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DANIELLE WOOD

THE DEPTHLESSNESS OF SOUP

Sitting across the table from one another, at about ten past eight on the evening of the second anniversary of the day that they'd met, Paula and Will were like a pair of dangerously inflated balloons. Each of them had something important to say to the other, and the words that would make up these important somethings were already in their lungs, clinging like horseback riders to molecules of oxygen, impatiently awaiting a chance to escape. So preoccupied were Paula and Will by the sensation of mounting pressure within their chests that neither of them actually saw the waitress. The soup, a consommé, appeared simply to land — in wide, white bowls — on the table before them.

Perhaps it was the rising vapours of the soup that alerted the waiting words to the fact that an opportunity was nigh. Or perhaps it was the crusty warm scent of the bread rolls on the side plates. But in any case, by the time Paula and Will took up their spoons, words were jockeying in their mouths, swelling out their cheeks. Paula and Will each parted their lips in order to take a shallow sip of air, and the trapped and pent-up words took their chance, making a headlong, hurdy-gurdy rush for the big outside world.

The crucial question is, of course, whose words would get there first? But in order to answer this question, we must consider the events that took place in the lives of Paula and Will in the week leading up to the anniversary dinner, and also some elementary facts of physics.

1. What Will did in the week leading up to the anniversary He took Wednesday afternoon off work and drove across town, through the industrial suburbs with their workshops and warehouses, to the home of Paula's father, who no longer lived with Paula's mother. She had quite dispassionately up and left him a few days after the youngest of their four daughters finished school, and then, once the paperwork was in order, married a quiet and gentle bachelor with notably short legs. Will thought it was rather as if she had simply decided that at her stage of life one was better off with a dachshund than an alsatian.

Paula's father was not the sort of man Will could ever imagine himself being able to hug, but he hoped to be able to conclude today's conversation with a warm handshake, perhaps even one of the sincere, two-handed variety. That's if Paula's father was at home. Will had decided not to ring first, because Paula's father might have asked what he wanted to see him about, and that would have been awkward. It was not a conversation he wanted to have over the phone.

The house was a charmless red brick square, out the front of which was a cemented yard with a few circular sinkholes that were home to straggly and untended rosebushes. Will didn't bother to ring the doorbell, just followed the sound of an idling engine around the side of the house to the garage in the backyard. Here Paula's father stood between the nostrils, and beneath the raised sky-blue hood, of his 1955 Holden FJ.

As he crossed the yard, Will felt in his pocket for the box containing the ring that he had on Monday collected from the jeweller. Paula's father wasn't exactly the type to appreciate the subtleties of the design, but a diamond that size was expensive in anyone's language. Will might not even show it, but it was there, as a prop, in case he needed a graphic demonstration of just how serious he was.

Standing a few metres behind Paula's dad, Will coughed, but not loudly enough to be heard over the engine. He coughed again, louder this time, but still Paula's father remained intent on the FJ's whirring mechanics. Will tuned in for a moment to the melody of the engine, and even he — who had scarcely more than a postage stamp's worth of knowledge on the subject of car engines — could tell that it was singing off-key. The irregular revs gathered into a crescendo. There was a muffled explosion, and then silence.

'You motherfucking cunt of a fucking pox-headed arse-wipe,' said Paula's father slowly, distributing his emphasis equally among the words.

Will coughed, audibly now, and the man to whom he was about to apply for the position of son-in-law turned around with a fierce sort of a look that changed to one of total incomprehension.

'Yes?' he asked.

Will coughed again, this time just to clear his throat.

'It's Will …just in case you, um …' 'Something I can do for you?'

'I, um …trouble with your car, I see.'

'No shit, Sherlock.'

Vigorously, Paula's father rubbed his filthy hands with an equally filthy rag.

'I wanted to talk to you about Paula.'

'Paula? Oh. Oh, right,' he said, and Will could have sworn that he heard the small

ker-tish of a penny dropping.

Just as soon as the said unit of currency had landed, though, Paula's father tucked his rag into the pocket of his overalls and walked around to the side of the car and slid into the driver's seat.

'I'd like to marry her,' Will said, but the last half of his sentence was drowned in the ineffectual churning of the starter motor.

'What's that?' Paula's father called through the open car door, then turned the key and planted his foot again.

'I'd like to marry her!' Will said, trying to shout over the staggered bursts of mechanical noise.

The car fell silent and Paula's father hauled himself out from behind the wheel. Returning to the front of the car, he planted both hands on the edge of the engine well and peered into the workings.

'I'd like to marry her,' Will repeated, edging around to stand by the passenger-side headlight where he might catch the older man's eye.

'Fucking oath,' said Paula's father, but Will was almost certain that the curse pertained to the car and not to his inquiry.

'So, is it okay? If I marry her?'

'Who, Paula?'

'Yes.'

'What's it got to do with me?'

'Well, you know, traditionally … I thought it would be polite, you know, the done sort of thing, to come, and ask …'

'Been a long time since any of my bloody daughters listened to anything I had to say.'

'So it's okay with you then?'

Paula's father looked up from the engine and Will felt, for the first time since he'd arrived, that he had his full attention.

