

Transplant

Life on dialysis draws nearer to Phoebe but the word is as elusive as ever, the word I have been seeking since youth to describe what she and her mother mean to me. Behind the optimistic slogans in Phoebe's Facebook statuses, I sense her desperation. Not one of her willing kidney donors is suitable. She regularly posts the numeric declines in her organ function.

Yet I am unable to help. She refuses to respond to my frequent requests to get together, won't acknowledge my private messages.

She warned me back when we had our affair, I would be cut out of the loop when her condition got to this point. It just didn't register at the time.

It was ten years ago. I had returned from the inevitable, though long time coming, weekend Phoebe and I finally consummated our love. I was catching up on weekend chores, a brilliant Sunday afternoon, mid-Spring, the sun at the top of its cycle. Sweat broke through the cloth of my ball cap as I raked out winter's rot in the backyard. Taking a short break, breathing hard, I gazed at the open sky. Staring back at me were billowing profiles of Phoebe and her mother

Verona, sculpted from clouds, my own Renaissance painting on a pristine ceiling of lifelong love and affection.

Here's what spooks me to this day. That same profile of Verona, I could swear to its exactness, had appeared in the clouds one year before this, following Verona's funeral.

I had returned to my hometown where the service was to be held. I arrived the day before, seeking plenty of time to wrap my head around her death. After grabbing a bite to eat, I decided to stop by the church, where Verona's family had been foundational members of the congregation for decades. The weather was crystalline perfect. The air seemed to want to be still for the service and the days of mourning ahead, to allow her spirit to pass quietly through, to the other side.

With the notepad and pen I carry everywhere, I sat on a masonry wall ten feet above the recently planted church garden that would later be named The Verona Wilder Sanctuary. The obsession gripped me like I gripped my pen. The word, the one word, the not-coined word, for our constellation of three, still escaped me. In its place was Verona's apparition, on the blue tinted ivory canvass of a sky above me, the same one I later saw accompanied by Phoebe's from the back yard.

Still, I craved that word, as I was rooted to the cement, to unlock the meaning of why I was at this place, why Verona, the most caring woman I had ever known, was taken away, why I still loved her daughter, and why Phoebe insisted I be there for the service. I wanted to utter the word, roll it around my tongue, swallow it, let it take root and nourish my insides. If I was

allowed to say something about the deceased the next day, I would need it, just one perfect word.

What I wrote was juvenile, worse than that, imbecilic. It did not contain the word.

Verona died from the same thing that was going to tie Phoebe to that machine.

I've known the Wilders since I was ten years old when my family moved from New Jersey to outside of Huntsville, Alabama. Verona adored me, Phoebe told me once, from when she first laid eyes on me at the community swim club, a dark kid for those Southern waters at that time. She wanted to know my heritage, which church my family attended, and where I had moved from.

I was a city kid, rough around the edges. I was always punished severely by my parents and schoolteachers, more so by these new, gentile Southern adults. None of that bothered Verona, who regularly meddled to make sure Phoebe and I spent time together.

Once, my parents sat me down and brought up the whole Mrs. Robinson thing in the same breath as Verona. Friends of mine mentioned "ménage a trois" if I attempted to explain, forget about with one word, with lots of words. I never mentioned the Wilders again. Well, except once.

Years passed. Phoebe got married, I got married. We stayed in touch. After Verona's funeral, we each needed more from the other.

I didn't know Phoebe had inherited Verona's genetic disease until the weekend of our affair. We were lying in a plush hotel room bed, amongst half a dozen pillows, plus one more Phoebe had brought.

"I can't sleep without my own pillow," she said, shoving it at me playfully, "feel the satin case!"

Her excuse was a ladies' weekend shopping. I traveled for a living and my wife was just glad to have the weekend free of my presence.

Snuggled in bed, she pointed at her deformed organ, poked at it a few times, as if trying to wake it up.

I lay there mute. I could barely look.

"Feel it!" she said, smiling. Phoebe's face is a stage for a thousand synonyms for "smile."

"Are you sure?"

I hate medical stuff.

"Feel it! It won't bite."

Gently, with trepidation, I placed my palm on her abdomen just above the cloth.

"Not like *that*."

She clasped my wrist in her hand and slid it forcefully under the rim of her panties, and pressed firmly. It was like a turnip.

“It’s supposed to be the size of a hardball, and soft like a Nerf ball, but mine’s the size of a softball and hard as a baseball.”

“It doesn’t yield at all.”

“It keeps getting bigger and denser.”

