VEGETABLE PSYCHOLOGY, LOVESICK ASTROLOGY

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The first time I ever saw my dad without hair was in a crowded restaurant, where the overhead lights played up all the subtle dents and ridges in his skull he'd never known were there. Two days earlier, he had shaved his head. All that thick, brown, respectable hair—gone. Now he was sitting across from my brother and me, studying the menu and trying to buy psychedelics. He leaned forward but didn't lower his voice: "Do you think you could get me some mushrooms?"

In some ways, this request was actually less surprising than if my dad had decided to order fried mushrooms for an appetizer, since he hadn't eaten anything resembling a vegetable since 1997, when I was thirteen years old. That was the last time he'd tried eating lettuce, and the first time I heard him say "fuck," as in, "I try to eat lettuce, but I just fucking *hate* it." Still, the question was out of character for my dad, who could barely drink alcohol and had never smoked marijuana.

My brother was in his second year of college; I had graduated a few months earlier. Mom and Dad had called each of us the night before and told us they were coming down to Columbus "just to visit." My parents have a tradition of taking their children out to the most impersonal places—a Chili's, a Damon's Grill, any chain restaurant with gigantic television screens and fried mozzarella sticks—and making dire announcements mid-meal (Mom: I found a lump in my breast, Dad: The dog is dead), so I was wary. A week before my sister's first wedding, Mom took my sister and me to Damon's and told us that she'd been having regular affairs with Dad's

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consent since we were kids. I cried into my rib basket.

My parents had driven two hours to see us, and after I decided on the chicken fingers, I sat and waited. I assumed they were there to announce that they were finally splitting up. Their marriage had been floundering for years, and Dad's sudden interest in mushrooms had me picturing him in the deep end, down a few feet in the greenish murk, kicking. I figured tripping with Mom was either a desperate plan to reconnect or a last hurrah.

Maybe they'd finally exhausted all the legal possibilities for making each other interesting. Because my parents are honest, funny, and candid, but also because they have never fully understood that a child is something different from a friend, I know rather too much about those possibilities. When I was in high school, I had to make up elaborate lies to keep my friends out of the basement so they wouldn't see the giant sex swing crouched in the corner like half of an eight-foot spider.

"Big rats," I would tell my friends. "Sewage leak."

Mom had laughingly told me not long before the night at the restaurant that she used it now as a regular swing, *sans* sex. This was the same commitment to transparency that led my father to ask his son to buy him illegal drugs.

"Come on, it'll be fun," Dad said now, pressuring my brother like the bad kid in the black jeans in an after-school special.

"No," my brother said, like Nancy Reagan.

Because my brother was the youngest in the family, he had been spared the trip to Damon's the week before my sister's first wedding and thus knew very little about the constant blundering that constituted my parents' marriage. His "no" was offered out of plain old common sense, rather than against any misgivings he had about hallucination as marriage therapy.

"But you've both done them and had good experiences," Dad said.

I looked at him, this man who once cried at the sight of my baby picture suspended in a crocheted snowflake, and said, "But we're kids and don't have an anxiety disorder." This was not entirely true. I was actually twenty-three, not technically a kid at all anymore, and had a history of working myself into wheezing fits when I was upset and not adequately medicated.

"I'll just take a little," he offered.

"You'll just lose your mind," my brother said.

Mom wasn't saying anything, which was unsettling. Usually both she and Dad spent visits nearly breathless with mundane questions for us, but she just sat there, looking washed out.

"It's my life," Dad said, squaring his shoulders like he was about to leave his job on Wall Street to start up an animal shelter.

"I'm not going to get you mushrooms. You have no idea how bad you would freak out," my brother told him.

I nodded. I take a certain pride in knowing my family's genetic susceptibility to multiple cancers, suicide, heart attack, and killer allergies to bread. I tell the history well when the doctor asks, in precise and graphic detail, so that by the end I feel as if I'm a great survivor, that I've overcome terrible odds in order to sit on that examining table and take two deep breaths.

