

Gaffe

Betsy's giraffe falls from the table. He bounces once and comes to rest at the legs of her chair.

I know he's a he because although he consists of molded plastic and where his genitalia would be is only the seam where his two halves meet, Betsy declared his gender. It's amazing that a person as little as she, who dresses in pink-starburst leggings and t-shirts emblazoned with the names of princesses, could hold such power. From the moment Jia and I transferred guardianship of the giraffe, Betsy, though not yet able to speak, entered into a sacred relationship with him. She held him by his four stiff plastic legs. She sucked on his plastic head. And when she began to have words, she spoke of the giraffe as *he*. He became Gaffe, hard g, because that's what came out when Betsy tried to pronounce his species.

Which may explain why he's always falling off things.

I can't blame this morning's fall on Gaffe. The scene leading to the fall involved the ticking clock hanging over the table that urges Jia to hurry up with breakfast because she has an important meeting. I have an equally important meeting. Our agency's biggest client is due at 9 a.m. for the unveiling of the ad campaign for his make-or-break new product.

Betsy's mother and I are not talking. Have not been, it seems, for months. Instead, this morning, we calculate silently. Jia stands by the coffee maker, which emits an annoying whistling sound, drumming her fingers on the counter. I imagine her wondering about traffic on the 101 and whether she could ask to switch day-care drop-off days to

gain a few extra minutes, about whose turn is it to pick up something for dinner and whether that could serve as a bargaining chip in the Betsy drop-off. I calculate what the switch might cost and quickly decide it's not for sale.

Into this interior interrogative comes a sound from Betsy almost the exact frequency and pitch of the coffee machine's wail. She bangs Gaffe on the table. Her mother turns from the counter where she awaits the dispensation of caffeine. Betsy adds words to her wail: "I WANT SQUARES!"

I look at Betsy's plate, decorated with a flaxen-haired princess, atop which sits Betsy's buttered toast, cut into four nearly perfect triangles. I say *nearly perfect* because even an ad man knows you can't make equilateral triangles from a rectangular piece of bread unless you cut a strip off the side first. And of course, even I know that, while you can rescue toast that has been cut into squares by subsequently cutting each square diagonally to make two triangles, there's not a damn thing you can do to turn a triangle back into a square for your three-year-old princess.

As I contemplate the plate, Jia turns from the coffee maker, sweeps her arm across the table, and sends Betsy's plate, toast, and Gaffe tumbling to the floor. On its way down, the toast makes a passing acquaintance with the front of my white dress shirt, right beside my red power tie, leaving a butter splotch of a size and shape similar to the birth mark on Betsy's leg, just above her knee.

Betsy begins to cry. The melamine plate bounces and rolls instead of breaking. I bend to the floor. I know better than to ignore Gaffe in favor of the toast, although I can see the slick of butter spreading across the tile. Crouching out of sight of my wife and daughter, I whisper to myself, "What the hell?" I try to construct a scenario in which the

sweep of Jia's arm was an accident.

Still crouching, I raise Gaffe like a puppet master over the edge of the table and face him toward Betsy.

"Gaffe is okay," I say in my best giraffe voice. "He's sad he fell down. And he's sad Mommy is upset."

I can't see either Betsy or Jia but I hear Jia remove the carafe and begin to pour before the brewing process is finished. I hate when she does that. The coffee will continue dripping onto the plastic holder and, when she returns the carafe, the dripped coffee will transfer to the bottom and leave oily rings wherever it's set down.

I can't stay here on the floor forever, but I can milk this puppet mastery a little more.

"Mommy and Daddy are both in a hurry this morning. So Betsy *might* have to eat her toast in the car. And Mommy has to make more toast because Daddy has butter on his shirt and he has to change."

I stand up and hand Gaffe to Betsy, who hugs him to her chest. She kisses the top of his head where incipient antlers rise between his ears. Who knew giraffes even had antlers?

The coffee maker finishes its final spritz.

"Fine." Jia thumps her cup on the counter. "Go. Change your precious shirt. I'll take her."