I stroked it, massaged it, kissed it, lapped at it, bit into the flesh around it until she winced with pleasure and stretched with both arms for my neck. I pretended to reach in, grasp it, pull it out and pitch it out the window. With her encouragement, I rubbed my hard self against it, as if my twitching wand of an organ could magically cure hers.

Then I cried.

When my tears subsided, we reminisced about the last time my hand was inside her panties, two decades ago, college kids, petting heavily on the living room rug in her family’s house. She had guided my hand down there then, too, eyes closed, her peasant blouse twisted around the top of her torso, her drugstore musk perfume attaching itself to me.

“Should we be doing this? Right here, I mean?” I asked.

“Momma trusts you,” she whispered.

That had been my fear. How could I violate her trust? Verona had taken scruffy-looking me, always on the edge of delinquency, to the restaurant at their country club for a hamburger

the last time I was in town. She offered their house to stay in during my next trip home. I figured Phoebe's on again, off again boyfriend Locke, wouldn't appreciate that.

Remembering all this, Phoebe laughed through palms clutched to her face.

"How can you laugh? I'm serious as a heart attack," I whispered, as if we were on that rug, not in a hotel room.

"Momma put Locke on an 11:00 pm curfew in my house back then. You, you could have been passed out in our living room in the morning and she would have made you pancakes."

Locke had been her boyfriend since she was sixteen, then her husband after college. Once, when I was in town and he was in Canada hunting moose, I went to visit Phoebe with Verona at Phoebe's house. Locke's proudly displayed arsenal and mounted game greeted me above the fireplace in the den. Visions of my head wedged between the deer and the quail still haunt me. The last gun I shot was the BB variety in sixth grade.

She warned me in that hotel bed. There would come a time when she'd have to cut off all contact.

"I went through this kidney thing with momma. I won't allow you when it's my turn."

Minutes later, feeling her body frictionless against mine, I asked the question.

"What is the word for this, Phoebe, this, relationship, you, me, Verona, I mean, what is it?"

"Mom thought you were special."

So special that two days after making love to her daughter that late night on Verona's living room floor, the three of us were enjoying dinner and theatre together, courtesy of Verona's season subscription. Locke wasn't invited. Phoebe had insisted they were broken up for the summer. Verona figured Locke wouldn't have anything intelligent to say anyway, or so said Phoebe.

"And you?"

Phoebe looked dreamily at the hotel room ceiling, pulled me on top of her.

"I have more sides than a polygon," she joked, showing her math teacher background.

"Locke, he's one of those sides, maybe two. You're a few, too."

Did the possibility of dying prematurely like Verona make her attitude cavalier about such things?

"Mom would have wanted this for us," she said, "I know, that sounds so weird, but call it what you want, she would have wanted us to have this."

I got up to go to the window, pull the blinds, and look out from the twelfth floor room. Clouds were gathering. "You don't know that."

"Momma always said life is short enough, ours will be shorter."

"Still..."

"She just had a thing for you, a thing for me to be with you, I mean. That's all."

There had to be a word for us.

"It's going to kill me, too...eventually," she said.

I tried to deflect her thoughts.

"I was so uncomfortable at her funeral sitting with your family."

I had tried to sit in the back row. When Phoebe entered the church with Locke and her kids, she saw me, grabbed my arm, and escorted me to the first pew reserved for family. Momma would have none of that, she had said, sternly. I could not have looked more out of place but was grateful to be considered part of a family which seemed more mine than my own those years. Locke was quiet and expressionless. How would anyone know what he was thinking?

"I want to go through this with you!" I insisted, childishly burying my head in her pillow.

"No!"

"How can you deny me?"

"Deny you? Honey, I'm protecting you."

I pouted. I was "loved" by her, "loved" by her mother, but I am not a "loved one." I sat with the family at Verona's funeral but I was not family.

"That has nothing to do with it."

"That's why the word is important," I cried out to the hotel ceiling."

“I don’t have time to search for perfect words,” she said. “You search for the three of us.”

She paused, then said, “You search for the word. I’ll live it.”

And I’ve been searching ever since. Even now, as Phoebe posts that the queue for kidneys from deceased persons is years long. Her organ function is at 11.5%. At 10% it’s the tether to the machine. She pleads for her social network to spread the word to possible donors.

I send more private messages. No response. I call her office line at her work. She does not answer. I’m too chicken to leave a voice mail. I spend hours each day pacing. I need to talk about this. She’s not allowing me in.

