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FIVE STAGES OF HUNGER

Dan Leach

Denial

“You must be hungry,” says my husband.

“I could eat,” I reply.

I say this without hesitation, but it is a lie. Which is why I deliver it with a code—a face that says, I’m lying. Please notice that I’m lying.

The code is designed to lead him to the truth. The truth is I have not been hungry in months. The truth is, after my mother died, food became another tasteless, colorless thing that I could suddenly do without.

Someone told me this would happen and that, in time, the desire to eat would return. But my mother died almost six months ago and everything good still tastes like nothing.

“I’m in the mood for steak,” my husband says.

“I could do steak,” I lie again and resupply the code by adjusting my eyes to say, *Please, Honey. I. Am. Lying.*

“Perfect,” he says. “Let’s try that place on Second Avenue.”

It is not his fault that he thinks of steaks when I’d rather him think of codes. My husband wasn’t raised to think in terms of codes. He is a good man, born in the Midwest and literal as a bucket of snow. He says what he feels and expects others to do the same, Meanwhile I am a Southerner and therefore ruined by ambiguity.

There is also this: that everyone he loves is still alive.

Why the code at all? Why not simply speak to my husband like an adult? Other than grief itself, which has made me starved for things I should not want, I have no

valid reason.

“Second Avenue,” I say and grab my purse off the counter. “Sounds like a plan.”

While he is putting on his boots, I stare a hole into his large, reliable shoulders.

Something about the size of his back makes me seethe. His head, which is brown and still wet from the shower, takes on the appearance of a football and I nurse the fantasy of kicking it off his thick neck. I would hate this man if I did not love him.

I would hate him if he wasn't so perfect. But he is. He was perfect before my mom got sick, he was perfect when her cancer got worse, and he was perfect at the end, when the pain was so bad that she begged for it to be over, and when I wanted what she wanted, except that I didn't because I still wanted her with me in this world. And now that she's gone, he is perfect still—encouraging me when I can't get out of bed, feeding me when I don't feel like eating, and keeping me in forward motion through the hardest season I've ever endured.

“We will get past this,” he says to me, almost daily. “One day at a time, we will move forward.”

Why anyone would hate a man like this, I cannot say. But I do. And I hate him most when he forces me to eat. My husband is always forcing me to eat.

As soon as we leave our apartment, he puts his arm around me. I can smell his cologne and, beneath that, the pine-scented soap he has used since we first met. We walk together down Second Avenue and when the restaurant is in view, he leans down and whispers in my ear, “I'm excited.”

“Me too,” I say.

“Perfect night for steak,” he says.

“It is,” I say. “It really is.”

I have given up on code for the night. I do it his way—I move forward one step at a time.

When we get to the restaurant, we do what we have done thousands of times

since we got married eight years earlier. We eat and we drink. One of us asks a question and the other one answers. And when, towards the end of the meal, he asks why I hardly touched my food, I lie without even thinking about it.

“I ate something earlier,” I say. “It was a big bowl of cereal.”

He laughs and says something about how great it is to have leftovers. And as he laughs, I watch his teeth. They are large and white and neatly arranged in rows. Anyone would be lucky to be married to such teeth, but tonight I do not feel lucky. Tonight his teeth remind me of perfect little tombstones. I want to use the butt end of my steak knife and see how many I can break. I want to scream my mother’s name to a roomful of strangers.

My husband reaches across the table and takes my hand in his.

“Let’s go home,” he says.

“Okay,” I say.

We go home and deposit the leftovers in the refrigerator. My husband waits until we are in bed and the lights are off before he touches me. Like food, sex has lost whatever colors it once had. It is a grey and hollow thing, but like eating, it is not hard to lie and to let one moment slip into the next. I let him touch me however he wants. I touch him back in ways that I once meant.

In this way, we make love. Then we move to our separate sides of the bed and try to fall asleep.

The last image that comes into my mind before I sleep overtakes me is, strangely, a large red bowl of Rice Crispies cereal. The tiny golden puffs are floating on the whitest milk I’ve ever seen and I can tell that someone has dipped a spoon into sugar and sprinkled the sugar across the cereal. I almost manage to fall asleep before the sobbing starts.

