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Relativity

Although Howard had commented a million times before, he picked up his spoon and waved it around like it was a wand and commented once again, much to his mother's annoyance, about the increasing length of the crack in the ceiling, the one he had promised to fix all those months – or had it been years? – before.

“If you lived here you could fix it anytime. There's no time in a week.” she said.

He searched for signs that she was distraught, but found none. He noted there was an uptick in how she began her sentences with “No” or “What.” Howard assumed this was a defensive maneuver, a preference, rather than a sign of age. He knew her to be willfully obstinate when she wanted to be. Her hearing, too, was fine because she had responded to his mutterings-to-himself on more than one occasion from across the room.

Her husband's death must have come as a relief. It occurred to Howard she had been in mourning since his sickness had begun several years before.

“Are you going to fix the ceiling this time?” his mother asked.

“It's up to you. It'll disrupt the kitchen. Last time you didn't want that.”

“And I still don't want it. You're right. But it has to be fixed sometime.”

The next night the girls came to play 3-14, a double-decked card game. The girls' ages ranged from 60 to 92. They dispatched the game as if they were preparing Thanksgiving dinner for the thirty-fifth time, with efficiency and a practiced, poker-like coolness.

"You girls are sharks," Howard conceded. He had come in last. He marveled at their tenacity.

Frequently, he and his mother sat at the oblong white Formica table in the canary-yellow linoleum-tiled kitchen. Everything seemed to Howard as if it was coated in plastic. In fact, the entire state of Florida seemed coated in plastic. It had a sheen, a lacquered patina that spoke of armies of prosthetics at work, marching across the Babylonian swamps, sands and strip malls. The air felt surreal and heavy, a runaway sweatlodge.

One morning, drinking coffee and talking: "He never touched me, you know." she said. "Not in ten years. Or was it more?" She sighed and sagged into herself. This shocking bit of intimacy caught Howard by surprise; not because of what she said, but that she had to tell her son. Perhaps their relationship was changing. On one hand, he liked being trusted with the truth. On the other, he wasn't sure he was prepared for it.

She had lost weight since Howard had been there last. She seemed bent, a reed yielding to the wind. She still dyed her hair red. And she was still beautiful. Although her skin was wrinkled, her eyes were frank and direct, though dimmed by age.

She's depressed, Howard thought. Well, of course she's depressed! She's old and getting older. Her husband of 40 years just died. She's next. What's she got to look forward to?

"Not even a hug?" Howard asked.

“He wasn’t interested,” she said. Howard couldn’t imagine going that long without touching or being touched. Is that what he had to look forward to, he wondered? He imagined the deep, warm pockets of his body filling with dust.

An awkward silence ensued. “I’m sorry,” Howard said. She jerked forward slightly, as if trying to catch a tear before it fell, but said nothing. Then she recovered herself. “Anyway, it’s not your fault.”

“But you must be so lonely.”

“No, not really.”

“But you just said.” Howard sat back, exasperated. She managed to insert a contradiction at the moment his guard was down. His counter-strategy was to slow his speech to an excruciating tempo, emphasizing each word as if he was talking to a foreigner or a child. He didn’t mean to patronize her, but to get her attention. “Mom,” he began laboriously, “you said he hadn’t touched you and you seemed sad and now you’re saying you weren’t lonely. . .”

“OK, enough, shut-up already,” she said.

Howard was pleased. She would talk. Outwardly, he wore an injured expression.

“They’re not the same,” she said.

Then she paused, frowned, and said, “Maybe you could hold me later?”

He wasn’t sure he had heard right. He stifled the urge to say “What?” “You mean, give you a hug?” he asked. Howard wondered how a little water could make a difference to one so parched. “Of course, Mom,” he said, hiding his fluster, when she said nothing. She stood and quickly cleared the table. Howard looked at the ceiling. Had the crack lengthened? No, of

course not. But it appeared as if it had gotten larger, somehow, with intricate, meandering hairline fractures blossoming like capillaries. Well sure, he would give her a hug. Later.

Howard was confident about his hugging. He had been told he was a good hugger more than once. He gave strong hugs, not the hold-at-an-arms-length type hug, which felt like hugging plywood. He put his back into it, and pressed up close, unless, of course it was a man, and then Howard would press shoulders.

The man Howard's mother had married after she divorced his father, who had – like so many before him – discovered the charms of his 19-year old secretary, was as short and fat as Humpty-Dumpty. He must have been thin at one time, but had since grown with Michelin-man-like geometry into a waddler. His slick-black thinning hair and dramatically arched eyebrows stared at Howard with probing ferocity. Howard had never felt entirely relaxed in his presence, even before the meat cleaver incident.

Herr Stepfather, Howard secretly called him. *The Deli Man*. *The Deli Despot*. Howard still smarted when he recalled the event.

Before Howard's mother had married Paul, when Howard was still in his teens, his mother had decided it would be a good idea for Howard to work for him. Howard would make some money and perhaps the two would bond.

