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Birthright

DAVID GALEF

My mother's last words, according to my father, were a woozy three a.m. reminder to give the mailman and garbagemen their holiday tips. Lymphoma had spread throughout her body, the pain worsened by all the radiation and chemotherapy, and she died a few hours later. Once a full figure of a woman, she looked in the end like a white shadow—I know because my father let me and my sister see her on the bed before the mortuary assistants came to take her away. It was days before anyone thought to cook or take care of the house. That was a week before Christmas, twenty-five years ago, but the holiday season still puts me in a funk. I often check my lymph nodes and fret about cancer. Even more, I worry that I'll end up the same way, not attending to my own needs, wasting my last moments in some act of unre-membered generosity.

These days, I'm the one who performs the household miracles: the garbage gets taken out, the toilets come clean, dinner is prepared, and even the dishes are mysteriously washed on nights when my wife Diane is feeling down on domesticity. She works

as a loan officer in a pristine bank while I lead retarded children through their tangled days. On the other hand, her job is more financially rewarding, as she occasionally reminds me. So I do more than my share, but what kind of gravestone epitaph will that make? "He gave freely of his time, 1966-1999." I've written over a dozen endings for myself, none of them cheery.

But I'm good at putting up a likeable front, a can-do attitude. Around the school, I'm known as Mr. Extra, the one who's willing to stay late when there's a problem with a child, or who'll clean up the bodily fluids the students excrete. I don't want a child myself—I've got enough on my hands with this raggletag crew—but Diane doesn't see things that way. She was an only child, and she just doesn't realize how much attention a kid, any kid, demands. She used to hint at it from time to time; now she's started pressing the subject. We're both in our thirties, though we've been married for only two years.

"Jonathan," she says, as I unwrap chicken thighs from their foil coating and remove the broccoli from the steamer, "don't you think it'd be nice if we had some company? Someone small?"

I scoop brown rice into a blue ceramic bowl and plunge a spoon into it. "How small?" I ask. "We have enough trouble around here without inviting in dwarves."

Diane bites her lip. "I'll be thirty-four in April. One of these days it'll be too late."

"Pepper?" I offer a bit too brightly. It's either that or sigh from somewhere beneath my sternum. No matter what my response, it kills both our appetites so all we can do is pick at our food. Eventually, I get up to clear and throw everything in the plasticized maw of our trash compacter. Depending on how I feel, I might return to the dining room and massage the day's loans from Diane's shoulders. I give wonderful backrubs, the kind that linger long after my hands have left you, the way my mother taught me when I was seven years old. In sarcastic moments, Diane claims it's why she married me.

The truth is that she'd make a lousy mother—I'd make a better mother—but how can I tell her that? Or maybe she knows already but is hoping it'll turn out all right somehow. She has an unrealistic outlook, the kind of euphemistic attitude that in my line of work turns mental retardation into "learning disability" and crippled into "physically challenged." Maybe I put on an optimistic face at school, but I never forget the difference between possibility and wishful thinking. Getting Gregory, who has advanced Down's syndrome, to eat his lunch without getting any banana on his clothes is within the realm of the possible and a good goal to strive for. Teaching him arithmetic is ridiculous and will only lead to tears. It's that damned word *empowerment*. As Barbara, the token hippie at school, points out, *empowerment* is used by people who don't have any. And Diane talks about motherhood so glowingly because she doesn't understand the responsibility involved.

Diane punches the video-remote to watch a rerun of *Cheers*, which to me is like being trapped in hell with a laugh track. I retreat to the bedroom, which is quiet as a womb. You are what you read, and lately I've been paging through a novel that had a moment's fame some years ago, *Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon*. It's about three dysfunctional people in an era when the term *dysfunctional* was still a gleam in some social worker's eye. It has its own poetry without trying to extract too much from an obviously untenable situation. I hunch over my side of the bed and take up where I left off the night before.

I read long enough so that the posture-perfect mattress underneath me becomes a buoyant sea I float along on. When I look up, the digital timepiece on the bedside table is winking 9:00. I come back into the living room to find the television still on and Diane asleep in what I call her uneasy chair. Her neck is arched back, her mouth half-open like someone who's seen God on the ceiling, but her eyelids are delicately shut, and a gentle sigh issues from her lips. She still hasn't changed out of her blue

suit. Poor Diane. I'd like to kiss those parted lips and stroke her ivory neck. Yet something in her aspect reminds me of a semi-aphasic student named Denise who stops right in the middle of a sentence. I hate myself for the comparison, but there's no getting around it. I tiptoe away and come back after she wakes up.

