

Mid-Life Crisis

One day, Anne's husband, Dan, decides to start wearing diapers. He is 49-years-old, has never had any incontinence issues, or signs of incipient senility. His father, however, died five months earlier, not long after suffering a super-nova stroke that obliterated a large section of his brain. Dan Sr. spent the last few weeks of his life in a hospital bed, diaper-clad, minus his dentures. His nourishment was dumped directly into his stomach through a plastic umbilical cord attached to an upside-down bottle at the head of his bed. He lost the ability to speak and could only repeat the same sound over and over again: "Va va va." Questions like "Are you comfortable? Do you want another blanket? Shall I close the curtains for you? How about some TV?" all received the same response. Dan's mother was also nearly speechless during those weeks. She spent hours at the hospital, holding her husband's hand and staring at what he had become.

In bed, Anne, watches Dan pull on his trousers over an adult diaper, so unlike the bulky ones she used twenty-plus years ago when her son and daughter were infants. "What are you doing?"

"This?" he says, gesturing toward his groin. He shrugs. "It's just easier. I'm so busy at the firm. This way I don't even have to leave my desk."

"You're not actually going to use it?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"What will your staff think?"

"They won't even notice. See." He turns around to show her his rear, and sure enough, there's barely any sign of the diaper beneath his pants.

Dan leaves for work, and Anne would like to go back to sleep for a few hours until eight or nine, but she can't because her brain is wide awake and circling around her husband's actions

like a cat trying to kill a snake. Should she talk to somebody about Dan? No, she doesn't want to worry the kids. And telling her friends is out of the question. She can imagine their faces, how odd, repulsive or, even worse, funny but in an embarrassed way, they'd find his behavior. It's just a tardy manifestation of his grief over his dad, she thinks. The compassionate thing to do is humor him until it passes.

Later, in the kitchen, Anne gazes out of the large bay window above the sink as she sips her coffee. It's early September, and everything is still green in Scarsdale. For almost two decades, this month had a specific feel to it that has been programmed into her body. It's a liminal month straddling two eras, the end of the summer and beginning of the school year when the house became hers again. Quiet. Peaceful. Though it's been a few years since Anne was ruled by her children's schedules, a ghost of the anxiety she often felt back then lingers. September always provokes a constant nagging feeling that she's forgetting something important.

She studies the climbing rose Dan planted six years ago on their 25th anniversary. Several large, pink clusters of flowers drape over the arbor. Japanese beetle season is finally over, giving the rose a chance to put forth its final blooming effort before it went dormant for the winter. What was it Dan said when he planted it? He hoped it would grow as strong as their love had over the years. He's sentimental like that, the kind of man who can be counted on to leave a random love poem on the fridge where she'll find it. She wonders if their son Dennis does these things for his girlfriend, or if her daughter Nicole expects them from the men she dates.

Anne carries her coffee into Dan's office and sits at the computer. Since the kids left for college, she's held a number of jobs. She was a receptionist for a local performing arts theater, a salesperson at a gardening center, and a volunteer at the animal rescue society. All were in areas she'd once had some interest in during her college years, before Dan and the kids became the

center of her universe. Now, every job feels as impermanent as the summer. They are never things she can see herself doing for the rest of her life.

Online, she finds an opening at a salon looking for a receptionist. Not that she and Dan need the extra money, but her grooming habits add up by the end of the month. There's various waxings, facials, pedicures and manicures, hair dying, cutting, and styling. Surely a salon would give its employees discounts.

Right after emailing her résumé for this job, a faint warm pulse begins in her chest, travels up to her ears, then outward to her hands and feet. Anne stretches out her arms and legs, distancing herself from her body, in order to create as much surface area as possible to allow the surrounding air to cool her. The hot flash dissipates after a minute, unlike the longer and more intense ones that were foreshadowed by a feeling of unwarranted panic and anxiety, or "aura," that she'd experienced several months after the surgery. "Surgical menopause," Doctor Jorgen called it, as opposed to the regular kind some of her friends had already experienced or were currently enduring. Anne knows she's on schedule to experience the change of life, as her mother refers to it, but that doesn't stop her from wishing she could have put it off for a few more years.