So of course I knew that my dad's side of the family often suffers from intense, specific, and not unbeautiful paranoias. My cousin Matt woke one day to find that he had lost his faith, not in God, but in gravity, convinced that it was subject to break down just like everything else on earth. He has since suffered, on debilitating occasions, from the fear that his feet will simply detach from the earth and his body will rise, up and up, at an unremarkable rate, into the sky forever.

And then there were my father's own existential woes, as when he swore at salads, or when he sometimes forgot to breathe while, driving home in his Ford Aspire from a day of designing software to make machines to make bearings to make windmills and spaceships and cars, he stumbled upon the concept of infinity, and couldn't make the universe stop expanding, no matter how hard he concentrated.

He'd been an engineer for over twenty-five years and developed a visceral relationship with numbers. During one of the first of the infinity episodes, he was hauled off in an ambulance, convinced he was dying.

When the food finally arrived, at least there was no lettuce. In addition to the French fries, Dad ate a burger topped with mayonnaise and cheese, though he was careful to order it backwards. He never asks for a burger with mayonnaise and cheese. Instead, he'll order one with a name

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like "Garden Stacker" that comes with lettuce, mayonnaise, pickles, onions, tomato, and cheese, and then list what he would like to have removed. This way he seems finicky instead of unhealthy.

The hamburger's mass and flavor were an indulgence—he told me he'd been subsisting on oatmeal and tapioca pudding for weeks. Earlier in the evening, he'd pumped his fist triumphantly and told us that he was "in the 180s."

"But you're starving yourself."

He shrugged.

We all ate slowly, and too much. I waited patiently for the announcement, but suddenly there were empty plates and still no awkward revelation. There was only the cold, foreboding silence of my mother, and the ongoing mushroom conversation with my father.

Dad jabbed a French fry at his plate a few times while he considered his final words on the subject. "I don't know. But I'm getting old," he said. "I need to see some new things."

A few days later, I decided to drive up to my parent's house and spend the weekend. I figured by Sunday either Mom or Dad would tell me why they were acting so weirdly. Now it was Sunday, and it was dreary and rainy outside. The muddy creek at the bottom of the sloped front yard crept ever closer to the fence along the border. Valentine's Day was Wednesday, and Mom was making Reuben sandwiches. She wrapped them in tin foil and talked, downright bright-eyed, about what makes a classic Reuben. "Corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese, and thousand island dressing." She said the thousand island dressing was the secret, but she was fretting over not having rye bread.

I watched her as she clucked her tongue and muttered, "I just wish I had some rye bread. It's really not complete without the rye bread."

Mom hadn't made a hot sandwich since I was a kid, and the subtly layered sandwiches eating up the counter space in front of me were not sloppy joes or steak-ums. I thought about how unhappy she'd been in our company at dinner last week and how Dad was losing all that weight. I thought, "She's awful intent on that rye bread." Then, "She's having an affair."

It wasn't a shock. In fact, a part of me was relieved to know that the trouble I sensed was just an affair and not something more serious, like one of them carrying around a giant abdominal tumor. The other part was angry with Mom. I'd always sided with my dad in their fights—not because there was anything like a clear right or wrong in the bizarre world of my parents' half-open marriage (my father has been monogamous his whole life), but because Mom's actions had consequences that affected me directly, led to confusing handshakes with men I'd never met before and would never see again, while Dad's voyeurism and encouragement remained hidden behind bedroom doors and in corners of my brain I'd draped curtains over.

I wanted to have a conversation, to be clean and quick, and avoid the sniffling, aching mess this situation sometimes led to.

"Who are you cooking those sandwiches for?"

"A friend at work."

"Are you having an affair?"

"No," she said. She held the word for emphasis, making it clear that she wasn't surprised I asked.

