ew – so I scat too. What fun we're having. I doubt that Elsbeth has ever had so much fun. I roll down the window, stick her head out and shout so people will see how happy a fat old lady can be. Walter yells, grabs me by the waist of her orange stretch pants, but only the pants move. Then he gets a hunk of her arm, I yank away but he doesn't let go, and suddenly we swerve, into the path of a shiny red sports car. The young woman driving has her mouth wide open, like mine, as if we are singing together.

But the expression on her face changes to angry and she turns away. Her car veers onto the shoulder and Walter manages to steer our car back into the center lane. Horns are blasting, Walter is yelling and Ella is still scatting away. I look back and see that the red car has stopped. The road curves and I lose sight of it altogether. After that, Elsbeth sits quietly and stares straight ahead, hands folded neatly in her lap. I don't even reach up to adjust her glasses as they slide down her nose. Her arm hurts where Walter grabbed her but she doesn't complain and I don't say a word. One more visit to the doctor won't kill me.

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