

Brining

For years, people had told Miriam to try brining her turkey: that was the sure fix for the typical glitches of Thanksgiving, the dried-out problem, the over-cooked problem. Ben was skeptical. Turkey, in his estimation, was a serviceable food when deployed properly—say, sliced, within a sandwich—but would disappoint when forced center-stage.

In their couple, Miriam took on the role of the convention-subverter; she was the one who agitated for Pakistan versus London for a family trip. But she refused to meddle with Thanksgiving, though Ben knew Miriam found turkey just as unimpressive as he did. Left to her own devices, extricated from the influence of her brother Ethan, from her sister-in-law Lynn, whose face was as flat and round as a plate, from her recently widowed mother, all three of whom they would be hosting, Miriam would blow off the inevitably underwhelming turkey and go for something dynamic: paella, bouillabaisse, something worth the hours of sweat. Ben was convinced of this.

As it was, though, she said, “This year, I’m going to brine it.”

She looked at him, awaiting the rant. Instead, Ben volunteered to get a 24 gallon plastic bucket.

Miriam’s eyes sharpened, then: they became as pointy and precise as the pencils their daughter Edith would whirl into barb-like condition and perfectly line up on her desk. “Thanks,” she said, after taking, Ben felt, his full measurement.

“Anything else we need?”

“Wine. Beaujolais. Ethan will bring something crappy.”

“Sure. Flowers?”

His question seemed to sharpen Miriam's eyes one last notch. Ben was not, and never had been, a purchaser of flowers. But she was busy: her hands were floury with pie crust. "If you see anything pretty."

Starting the car, Ben tried to calm his racing heart. Since they were undergraduates, since he first met her, Miriam had always been smarter than him. Back in college, her meticulous notes in maniac's handwriting had lifted Ben into many an A. But there were times when it would be expedient to be married to someone less sharp.

He reflected, as he had frequently in recent weeks, upon the difficulty of assessing when his behavior was suspicious.

There was too much latitude for suspiciousness, was the problem. Being cooperative and helpful was potentially suspicious, as was being romantic. But so was being brusque, distracted, critical, or cranky. He felt like he was navigating some tricky video game, quicksand everywhere; then he questioned why this mental picture dressed itself as a video game, instead of some real (if still imaginary) bayou. Was Ben that severed from reality these days, that his fantasies packaged themselves in pixels?

Something needed to change.

He went to Target first, to get the errand out of the way. There was no predicting the lines the day before Thanksgiving, except that they would worsen as the afternoon unrolled. He congratulated himself for choosing Target, relatively empty, rather than packed-to-the-rafters Whole Foods. The problem was the limited options for wine and flowers, but Ben persuaded himself that a cellophane arrangement of red leaves and bronze chrysanthemums was seasonal, and that the flowers would hold up in his car for an hour.

An hour was all he had time for; an hour, with Thanksgiving press, was plausible. He wasn't willing, when he considered Miriam's pencil-point eyes, to risk more.

He parked down the block from Annie's house. He put the flowers on the car floor, along with three bottles of Beaujolais, and tucked the fourth under his arm.

Annie's front yard was overgrown, strewn with leaves.

The day before, he had filled two Hefty bags with his own yard's leaves, thinking, as he scooped them up in crackly handfuls, of when he had picked up Miriam at the salon the week before to save her the walk home. Her stylist unsnapped a silver plastic shawl from Miriam's neck; all around her swivel chair were trimmings of Miriam's hair.

"How sweet of you to pick her up." The stylist, improbably named Lisbon, beamed at him. Miriam's eyes, though pleased, were appraising.

Annie's yard was a mess. Her leaves reminded him less of hair clippings than of the debris he associated with Annie: her desk overflowing with papers that he wanted to straighten and corner, bowls full of paper clips, buttons, a thimble. How intensely Ben wanted to rake her yard; it felt like a compulsion. But of course there was no time for that. He pressed his thumb on the doorbell.

Annie opened the door. "Darling," she said, and buried her nose in his sweater.

Ben waited a few seconds before lightly pushing her back into her house, and closing the door behind them.

He handed her the wine. Annie said, "I already opened some. Want a glass?"