After applying for several other jobs online, she spends the rest of her day reorganizing her kitchen cabinets and doing laundry. Her cat, Ginny, and a radio tuned to a classical music station keep her company. She makes a smoothie for lunch, one enhanced with flax seeds and other omega-3 fatty acids to keep her heart healthy. But mostly she drifts through her day like an untethered raft, waiting for the phone to ring with a call from one of her children (it doesn't) or from Dan (it does), and for the occasional hot flash, which is a regular reminder that her body still exists.

That night, Dan comes home with a diaper genie, a tall, white kitchen garbage can featuring a lid activated by a foot pedal. The box holding it boasts “Hands-Free Diaper Changing!” and “No Odor!”

“Listen, there’s no reason you should have to deal with this,” he tells her, motioning toward his hips.

What she thinks is, I hadn’t planned on it because a baby’s diaper is one thing; this is quite another.

What she says is, “You don’t seriously mean to use that?” Exactly what is he trying to do? she wonders. Make the point that in the end, we’re all infantilized by our failing bodies, like his father was?

“You never know. It might come in handy someday.”

“I hope not.”

His only response is a shrug before he retreats to their bedroom to change out of his work clothes.

After dinner, Dan settles into his office to catch up on work while Anne takes a copy of *Self* magazine into the family room. She reads an article on an actress who’d recently given birth. It includes tips on how the woman regained her pre-pregnancy figure. Of course, she’s only in her mid-twenties; how difficult could it be for her to return to her previous state at that age, and with a chef and personal trainer to help? Anne remembers what it was like to have a body that she controlled, not one that ignored her commands like a disobedient dog.

They’d had a scare, if that’s the right word to describe it, nearly two years earlier. When Anne told Dan she thought she might be pregnant he’d looked pleased at the idea. But to have to start over and raise a newborn at their age wasn’t something she could imagine. The scare had

turned out to be nothing more than a fibroid, a mass of tissue growing in her uterus and enveloping her ovaries. A hysterectomy had taken care of it all.

She turns on the lamp on the side table. There had been a charge for medical waste disposal on the copy of the hospital bill the insurance company sent them after her surgery. It had taken her a few moments to realize this meant the disposal of her uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, and even the fibroid mass. She wonders now what they did with these useless bits and pieces of her. Were they incinerated? There are power plants that burn garbage to create energy. Could they also use human parts that were otherwise going to waste? No, most people are too squeamish and wouldn't go for that. But Anne wouldn't mind. At least then what was taken from her could be put to further use. She imagines turning on a light in her house and this being made possible by her uterus.

Sometime after midnight, a night sweat wakes her from a deep sleep and she scolds her hypothalamus. Enough! But it ignores her, a defiant child far out of her reach and testing the limits of what it can get away with.

She turns over to look at her sleeping husband. A Strawberry Shortcake fleece blanket (once Nicole's favorite "blankie") covers his lower half. Even with only the dim moonlight to brighten their bedroom, Anne can see the tufts of gray intruding like weeds among the dark brown hairs on his chest. Once, she would have stroked his arm and woken him, and he would have rolled over regardless of the time, easily persuaded to take care of her needs. But what's the point now when she doesn't have any? If only she could put up posters in the neighborhood asking for help to find her missing libido. If only they could go back in time. But of course that's impossible. No matter how hard she digs in her heels, nothing will stop her forward momentum.