I was fairly sure she was lying. After the dinner at Damon's and some therapy, I'd suggested to my parents that perhaps it would be healthier for us all if we imposed some boundaries on the type of information they shared with us kids. It was possible, I suggested, that knowing Mom could easily reach orgasm in any of the most popular sexual positions was not vital to my feeling close to her. None of us ever took this advice seriously, including me, but as a result of my having introduced the idea, Mom sometimes lied about her relationships with men other than my father, as if she'd suddenly, if only occasionally, adopted the position that I might be too vulnerable to know such things.

I thought back over the last few months and piled up evidence. There was the time over the summer that I had gone to get something out of her car at work and was surprised by a bottle of lube in the console. This was incriminating, since most of Mom's affairs started at work, but not conclusive, given my parents' kinkiness. Then there was her curious reaction over the Thanksgiving dinner she tried to save, also for "a friend at work," which

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was prematurely devoured by the dog—I saw her snuffling over the ravages of turkey and mashed potatoes. There were the three prior affairs to consider, and now the six gleaming sandwiches she was wrapping, the foil making a racket.

"Can I have one?"

"Sure," she said.

I ate it and glared at her.

My dad is a brilliant man who makes the stupidest mistakes. One of his friends at work—a young guy working on his PhD—told him once that he'd given up on talking with the other PhDs there about his ideas. They didn't seem to have a clue, he said, while Dad followed along and gave useful advice with just his BS from nearly three decades ago. But at home with us, the sort of sound reasoning Dad's friend relies on occasionally goes missing, like the time he burned a pile of straw under a pine tree, because he said green things didn't burn. Seconds after the straw ignited, the flames rode up the trunk and the top of the tree exploded like God calling Moses. The fire was reaching for the house with red-orange hands.

My brother, who was twelve, disappeared. Then he burst out the front door and ran straight to the tree, heaving a single, full glass of water onto the inferno.

Dad told me later that he loved my brother for that moment, for believing he could save us all with his single cup, and no less for the slumped shoulders and disappointed exhale that followed as the flames continued to crackle and crawl. Mom screamed obscenities while I waved the cordless phone around offering to call the fire department. Dad eventually put it out with a hose, talking loudly about how we'd all overreacted.

I'm not sure if Dad tells that story at work, or if, like his basement tinkering with homemade perpetual motion machines—chimerical according to the first law of thermodynamics—he keeps it to himself in the company of fellow engineers.

I've seen all manner of things crash and burn in my father's path, only to hear him explain what just went wrong with an answer straight from a physics book. For example, I once dropped my cell phone from a

considerable height directly into a cup of water. Dad had heard of some trick for drying them out, and, remembering wrong, tried the microwave—fireworks and a melted screen. "Oh yeah," he said, unabashed. "Metal in microwaves." He went on to spell out the science behind the carnage in great detail. Then it occurred to him, quite joyfully: "Incubator! That's what you're supposed to use." Raised Catholic, his mistakes are brainless, his confessions elegant.

A few days after I'd asked my mom if she was having an affair, Valentine's Day came, and then went. No mushrooms were ingested, hallucinogenic or otherwise. Then Mom moved out, and into an apartment with her boyfriend. I did not know his name and did not seek it out. It was easier to call him "Asshole" or "Dickhead."

Meanwhile, Dad set up a telescope he had recently received for twenty-five years of service with his roller-bearing company. He read that Venus was looming large, but he couldn't find it.

In response to his phone call shortly after Mom moved out, I found myself home again, sitting across from him in the hot yellow light reflecting off the kitchen table. He sat with his palms facing up on the tabletop. He was assuring me that he wouldn't try to kill himself again and showed me a can of lentil soup to prove it. He pointed to the yellow ribbon printed on the label. "Look, a full serving of vegetables in every bowl."

He'd tried twice over the last three days, but he told me they were half-hearted attempts. The first time, he downed a handful of sleeping pills and then immediately realized he didn't actually want to die. What he really wanted was for Mom to stumble upon his dead body and feel very, very sorry for him—so he went to the kitchen, mixed a tablespoon of salt into a cup of tap water, drank it, and threw up all the pills.