While she poured, Ben looked at his watch: 1:58. Early for a bottle of wine to be half empty. Perhaps she had opened it the night before? Her teeth, he saw when she turned back to him, were tinged red.

“God, Ben, I’ve missed you.”

He took a sip of wine (not good; Annie’s wine was usually not good. She seemed to have no principle of selection, beyond an eye-catching label). Annie put her arms around him, knocking his hand, spilling wine onto the sleeve of Ben’s sweater.

“Careful!”

“Oh, sorry. I can wash that for you. Take it off.”

“I don’t…” Ben was about to say, I don’t have time, but stopped. He pulled off his sweater.

“Mmm! See, that was a ploy to get you to take off your clothes.” Annie turned on the kitchen tap.

“Water won’t remove a wine stain. Don’t you have white wine vinegar and salt?”

She stared at him. Funny how the two women in his life looked at him. Their eyes, like the rest of them, were yin-yang opposites, but both sets wounded in different ways: Miriam’s pencil points, Annie’s teary. She was so damn sensitive, no shell at all.

“Annie…”

She turned her back and opened a cabinet. “Does it have to be white wine vinegar?”

“Yes, because—”

“Let me guess: it has to be Chardonnay.”

This was new, this bite to Annie.

“Here you go. I don’t want to misapply it somehow. Further screw up your sweater.”

Silently, Ben took the bottle of vinegar.

Annie’s angry blue eyes refilled. “Sorry! I don’t know what’s wrong with me!”

“It’s okay,” said Ben. He drizzled vinegar on the spot. “Do you have salt?”

Annie handed him a carton of Morton's. Ben tipped a pinch of salt on the stain. After eyeballing the countertop (the mystery of Annie's perpetually sticky kitchen, it was as if she scrubbed her counters with syrup), Ben flattened his sweater on top. "Disaster averted."

He was trying to be light, but Annie grimaced. "Right. My house is full of booby traps."

Enough already, Ben thought. "Well, your boobs are traps."

Annie's lip, quivering, turned up. She put her arms around him and lifted her face to be kissed.

Embracing Annie, a thought pinballed in Ben's mind. He did suspect Annie of carelessness.

Not so much of consciously spilling wine, but of not caring if they were caught. She encouraged him to park in her driveway; she bugged him to take her out to dinner at The Crab Apple, where they could easily run into people they knew. Ben was starting to feel, when he left Annie, the need to examine himself for gold bobby-pins secreted in his pockets.

Ben's friend Mitchell had been caught in an affair when his girlfriend intentionally left her hairclip on the keyboard of his wife's computer. Now Mitchell was living in a grim apartment with a hissing radiator, his wife divorcing him. Mitchell was philosophical. "Well, Lisa wanted me to herself," he said. Ben remembered Mitchell's blended tone: chagrined but flattered.

It wasn't like Annie hid her hopes. They were the same as that Lisa's (Ben had never met Lisa the Mistress, but pictured her as leggy, aerobicized). The difficult thing to sort out was not what Annie wanted, she was her transparent self, but what Ben did.

Ben's desires were a bird that wouldn't stay on one branch, but kept taking flight. His were desires, plural, and consequently irreconcilable, whereas Annie's desire focused on him.

Oh, he certainly wanted Annie. Not so much her boobs: despite his “booby traps” joke, Annie’s breasts were the one part of her body Ben did not find particularly attractive. Small, sagging, the skin thin and papery, the nipples disproportionately large and brown, too dark for her pale skin: her breasts reminded Ben of tea bags. When he fantasized about Annie, he always modified her breasts, pumped them fuller, made her nipples pink and round as quarters. But her legs were extraordinary: muscular from running, and as long as his. There was no sensation like the grip of Annie’s legs around his back.

But he also wanted Scrabble with Miriam by their fireplace. He wanted the elated expression she got, landing the Q on the double letter, “Quixotic” on the triple word. “This is,” she had declared, “the greatest moment of my life!”

