

Sick

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By the time Peter's wife noticed his new habit, he had already removed most of the lashes above his left eye. The lid was pink and hairless, as if he were returning to a fetal state. He and Rebecca sat upright in bed, propped on their pillows, each reading a book. Earlier in the day, Rebecca had changed the sheets, which smelled now of bleach and limes. With a surgeon's precision, Peter brought his left thumb and forefinger toward his face. He felt his wife's eyes on him but was unable to stop himself. With a single pull, he yanked a lash from his lid, then brought it to his nose and, ever so slowly, inhaled.

Weeks earlier, he had begun pulling out the hairs on his head. They had a noticeable spring to them with their coiled bob and sway—the way the thick strands of grey folded over and onto each other. The warp and weft. But his attention had gradually drifted southward, to the finer specimens above his eye. It was the feeling of release upon the initial tug that made his heart rush.

Peter felt Rebecca lock her gaze back onto her novel. After fifty-three years of marriage, they had each learned to pick their battles. Peter could still fight, despite the stroke eight years ago that had left his right cheek muscles slack as pudding. He'd stare her down, silently, until she couldn't help but blink. Then he'd start in with the framework of an irrefutable argument, molding his words like clay.

He knew how, over time, she'd grown to bear his odd behavioral tics in order to keep the relationship on course: the squeaks of passing gas after a dinner with broccoli, the fleeting interest in topiary and West African mythology. This would be no different. He rolled onto his side, away from Rebecca.

“Good night, dear,” he said.

“Good night, dear.”

She touched his shoulder gently. Her hand was the last thing he felt before falling asleep.

Peter awoke and climbed out of bed before dawn, when the first boats began shuttling down the Intracoastal Waterway, the jellied heads of giant manatees shadowing them below the water's surface. He brushed his teeth for a solid five minutes. Seventy-six and he still had all his originals. No silver, no gold, no porcelain. He lathered his sunken face with a soft-bristled brush and

scraped away the stubble with the foam. There was less growth in these later years, and daily shaving was more ritual than necessity. He relished the scrape of the razor as it excavated the hairs burrowed deep within his skin.

He climbed into the shower and cranked the faucet handle to nine o'clock with his left hand. When the hot water scorched his belly, he jumped back and yanked the handle clockwise.

"Damn water heater," he said aloud.

Once he'd scrubbed all the necessary spots, Peter turned off the water and reached for a bath towel. He clamped one end under his neck, gripped the other in his extended left hand, and wriggled his body against the towel to dry himself. Routine hygienic tasks were infinitely more complex now that the fingers of his right hand were permanently knotted up, like the gnarled limbs of an old tree.

That's when he remembered. *Tomorrow is Thanksgiving*. His throat constricted at the thought of dinner with his son and daughter-in-law. Theo, named after the first President Roosevelt, had indeed had a penchant for teddy bears as a boy, but Peter, a professor of Sanskrit, had nicknamed him "Vani" after the Sanskrit *vaanara* for "monkey." To his son's dismay, the name had stuck into adult life.

Peter wiped at the condensation on the mirror, squeaked it off in streaks, until his face bloomed into focus. His eyes were still bright green, but the flesh around them was chiseled into deep wrinkled channels. Theo had been sweet as a child, with an insatiable curiosity for all things mechanical—locks, watches, engines—which left Peter feeling as if he had very little of interest to teach. As he grew older, Theo gravitated toward Rebecca, the more playful of his parents, and Peter often found himself orbiting the pair at a distance, unable to find a way in.

Two years after he married, Theo suddenly became difficult. The smallest comment could set him off, and Peter and Rebecca grew increasingly guarded during visits with their son. Then five years ago, shortly before his thirtieth birthday, Theo began falling. He'd trip while walking across a flat surface, suffering split lips, broken noses, dislocated joints. He was diagnosed only recently with late-onset Tay-Sachs and already the disease was eating away at his mind—he'd drift out of lucidity as suddenly as he'd drift back in. Allison, their daughter-in-law, insisted they would come to Florida for Thanksgiving this year. It was important to Theo to make the journey, she said.