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The next day, long after Dan has left for work, Anne showers and dresses for her 10:00 a.m. hair appointment at The Jean Francis Salon. She picks out a shirt with a deep v-neck and form-fitting jeans to wear, along with a pair of high-heeled wedge sandals. At the salon, she is greeted by the staff and her hairstylist, Yvonne, with an insincere warmth she expects. Anne is a regular and all her stories, at least the ones she's willing to tell them, of her children's scholastic and career successes, are no longer a novelty. What if she told them about Dan's recent behavior? They would love to hear something as strange and embarrassing as that, but she would never betray her husband. For Anne, her marriage has always been like the Halloween candy Nicole hid under her bed as a child: a secret pleasure she keeps to herself.

As she is led into the back to have her hair washed by a young woman named Felice, Anne thinks it might be time to find another salon where she'll be new and interesting. She endures the thorough lathering and conditioning, her neck jammed down onto the black porcelain sink, while staring up at the decoratively painted ceiling. A few minutes later, she's sitting in a black chair at Yvonne's station. Her wet hair is combed away from her face, and the harsh downward pointing lights make her look like an older and exhausted version of herself.

"It's getting so long," Yvonne says. She combs Anne's hair without looking into her reflected face. "Just a trim again, right?"

This is Yvonne's way of attempting to talk Anne into doing something different with her long hair. Something edgier, more mature, more current – all words and phrases Yvonne has at one time or another conjured up to convince Anne to allow her to work her cutting magic.

"Yes, that's all."

With a doubtful smile, Yvonne begins her work and Anne relaxes. What if, for once, she let the woman do what she wants, and surrendered to Yvonne's desire to change her? What difference would it make? Other than that it would mean cutting off another part of her.

On her way home, she stops at the supermarket to pick up a few ingredients she needs for dinner. She recently read an anti-aging book that claimed blueberries and salmon are the key to looking younger and living longer. Since then, they'd become a regular staple of her and Dan's diet. The man behind the fish counter grins at her as he hands her the salmon she selected, and Anne smiles gratefully back. She heard somewhere that forty is the new thirty, which makes her 38, a good age to be a woman. A time when her body was still intact and compliant. It had felt lush then, a thing capable of giving and receiving pleasure. Not like just after the surgery, when Anne felt as spayed as their cat. That's when she started growing her hair. It's halfway down her back now, longer than she's ever worn it. Her monthly visits to the salon ensure not a single strand of gray shows among the brown waves, and the roots are never allowed to betray her age. She isn't going to be like some of her friends, the ones with short, gray hair, whose mannishness is increasing as the estrogen fades from their bodies like a slow summer sunset. Anne even started wearing low-cut shirts and push-up bras. Dan wasn't the only man who noticed. But despite all her efforts to shore her outside, to put up a good front, she sees the gutted whole fish on display behind the glass, thinks of the long scar that bisects her abdomen, and imagines her own flesh pulled apart to reveal an empty abdominal cavity.

That night, she grills the salmon for dinner, and Dan blends his portion into a smoothie of his own. He pours the gloppy peach mess into a bowl then sits down to eat it with a napkin tied around his neck.

"That's disgusting," Anne tells him.

"It's really not that bad," he says, taking another spoonful. He purposely dribbles some down the front of his makeshift bib, as though he's eating without teeth.

"Come on, Dan," Anne says, taking her plate into the family room. She imagines calling Nicole to tell her, "Your father's a baby. Literally." And Nicole's disbelief.

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Two nights later, she finds a baby bottle in Dan's briefcase. She opens it and the smell of sour milk and formula rises to her nose, but there is no accompanying memory triggered by the scent. There are simply too many years between now and the last time she smelled this particular odor.

He's laying on his belly on the carpet in the family room off the kitchen, watching TV. From her position near the kitchen sink, she can't see what's on, but she hears the voices of several children singing a song about trains through the surround-sound speakers.

"Let me get this straight," she tells him, pulling his attention away from the TV. She waves the bottle in his direction. "It's just easier."

He cocks his index finger at her. "You got it," he says.

"So does this mean I can stop cooking?"

"Well, then, what are you going to eat?" He takes his finger and runs it inside his mouth along his upper right gums. "I think I'm getting some teeth in. Here, check."