He wanted Miriam’s taste and Annie’s admiration. He wanted to suck Miriam’s nipples (her breasts, even at forty-one, her best feature) and to be gripped by Annie’s legs. He thought of a flipbook Edith had loved when she was little. The pages divided into thirds, so you could combine the illustrations to produce a body with a fireman’s head, a ballerina’s tutued torso, an astronaut’s silver-booted legs.

“I’m sorry I’m so moody,” Annie said, breaking the kiss. “The holidays suck. It’s so unfair, that Hud gets Skylar for Thanksgiving, and Christmas too.”

“Sorry.” Ben tangled his fingers in Annie’s bushy, pre-Raphaelite hair. *Sorry*, the epitome of an inadequate word: he tried to count how many times they had volleyed it today.

“Skylar was happy to leave because he’s taking her to some stupid ice-skating rink. Hud’s been a shitty father his whole life, doesn’t do a single carpool, never goes to parent-teacher night. Then when we finally split up, so when it’s no use to me, he decides to become this fun dad? I can’t believe Skylar falls for it.” Her eyes welled again.

“Sorry, Honey,” repeated Ben, but now he twisted his hand in her hair to see his watch. Forty-five minutes left at the outside.

“I hate Hud.”

Even the name, short for Hudson, was ugly: it sounded like a bowling ball dropped on the floor.

Ben had done his commiserating time, he told himself, his fingers groping Annie’s breast. He had listened to Annie’s litany: Hud’s total lack of interest in Skylar, until Annie finally kicked him out, or, more precisely, didn’t allow him to come back the last time he left. But now Hud wanted, competitively Annie believed, as an act of hostile one-upmanship, to lure Skylar from her mother.

Poor Annie. She was involved in more than one love triangle.

And Ben had heard about Hud’s drinking, his verbal abuse, the names he called Annie: a bad cook, a slob, an overly indulgent mother, a moron. (The first three of those things Ben privately considered true). He had heard about Hud closing his eyes when they had sex; Annie was convinced he had imagined himself with someone else.

Hud reminded him of the chapter books Edith had wanted him to read aloud before she was old enough to read to herself, that awful series in particular about the fairies. It had gotten to the point where Miriam and he would rock-paper-scissors for who had to read those damn books. Doing dishes was preferable, folding laundry was preferable, scrubbing toilets, Miriam had maintained at one point, was preferable, to reading that dreadful story one more time. Kissing Annie, backwards-walking her to her unmade bed while they still had time to have sex (forty minutes now), Ben thought this may well be the true definition of love: subjecting oneself, willingly, for the sake of one’s beloved, to boredom.

It was 3:15 when Ben got back in his car. Despite the fact that the temperature was in the forties, he lowered his window. There had been no time to take a shower. The wine stain on his sweater was a faded but visible bruise.

As soon as he entered his house, he could smell baking pies. He carried the plastic bucket into the kitchen. Miriam stood at the counter, trimming stems from mushrooms. She looked up, meaningfully, at the kitchen clock.

“Where the hell were you?”

“The lines...” Ben said. He dropped the bucket on the floor, as if it were heavy, instead of simply cumbersome. “Hang on, let me get the rest of it.”

His heart raced as he gathered the wine bottles and flowers from the passenger side floor. It had been difficult to extract himself. In bed, Annie had gotten on top, as if she wanted to pin him, her long, strawberry-blond hair suffocating him. Then later, more tears about how hard it was to be alone on Thanksgiving.

If Annie were a plant, she would cling. Whereas Miriam would be full of fine needles that stung.

Ben set the wine and flowers on the counter. Miriam wrinkled her nose at the chrysanthemums. At Target, they had struck Ben as festive, the color of doorknobs, but under the kitchen lights they looked cheap and dry.

“Can I explain to you how brining works?” Miriam said. “Every single recipe says you need to leave the turkey in the salt solution for twenty-four hours.”

“The lines,” Ben said again, and then, again, he stopped, because Miriam closed her eyes. He looked at Miriam’s fingers splayed on their countertop. She stayed perfectly still, as if giving Ben time to study her.

“Ben, allow me to give you some advice,” Miriam said. “Don’t say anything stupid. Better yet: don’t do anything stupid.” She picked up her paring knife and began, again, trimming mushrooms. “Anything else stupid.”