“Are you okay?” my husband asks.

“I’m fine,” I say, choking down the tears.

Rice Crispies—my mother’s favorite.

Anger

It's dinner time again, several nights later, and my husband says to me, "How do you feel about Italian?"

I consider leaving more code. Code which, upon decipherment, would tell him that I feel nothing about Italian because I feel nothing about everything, especially food. Code which would illuminate for him the reality of my appetite. That I wake up not hungry, that I go to work not hungry, and that in the evenings when he wants to talk about dinner I am not hungry in my compliance.

I am sympathetic with respect to his efforts. I know he has noticed the weight I've lost—twenty, possibly thirty pounds. I know this scares him and I suspect that this is why he works so hard to ensure that I eat.

But at the moment, I am tired of being sympathetic. I am tired of the deception and tired of the compliance and tired of scattering code like some kind breadcrumb trail for him to follow back to the truth. I decide to just tell him the truth.

"I'm not eating anything," I say. "And don't try to force me."

"Did you already eat?" he says and looks confused, like a bright-eyed student struggling to solve a tricky equation.

"No," I say and can feel my anger tingling in my nail beds. "And I'm not going to."

The tone I use and the face I make is not a code. It is a neon sign composed of two-foot letters, which flash like a cop car and loop in script to spell "LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE." Or, better yet, simply "LEAVE ME."

"You have to eat," he says and tries to come close to me.

"No," I say and move away.

"It's not healthy."

"I don't care."

“Part of moving forward is—”

“Stop talking.”

“I’m trying to help,” he says. “Tell me what I can do to help you.”

I answer this question as honestly as I possibly can.

“You can leave me alone,” I say.

“Okay,” he says and backs away.

Shockingly, my husband honors both requests. He puts on his boots, tells me that he loves me, and leaves the apartment without another word. He stays gone for just over an hour and when he returns he has food for me.

“It’s eggplant parmesan,” he says through the door to our bedroom, which I have closed and locked. “I’ll leave it in the refrigerator.”

I say nothing in response. And because I want one more locked door between us, I go into the bathroom. I take a long hot shower in which I don’t wash but instead just stand there and let the scalding threads slide down my neck and back.

When I emerge, I stand naked in front of the half-fogged mirror and look at myself. What I see is not good. It is much more than twenty pounds that I have lost. Though the steam softens the blow, I see the sharpened bones in my shoulders. My arms are wasted down to sticks. There are shadows gathering where they shouldn’t—in my cheeks and around my hips. What I see is a skeleton.

“Eat,” I say to the skeleton, looking directly into its sunken eyes. “You want to live, don’t you?”

But to this, the skeleton says nothing. It just stares back, all pale skin and sad veins and poking bones.

Eventually the anger recedes. My husband keeps a bottle of gin in his closet. I drink a third of it and the anger recedes even further. When finally I’m more numb than fractious, I leave our bedroom and join my husband on the couch. I apologize for losing my temper. He brings me the takeout container and I shove bites of eggplant parmesan into my mouth. I tell my teeth to move. They comply.

"It's good, isn't it?" he says.

"It is," I reply.

"You know I'm just looking out for you, right?" he says.

"I do," I reply.

"And you know we're going to get through this, right?"

"I do."

"One day at a time," he says and kisses me directly atop my skeleton cheek.

Bargaining

Weeks go by. Or maybe it's months. Another thing they never told me about grief is that turns time into a splintered, swerving mess. I have good days and I have bad ones. My husband has only good ones. He persists in his perfect array of duties—listening and encouraging and loving and forgiving and, each night at exactly six-o'clock, ensuring I receive bodily nourishment. Because of his persistence, I gain ten pounds. My husband is pleased but reminds me that I need to gain even more.

"Hey," I tell him. "Ten pounds is a small watermelon."

He laughs and congratulates me on gaining a small watermelon.

"The bottom line," he says. "Is that you're looking better every day."

