

## The Pivot

Todd wondered if you could catch dyslexia like a virus. He'd never mixed up words until now, on the sharp cusp of forty. And the virus theory diverted him from thinking he was losing his mind. He was convinced Vanessa, his newish girlfriend, had already noticed his encroaching weirdness. So far, his bossy sister Nicky had not. Neither had Dave, his generally unobservant brother-in-law. Yet.

Todd's day started routinely enough. Shower, shave, subway, Starbucks. Back-to-back meetings plus the usual email tsunami to wade through while he chomped on a soggy, lukewarm BLT at his desk.

By the end-of-day staff meeting his brain was fried but he faked some enthusiasm to just get through it and head home. He didn't realize he'd said "circumcised" when he meant "circumscribed" until he saw the startled faces around the table looking up from their phones. Nobody laughed. Flustered, he carried on, gamely outlining the firm's proposed liquidity constraints.

Todd was a reluctant investment banker – which he considered unholy penance for being a math whiz – although he certainly looked the part with his bespoke suit and purposeful Speedy Gonzales scurry. The ridiculous six-figure salary plus bonus and stock options somewhat eased his dissatisfaction until the golden handcuffs merely rubbed raw.

The kill-or-be-killed world of finance had soured Todd. Many days were suffocating, ensconced in his top-floor floor corporate bubble with its vast, beckoning view over the lake. He was living the sorry lesson that money doesn't buy happiness but was scared to give it all up. When he tried to visualize what he might do next, he saw only a blank, black canvas. And what would Vanessa think, even though she seemed

unimpressed by his wealth. So unlike Annabelle, his previous girlfriend, who flaunted him like a shiny bauble she endlessly polished, dragging him to exotic rivieras and five-star restaurants. Not that he'd been any more frugal. He'd constantly eased his restlessness with big-ticket trips and fancy big-boy toys. At least he'd helped his sister Nicky buy a house, so that was something. And Dave would never know. A sibling pact that satisfied them both.

Still, Todd itched with the shame of squandering his advantages. He'd been whip smart with other people's money but pathetic with his own. Thank god his dad, a bus driver for forty years, never knew. Todd had cried at the bedside of that big man dying in a small hospice room and vowed to do better.

On this particular day, Todd was so seized by the urge to quit it rattled him. After the wretched staff meeting, he decided to walk the long way home by the shore to calm down and avoid the sweaty train mob on the unseasonably hot autumn afternoon. He glanced at the For Sale sign on a splashy waterfront spread and read "Marnie Law – Realtor" as *Marine Law*. When he turned onto Spindrift Road and followed the curve where the oaks splashed neon bronze against the pines, he saw the street sign as *Spendthrift*.

Vanessa teased him about being a spendthrift whenever he surprised her with flowers mid-week or randomly called to say, "Hey hon, let's grab a bite out tonight." Feigning shock, she'd ask: "Are you sure you can afford it?" She made him laugh and Todd didn't want to lose her.

He'd overheard Vanessa telling a friend on the phone that she liked his spontaneity, making him sound romantic, although nobody had ever accused him of it.

Romantic? He wouldn't describe himself as such. He just believed that women liked flowers and the surprise of Thai on a Wednesday hump day. Wouldn't anybody? Anyway, Todd liked her company. The way she was interested in talking about anything but also listened to him like he was important; not just pretending to listen while endlessly cross-examining and putting every word, every gesture under a head-game microscope. That was the problem with Anabelle. Slow death by analysis. Sometimes he was secretly relieved when she ghosted him.

"It just didn't work out," Todd told his sister Nicky when she pried. "No big deal. Fun while it lasted." His casual, cold tone belied his seeping humiliation at being so unceremoniously dumped, despite his frequent relief at being freed from the sweet misery of Anabelle. Nicky backed off, steeped as she was in the la-la-land of early love with Dave and mercifully distracted.

Near the end of the shore walk, Todd plopped down on a half-hidden bench in a sheltered grove overlooking the bay. He was contentedly alone at last after his miserable day. He flung his suit jacket over the back of the bench and frantically ripped off his tie. He rubbed his clammy hands on his thighs. *Thai ... thigh*. Todd knew that wasn't dyslexic. Homonym-ic? No, that would've been Thai-tie. And he definitely had thigh on the brain. Vanessa's: long creamy wishbone thighs cradling him, a thought that briefly diverted his mind from the idea of quitting his job. A resignation letter would be easy. Keeping Vanessa would not. He had convinced himself she would leave, even as he contemplated the hypnotic planes and angles of her beauty and how she, a dental hygienist, could make scraping away mouth gunk sound like a sonnet.