Peter felt his heart accelerate as he recalled the early signs of his son's transformation—his shoulders tensed, jaw tightened. His fingers moved magnetically to his face to satisfy an invisible urge. He rifled through his thinning lashes. When he found the one that had to go, he gripped it between

his nail and thumb, and tugged, but his fingers slipped off target. On his second attempt, the root released. There was a sharp pinch, a burn, and the hair came out, freed from the follicle.

It felt almost lewd, his new compulsion. He would never discuss this with his wife, just as he'd never discuss post-coital scrotal retreat. He smelled the tiny hair for a moment, then tucked it into the pocket of his slacks as he dressed.

Rebecca was frying bacon—extra lean, of course—in the kitchen. He heard the sizzle and pop as he emerged from the bathroom. Their move to South Florida from northern Illinois six years earlier hadn't disrupted his morning rituals in the slightest: a shower, bacon with Wheatena, and not a word exchanged with Rebecca until he'd had a chance to scan the front page of the *New York Times*. After that, congenial banter was fair game.

For more than thirty years, Peter had taught at Northern Illinois University, drumming the 2,500-year-old grammatical structures of Panini into the heads of a few graduate students each year. He drilled them in the differences between *tatpuruṣha* and *bahuvrīhi* compounds, immersed them in the linguistic opulence of classical Indic poetry. It had been a decent career with occasional publications, though bereft of academic glories. Dekalb, Illinois was not a place where one chose to live. But Peter was awarded tenure, and he and Rebecca had managed to carve out a life there. It was deathly cold for six months a year and deathly hot for four, but Peter hadn't wanted to leave. Retirement was the neurologist's decision. South Florida was Rebecca's.

By the time he and Rebecca migrated south, most of his colleagues were either kids or dead. The department held a retirement party for him at the only Indian restaurant in town. Peter had never been to India. He descended from a long tradition of Orientalists who refused to let the perfected, imagined India of classical texts become unnecessarily fouled by exposure to reality. And he didn't care for the spice and heat of subcontinental cuisine. Nor, since his stroke, did he enjoy being toasted, praised, or otherwise noticed. The small office he chose to inhabit for his final few years in the department was dark, womb-like, difficult to find. Rebecca held his hand under the table throughout the whole farewell dinner party, patting him whenever his tired muscles contracted.

Peter had been working on a new translation of the *Upanishads* at the time he retired. He never completed it. He'd become stuck on one of the most famous treatises, the *Chandogya Upanishad*, in which the teacher Uddalaka Aruni, dismayed by the inadequacy of his son's tutors, personally instructs him about the nature of reality. At the end of the lesson, Uddalaka

declares, “*Tat tvam asi*,” commonly translated as “Thou art that,” but generally interpreted to mean: that which is deepest within you is the ultimate reality.

The issue for Peter was not how to translate the line. It was that each time he began, he found himself paralyzed with nostalgia for Theo’s childhood, regretful of missed opportunity. Like Uddalaka, Peter fashioned himself a teacher’s teacher, a principled man with decades of study to be tapped for his child’s edification. But he had been unable to forge the necessary connection with Theo. He’d brushed aside his son’s extensive childhood collection of trucks and construction equipment, resolving instead to teach him the finer points of formal debate: argumentation, inference, logic, negotiation. Whenever he’d sat face-to-face with Theo, Peter had tracked his son’s eyes, charting the increasing speed with which Theo’s interest melted away.

“Later, Dad,” was Theo’s refrain as a teen in response to Peter’s attempted “lessons.” It was Rebecca who became Theo’s primary teacher and confidante.

“I’d like your help with the cranberries tomorrow,” Rebecca said. Peter knew he was of limited use on the domestic front these days. Carving the turkey with one arm was not an option. Wielding the potato masher was a possibility, but dangerous. Stirring the berries over ultra-low heat, plying them into a thick, sweet custard of a sauce was a safe bet.

He nodded without looking up, continuing to scour page after page of the paper, desperate for news to be hopeful about. Iraqi Shiites were killing their Sunni brethren, Tamil Tigers were resuscitating an age-old war, the U.S. economy lay in tatters.

“Theo needs to know you love him,” she said. “This visit especially. Now that he’s dying.” Her voice trailed off. “Are you even listening to me?”