My husband says this so often that I am beginning to think he means "You're *getting* better every day." He has never admitted this conflation, but he doesn't need to. I know how he thinks about progress. That the best kind of progress is progress that's visible: points on a scoreboard; pounds on a scale. A Midwestern literalist, he understands things best when he can see them.

What he cannot see, and what I have not told him, is that food, like most things, still seems empty to me. I don't desire food anymore than I desire to get out of bed or shower or go to work. He aims to remedy this by making the foods I used to

love. Except that even the foods I used to love—pineapple pizza and chocolate chip pancakes and grilled cheese sandwiches served with tomato basil soup—have all lost their power to move me.

“I could go for Mexican,” he says one night, right on cue, as the clock on the microwave hits six o’clock. “Fish tacos. Chips and salsa. Maybe one of those margaritas you love with the little umbrella?”

The word “umbrella” makes me think of rain, which makes me think of my mother’s funeral, which makes me think of all those black umbrellas, which made it hard to tell who was who, and which also made it so I could barely hear the priest above the slap of rain on plastic. When my husband calls my name, I am no longer thinking of umbrellas. I am trying to remember whether it was orchids or chrysanthemums that were arranged by my mother’s casket.

“Honey?” he says and actually claps his hands. “How does Mexican sound to you?”

Instead of answering him, I pray. To God, to the Universe, to whomever or whatever is listening, I pray, *Let my hunger come back. Let me move forward and want the things I’m supposed to want. If you do this, I’m yours.*

“Honey?” says my husband. “Are you okay?”

“What’s that?” I say, still waiting for God’s response.

Praying reminds me of my father, who spent so much time kneeling down beside my mother’s hospital bed that his knees and shins became covered with bruises. I wonder what he tried to bargain in return for my mother’s life. I wonder how he felt to know that, whatever he offered his god wasn’t good enough.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” my husband says to me.

“Mexican sounds fine,” I say and, as he bends down to put on his boots, I realize something about my husband—that though he likely prays for many things, he has never prayed for a life.

Depression

“Whatever” is what I say to my husband when tells me that he intends to cook

lasagna for dinner. Much time has passed and I have gotten worse, not better. I am done with codes and confrontations. I have resorted to inebriated growls.

Something about “Whatever” concerns him. Maybe it’s the frequency with which I now use it, the way it has replaced “Yes” and “No” and even “I don’t know.” Or maybe he thinks it’s emblematic of other recent changes—my getting fired for too many absences; my moving from drinking wine at night to drinking bourbon whenever I feel like it; my overeating and undershowering, which has effectively transported me from skeleton to troll. Maybe, for him, “Whatever” is the word that captures just how bad things have become.

Because the moment I say “Whatever” to his plan for lasagna, he comes out of the kitchen and confronts me.

“How drunk are you?” he says.

“Not drunk enough,” I say and want nothing more than to get this over with.

He grows silent at this. He bites his bottom lip in the way that he does before saying something he is afraid to say.

“I think,” he starts. “That it’s time you see someone. A professional, I mean.”

For this, I summon something other than “Whatever.” For this, I look him dead in the eyes and say, “No.”

“It’s almost been a year,” he says.

“No,” I say.

“I’ve been asking around,” he says. “I found someone who I think would be really great for you. She’s been a grief counselor for—”

“I said no. End of discussion.”

This is where I get up from the couch and walk away, not fast and violent as in the angry days, but stumbly and slow enough to tell him what, in many ways, he already knows—that I could not possibly care less about whatever he has to say. He yells at my back as I cross the room.

“What makes you think you get to end the discussion?”

“Because,” I say, not bothering to turn around. “I don’t want to talk to a professional and I definitely don’t want to talk to you.”

“Well,” he shouts. “You better start wanting to talk.”

I have reached the door to our bedroom and intend to enter, lock it behind me, and pass out on the bed. And yet, I am intrigued by his last remark. That is, I am intrigued by the way he said it—as if it were a threat.

Still in the doorway, I turn to face him.

“What does that mean?” I say.

“It means you can’t go on like this.”