At school the next morning, I have to prevent a fetal-alcohol case named Billy from walking away with Gregory's lunch. Down's-syndrome kids are so dopily affectionate that people tend to take advantage of them, and it's my job to maintain the balance of power. Children, Freud wrote, are little savages, all id—but what did Freud know about kids with brain damage, kids with severe motor impairment who can't even go to the toilet by themselves? I've handled more feces in the past three years than most parents. I wonder how Diane would react to diapers on a ten-year-old.

In the other corner of the room, Barbara is crouching at the level of three kids who want her to join in their game, which generally has something to do with jostling elbows and "You're it!" Better schools have more structured programs for retarded children, but the main feeling in Tate county is "Keep 'em busy." So we do everything from Simon Says to Put the Velcro Tail on the Fuzzy Thing. We're also supposed to go through a standard set of activities including physical coordination games and speech therapy, but the truth is that we improvise a lot. Most of the parents either don't know what's going on or don't care to.

Today Barbara is wearing torn black jeans, a tucked-in U2 T-shirt, and combat boots. Her bare arms look cool under the fluorescent light as she reaches out to wipe off Tommy's chin, which always has a whisker of drool. Those arms are strong and competent, able to pat a child comfortingly or hoist a seventy-pound berserker about to throw a building block. Many of the children are on medication, but a few can turn surprisingly aggressive in the space of a turned back. Barbara is particularly good at quelling disturbances even before they get started, nicely

and without fuss. I admit I'm attracted to her, from her heart-shaped behind to those knowing green eyes, but it's more than that. One of my recurrent daydreams, an odd combination of fantasy and nightmare, is being reduced to the stature of a retarded child as Barbara holds me tight in her arms and soothes me.

The ten o'clock bell rings, which means that it's time for outside play. The head of the retardation center, a bushy-haired woman who spends half her walking life with arms akimbo, is a great believer in regimen. So we have bells for snack time, bells for recess, bells for every period—which creates a certain Pavlovian effect. Some of the kids always think it's time to eat, and salivate on cue. But instead here I am, bundling up my charges to go outside, making sure that shoes are tied and buttons fastened.

"Here, catch!" Barbara shouts, tossing me a maroon playground ball. Outside, I lob it high in the air towards Gregory, who catches it firmly with a big hug. He chucks it up to Elsie, who punches it out of her way toward Billy, who happens to be looking in the other direction. Before it can hit the ground, I rush in to save it. The group has a mild phobia about letting the ball touch the pavement, so I intervene as best as I can. This means that I'm often left holding the ball. Barbara is on the other side of the playground, leading a circle of Duck, Duck, Goose.

After forty-five minutes of this, the bell rings, and we troop inside again. For some reason, lunch is particularly exhausting, and by three o'clock, the smile on my face feels like plastic stretched over a coat hanger. In the cloakroom, as I'm about to leave for the day, Barbara looks closely at me, as if she's seeing me for the first time. "You look tired," she says softly, and lightly brushes my forehead. All the way home, I keep raising my hand to feel where she touched me.

Diane is waiting in the hallway with a surprise. "We're going

out to dinner," she announces, and whisks us away to the one restaurant in town that doesn't use iceberg lettuce in its salad. We sit at an intimate table, my wife and I, and chat amiably about our day. Diane can make funny jokes about her clients—she can turn the most trivial incident into an anecdote, and I do love her for it. "So I wore the beige suit today. How can you get in trouble with beige? *Then* Mr. Murphy walks in. . . ." Her smile reminds me of my mother's, a sudden flare of the lips.

Back home again, as we get ready for bed, she springs another surprise on me: a chartreuse silk teddy that looks as if it came from Victoria's Secret. Diane is busty, and the sway of her bosom has always done things to my head. I trail my hands down her body, lingering on her wide breasts and the chartreuse gap between her thighs. When we lie down, her skin is so warm that it feels as if heating conduits are underneath. We start to make love, but just as I'm about to enter her, I think of asking: "What about your diaphragm?"

She shrugs her thighs. "Doesn't matter. I'm about to get my period anyway." She presses her hand against my buttocks.

But in my mind I see a seed planted, a sperm fertilizing an egg. I jump ahead a year to a squalling baby, red-faced and implacable. The baby's expression changes into one of those permanently twisted faces I see on the children at school. I ease up from my position on top of Diane. I sit on the edge of the bed, everything dangling down.

She touches my flank. "What's the matter?"

I shake my head, which is not an answer.