Peter folded the paper carefully in his lap, then looked up. This was not a discussion he cared to have. Rebecca’s grey ponytail dangled over her left shoulder, falling across her breast. She was slimmer than when they’d first met: he, utterly lost en route to teach his first class as a lecturer at the university, briefcase filled to bursting; she, seated at her receptionist’s desk in the physics department. She’d scribbled a map on his open palm, tracing the most direct route from Faraday to Adams Hall. He credited her with the fact that he’d held that job for more than a day.

“I know what he needs,” Peter said. There was enzyme replacement therapy, the promise of a stem cell transplant if the good-for-nothing federal government would just approve the procedure. And there were always additional medical opinions. They’d had six and the conclusions had been unanimous, but no one in the scientific community knew anything with

unflagging certainty. Peter had pored over the medical literature. The victims of Tay-Sachs were usually children, dead by the age of five. The late-onset form was so rare that few of his doctors had even seen a case. The one thing they agreed on was that, based on Theo's symptoms, he likely had just months to live.

But scientific facts were by definition subject to change. Doubt lay at the very core of the sciences—just as it did in the humanities. Peter recalled a joke familiar to all Sanskritists: every Sanskrit word means itself, its opposite, and “elephant.” The accuracy of translation was, therefore, never certain. Nor was the prognosis of his son's demise.

They spent the rest of the morning preparing the guest room for Theo and Allison. Rebecca stretched the faded sheets across the mattress until the elastic corners snapped into place. Peter ran his hand over the creases to smooth them. She emptied the drawers of his notebooks and crumpled photocopies, and stacked them on the closet shelves. He adjusted the shades on the two bedside lamps so they cast perfect reading light on each pillow.

When they finished, Rebecca seated herself on the bed next to him, her knee pressing against his. “This will be our last Thanksgiving,” she said. She shook her head in disbelief, then placed one hand on his cheek and caressed his jaw, his neck.

“We don't know that,” he said, pushing her hand away. He was annoyed by her resignation, her malleability, by the way she molded herself to tragedy's intrusion rather than fighting ferociously until all life-saving measures had failed. His foot began to tap. He could feel the trembling in his hand, a craving to reach for his eye again, to tear out his body's excesses and rid himself of the tension billowing inside. With his fingers, he gripped his pant leg to anchor his hand. He had one child, one son. He was not prepared to let him slip away. Only a hundred people in the country were afflicted with late-onset Tay-Sachs. The disease had lurked dormant within Peter's own body since his birth, hidden amid the genes of the fifteenth chromosome, waiting to poison his progeny.

The day spent itself as they readied their home. Rebecca cooked a warm squash soup with Gruyère croutons for dinner. They sat together in the kitchen sipping their broth, crunching on toasts. Outside, the shriek of palmetto bugs echoed through the leaves of tall coconut palms.

Peter remembered the night they'd first moved Theo, four months old, from their bed to a crib in his own room. The move had come at Peter's urging. He wanted his bed back, the luxury of rolling over without repercussion. He wanted his wife's body to himself again, at least for a few minutes each week. Rebecca had protested—it was too soon, Theo was too small—but

ultimately she acquiesced. The baby had screamed at this betrayal and flailed his tiny limbs, swatting at the air. But his fury weakened and finally subsided. Pleased with his decision, Peter stretched himself feline across the spacious mattress. With his fingers, he stroked Rebecca's back, which she had turned to make a statement.

Five hours into the night, Theo's room was still silent. Rebecca slept soundly with her familiar snore of reeds and rushes. Peter could not. Shouldn't the baby have cried by now? Theo would need to eat. If he were hungry, though, he'd wake himself, wake them. But he hadn't. Peter knew better than to wake a sleeping infant. He just needed to verify the breath, confirm the pulse. On the other hand, if the boy were already dead, what good would it do to find out before daybreak? Better to wait and retrieve him in the morning. No, it needed to be done now.

Peter crept down the hall and placed his ear against the wooden door. Silence answered. He opened it to the smells of fermenting diapers and Desitin. He walked to the crib and leaned over his son. He could hear nothing. His heart began to knock violently against his rib cage, as if trying to free itself. He knew then that the baby was gone. He picked up the small body, clasped it against his own, squeezed it tightly, and cursed himself for not coming sooner. Theo opened his eyes in the dark room and let out a wail loud enough to knock the walls down. At the door to the room, Rebecca stood in her nightgown, shaking her head.