“And what if I do?” I say. “What if I never get better? What then? You’ll leave?”

“Is that what you want?” he says. “You want me to leave?”

I take longer than I should to answer this question, in which time he wrings his large hands like some small and worried child. Also, though I cannot be sure, from where I am standing it looks like his eyes are covered with the film of new tears. I watch him for a moment. I watch his little boy eyes, waiting to see if anything comes out. When it doesn’t, and when I feel so tired that I could fall asleep right there in the doorway, I stand there and open my mouth. That’s all it takes for the old refrain to follow.

“Whatever,” I say before closing the door.

I use the bathroom before going to bed and only briefly do I look in the mirror on my way out. The troll that lives there is worse than the skeleton. I hate its sad and puffy face. I hate its greasy hair and bloodshot eyes. I hate the defeated slump that never leaves its shoulders. So I say the most hurtful thing I can before turning off the lights and climbing into bed.

“If mom saw you like this,” I say to the troll. “She would be so disappointed.”

Acceptance

“Wake up,” says my husband.

I do and see that morning has flooded our bedroom. I feel tired and hungover and hopeless, as I do most mornings these days. And yet, there is something about this light. There is something about the way my husband walks through it and sits down on the bed. I do not feel hope, per se, but some minor sense of possibility.

“Come on,” he says and rubs my back. “I made us breakfast.”

“Is there coffee?” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “Strong coffee.”

I sit up and compose my thoughts. I remember last night, or enough of it to know that I feel ashamed of my behavior.

“I didn’t expect you to be here,” I admit. “I thought you’d be gone.”

“I live here,” he says. “Remember?”

He takes my hand in his and squeezes it. Then he brings it to his mouth and kisses me on the knuckles. I feel his perfect teeth against my skin and don’t, at this moment, completely want to break them. In fact, in this moment, I feel some level of ownership is called for.

“I’m sorry about last night,” I say.

“It’s okay,” he says.

“No it’s not,” I say. “None of it is. I’ve been horrible lately.”

“It’s okay,” he says.

“I don’t really want you to leave.”

“Good,” he says. “Because I’m not. Now get out of bed and come to the table before everything gets cold.”

I join my husband at the table, where there is scrambled eggs and buttered toast, fresh coffee and orange juice. We sit down together and he fixes me a plate. He starts to eat and encourages me to do the same. For the first time in months, today feels like it might be a good day. And yet, before it can be a good day, there is something I have to tell him, something I only now am able to put into words.

“I need you to do something for me,” I say. “Actually, I need you to stop doing something for me.”

“Okay,” he says. “What is it?”

“Stop saying that I’m going to get through this.”

“But you will. It’ll take time, but you’re going to—”

“No,” I say. “I don’t want to get through this.”

Quicker than I knew they could, tears pour out of my eyes and grief folds me over the table. I weep and I tremble and I scream. My husband reaches over and puts his hand on my back. When I finally I sit up again, I use my napkin to blow my nose.

“She was my mom,” I say, still crying. “I don’t want to move past her.”

He thinks about this for a long time, so long that I collect myself and reach out for his hand.

“Okay,” he says. “But let me ask you something.”

“What?”

“If you don’t want to move past this,” he says. “What do you want to do?”

There are many things I want to tell him in this moment. How I need him to stop being so perfect. How some nights I need him to just say nothing and hold me while we watch bad television. How other nights I need him to tell me every story he has about my mom, no matter how small or silly he believes it to be. How I love him more than anyone on the planet and how even though I am not moving past my mother’s death, I want to not move past it with him.

I want to say all of this, but I don't say any of it. Instead, I pick up a piece of toast and spread blackberry jam across it. I cut it into two triangles and lift one to my mouth. I take a small bite out of the corner and, instead of chewing it, I hold the bite in my mouth for as long as I can, so long the butter that has mixed with the blackberry jam drips off the bread and onto my tongue.

My mouth is full of sweetness when I answer my husband's question. I say to him, "How about we try eating?"

RUNNER-UP for the 2020 BARRY HANNAH PRIZE

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