She strokes her own side and tries a smile. "I can't change into anything more comfortable than this."

I get up and rummage around in the drawer of the night table. When I finally produce a raspberry-colored condom, my wife has lost interest.

The next day at work, I offhandedly ask Barbara whether she intends to have any kids. All I know is that she lives with a guy

named Floyd, and occasionally she'll tell me with a flip of her hair, oh, Floyd this, or Floyd that. But her answer to my question surprises me. "It's not really an option for me," she says, looking off to the left. "I had my tubes tied when I was twenty."

"Why?" My syllable of dialogue hangs in the air like a large, clumsy balloon.

She shrugs. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I don't know about now." She turns back to supervising a patty-cake contest. One of the children is smacking the wrong areas, and she has to intercede.

Her answer only opens up other questions. What kind of relationship did she have then? Has working with retarded children turned her around, or just made her uncertain? What's the motive for having children, anyway? Ego gratification, perpetuation of the species, something to occupy your life? These are the issues that had me staring at the ceiling last night until almost dawn. I'm surprised Diane couldn't sense the tension, but she slept on oblivious.

Over the next week, I feel the unrest at home. It's sort of a combination of Diane's urgency and my unease. I burn Wednesday's dinner of lamb and eggplant; she stubs her toes a lot on furniture she used to walk around gracefully. We talk more and more in elliptical sentences and don't meet each other's eyes. This isn't the first time phantom children have come between us, but this time they seem here to stay, future shadows assuming weight and substance. They can be shooed away, but like crows on the lawn, they'll just shift to another area.

Diane is a careerist, determined and competitive, and at first I didn't see how she'd ever allow kids to interfere with her schedule. "I need a twenty-seven-hour day, Jonathan," she once told me after a particularly hectic week. "The men all give me the work they can't handle." But when her married friends began to have babies, she grew dewy-eyed, and it was a short step from there to wistful.

For a while, I was successful with diversions. I bought an ice-cream maker and proceeded to churn out a rainbow of flavors over the next month, from mocha cream to cherries in brandy. I bought twin mountain bikes and persuaded her to ride the midget trails in our community's nature preserve. I even began acting more childishly, walking toward her on my knees to hug her, or clowning around in public. I'd bring back odd objects I picked up in the streets: a rock shaped like a face, or a giant bluejay feather. "Where *did* you get this, Jon-jon?" she'd ask in mock astonishment. I could hang my head like a five-year-old who knows he's done wrong; I would half-lie in her lap and let her run her fingers through my thinning brown hair. I enjoyed making myself small for her.

But then we'd visit our friends and observe how well little Samantha played with her Legos. It didn't even have to be a success story: after an afternoon watching a two-year-old wreck the living room, we'd come home and suddenly our upholstered chairs would look unmussed and forlorn, or so Diane would claim. I couldn't deal with arguments like that, and I started to withdraw.

It's been that way for a while, and it's getting to me at work, too. I lose patience with Gregory when he wraps his arms around me so I can't put his jacket on. He'll never learn a damn thing—someone to mother forever. Outside, I let the playground ball bounce away as my group of kids looks on uneasily. I know the burnout rate for this kind of job is high, and I may be reaching my limit. I haven't smacked anyone yet. The problem is that I see so little progress, but then what did I expect? I got into this field as an education major interested in remedial problems. The nastiest adults are those who deal with retards so they can feel superior to someone, but that's not me at all. I suppose that begs the question of what my real motives were. I think I like working with them because, demanding as they can be, they're so *undemanding* in ways that count, and grateful, too.

At home, Diane has opted for open confrontation. "If you want this marriage to progress, we *need* to do this." We've just finished dinner, a lentil stew against the cold night, along with boiled potatoes and cabbage. The dishes lie scattered about like rejects we've discarded.

All I can do is shrug. "Look, if anyone should want kids, it's me. But I don't. I deal with them every day, and that's enough."

She waves her hand dismissively. "Those aren't normal kids. That's the cross you like to bear—I don't know why."

My sister Mary said the same thing when I started my job, except that she also said she understood. She's a nurse, and that's *her* way of compensating. She's been living with her boyfriend for four years, but she doesn't want any kids, either. Over half the men and women in my family have died from cancer, many in their forties. My father, perhaps to even out the score, died of an aneurysm two years ago.

"Besides," Diane continues, "I don't see why a bunch of strange kids are more important than the children we could have."

Because children shouldn't have children, I think. But I can't tell her something I don't quite understand myself. I try the rational route. "All right, let me put it this way. Why do we need kids?"