So it went, a constant, jumbled seesaw in his mind ... *Vanessa!* ... *This letter is to inform you that .... Vanessa! ...effective Nov. 15, Vanessa ... to follow other pursuits ... Vanessa!* ...back and forth, back and forth. Fack and broth.

Todd blamed his family for his growing obsession that he was starting to lose it, given their rich history of endless exaggeration. Headaches were migraines. Stubbed toes, broken. Upset stomachs, colitis. Or, worse, the Big C. The fact that his parents remained remarkably robust in their seventies – despite careless decades of smoking when it was still fashionable and quaffing copious quantities of Harvey Wallbangers – was small comfort as Todd began his own dull descent into early middle age.

He wanted to hide his worry from Vanessa, a munificent, lusty specimen eight years younger who was unstintingly kind and outrageously sexy. She would look right at home on the cover of any glamour magazine with her silky auburn hair and magnetic gaze that drew you in. And her name – *Vanessa!* – distinctly elegant for the type of woman he'd always figured was way beyond his reach since Todd was a short, wide fireplug of a guy, a clone of his Irish forebears as the old family albums revealed. But here she was, with him. Even on the rare so-so days, he thought it must be a mistake that she was there at all. So he was trying hard to be the best boyfriend. Attentive, considerate. Almost cool. Cool? *Loco!*

Todd had Nicky to thank for introducing him to Vanessa last year when they were at Dave's and Nicky's housewarming party. Todd hadn't noticed Vanessa until she presented her gift to Nicky – a slender box wrapped in tissue printed with jaunty horseshoes. Inside was a narrow ceramic welcome sign, intended for the front hall, with the traditional Gaelic welcome *Ciad mile failte* for one hundred thousand welcomes.

Todd was captivated by the shy dip of Vanessa's head as she explained she'd bought it for them on a trip to Dublin in the spring when they were weeks away from closing their house deal, and that she hoped their home would always be welcoming. He wanted to meet this thoughtful woman. Somewhere near the guacamole and pita crisps he found himself standing beside her as Nicky sidled up, eyes a gleam, to introduce them.

"I love your gift, Vanessa, thanks again," said Nicky, faking her real purpose in coming over to them, which didn't fool anyone. "This is my brother, Todd. You know, the banking nerd I told you about. For a good time, talk about anything else!" she teased before drifting away again.

"Well then, I guess we'd better find something else to talk about," said Todd, grinning. "Nice to meet you, Vanessa. How do you know Nicky?"

"I'm actually her dental hygienist, not exactly the usual place to find a friend," Vanessa chuckled ruefully, "but we started bumping into each other at the farmer's market on Saturdays and grabbing coffee together. We just hit it off and she's a great friend."

"With great teeth," Todd laughed. "And harmless, mostly. She means well."

"She's spunky and I'm glad she introduced us." Vanessa smiled at Todd.

They started going out the next week when Todd, not Nicky, showed up at the farmer's market carrying coffee.

Nicky had needed no convincing to stay home from the market that day. "Ha, you sly bastard, go for it!" she'd laughed when Todd told her his market idea. The chilled bottle of Prosecco he gave her as thanks in advance was a nice touch, too..

Nicky was three years younger than Todd. Usually he ignored her bossiness because she was big-hearted and, after many years, had mostly given up trying to clean him up, set him up. For this he thanked Dave – someone Todd privately saluted as a most welcome chief disrupting influence who'd managed to tame the irrepressible Nicky and sidetrack her from delivering blunt, unwanted opinions about Todd's love life. She'd always looked up to her big brother – a textbook adoring little sister – so he'd always had lots of time for until she married Dave and turned smug in love. "Dave this, Dave that ... my husband, Dave and I ..." She carried on about him like he was Mr. Perfect despite his failed first marriage and rocky relationship with two pimply teenaged kids. Todd wasn't envious of Nicky, and didn't begrudge her joy, but was acutely aware of how her happiness put his flat lack of it in stark relief. Until Vanessa.