It comes to me one morning like skywriting. I will be the donor! Locke can’t mount my head as a trophy if I save his wife. As if it is as simple as an Internet search, I hurriedly look up the risk factors - age, blood types, cholesterol levels, presence or risk of kidney stones, general health. I search what few medical records I have. I rarely visit a doctor. I call his office. No, they don’t routinely test for blood type, unless surgery is scheduled. No, blood type test is not routinely covered by insurance. Check your birth certificate.

I can’t find it.

Undeterred, I imagine keeping Phoebe’s smile alive for thousands of others to see, untethered to a blood-filtering machine. I will save the woman who gifted me a weekend fling

because honoring what you perceive as the wishes of your deceased mother makes it okay to have an affair with the boy/man momma preferred. They honored me. I will honor them.

II

The only person to whom I ever disclosed my tryst with Phoebe was another woman I had an affair with, Samarra. Maybe I could talk to her about this. She might know the word, except she won't, will not, under any circumstances, ever talk to me again.

I found it curious, though, when she accepted my Facebook friend request years after our affair ended.

Samarra and I had thrown caution to the wind. We made love in public parks, in remote corners of restaurant and mall parking lots. You name a place in the city we lived in. We did it there.

We met as members of a political activists group, the type of thing my wife at the time would never involve herself. Our affair coincided with Samarra's urgent need to be free from the boundaries of her Muslim upbringing and avail herself of the opportunities of liberal American culture. Or maybe, as she explained later, menopause unleashed a sexual desire heretofore unknown to her.

Our first conversations involved activist business. I thought I caught her staring at me once when the geometry of the room and our seats in it aligned such that she could look at me inconspicuously and I could see peripherally that she was doing so.

One evening after meeting, I maneuvered my exit to walk alone with her in the parking lot.

“I would like to know what the rest of you looks like behind that scarf,” I said.

“It is called a hajib,” Samarra replied, with annoyance.

“Yes, I know, I chose to use an English term,” I lied. I felt flush.

We slowly acclimated to each other on terms other than our activism. I kept asking her to meet me at a very public intersection, about a mile from the group’s office space. I would go to that corner and wait for five or ten minutes hoping she would appear.

One day she did. I parked my car, got in hers. Later in the back seat, she meticulously unveiled herself, not erotically, but as someone who wished to test the patience of her partner. I kissed her neck. Her eyes remained closed. I took this as a sign of yearning for more. We kissed for real.

Getting to the evening we did more than make out was a separate trial. I quit counting the weeks. One evening I could hear the inevitability of our going all the way in her moan, descending octave by octave, to guttural.

Suddenly the vacated volume from Samarra's mouth to the branched passages of her lungs found words. She demanded that before I partake of the reward of her giving over to me fully, I inform her about every woman I ever had intimate relations with. I complied.

Truth, she said, is the greatest aphrodisiac.

When I finished, beginning with a girl I had kissed in fourth grade, I asked her to do the same.

"There was an awkward boy in Kansas, then my husband..."

"That's it?" I exclaimed.

She answered with silence and the stern look of a schoolteacher.

"Are you certain this completes your intimacies?"

She asked as a woman of authority might, suspicious of what she was hearing.

"Because when we have the intercourse, there is no turning back."

"There is one more," I admitted, sheepishly, voice cracking, "but that will have to wait until, well, you know."

I felt badly for the bargaining chip, but she started it.

Weeks later, I filled in the missing piece of my romantic life, my weekend with Phoebe, as I had promised.

Now you have the truth, and nothing but the truth, I said.

Samarra's guy friends fawn over her Facebook posts with suggestive comments, now that she's separated, apparently, from her husband. She hasn't once acknowledged a word I have written on her page, "likes" to her posts, or responded to my own statuses. In every photograph she wears the Hajib.

Why doesn't she just block me?

It's been five years since I last saw her. That it didn't end well is an understatement, but at least she knows about Phoebe. She knows more about me than anyone. I don't even know what I am looking for, advice and counsel, a shoulder to cry on, someone to talk me out of donating, or into it? Am I searching for someone to encourage me, support me through the ordeal? Why do I bother? She's not going to talk to me. She'd prefer all my organs be donated to laboratory rats.

Never have I felt so alone. Never have I so needed that word.

The word doesn't come but the courage finally does to message Samarra directly. I write that I've got to talk about a life or death situation. I make it seem like it could be *my* life or death.

It could, I suppose.

I check Facebook every hour for a response. Days go by. Why did she ever accept my friend request in the first place?