Thanksgiving morning, Peter stared in the bathroom mirror at the last lash hovering above his left eye, relieved that Rebecca hadn't noticed, or that at least she'd said nothing. He examined the vacant space where others had once hung. There was no sign of re-growth. His son would arrive in two hours and Peter looked like he should be confined to a psychiatric ward. Despair rose within him, squeezing against his lungs. He began to pick at his eye, staring entranced at his reflection. His hand seemed to move by itself, grabbing, plucking, until it latched on and yanked out the final lash. He sat down on the floor, naked and red-eyed, and fingered the lifeless strand.

There was nothing left to do. He'd feign sickness. There it was, the only solution. He'd hide out in bed until his son and daughter-in-law had left. This way, at least, Rebecca would be able to focus undistracted on their son. Theo deserved as much.

Their last Thanksgiving, she had said. It seemed preposterous. But what if she were correct? Theo would need him.

He had to collect himself, gather his thoughts. He had always been a man of ideas, solutions. This problem with his eyes could be fixed.

He hunted through the medicine cabinet for anything that might help. Bottle after bottle of expired prescriptions, colored creams, scented salves. And there was Rebecca's liquid mascara. He'd watched her apply it daily for half a century. His left hand trembled as he brought the brush to his face. He began to paint black lines across his eyelid with slow strokes. But the lines rushed together and the lid turned dark. This was madness. He replaced the makeup in the cabinet.

Just before closing the door, he noticed a set of long, fake lashes crumpled in the corner. He rolled them between his thumb and fingers, examining them closely. They were still pasty with adhesive. These might just do the trick. With his good hand, he applied one set of lashes to his eye in front of the mirror, pulling it to the right and alternately to the left until it fit as it should. The nylon hairs were darker, finer, more feminine than his had been, but they just might pass.

As he looked more closely, though, he saw that they wouldn't. The real lashes, still intact above his other eye, were of an entirely different color, a deep grey with a tint of blue.

There was a loud knock on the door.

"Sweetheart, it's been more than an hour. What's wrong?" Rebecca's voice was tense, higher pitched than usual.

"All's fine, my dear. Just readying myself for the visit. I'll be out soon enough." He kept silent and waited. At last, she walked away.

Uniformity would be key if Peter was to avoid calling attention to himself. He grabbed a pair of scissors from the cabinet and turned to the hairs that still hung above his other eye. With meticulous attention, he systematically denuded it, severing the lashes as close to the lid as he could. He affixed the synthetic lashes and adjusted them. Then he gazed upon his haggard face, on the long woolly hairs that fluttered with each blink, reflecting on just how far he'd fallen since his stroke, his retirement, his son's illness.

He opened the door and shuffled back down the hall, past the kitchen, past Rebecca, who was completing the crust of the apple pie when she looked up. He hoped to God she didn't notice what had changed in the core of his face.

Peter was already at the window when the rental car, a blue Subaru, pulled into the driveway. He shouted for Rebecca and she hurried over to join him. Peter watched her smooth the wrinkles in her dress, attach a maternal smile to her mouth, and inhale. She opened the door and took his hand. Together, they walked down to greet their guests.

Fleshy bags puddled under Allison's thirty-five-year-old eyes, and for the first time, there were strands of silver in his daughter-in-law's dark chocolate hair. She embraced Rebecca and for a few moments each held the other's head in her hands. Then Allison opened the passenger's door.

Theo had fallen forward in his seat. He'd been sleeping when they arrived, Allison said. Now he couldn't sit up. He rocked back and forth with an animal moan, attempting to straighten his back. Rebecca started towards him, but Allison caught him first.

"I've got you, Theo," she said. "Breathe now." She hooked an arm under his skeletal legs, pulled them around, and stretched them down to the ground.

Rebecca knelt down and held his hands. "Hello, my love," she said. Theo looked up. His hair was shaved short, and the bones of his skull protruded with an unnatural angularity.