She shakes her head. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, seriously. My mouth has been hurting all day, and I think I have a fever." He puts a hand on his forehead.

"Dan. I think you need to see a doctor."

"Yes. Exactly. A pediatrician. You don't think the kids' doctor is still in practice?"

"No. I mean a psychologist."

"Honey, look at me. Do I seem crazy?"

She stares at her husband, absorbing his features as though he's about to depart on a long trip. He looks the same, older, yes, with more lines radiating from the corners of his eyes and carved across his forehead. His expression is calm, with a slight smirk around his mouth that's hard for her to characterize. It's not an expression she's used to seeing on his face. But there's

nothing insane looking about him. “You’re not your father, you know,” she tells him. “You have your mother’s genes, too. She’s 76 and perfectly healthy.”

“I know that. Besides, Dad was fine until he had the stroke.”

“So why all of this?” She holds up a pacifier with several cat hairs attached to it that she finds on the floor.

He says nothing for several moments, only bats around a soft orange toy between his hands, like a kitten. He must have dug it out of the storage bin in their attic. Part of the things Anne saved to pass on to the grandchildren they might have one day.

“Imagine if we’d had another baby,” he says. “Maybe it would have been exactly what we needed.”

“We were too old to have a baby. And now it’s too late.”

There is silence between them after that, an emptiness of words and voices that feels like it could become as infinite as space. A part of her wants to leave it that way. Because it would be easier.

But eventually, Dan’s voice interrupts it. “I’m taking a bath,” he says, crawling out of the family room. “Mind checking on me in a bit? In case I drown?”

She nods, still unwilling to speak. After a few minutes, the silencing of the TV brings her out of her blank state. Anne looks down at the pacifier still clutched in her hand. She turns on the hot water and rinses the cat hairs off the blue rubber before placing it in the drying rack next to the sink. Without much thought, she takes the bottle and rinses that out too, using the scrubber she finds in the utensil container of the rack. She notices how easily she falls back into the motions of motherhood – for her husband. Whatever happened to being a wife? Anne wonders. She tries to remember the last time she and Dan kissed or embraced with any passion, and can only recall holding him after his father died. She’d cradled him the way a mother clutches a

weeping child. Yes, there were the occasional hand clasps and shoulder rubs at the hospital and funeral, but they'd left no impression, like footsteps on frozen ground.

She stops washing out the bottle then, and throws it and the scrubber into the steel sink. As she passes the family room on her way to the bathroom, she sees the Baby Einstein DVD case on the coffee table. Anne walks over to it and grabs the case, which she opens and rips in half before throwing both pieces at the couch. Air resistance causes them to fly awkwardly and only a few feet, without making any sort of satisfying sound or violent landing, denying her the satisfaction of hearing something break.

In the bathroom, the water is still running into the tub. Dan seems asleep, his penis shriveled close to his body. She wants to yell at him and shake him out of this odd state, but the utter relaxation of his body stops her. When she kneels down on the bath mat beside the tub, he opens his eyes, staring at her with a blankly happy expression on his face similar to the one her babies sometimes wore. After she turns off the water, she reaches for a washcloth and a bar of soap. When she has a thick lather worked up, she takes his left arm to clean it. Slowly and thoroughly, she washes his whole body this way. His eyes remain closed the entire time, and his body relaxes into the pleasure of being cared for.

When his dripping hand reaches to pull her breast out of her bra and low-cut shirt, Anne closes her eyes. She hears and feels him sitting up out of the water before the sensation of his mouth hungrily sucking on her nipple causes an instant if distant arousal. The first since the surgery, as though nerve cells that were once severed have forged new connections.

Anne stands and draws her husband out of the water. She pulls his hips to hers above the tub wall separating them, feels the change in him, before leaning into his wet neck to smell his warm Dan-scent.

“Hurry,” she says. “We don’t have much time.”