The last thing I hear before I shut the bedroom door and strip off my butter-spattered shirt is Betsy singing, in Gaffe's voice, a song about Mommy and Daddy and toast.

Fresh in my new shirt I re-enter the kitchen on my way to the garage. Jia loads the dishwasher with her back to me.

A year ago, a month ago, I would have said, “Thanks for taking her” and crossed the kitchen to kiss Jia goodbye. Even a month ago the makeups came that quickly after the blowups. Now we have both dug in, though I’m at a loss to say exactly what we’re defending against.

I kiss Betsy instead. She wraps her arms around my neck. I hold myself lightly away from her in case she has butter on her somewhere.

“Kiss Gaffe!” she demands, shoving the grimy plastic creature against my cheek. I purse my lips and touch them to the nascent antlers. I grab my briefcase and head toward the door. I’ll never hear the end of it from Lawrence if I’m not there in time to set up the video monitor.

“Bye, punkin’,” I call on my way out.

* * *

There’s traffic, as expected. I should be thinking about the presentation and the client but instead I’m thinking about the day Jia and I met. There I was, suited and tied as usual, behind the shiny brochures and the giveaway pens imprinted with the agency logo, smiling. Jaws aching from smiling. Hello, I’m Paul. What department are you with? Can I show you some of our designs? Engage ’em, Hawkins told us. He was the master of engagement and we looked up to him like the communications god he was.

She sailed in with hair piled high, not chopped to her chin like it is now. A confection of cinnamon lipstick and coffee skin. Looking at her like that was completely inappropriate—this was 1999, after all, not 1899—but I couldn’t help it. She wore black pants and a cream-colored shirt, a uniform not so different from my suit, and some kind

of outdoorsy perfume.

My nametag said *Hello. My name is Paul* but I introduced myself anyway.

“Jia,” she said.

Later, I learned her name means *sweetheart* in Hindi.

The conversation began at the literature table. When the event was over, she waited for me to pack the brochures into the box and wheel the box on the dolly out to the parking lot. In the fading afternoon sun I rushed to dump the box in my trunk. When I got back to the hotel lobby, she was sitting with her legs crossed in the simple black pants, jiggling her foot. When I got closer I saw a single crease between her eyebrows as she squinted at a binder in her lap. I saw the world in her and wondered what she saw in me. Maybe something of her native-born American father, although she bore a greater resemblance to her mother, who was from Kolkata via London.

We had three drinks each at the hotel bar and then another one for me. I knew I wouldn't be driving home. I wouldn't let her, either, which led to our first argument.

“I've only had a couple of white wines,” she said. “It's been a few hours. I'm fine.”

No, no, and no. “I'll pay for a taxi.”

“What about my car?” She rested an elbow on the bar.

“I'll give you a ride to work in the morning.”

“And how are you going to do that? Your car's here!”

“Easy,” I slurred. “I'll get up extra early and take another taxi back to my car and then come pick you up.”

It was her turn to say no, no, no. “That's insane. Besides, you're not coming to my apartment at seven in the morning.”

Somehow she overlooked the fact that we were sharing the taxi so I ended up at her apartment at ten at night instead of seven in the morning. I stayed in the car, though, and it was all very businesslike—goodnight, Paul, goodnight, Jia, thanks so much for the drinks.

But I knew how to find her and she knew how to find me since her company had sponsored the mini-exhibit at the hotel. Neither of us was surprised when I called her the next day, at the respectable time of late afternoon, just to make sure she'd gotten her car and everything was okay.

The next thing I knew we'd had dinners, plural, and drinks again, and then I met her parents and she met my mother. If either of us saw cracks in the façade we didn't say. The cracks became visible only when the new marriage paint wore off and I started to notice just how ambitious she was. Not that I have anything against ambitious women. In Jia, though, it bordered on obsessive. And she was ambitious not only for herself but for me. She derided my restless discontent at my job and my inability to do anything about it. The cracks widened with 9/11 and the dot-com bust and the layoffs and us, newlywed, hanging on by our fingernails as everything shifted around us.

