

Eine Kleine Angst

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She sat in the breakfast nook. I poured her orange juice. She was about to say something. Defensively, I opened the newspaper to the financial section. For what was there to say? *Excuse me for being somewhat blah today. In truth, I am suffering the symptoms of calamitous withdrawal. You know, acute anxiety, sharp pains, that horrific stream of gas. You see, I have resolved not to philander. All in the interests of preserving this sham of a marital union. A bitter if necessary societal accommodation, but what in our lives isn't? And yes, I know I denied it, but I did enjoy the pleasures of our neighbor, Mary Kay Parsons. And Miss Randall (the piano teacher). And Janie McIntyre, our son's camp counselor, whose comprehensive knowledge of poisonous plants and herbal remedies prevented me from breaking out in inexplicable rashes. What can I say? P. S. It has nothing to do with you.*

I buttered her toast. I agreed to a long list of household chores, and felt the airy cheat of her kiss on my cheek. In my soggy corn flakes and crumbling egg I saw my life. I dissolved sugar cube after sugar cube into my coffee; still, the same flavor of watered-down bleakness prevailed.

During the course of the weekend I mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedge, purchased teak patio furniture, and trimmed, with a ferocious eye, every cherry blossom extending over the property line. Sunday night I sat outside on the patio. It had been thirty-six hours since I made my resolution, and I had now razed every green surface on my property. I sunk into the all-weather goose down of my new teak recliner, not knowing what to do. I had no reason, not any longer, to conceal myself in the rhododendron to place my surrepti-

tious telephone calls. No elaborate list to memorize of where I had been, when, and with whom. Mary Kay had precipitously relocated, Janie was pursuing a degree in botany, and Miss Randall, well, she was gone too.

I decided to go swimming. Looking at my pinched and flaccid legs under the water, I refused to believe that nothing would ever change, nothing save my salt intake (lower), my cholesterol level (higher) or my golf handicap (also higher). I might as well write my own obituary: *Hunt, noted attorney, partner at the venerable firm of Bloodstone & Moore, died yesterday at the age of forty five. True, what he'd really wanted to be was a jazz pianist, but who really does what he wants? Besides, his father was threatening disinheritance, and he was too profligate, even at age twenty-two, to ignore him. Not to mention irresponsible and degenerate, all of which, of course, require funding. (These years of dissipation have been censored in the interests of decency.) His later years were uniformly dull and do not bear exhaustive recapitulation; let us merely mention lawn furniture, breakfast nooks. Hunt suffered cardiac arrest while at home drinking shots of Bombay, in desperate contravention of doctor's orders. He is survived by wife, four children, sixteen (former) mistresses, numerous creditors, and a mother who refuses to die, although already living in some kind of alternative universe, populated by lieder singers and Viennese bellhops.*

On Monday, Miss Hargrave of Pine Manor nursing home called me at the office—another incident involving my mother. She did not want to discuss it over the telephone and asked if I could visit. I agreed. And what harm? I might also mention that Miss Hargrave is shapely, fit and provocatively prim. I laid my head on my dashboard of my Lexus, indecently imagining Miss Hargrave's posterior plastered on my windshield, in place of the pigeon shit that had so thoughtfully been left for me.

But no sooner had I emerged from the Midtown Tunnel than I began thinking of Janie, and Mary Kay, and Miss Randall, even former Scout mistress Diane Doherty, whom I had long forgotten but who, in my newfound deprivation, suddenly seemed ravishing and possibly worth looking up again. If only I hadn't pushed it by asking Mary Kay to flash me (literally) signals across the driveway. If only I had practiced my Kreutzer etudes, perhaps Miss Randall would have

had less to berate me about.

Miss Hargrave buzzed me into her office and closed the door behind us.

"This is quite awkward for me," she began, promisingly. "Your mother can be a difficult patient, but this is altogether unprecedented, even for her." She paused, adjusting her skirt. She had summoned me to her fastidious office before, to report pilfering of Swiss chocolates, to complain of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau blaring in the night, but she had never been as flush and fulsome as she was now, even when she had recounted Mother's grand-scale delusion involving a tryst with a bellhop at the Hotel Sacher.

"The persistent Viennese fetishism is, of course, a problem." This was nothing new; my mother had, since her arrival at the Manor, redecorated her room in the style of Emperor Franz Joseph, refusing sustenance that could not be recategorized into some kind of schnitzel. And, I admit, listening to Schubert for hours on end can drive even the most belligerently happy of us to tears.

"Schubert himself succumbed to syphilitic delusions," I pointed out.

"Well, I can rule out transmission of venereal disease," she responded, briskly. With her back to me, I took in the full length of her unyielding figure, the firm, impertinent rise of her buttocks. "Granted, it is somewhat difficult for the nutritionists to be innovative, given her dietary preferences. But in the past," she continued, "your mother's idiosyncrasies were—with the notable exception of the cuckoo clock—confined to herself. Your mother," she said, "is having a subversive influence on the other patients."

"Subversive?" I repeated.

"Yes," she said, her lashes fluttering. "Yester—Yesterday," she continued, the stricture of her pencil skirt causing her to pace in short, nervous leaps, "your mother, during oil painting, exposed herself to Mr. Kleinschafft, who then suffered a stroke."