"*Why?* It's natural."

"That's not an argument." I fold my arms.

"All right. I like children."

"So we'll go and visit some."

"But I want a family." Her heavy lips set in a line.

"Okay, but why?" I get up to clear the dishes. "I'm sorry, I know it sounds like I'm being terribly obtuse, but I mean it. *Why* kids?"

She looks at me startled. I might be a loan client who's just asked for twenty-five cents, but somehow it feels like a million dollars. It takes her a moment till she can reassert herself. "All right." She begins to tick off reasons. "First, kids are fun—"

“When’s the last time you spent all day with one?”

“*You* do all day.” She looks at me slyly, her fertile brown eyes appraising. “Actually, I think you’d be a good father.”

“Years ago my high-school advisor said I’d make a good lawyer, too.” I start stacking. “But law wasn’t what I wanted to do.”

“But kids are a chance at immortality!”

“Maybe, but you give up your life for theirs.” If she’s going to use clichés, so will I. They’re probably both true, anyway.

“Jonathan.” Her voice has become soft, almost pleading, except for an inquiring edge that pulls me in. She takes my chin in her hand. “What *are* you willing to give up?” Her hand reaches around to rub my poor neck. “You’re not going to stay with that job forever, I can tell.”

“What if the child’s damaged?” I murmur. This is close to the heart of my fears, only the damage lies elsewhere. In me.

“The chances for that increase the older I get.” She releases me but reaches out for my hand. “Anyway, they can check that sort of thing nowadays. In utero.”

“Yeah.” I retract my hands, stack some dishes. “Listen, would it kill you to help me clean up?”

She’s hurt, the way she always is when I ask her to help out, but she complies. Only she’s not too good at it: she doesn’t clear off plates before stacking; a serving bowl breaks. It strikes me as the kind of ineptitude that doesn’t go away with practice. I feel my hackles rise, or maybe it’s just the lymph nodes in my neck, which feel tender and swollen. I’d call my doctor, but whenever I show up with these fears, he diagnoses them away. “Worry about something more important,” he said the last time. “Your job, or your family.”

So nothing gets decided that night, but we can’t go on deciding nothing or that’ll be our decision. “Nope,” I think of telling my sister long-distance, “instead of a baby, we opted for a void.” Diane and I move warily about that night and the next, eluding not just each other but the dark, furry subject between us, too

inchoate to wail. The walls of our prefab ranch house seem thin and arbitrary as to what they enclose and what they keep out.

Thursday, everything falls in. A crisis hits the school at noon. It's Gregory: a heart attack at age nine, his padded chest no protection against a faulty valve. Barbara frantically tries CPR, trying to kiss air into him, straddling him with her thighs and pummeling his ribcage hard. It's no use. By the time the medics arrive with an ambulance, there's little chance of recovery. The medics apply an oxygen mask, but he reaches the hospital as a DOA. Half the kids seem stunned at the news while some of the others don't really understand what's happened. Absences are always harder to comprehend than presences. Barbara cries quietly against my shoulder as I numb myself by patting her head over and over. Friday I quit my job.

I don't tell Diane about this at first, partly because we're not speaking to each other much these days, and also because I can explain the death of Gregory but not my decision to leave. At times I feel like a passenger on a train waving goodbye to a figure at the station, though I don't really feel as if I'm moving at all. And why do I always feel so panic-stricken at the prospect of departure?

It's been almost a week since I went to school. I go out in the morning and come home in the evening, just to keep up some semblance of activity, but all I do is go to the Moonshine Diner and drink a lot of milky coffee as I read a book. Sometimes I just drive around. Late one afternoon I arranged to meet Barbara at the diner, but all she wanted to talk about was work. I told her I might not live long enough to go back to work, and she didn't know how to take that.

At home, the meals I make rely more on comfort foods: mashed potatoes, hamburgers, canned soup—the kind of food I learned how to prepare when I was small and my mother loomed large. Later, when she got too weak to get up much, I brought things in on a tray. I read to her when her eyes got tired. She

loved mysteries. I don't know what she would have made of me, aged thirty-three.

Tonight I'm lying on my side of the bed, staring at the ceiling and waiting for sleep. The dark form of Diane is two feet away, the quilted coverlet accentuating her size. Her slumber smooths out her features, her big bosom gently rising and falling with the automatic rhythm of those blissfully unconscious. She'll leave me one day, I know it, and not even the threat of my death will stop her. And because I know this, I snuggle up close, curling against her yielding side, feeling her warmth, trying to hold on.