Later, his emotions got all tangled up again and he forgot the difference he'd spotted between wanting to kill himself and wanting to make Mom feel guilty, so he worked up a numerical pattern, and then started all the engines in the garage. The pattern was this: ten times into the room, starting with ten breaths and increasing by ten each trip. He'd be dead far before he hit four hundred seventy.

He set about his task, plodding in and out of the garage, increasingly foggy-headed in the building carbon monoxide. Before long, like a referee of corporeality, the carbon monoxide detector at the far end of the house went off, the shrill, relentless chirp calling Dad's bluff. *Danger, danger!* it called, reminding him of the tag-along body he'd almost forgotten as his desperate mind flew outward like the cold cosmos and into that expansive plane of panic, pain, and despair. The little batteries powered an angry shout, which compressed his anxiety to the immediate problem of oxygen.

He was overcome with a profound sense of guilt for the life he had almost thrown away: that of Duncan, his dog, who would have been trapped in the house while the carbon monoxide continued to build up. Duncan, the clairvoyant, who months before had heroically devoured Asshole's turkey dinner. Dad threw open the windows and turned off the engines, worrying all the while that he was too late.

The first thing I told him was that I was sorry he had wanted to die. Then I told him to stop fucking around. I said, "You can't ever count on your rational mind calling you back from the brink of suicide." I said, "Truly suicidal thinking is madness, and you can't will away madness." I told him other things my therapists had told me when I talked about wanting to be dead. I told him to call me the next time he thought about offing himself.

Mom came over a few hours later because Dad had told her I was in town, and I'd stopped answering her calls. We sat in the downstairs living room and yelled at each other. I said something about being on suicide watch and got choked up.

"What?" she asked and looked at my dad.

"Yeah, I've been feeling pretty down," he said, looking at the floor.

"Are you stupid? The next time you think about killing yourself, you call me. You don't call your kids about that shit!" She started to cry then too.

After some more yelling she tried to leave, but her car got stuck in the snow at the bottom of the driveway. "Need a push," she huffed after tramping back up the slippery hill. Dad suited up and was marvelously happy to get her unstuck and back on her way to Dickhead.

Watching Dad lace up his boots and cover his shaved head with a

trapper hat, I wondered what would have bounded forth from the minds of my parents had they eaten mushrooms on Valentine's Day. Would the pictures on the wall have danced for them, the photos of their three children, their twelve brothers and sisters? Would their bodies have gained a new splendor and warmth in the vast, empty house? Or would the panic have set in as each registered the deep-set eyes, the bland raiment of skin that decorated the person across the room, and the terrible distance that grew between their inward rushing minds?

Late in the evening, I stepped out onto the second-story porch and saw Dad crouched awkwardly over his telescope. A gigantic yellow moon hung fat above the line of pine trees. His head was shining, reflecting the light from the moon, itself a reflection of light from the sun; his neck was twisted and he was shaking a bit with the earnestness of his gaze.

He must have had some cosmic light bulb aligned, because he didn't look back to see me planted in the shadows. Inside the tube, lenses were morphing the star through various stages of distortion, but if everything was twisted and turned as it should be, the star would appear bigger and clearer. There was a lesson for him in the telescope, one about distance and time and perspective. About patience and the remote glow that touched him. But these days more than ever he felt in his stomach and knew in his brain that the stars were fleeing from him. He had just nearly lost his mind in the increasing distances, almost been cut loose by a lull of lonely hours here on earth. He was peering through the tiny eyepiece, reaching out across the far-flung expanse that could blot out his significance so palpably that he sometimes had to call for an ambulance.

The bright moon seemed near enough to matter, and its light was reflecting from his blade-ridden head, from his shiny, complimentary telescope, from the window on the porch that reflected my own glowing outline. We stood apart, glowing in the same impossibly remote light. I was waiting for him to turn around and see it.

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