And then, Betsy.

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I pull into the parking lot at 8:52 and my cell sends three trills from my pocket telling me I have a text. I forget the trills as soon as I pull open the glass doors of the office building and nod to Suzanne. "Lawrence is waiting," she says, but I'm already down the hall.

Suzanne’s duties as a receptionist include the arrangement of Danishes beside the projector. I eye them on my way into the conference room.

“About time.” Lawrence looks up from a tangle of cords.

I slip my laptop from my briefcase and take over setting up. Hawkins will be here at nine on the dot, expecting everything to be ready.

A half-hour later, when Lawrence and I wrap up, Hawkins points at the image on the projector. “And here you can see how the space represents the huge distance you guys are bridging.” We follow his finger across the screen showing massive cliff sides plunging into a river that flows to a sea in the distance.

The client, head of Monmouth Connectivity Solutions, leans back in the leather conference chair and squints at the image. Brian Monmouth is not one to be wowed by metaphor or symbolic representation. Maybe we should have gone with something more literal, like a couple of black boxes with cable running between them. But he’s nodding.

I point to the two tiny figures on either side of the chasm. “These will be a little bigger and we’ll have them wearing Monmouth blue and orange.”

“Could the sky be less cloudy?” Monmouth asks.

“Of course,” Lawrence says. “This is just a stock art mock-up.” He, Hawkins, and I exchange glances. If Monmouth is asking about the sky, he’s sold.

My cell phone shudders against my leg. Nobody but me would have noticed except that I am leaning against the table and the phone makes a muffled buzzing against the wood. Hawkins raises his eyebrows.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought I put it on silent.” I pull it out—unknown number—and dismiss the call, then switch it to silent.

Hawkins came up in the ad world long before cellphones. He doesn't own one and has a strict phones-off policy for meetings. Even his clients know not to text or check messages when they're with him, which makes scheduling difficult since you have to write down times, consult your calendar when you're back in your office, then call his assistant to confirm.

"The idea is to express connection," I say. "Human connection."

I'm not sure why I'm still talking. Maybe to prove to Jia, who isn't even here, the importance of my presence at this meeting. The phone call, the second from the unknown number since I arrived at the office, has rattled me, as has my boss's disapproving eyebrow arch. I'll just muck things up if I keep going but I can't help it. I wrote the headline to accompany this concept, the one Monmouth seems sold on.

"We felt the nature theme, two people alone in a landscape, emphasized the potential solitude." I have yet to write the copy for the ad. Presenting that will mean another whole to-do with the projector and the Danishes and Hawkins offering around the plate before he takes one, even though he's the only one who eats them.

Monmouth walks close to the screen and crosses his arms. "Could we change the 'a' to a 'the'?"

That's when we know we have him.

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I forget the calls and the notifications until fifteen minutes later, after Hawkins has walked Monmouth out and it's just me and Lawrence again, shutting down the laptop and unplugging the monitor. I pull my phone out and stare at the blue blinking light.

“Jeez,” Lawrence says. “I didn’t know you’re such a popular guy.”

What can I say? I like Lawrence, who doesn’t let anyone call him Larry. He’s ten years on from an MFA and working here, stitching together stock art for middling tech companies run by middling execs who all think they’re the next Steve Jobs. I know Lawrence has a nighttime gig designing music posters for his boyfriend’s band, the one that plays a twitchy kind of hip-hop he tried without success to get me to listen to. I’m only seven years older than he is but I sometimes feel like I could be his father.

“They’ll try again if it’s important,” I say. That’s what Hawkins always says to make people feel better about his no-phones policy.

“Dude,” Lawrence says, “I think that’s what they’ve been doing.”

All this is to explain why I don’t listen to the messages until I’m back in my office at 10:43 a.m.