Now, let me say something. My mother had always been the kind of woman who would not dare look between her own legs, let alone bare herself to a roomful of spectators. Generally she kept her legs so tightly crossed that no glimpse of her underwear was ever

possible, unlike the other lady residents of the Manor, whose thigh muscles seemed to have slackened as much as their minds.

"Was he Viennese?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Well," I asked, "What's to be done?"

"We are thoughtfully evaluating your mother's case and will keep you informed. Oh, there's this," she added, holding up a plastic bag by the tips of her fingers. "We recovered it from the recreation room." In its airless sack was a nondescript, high-waisted white underpants. The type, incidentally, preferred by my wife.

Exiting Miss Hargrave's office I headed straight for the solarium. There I easily outwitted a man in a walker and breathing tubes for a window seat location, a refuge where I could sit staring out the window at the Atlantic coast, trying to forget the rasping indignities of the place. But by the time the invalid managed to traverse the full length of the room, breathing demandingly through the hole in his throat, I was shamed. Yes, even me. I got up. I desperately wanted a shot of Bombay, a slap, another censure from Miss Hargrave.

What I really wanted to do was to call Janie, or Mary Kay, or Miss Randall, to tell her (them) I was wrong, that I was on my way over—if, of course, I was welcome. But I wandered upstairs instead.

Mother had been expecting me.

"Did you bring my passport?" she asked brightly, dusting her replica Hapsburg-era chandelier with an old handkerchief.

"You haven't been out of the country in twenty years, and it's long expired. Besides, only sane people are allowed to travel. By regulation of the State Department."

She looked only somewhat dismayed. She stopped dusting and sat down on her gothic bishop's chair.

"But dear, how will I make it to your father on time?"

"Dad's been dead for a quarter of a century," I clarified. "Actually, the date was the nineteenth of February, 1975. The customs officials managed to get his body back in decent shape, despite the ungodly pressures of the cargo hold in the DC-9."

"Why must you be so contrary?" she asked, putting on a

recording of *Der Tod and Das Mädchen*. "He's waiting for me in the Hotel Sacher." With that, she delved into the marzipan tin.

"He's not waiting for you. In fact, he's not been communicating with you, I'm quite certain, given that you have no telephone privileges. Here," I demonstrated, "the phone's dead."

"Don't be silly, dear," she chided me. "What of our opera tickets?"

"Your cousin, Empress Elisabeth, can use them. But you're certainly not."

"But all the arrangements have been made," she protested, "all I need is my passport."

"And how were the arrangements made?" I inquired, readjusting my arm on her velvet bolster. "Is this a touring stop for the Viennese StaatsOper?"

"No, of course not. Don't mumble," she said, eating more marzipan, which, amazingly, had no effect on her elocution. "Your father bought the tickets last he was in Vienna."

"Last he was there, in fact, was 1975. And," I continued, "your German is terrible." Mother did not take issue with my characterization. "Who will administer your medication? Who will ensure the complex chemical orchestration of your brain? And Mrs. Livingston," I knocked on the wall, knowing her wheelchair would be pressed against it, "what will she do without your company?" How will she even get dressed in the morning without you to intercede for good taste?" I brushed aside a wisp of hair that had fallen on Mother's cheek. "No, this is your home now."

I offered her the porcelain plate of bittersweet chocolates. She lifted a bony hand in protest, then pulled herself up, keeping (I noted) her knees together.

Miss Hargrave sent me a follow-up letter, notifying me that my mother's case was to be presented to a full panel of Manor clinicians, all of whom were described as "eminently qualified" and "sensitive to the full expressive range of elder dementia." According to Miss Hargrave, whose letter was, as she, frustratingly brief, the matter was quite serious.

The letter arrived on a Saturday. I was recumbent on my teak

lawn chair, looking to all the world like a radiant, exemplary family man—and as long as I did, what did all the rubbish inside matter? Why, I had managed to make it to mid-day with hardly a thought to Miss Randall, or Janie, or anyone else, or to the hollowness I felt inside. I raised a Bombay on the rocks in tribute to myself. I waved at my neighbor, whom I could see now that the hedge was so assiduously trimmed. I smiled at my wife, who, at first taken aback, reciprocated with strained, slightly-parted lips. At least my mind could still differentiate halcyon suburbia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Yes, I was as solidly rooted as the elm that threatened to disrupt my lawn. And for that I could be grateful. Feeling inspired, I penned a reply to Miss Hargrave: *I am abjectly apologetic for my mother's behavior of Sunday last. That she should so inexplicably bare herself is deeply troubling to me, as it is, I'm sure, to you and to all the hapless bystanders in the sunny recreation room. Perhaps I underestimated the soothing effect of the Sacher torte upon her brain chemistry, and will ensure that she consumes enough of same in the future so as to spare us all recurrence of this embarrassing event. My apologies to the family of Mr. Kleinschafft, whom, I understand, is still in intensive care recuperating. Should you care to reenact the event, purely for clinical reasons, I will be happy to assist. Anything to hasten my mother's recovery and that of poor Mr. Kleinschafft.*

Only, I beg of you, please do not throw her out of your pleasant minty halls, for I cannot tend to her just now. Not with my present exigencies of mind and spirit, the details of which I will spare you.