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Todd was lost in his reverie, eyes closed, face tilted to soak up the sliver of sun piercing the shaded grove, when he felt the bench shift. He half-opened one eye and saw a scrawny kid with a cowlick perched at the far end staring intently at him

"Hey, mister, why is your stuff all over?" asked the kid, pointing to Todd's jacket and tie haphazardly flung over the bench. Looked about six and his small fists clutched handfuls of twigs and leaves.

Todd, startled, bolted upright. "What are you doing here alone? What's your name?"

"I can't tell you because I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," said the boy solemnly. "I was getting food for my dinos. There's my mom," he nodded toward to the beach. "She's getting the rocks."

"Do dinos eat rocks?" asked Todd.

"That's silly. The rocks are for their cave so they can hide from T-Rex. He's the biggest and meanest. Are you hiding?"

"When I was a dino, I liked to hide, too," said Todd.

"You were a dino?" asked the boy, wide-eyed.

"For sure. In the Jurassic age. Before the big meteor wiped us out," said Todd, warming to the shared fantasy.

"I think they're still around," whispered the boy

"Me, too," Todd whispered back.

Suddenly, Todd was watching himself as a kid again, cocooned in the magical worlds he used to create. The best was the dino diorama he'd painstakingly assembled in a shoebox.

Todd had built his diorama to scale and carefully calculated every dimension to position each dino just so. He made trees out of Popsicle sticks and cotton balls dyed green with food colouring. A Playdoh river he painted bright blue. It had real rocks, too: smooth pebbles he collected while wandering along a shallow creek on walks with his dad. He kept his creation hidden under his bed so Nicky, then a marauding toddler,

couldn't wreck it. He hadn't thought about those days for ages when everything seemed possible.

"Where do you think they're hiding now," Todd asked.

They move around a lot. But I always find them because they don't hide from me. You know, because I find them food," said the boy.

"Ah, so *why* do they hide?" asked Todd.

"They're scared. Sometimes I get scared."

"What do you do if you're scared?"

"I hide. Do you ever hide?"

Todd saw the boy's mother racing up from the beach. He scrambled to stand up and put his jacket back on, terrified she'd be a hyper-vigilante who assumed any guy sitting alone with her kid was a pedophile.

"You know what, I used to hide," Todd told the boy, who continued to stare steadily, unblinking, like he could see right into him. Todd shivered under the captivating scrutiny. "But I'm not gonna hide anymore."

Todd threw up his arms and vigorously waved at the boy's mother running up the steps from the beach and screaming "Liam! Liam! Where are you?".

"He's here, he's okay," Todd shouted.

The mother approached warily, panting with eyes blazing. She yanked her son off the bench, crouched to confront him and firmly grabbed his upper arms. "Liam! What were you doing? You know you have to stay with *me*. Don't ever leave like that again. Do you understand?" she spluttered.



The boy looked sheepish, briefly, then gazed dreamily into the grove. He held up his tight fists holding the twigs and leaves. "I was finding food for my dinos." He said it so earnestly and convincingly that Todd and his mom burst out laughing.

"What am I going to do with you," said the mom, shaking her head but still chuckling, and calmer.

"You've got quite the kid there," said Todd. "Creative."

The mother furtively looked Todd up and down but finally started to relax. "I hope he wasn't bugging you?"

"Not a bit. No problem. He told me about the rocks. For his dinosaur cave. Guess he keeps you hopping."

"That's for sure, non-stop energy, this little guy." She turned to Liam. "C'mon buddy, let's get the rocks and go home." They headed back to the beach.

"Bye. Be good to your dinos, Liam," said Todd, plopping back down on the bench. Reflected in that little boy's bright face, he'd glimpsed again his once unwavering wonder and felt possibility uncurling deep in his gut. *Liam ... llama ... mail. Mail!* He pulled out his phone, keyed in his short resignation letter and without hesitating a nanosecond, hit Send.

He stood up and staggered as pulsing waves of relief pounded through his body. He sat down again and texted Vanessa, *Mexican @ 7?*

She replied with a thumbs up and smiley emoji: *K but not thai?*

Todd laughed. Oh yes, Wednesday! He took a deep breath and texted Nicky and Dave: *I just quit.* He'd barely sent it when his phone started buzzing. Nicky. Todd silenced it, turned around and started walking toward the Mexican joint, which was near

Vanessa's place. His jumbled mind was completely clear at last. He knew he'd be answering tons of questions but he was ready for them. Resolute.