The late-night bellowing conservative radio announcer Howard was forced to listen to night after night accumulated like grain-after-grating-grain of sand under his skin. And then one night Paul declared: "Escalate and teach those bastards a lesson," as the war raged on overseas and an endless amount of plastic bodybags accumulated.

“Go on and agree with whatever that jerk says,” Howard finally burst, “Go ahead and march in lockstep with that imbecile, you Right Winger!” His stepfather exploded as if he had been called Hitler. He snarled and gnashed his teeth and stomped his feet. Then he grabbed the meat cleaver. Fortunately, Howard was lighter on his feet. He ran as if his ass was on fire and hid amongst the Dr. Brown’s Cel-Ray soda in the basement.

It wasn’t until years later that Howard learned how as a boy Paul had fled Germany with his family on the last boat before the Hitler-hammer smashed down. The meat cleaver was the only response he was capable of.

To his shame, Howard realized he *had*, in fact, intended to equate his stepfather with Hitler. That’s the way he saw the silly, fat, gesticulating man. They never talked about the incident.

Howard was only 15 when he tried to convince his mother not to marry him. “He’s not the one,” he argued, “you’re marrying him for security, not love.” Back then Howard was a big believer in love. He still was, but it didn’t come as easily.

“He treats me with respect,” Howard’s mother had said simply, and then she married him.

For the last two years Howard noticed a disturbing tailspin in his self-esteem when it came to the opposite sex. He had crossed the forty-yard age-line six years before and it seemed he was disappearing. Whereas he had been in the habit of freely engaging pretty girls in conversation everywhere, including checkout counters, elevators, on the way to the subway, coming back from the subway, waiting for the bus and at the office, he now contended with

ever-remote, listless or polite responses, as if a cone of invisibility had descended over him and him alone, introducing him to his mortality. When did he cross that particular Rubicon, he wondered? Was his body withdrawing, withering? Was he too beginning that slow descent back into the earth?

He couldn't shake the notion he was just getting a feel for life. It was too soon to disappear. He tried reason: Was it his graying hair? The slowly dropping jowls? "Yes, of course, of course," he told himself, "gravity's blackhole, sucking the corpus relentlessly to the earth to fertilize the next generation." He looked at his face in the mirror and could feel his age written on it, heavy as lead, and terror crept in and settled two inches below his belly button like an undigested piece of pork.

The night before he was to return north Howard couldn't sleep. He lay awake in bed, staring. The thwacka-thwacka-thwacka of the ceiling fan hypnotized him. He felt the breeze on his face and sightlessly let the dark fill his vision. A faint whoosh of glass sliding doors brought him to consciousness. He felt her slide in beside him.

"Now," she said, pulling the covers up around her shoulders. "Don't talk." She wore a terrycloth robe that covered her from neck to calves. He thanked god he was in his pajamas, a light cotton outfit with Mondrian-like colors dripping purples, reds and yellows. Howard forced himself to relax. He could have panicked, freaked out, but he didn't. All she needed was a hug. Gently, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her to him. They lay unspeaking for half an hour, holding each other. He could hear her soft sighs and thought he might have felt tears.

Then she raised her head on one arm and spoke. "You don't have to move here, you know," she said. "I feel comfortable with my friends. I'm 84 but not dead. My husband is dead, but I'm still managing."

With a light, vertiginous sense that he was floating over an abyss, Howard asked, "How do you find the strength to continue?" He realized only then that was the question he most wanted to ask, that was the reason he had come to visit her.

"It's all seamless," his mother said, "you go on as best you can until you can't." She kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she said, and rose spectrally into the dark and vanished with a whoosh.

In the morning Howard showered, dressed and waited for her at the kitchen table, sipping coffee and gazing distractedly at the crack in the ceiling. It had grown since he'd seen it last. Or had it? He had never bothered to examine it up close. Now he took a chair and stood on it. His left eye bulged toward the tiny upside-down dusty white mountains. They reminded him of the snowy mountains back home. He missed walking in their majestic silences. "I hate Florida," Howard told himself. "I'd never survive here."

"Don't touch it," he heard his mother say from the doorway.

He wondered how long she'd been standing there. "You'll make a mess all over the counter."

"I won't, ma," he said, and sat down at the kitchen table while she prepared coffee. Howard felt no shame as he watched his mother. He guessed they would never speak of the incident.

“Can I ask you something and you won’t take it personally?”

Howard braced himself and nodded, prepared to follow the peculiar trajectory of her thoughts. “Don’t send me pictures of mountains on my birthday cards anymore. Maybe it means ‘peaceful’ to you, but not to me.”

Howard was speechless.

“Babies and animals,” she said resolutely, “just pictures of babies and animals.”

Howard kissed his mother on the cheek.

“Call me when you get there so I know you’re OK,” she said. “You can fix the ceiling next time.”

“I will, ma,” he said, knowing he never would.