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I do a bad job parking in the emergency lot, tires over the white line, but I don’t care. Who can care at a time like this? It’s amazing the other cars are parked so neatly. You’d think they’d reflect the various states of distress experienced by the people who race here but somehow, even now, there’s order. I remember that from the brief time with my father. The straight, neat corridors, the hip-height wooden rails, the wall of portraits of the hospital’s biggest donors. The rush to the bedside of the man who played catch with me maybe two times in my life, who disappeared into his “study” every night after dinner and made a stink with his cigars, whose presence I fled as soon as I turned eighteen when I moved across the country for college. I was three thousand miles away when he had the

stroke and returned barely in time to hold his hand for the final few minutes. His green eyes were empty by then, dull like tarnished copper.

We hurried, too, when Jia's water broke on the bathroom floor and the labor pains started almost immediately. No need to rush to the hospital if your water breaks, our doula had told us, as long as the baby's moving and the fluid is clear. "Fuck that," Jia said when a contraction gripped her for the third time in less than ten minutes. "We're going." Bouncing down El Camino Real with Jia on her hands and knees in the back seat, not buckled in, making animal sounds with her still-long hair falling over her face. I could see her butt in the rearview mirror, circling as she moved her hips to cope with the pain. If a cop pulled us over—but the three a.m. streets were nearly deserted and the lights synchronized at this hour so I sped through three Peninsula towns with barely a pause and left the car askew before the emergency room entrance. Our doula arrived in time to hold one of Jia's legs while I held the other.

So I, of all people, ought to know to slow the fuck down. Ought to know that anything could happen at any moment. And yet when I finally reach the nurses' station, it's not my life that flashes before me but Betsy's.

Flash is exactly the word because there's so little of it. Later in a life, three years might represent three-quarters of a college education or time enough to get a promotion or to serve several tours of duty. At a life's beginning, those years are taken up with the mundane activities of turning into a functional human. Sleeping, eating, potty-training. Walking, talking, feeding yourself.

And that's what makes me cry, right in front of all the nurses, down the hall from the operating room: everything Betsy has not yet done. The tears come so hard they choke

me. I sink to my knees without even considering how filthy the floor might be, crawling with germs I wouldn't want to touch with the bottoms of my shoes, never mind my pants legs.

That's when I hear "Daddy, Daddy!" and Betsy comes back from the dead.

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The surgical waiting room is not an unwelcoming space, really, for a hospital. Whoever decorated it chose ocean colors. Sand and taupe and silver and pale blue, tasteful and soothing.

I sit on a fake-leather-covered chair. Betsy snuggles against me, sucking her thumb.

"Where Mommy?"

"Mommy got hurt and the doctors are helping her," I say.

"Gaffe flied!"

"Oh yeah?"

"He flied out the window."

"Out the window! Wow."

"Mommy flied."

"What do you mean?"

"Up in the air."

I squeeze Betsy closer. At the nurses' station, once I stopped wailing, they didn't tell me much except *your wife was hit*. Hit. I assumed they meant her car. Now the pieces come together. *Gaffe flied. Mommy save Gaffe. Mommy flied*. I squeeze Betsy and rock back in the hospital chair. Jesus.

“Can I see Gaffe?”

Betsy uncurls her fingers from his neck and looks at me solemnly as she hands me the plastic animal. I examine him. Was that gouge on his belly always there? Does one of his antler nubs look as if it has absorbed the roadside’s grime?

Betsy reaches for him. “Gaffe needs his mommy.” She nestles him against her chest.

“I know, sweetie. I need Mommy too.” I wrap my arms around Betsy and close my hands over her and the giraffe.

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I thought Jia was pulling me into the toy store so she could find a place to sit. She was seven months pregnant and perpetually tired. But she had a different idea. “I want to get something for the baby.”

I hadn’t been in a toy store since I was a kid. This one, perhaps because it was in Santa Cruz, specialized in old-fashioned toys meant to keep kids away from their screens. My parents had never thought about such a thing, were happy to have me occupied with my Game Boy. Our child would have different preoccupations.