Finally, a message comes back, a question.

“What do you really wish to speak with me about?”

I prance around my computer, elated. She’s responded! I type “organ donation,” but then delete it.

I type “kidney donation” instead.

She agrees to meet with me.

She knows all about kidney donation, she says, when we get together. Her favorite auntie, still living in Dubai, needed a kidney transplant. Samarra had acted as her advocate through the entire process and recovery. She explains that in some countries, donation can be arranged anonymously using family representatives on both sides who act similarly as legal counsel, able to speak for their “client.” This is different from the United States, where non-family members may only donate through pools administered by hospitals.

I wonder who I could convince to pretend to be a relative of mine, befriend a member of Phoebe’s family, and arrange for the organ removal and transplant surgeries to take place outside the country.

“Who is needing the kidney?” she asks, “mother of your children, a sister, your brother?”

How do I answer this, I wonder?

“Remember when you asked me about all of my former lovers and I held back on one?”

I asked. “Phoebe, the woman from...”

The pupils in Samarra’s eyes become beady, her torso begins squirming.

“You are telling to me, a former lover of yours, of the need of a previous lover of yours for your *kidney*?”

I explain the history with Phoebe and Verona. I recount the weekend of our affair. I so wish I had the word.

“So this is ménage a trois with an older woman when you are a boy?”

“No!” I scream.

Patrons stare at the sight of a six foot two hulk wailing in public, not the cloth around Samarra’s head.

“You said you value the truth above all,” I yell. This is the truth!”

When I finish, she fiddles quietly with the utensils and condiments on the table.

“The word for what Phoebe and Verona mean to me has not yet been coined. I keep searching for it.”

“Why? Words are ill-equipped to represent feelings.”

“So I can explain it all to myself, to others.”

“You have the feeling. Why do you need the word?”

Why can't Samarra see how important this is to me?

"However, the logic of only being able to confide in one former lover about a situation with another former lover, to me this strangely makes sense."

Her gaze shifts to a point far beyond me. I detect a smile forming, but am unsure of its direction.

"How do you mean?"

"A lover occupies a singular place in one's life. More special than a spouse, even, after the mythology of love in a marriage shatters. Lovers, they are driven by the passion to break society's conventions...lovers who marry just follow the rules."

I pretend that it all makes sense to me, too.

"Phoebe and I had a weekend affair. She is a loved one. Her mother loved me as a son. Phoebe insists Verona wanted me as a son-in-law, instead of that jackass she married. But she's not a 'lover.'"

"You are still a child, you and your word for this, and that. Maybe this donating will make you an adult."

She isn't finished.

"Having sex isn't what makes people lovers. It is the congruency of their feelings, the intersection of souls where it is at once too dark and too bright to see well enough to describe with words." She put her arm out as if grasping something invisible from the air.

“You are a saint for even listening to me,” I say.

“Don’t swell your head. We weren’t lovers either. What we had, that was sex.”

I’m astounded to hear her say that.

“What about what you said, the passion you just spoke about?”

“Women, we need to find the right words around sex the way the skin of a piece of fruit protects the flesh. I felt that for a while. After, I determined I just needed to have sex with a sexy man. A friend told me it was a consequence of menopause. You are a child, but a very sexy man. This is truth.”

I wrap my head in my arms and bend over the Formica table, knocking over the ketchup bottle. Secretly, I hope she strokes my hair.

“Also, I am having reconciliation with my husband.”

My head jerks back up. What did that have to do with what she just said?

Yet Samarra goes to work on my behalf. She shepherds me through donor applications, blood tests, psychological profile, a grueling interview, for a procedure to take place in a hospital in Dubai. At the time she contacted Phoebe, her kidneys were approaching 10.50%, the threshold for when dialysis would have to begin.

Every decimal, every significant digit counts.

I just follow Samarra's instructions and pay the fees.

I deliberately keep myself ignorant of the procedure. Blind benevolence is how I can show my love for Phoebe and Verona. To have faith, I convince myself, is stronger than medical facts and figures.

The eight-hour plane ride to Dubai with layover is far too much time to test that faith. A vital part of me is going to be removed and inserted into Phoebe. Part of me will repair what genetics cruelly transferred from Verona to Phoebe. The congruity of space Samarra talked about will be matched by physical transplantation, my flesh and blood inside Phoebe, and thus part of Verona. I will keep her machine-free. All is anonymous. All is well.