He watched her hands, deft and efficient. Under the plastic cutting board, Miriam had inserted wet paper towels to keep it from sliding. He knew this even though he couldn’t see them. He knew the precautions his wife took. Wet paper towels: the thought couldn’t be more errant. Suddenly Ben felt like crying.

He picked up the ugly flowers and started unwrapping the cellophane, embossed with, he now saw, the red bull’s-eye logo of Target.

“Leave them,” Miriam said, without looking up.

“Let me just get them in a vase.”

Perhaps because his voice cracked, Miriam nodded. She let Ben get a vase out of the cabinet and clip the stems, puckered at the ends, without telling him to use the other vase, without directing him to cut the stems on the diagonal, without reminding him to add the envelope of revitalizing powder that Target, in any case, did not sell. Ben felt her eyes on him while he found the large coaster to put under the vase so their dining room table didn’t get a watermark.

After he left the kitchen Ben went upstairs, closing the door to their home office behind him. Tomorrow this room would be inhabited by Miriam’s brother and sister-in-law. The home office was directly above their kitchen. The soundproofing in their house had always been bad,

to the point that giggling Miriam held her hand over Ben's mouth when they had sex, so their daughter Edith, two doors down, wouldn't hear him.

Ben opened his email, the private new account. It had been difficult to come up with a password Miriam wouldn't guess. His wife knows him: this thought made his eyes fill. For a subject heading he typed "It's over." He pressed Send. When the email program asked him if he was sure he wanted to send an email to Anne J. Sarbaines without any content, he clicked, Yes.

For the past two months Ben had considered leaving Miriam; it was only as his email winged towards its target that he understood how concretely he had pictured a life with Annie. Not just raking her impossible lawn, but planting something pretty: a rhododendron bush, something that would bloom. He had been evaluating the two women, contrasting them, doing that Frankenstein-creature flipbook thing.

Only now did Ben understand that the dilemma for him was never whom he loved more: the answer to that was obvious. No, the lure of Annie was her feelings for him, not his for her. To Annie, he was the competent cleaner of gutters, the passionate lover, the consistent, wise father from whom to solicit parenting advice. He loved the image of himself that she beamed back.

The revelation was as clear and sharp to Ben as a picture materializing from the smoke of a Polaroid.

Years later, Ben wishes he was able to maintain this clarity, that he was able to follow Miriam's instruction to not do "Anything else stupid."

But break-ups are rarely as simple as clicking "Send without content." Fourteen days later, he replied to Annie's eighth or ninth hysterical email; he fucked her again, and then again, closing his eyes. He drove Miriam, by blatantly disregarding what was, after all, real advice, into

cracking his password, which was random enough that decoding it involved installing an expensive Spy program in his computer, one that memorized keystrokes.

Three days before Christmas, Miriam hurled clothing at him, including something that hurt on impact, a belt, and shouted, “I want you to fucking leave!”

Ben was packing a suitcase, which he later realized he packed like a lunatic, throwing in three bathing suits but only one pair of underwear. He was trying to figure out where to go because he now understood, with certainty, he would not be driving to Annie’s. He turned and saw Miriam in the doorway. She might have been standing there a long time, watching him; Ben had been too busy self-imploding to sense her presence.

Miriam said, “Correction: what I really meant was, I want you to fucking stay.”

She allowed him to hold her, then; she buried her face in his chest. Ben kept kissing the top of her head. They both cried. Miriam said, “We could brine a turkey in this pool of tears.” She said, “Tears have the same water-to-salt ratio as a brine solution, did you know?” She said, “We need to pull ourselves together before Edith comes home.”

They stayed married for another thirteen years.

At age fifty-four Miriam tells him one day she has met someone else. When Ben asks if she is in love with this other man, whose name is Lester, she says, “I wouldn’t use the word ‘love,’ but I also wouldn’t rule out its future use.”

Ben, fifty-five, wonders if everything would have gone differently, if Lester would have never materialized, if Miriam would never leave, if he had only been able to hold onto that moment of perfect, sharp-edged clarity: 3:43 PM, the day before Thanksgiving, 2002.