Jia examined a wooden train set and a dollhouse. The baby’s gender was a surprise and we’d talked about making sure that we didn’t stereotype him/her with our choice of toys, so those were out.

She offered something for my approval. Its hard plastic body was covered in orange-brown spots, its four legs slightly bowed, ending in cloven hooves. The faint striations of what was supposed to be fur showed through the spots.

The giraffe came home with us, peeking out over the tissue-paper wrapping inside a

paper bag with jute handles adorned with a sticker bearing the toy store's logo. I extracted it from the bag.

"How's the mama to be?" I asked in what I imagined would be a giraffe voice. The giraffe was talkative and didn't wait for an answer from Jia. "Daddy'll make dinner while Mama takes a little nap." I set the animal on the dresser and sat beside Jia on the bed.

"Sound good?" I asked in my giraffe voice.

Instead of answering, she said, "Can you put that thing away? It's creeping me out. And you are too, with that voice."

He wasn't yet Gaffe, wasn't yet a he, and although she'd purchased him out of some possible maternal impulse I could see that Jia's practical nature was not going to let her get involved with any fairy tale about talking giraffes, not now and probably not ever.

She maneuvered her belly, containing Betsy, whom we didn't yet know was a she, and rolled away from me. These were the final days before we became what we both avowed we wanted to be, parents, although by all rights we were parents already since our baby was separated from us only by the placenta and the layers of Jia's flesh.

"Do you think the kid will be a good napper?" I asked. Our few friends who'd had kids already were always boasting or lamenting about this.

"How should I know?"

"I'm not expecting you to know. Just speculating."

Jia looked over her shoulder at me. It was too much trouble, I could see, for her to bother turning her whole body back over. "You're such a ruminator," she said, but her tone was teasing, like it used to be so often and now hardly ever was. "I think the kiddo will sleep when we don't want it to and not when we do."

"That sounds about right."

"Paul?"

She paused, and I filled that brief silence with the things I always wished she would say to me if the ocean of her dammed up feelings could tip over and pour toward me, if she could for an instant become the easy, emotive woman she was not.

Jia looked away again, probably to ease the strain on her neck and said what she'd been planning to say all along. "I'm not going to take the four weeks off before the baby comes. I know it's use-it-or-lose-it time but I can't see just waiting around at home doing nothing." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Can you please move the damned giraffe?"

I got up and tucked Gaffe into my sock and underwear drawer.

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I make the coffee now. Jia's casts will come off her left arm and her right femur in a month. Until then she can only hobble. She can use a crutch but she can't use her dominant hand and even she admits that making coffee with her right hand would be too messy.

I leave the carafe under the stream of coffee for an extra minute after I hear the final hiss, then pour two cups. The toast pops. I butter both pieces and spread them with strawberry jam, careful to avoid the lumps of strawberries that will send Betsy into a fit. Next time I go to the store I'll buy jelly, not jam, and then I won't have to fish out the lumps.

"Look, Mommy! Gaffe dwink!" Betsy holds her sippy cup to the giraffe's unmoving lips.

Jia lowers herself into the chair opposite Betsy and smiles a half smile. Most things are by halves these days. Half an upper body and half a lower. Half her head shaved so

they could drill a hole and drain the fluid that collected around the fracture. Her hair is starting to grow back as bristly fuzz.

My phone trills. My heart stutters. I've heard the phrase a lot lately, *the new normal*. But who's to say that the old was any more normal than the new? Like the old normal, the new still involves the three of us eating breakfast. It still involves one of us taking Betsy to day care, except that one is now exclusively me and instead of driving on to work, I'll return home. I will portion out Jia's medication and get her a glass of water to swallow the pills. Later I will help her to the car and drive her to physical therapy. After lunch I'll lie with her when she naps and put my hand on her hip, as lightly as I can because any careless touch might ignite an arc of pain. I'll brush away from her cheek the half of her hair that remains and note that it's grown below her chin.

I reach into my pocket and silence the phone. Then I cut one piece of toast into squares and one into triangles, just in case.

END