The anonymous part is blowing my mind. Now that this grand act of benevolence is about to happen, I squirm like a little kid. Passengers around me get nervous. I close my eyes. I breathe, rhythmically, and imagine my kidney leaving my body for Phoebe's. I go light-headed, that feeling I get if I lie, or am overwhelmed with fear, when my face goes flush but only I can feel it and no one sees it, when a word dissociates from its meaning.

The flight attendant is weary of my constant requests.

Suddenly, I am overwhelmed by excitement! I am going to save Phoebe from the machine. I am going to honor Verona's legacy, the congruency of our souls. Blind benevolence!

Somewhere in all this is the word.

Samarra meets my flight at Dubai airport. She escorts me to the hotel where I will stay the night. I tell her of my state of mental health on the flight, hoping she would see that I probably should not be alone this evening. She has other plans, though.

“I have apologies and concessions to make to my husband’s family.”

“Confessions?” I ask, nervously.

“Con-cession,” she replies.

I ask if I may accompany her, but she says it would be awkward. She acts rushed, a bit distant, I think.

At the hospital moments before I am to go under anesthesia, Samarra asks me how I feel.

“No words, Samarra. It’s indescribable. I think I found all the parts of me that seemed to separate on the plane, though.”

“You are whole, then?”

“Yes.”

“We are all sharing in the congruity.” She smiles. Her smile is not playful like Phoebe’s.

Puzzled, I look at her. The nurse has finished prepping me. She signals to Samarra that she must leave.

“You are giving a kidney to a person you love, who was a lover for a weekend, a lifelong friend of the other gender, the daughter of a woman who wished you were her daughter’s spouse...”

I nod, pretending to understand why she just said this, but acutely aware that the moment had finally arrived.

“...and I am the only person who knows both parties to the transplant.”

That thought had crossed my mind more than once.

As I am being wheeled out, she mumbles that something has also been transplanted into her.

“This will occupy space in my soul forever,” she says. “There is a word to describe it.”

I turn my head to the side and try unsuccessfully, straining my neck, to look behind me, past the person pushing the gurney. Wheels squeak underneath me.

“Truth,” she says, “I know the truth, and hiding the truth, keeping it secret, exacts a terrible price.”

A few minutes later, the difference between concession and confession flickers. Then the anesthesia knocks me out.

The operations are successful. Weeks later, I read on Phoebe’s Facebook page of the miracle of an anonymous donor, the angel Samarra who appeared by the grace of God.

I am still glad to have chosen the path of blind benevolence. Photos of Phoebe, Locke, and Samarra together grace both of the ladies' statuses on Facebook.

But I begin to feel left out.

The temptation to hit the message button, to hint to Phoebe at where her good fortune originated, is overwhelming at times. Of course, I would never actually say, just drop hints of miracles, the congruity of souls. So far, I've refrained, content that I have prolonged normal life for a loved one, the daughter of the woman who loved me as her own. I wonder if eventually she will contact me and ask, and what I would say.

But I am not a patient man. I am bothered that perhaps anonymity is in this case deception by another name.

I am in need of something to refute this, if not the word, then something spiritual that affirms blind benevolence and the congruity of our souls. I drive to Huntsville and visit the Verona Wilder Sanctuary. It's well-tended, but has expanded upward and outward and around the corner of the church building which has its own large addition to it.

Churches, like time, do not stand still.

This time, my dangling legs brush the tops of hearty bushes. I gaze up at the sky, but the apparition I came for does not appear. Seconds later, a car passes on the road at the far end of the church property. Faintly, it seems, a car door shuts. I can't interrupt the moment and tear my eyes from the sky, now tearing from staring too long. Suddenly, there's a rush of wind. The ambient change is allowing the clouds to come together as they had so long ago, but the

bushes below me rustle, flowers at their side bend on their stems, the thick branches of a massively trunked tree shake with a coming fury. Bunched leaves break off and blow across the lawn.

The clouds turn greenish-purple, and the word makes no appearance nor does the milky apparition, but the image of Locke does, not as he must look now, but the youthful face I remember. I think the God who watches over this church is having Locke come to thank his nemesis for saving his wife. Indeed Locke's countenance is somber, hiding gratitude I suspect. He brings his arm forward as if to shake hands, but then the rifle appears and his other arm underneath to support it and the next image that comes to me is that of people dressed in white and blue, their gloved hands stained red, hovering around me wielding surgical instruments while I am blinded by the bright secret of Samarra's truth passed to Locke, and two long fluorescent bulbs tinted as pale yellow as sunlight on a cloudless day.

END