"Merry Christmas, you guys," he said, smiling. "I guess we made it. Good to be here." His lips were dry and brittle, and his arms twitched as he spoke.

"It's Thanksgiving," Peter said.

Theo looked confused. Rebecca shot Peter a stern glance and placed her finger in front of her mouth. She brushed Theo's hair with her hands and kissed his cheek.

The wheelchair in the trunk would be no match for the five stairs that led up to the house. The two women gathered Theo in their arms and began to ascend sideways. Peter approached with his cane, intent on helping, and attempted to work his way into the shuffle, to bear some of the weight. He nearly tripped them several times and Rebecca told him to step back.

"We don't need you. He weighs nothing," she whispered, her eyes beginning to well up.

Peter obeyed her instructions and took it upon himself to direct the effort instead. "Here comes another step. Try to keep to the left. Careful of the banister. Not too quickly. Good. Good."

They deposited Theo on the sofa in the living room, and he immediately began to pitch forward. Allison propped a pillow behind his head and raised his legs to recline him. Before the illness had wrestled him down, Theo had been a structural engineer—he'd designed bridges that seemed to defy gravity, towering edifices that pierced holes in the open sky.

"There's our man," Peter said. "You look good, Vani." A thin stream of saliva trickled past Theo's chin and down his neck, darkening his shirt collar. Peter wiped it off with his left hand. Theo smelled of menthol and peanut butter.

“You too, Dad,” he said. His expression was distant and dreamy. “It’s been a long trip. If it’s all right with you, I think I’ll rest for just a bit. I’m always better after a nap.”

They arranged four place settings on the coffee table in the living room, so Theo could remain on the sofa where he’d fallen asleep. Peter tried to wake him to eat, but he was unrousable and Rebecca asked him to let their son be. They had overcooked, overprepared: sweet potatoes with marmalade, brussel sprouts with pepper and hazelnuts, a Marcel Lapierre Morgon. Peter’s stomach was hopelessly knotted. The two women only picked at the food on their plates.

“Rebecca brined the turkey this year,” Peter said. “Gave the bird a thorough salting and soaking.”

Allison placed her utensils back on the table and looked up. “We’ve made arrangements for Theo that I want you to know about,” she said.

Peter and Rebecca looked at each other and then at their daughter-in-law.

“It’s the cheese cloth that really does it,” Peter said. “Helps retain moisture while roasting. A trick we learned from Vani’s grandmother.”

“Theo wants a Do Not Resuscitate order,” Allison said. “It’s his choice and we need to respect this.”

Peter felt a spark of protest burst within his chest. *This is not how it ends. Vani beating his old man to the finish line without a fight.* But he held his tongue.

After dinner, the three of them played Hearts while Theo continued to sleep. Peter couldn’t keep track of what had already been played and, despite his attempts to short-suit himself, kept ending up with the queen of spades.

By nine, the fireplace was just a glow of burnt embers. They agreed to let Theo remain on the sofa for the night rather than disturb him. Rebecca retrieved the extra comforter and tucked him in on all sides. Peter turned up the thermostat five degrees.

Once in bed, both clad in their blue pajamas, Rebecca rolled over and kissed Peter. “You were good with him tonight,” she said.

“I plan to discuss the DNR order with him in the morning,” he said. “It’s not the right decision.”

Rebecca sat up. “There are different ways to live and end a life. This is what he wants.”

Peter hammered his fist on the bed. “My son would not choose this if he were himself, if he understood the implications.”

She didn't respond, and he didn't say another word. Each waited for the other to yield.

After a few moments, Rebecca raised her hand to his face. She touched his eyelids with the tip of her finger and traced a half moon beneath one of the new sets of lashes.

"I need to know why you're doing this to yourself," she said softly. "I'm so worried—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said and rolled over, turning away from her. "Focus on your son. He's the one who needs your help."

For half a century, Rebecca had been the one to break their stalemates, navigating around the rocks that separated them, cutting a careful route through the tender spots.

"All of us need help sometimes," she said.

Slowly, her hand slid under Peter's shirt and down his chest. She hadn't touched him like this for months. Since his stroke, any time she'd tried to engage his body, he'd pushed her away. He'd convinced himself that climaxing was no longer possible. Now he lay quiet and tense, holding his breath, biting down on his tongue.

