

Shelf Life of Love

My brother calls from his car on the way home from the hospital while I consider lunch meats. He rarely calls, not until recently. My mother calls all the time. Or did. She can't get the hang of cell phones and besides, they don't let you use them from in there, where you need them most. The walkie talkies we gave her and Dad for Christmas spoon like lovers in a box under their bed. They were supposed to give peace of mind when he shuffled out on errands and left her alone. Good idea, a little late. The bed, I imagine, is neatly made, the bedspread faded but clean. She would have wanted it nice for when he came home. So far, he insists on staying with her. The report from my brother is brief, inconclusive. He'll get back to me when he has more news. We hang up without saying good bye.

Sarah calls when I'm deciding between organic bagged romaine and the regular kind. She wants to know if Michael ruined our vacation. We haven't even unpacked. When I think of ruin, he doesn't come to mind.

"He was fine," I say, wondering why the organic lettuce is so heavy. Then, because it's a friend's duty, I egg her on: "with us."

That sets her off.

"Why can't he be more easy-going with the kids and the dog?" she asks. "Especially the dog. The poor animal has no idea why he's punishing her. She hasn't got a clue what she did wrong."

Two nights ago, when we toasted the New Year together, Sarah and Michael made a resolution to see a couple's therapist. Their vow was every bit as earnest as the one they took ten years ago at their wedding. Both then and now, my husband and I squeezed hands as they sealed their intentions with a kiss. They want, more than anything, for a marriage counselor to extend the shelf life of their happiness. We wish them the same great good luck we wished them before, but harder.

I check the expiration date on the fancy bottled dressing in the produce case. We can't possibly eat a whole jar of blue cheese glop in only four weeks. I set it back on the shelf.

"I know you guys are going to make it," I say and Sarah is quiet on her end. I can't tell if she is crying, but silence seems the only response. I return to the lettuce and toss the regular kind into the cart. Sometimes you just have to decide. On a good day, I master weekly shopping in forty-five minutes. Today, I am thinking far too much and will be lucky if I make it out in an hour and a half.

Now my phone vibrates, which makes me want to hurl it into the kale like a hand grenade. It's my brother again. I put Sarah on hold.

"So which is it, ham or turkey?" he asks, trying to joke, but his voice sounds off.

"Turkey for you, buddy. I've got my friend Sarah on hold."

"The doctor took my call."

The silence that follows makes me notice Musak oozing from the ceiling over each aisle. In high school, Our House was our anthem to radical domestic bliss, an oxymoron as it turns out. The sing-songy trill sounds like Barney now. I press the phone closer to my ear, no doubt increasing my own chances of cancer. Everything is tinged.

"Come on, those guys never take calls," I say, hoping to somehow stretch out the joke, make us go on lightly like this forever, only it's just not happening.

"He usually doesn't." Another pause. "Unless it's urgent."

I am staring at an other-worldly stack of oranges. Navels whose color makes me think of Laugh In's psychedelic backdrop. My mind wants to go back, not forward. The stage lighting in Produce stings my eyes. Nature, I remind myself, is often this garish, as if that could reassure me. I shut my eyes and wait.

"Turns out those new spots on her lung we thought couldn't be good, aren't."

Eyes open again, I see my hand, incredibly pale in the light, touching the bright flesh of a navel.

"He thinks they can go in and try to clean it out again, then do more chemo. It'll buy us some time."

I squeeze the orange and vaguely register the miracle of its plumpness. It is both perfect and completely wrong. Has it been genetically altered, shot through with something to make it ideal, a steroid for the fruit set?

My phone buzzes to remind me and I apologize as I put my brother on hold. NPR is on his car radio and while it's not right to leave him, at least I know he is in familiar company.

"Sorry," I say, "I'll be right back."

"Hey," I say to Sarah, breathless. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. You don't need to hear our problems. You finally got away from us." Then I hear her say, "Stop it girl." She puts a hand over the receiver. "Bad dog. Bad, bad dog."

I hear the puppy's growl, one that wants to be mean, but isn't yet and probably never will be.

"What a pain in the ass," she says. "The things we do for our kids. That's what Michael doesn't understand. He doesn't get sacrifice." Even as she says this, I know she knows it isn't true. Or at least I think so.

I nod at the fruit for too long. Finally, I come to and say, "It was really great seeing you guys." My voice means to be buoyant while also suggesting closure. Instead, it sounds far off, disengaged. I pick up the orange again and let it roll off my fingers into the cart.

But what kind of mother buys a single orange? I grab a few more, forgoing the plastic bag because it's a new year in a new millennium and that's the least I can do. Sarah is talking sweetly now to the dog.

"My brother's on the other line," I finally confess.

"Why didn't you tell me? Is he with your mother? You better go. I'll call you later. We love you." She means it and clicks off.

Only, I don't want to press the button returning me to my brother. I always get it wrong anyway, disconnecting the call. I don't want to hang up either. I want to keep us silently tethered, my brother and me, so that our mother's future can float out there between us on some invisible phone line in cyberspace, bouncing from earth to satellite, rounding the stars we can't see in daylight, but exist just the same. Out there, she would be free from the mistakes, so many mistakes, of those of us left here on earth. My brother could keep hold of the tenuous catenary that binds her to us across the great distance and I could go on listening to Sarah.

I want nothing more than to go on listening to Sarah. I want to hear her dog growl and be scolded, her husband harangued and the kids cajoled. I want to witness her as both put upon and heroic like a mother, any mother, our mother. But I click back on.

"Sorry," I say into the line, unsure he's even still there. "So sorry," I say to anyone and everyone, to no one. And I mean it.

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