"It's okay," she said. She looked hurt. "I'll stop now." She kissed him again, this time on his cheek.

At midnight, straddling the edges of consciousness, Peter awoke to a thud on the other side of the house. *Intruders*. He sat bolt upright.

"Rebecca," he whispered. She rolled over and kept snoring. He felt around in the bottom drawer of the night-stand and grabbed the pocket knife he stored there, just in case. He was radically opposed to the idea of owning a gun, but an older couple needed something for protection. He hurried down the hall, holding onto the wall for support. The night was moonless, the living room encased in blackness. He fumbled in the dark for the light switch, knocking into the coffee table, the bookcase.

"I'm over here," said a voice from across the room.

Startled, Peter suddenly remembered his son in the living room. Theo must have fallen onto the tile floor. Peter imagined having to plug up a crack in his son's skull with one hand. He followed the voice until he found Theo's silhouette in front of him.

"Are you all right?" Peter said.

"I'm fine. I couldn't manage to get back up. Didn't want to wake you. I thought I'd just rest here till morning."

Peter found the switch and flipped it. Theo's legs were tangled up on the floor. His lip was swollen and his arms quivered.

“Let me help you,” Peter said. He grabbed under Theo’s armpit and started to pull urgently.

“Dad, I’m fine. You can’t.”

“Nonsense, I’m not leaving you on the floor.” Peter tugged and twisted and tried hauling his son up by the arms, only to let him drop again. It was a job that required two good hands. “I’ll have to get your mother,” he said.

“It’s okay, Dad. We don’t need anyone.”

Peter stopped. Slowly, he let his son go. He lowered himself onto the floor next to Theo. Sweat from his failed effort streaked down his cheeks and pooled above his mouth like syrup. Theo looked at him quizzically. Peter wiped his brow, his cheeks. He looked down at his hands. His palms were covered with the ink of mascara, and his left eye was blurry. The lashes hung low. He could feel them dangling down over his cheekbone. He turned away and fiddled frantically with his face, desperate to re-apply them. His son was not to see him like this. But without a mirror it was hopeless.

“Dad,” Theo said, placing both hands on his shoulders. “Look at me.”

Peter was crying now. He turned toward his son. “This is not normal,” he said. “I can’t stop it—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Theo said. “Let me help you.” He reached up and gently removed the lashes hanging from Peter’s eyelid. Peter watched his son examine the black threads, turning them over in his hand. Theo smoothed them out with his fingers and carefully reattached them. “It’s a good look for you, Dad.”

Peter blushed, then returned a sheepish smile. He remembered cradling his son—this man—in a rocking chair through colicky nights more than three decades ago. At that young time, neither knew how to comfort the other.

Peter placed his hand on Theo’s ribcage and felt the quiet beat of his heart. I made you, he thought. He tried to imagine how different the boy’s body would feel after expiring, how much coarser the skin, how much greater the bulk. How much emptier the world.

He tapped against Theo’s chest. “Everything you need is here, you know.” He felt himself getting teary again. “*Tat tvam asi*,” he said quietly.

Theo smiled. “Hey, remember the no-Sanskrit-at-the-dinner-table rule?”

Peter laughed. “Are you hungry?” he said. He could still feed his child.

“Starving.” Theo lifted a hand to pat his belly, but grunted from the pain and dropped his arm down again.

Peter pushed himself to standing. “I’ll be right back.”

He raided the leftovers in the refrigerator and returned, one trip after another, with a feast. He laid out the silver and china, the crystal and linen napkins. It took time, but there was no rush. He arranged dish after dish of

cooled meat and pies in a semi-circle on the living room floor. Then he fed turkey to his son with his best hand.

He remembered the first time he fed Theo solid food—a brown mash from a small glass jar. He could still picture the delight in the baby’s wide eyes. That was decades ago. The years had somehow collapsed.

By the time the sun broke, they had laid waste to the bird and drained the wine from its bottle. Theo fell asleep on the floor, seated upright, his back against the sofa. Peter stacked the dishes high on the coffee table—he would deal with them in the morning. Then he lay his own head softly amid the bones of Theo’s lap and closed his eyes. ☪