'Better ask Paula, mate. Reckon you'll find that she'll be the one to decide whether

she’s going to marry you or not.’

2. What Paula did in the same week

She booked in for Thursday, in her lunch hour, even though she knew the timing meant that until Saturday night she would have to take showers in private and keep her pants on whenever Will was around. It wasn’t like they had sex every single night (they were past that stage) so she knew that she would manage to keep the surprise under wraps.

The salon was part of a day spa whose humid, belowground premises smelled of chlorine and Epsom salts. Although the receptionist invited her to take a seat while she waited, Paula preferred to stand. As she stood, she conducted — by way of surreptitious glances into a mirrored wall — an honest appraisal of her physical self. Once she had pushed back her shoulders, dropped her chin slightly and tilted her pelvis to minimise the profile of her tummy, she was fairly content with the look of her body. She was slightly thick through the middle, but that was just the way she was made, and there was nothing more she could do about it than she already did at the gym twice a week. Her clothes were perfectly respectable: tailored, colour coordinated. Much less attention-seeking than the only other client in the waiting room, a skinny girl in chunky red boots that made her look like Olive Oyl. Paula was, she knew, a slightly unimaginative dresser, but she had some time ago accepted that she was simply not like the artists and designers at the advertising agency where she worked, who could afford to get around in hipster jeans and crushed shirts and blue hair. A good personal assistant wanted to exude control and efficiency, and Paula knew that she did just that.

Recognising the mental leap she had just made, from body and clothing to character and competency, she gave her reflected self a disapproving look. Precisely how short, she wondered, was the shortcut from the fit of one’s skirt to the success of one’s career? She had taken Gender Studies at university and ought, therefore, to have known better than to take that route, she chided herself. And then continued on with her appraisal, regardless. It was healthy, she thought, to be fully aware of one’s own character traits, good and bad. She knew that her worst faults were irritability and a high susceptibility to PMT. But these weren’t really such terrible flaws. Certainly not the sort of things that would prevent a man from wanting to marry you, for instance. Generally, she was very good-humoured; she was well organised, persistent and — somewhat incongruously with her conservative dress style, she liked to think — an energetic and uninhibited sexual partner. And it was this last segment of her personality that had brought her to the salon in the first place.

‘It’s Paula, is it?’

An elfin creature, her dead-straight hair coloured in several shades of pale blonde,

padded across the tiles of the reception area in her tiny white-plush slippers.

‘I’m Mary-Joy. This way, please,’ she said, and Paula caught both the hint of an accent and the quick silver flash of a cross bouncing against Mary-Joy’s tanned throat.

‘Your first time for this, is it?’ asked Mary-Joy, as she led the way in her slippered feet down a gleaming corridor.

‘Uh-huh,’ Paula answered.

‘So you’re a bit nervous, is it?’ she said, and this last ‘is it?’ was sufficient for Paula to place the accent as South African.

Mary-Joy showed Paula into a room that was full of lavender fumes from an oil burner, and had a towel-covered bed in its centre.

‘Now take off all your bottom things and just lie down on the bed. Pull up the sheet if you like. I’ll be back in a minute and we’ll start.’

Paula put her shoes neatly together on the seat of the chair provided, and over the top of them layered her pantyhose, underpants and skirt. Before she left the office, she’d gone into the toilets and wiped herself thoroughly with a KFC refresher towelette, but now she felt nervous all over again about discharges or smears. She plucked a few tissues from a box on a glass shelf and had another go, then tucked the used tissues into the toe of one of her shoes. She hoisted herself up onto the bed and covered her lower half with a thin floral sheet. Mary-Joy was so precisely on time when she returned with a pot of warmed wax and a selection of spatulas, that Paula couldn’t help but wonder if there was a peephole in one of the walls.

‘Is this going to hurt really a lot?’ Paula asked. ‘Or just a lot?’

‘Oh, it’s not so comfortable, but it’ll be worth it in the end,’ Mary-Joy soothed, whisking away the sheet. ‘Now, can you tuck your knees up for me? That’s it, bend them like that, and can you just hold them there, right against your tummy? I’ll be as gentle as I can.’

A Word from Rosie Little on:

Pubic Hairstyling

Let’s consider for a moment the vocabulary that was at the disposal of Paula and MaryJoy as Paula lay back in a pose she’d not adopted since she was a toddler in the midst of a nappy change. The procedure Paula was about to experience is, of course, most often called the Brazilian. Some of its most famed practitioners are the J Sisters,

the Brazilian-born siblings (Janea, Jocely, Jonice, Joyce, Judséia, Juracy, and Jussara) who have really made a name for themselves waxing the living daylights out of the New Yorkers who visit them in their West 57th Street parlour. In French-speaking countries, however, you might instead request an epile complet. And in at least some boutiques, the style is called the Sphinx in honour of a breed of hairless Egyptian cat. Some say that there are actually two styles, the crucial difference being that in the case of the Brazilian a 'landing strip' of hair remains, while the Sphinx leaves nothing at all in its wake.

Just in case you needed proof that up-selling has infiltrated every last nook and cranny of the marketplace, I can tell you that pubic hairstyling does not now end with some kind of soothing ointment being applied to redraw pudendal skin. You can have your 'landing strip' shaped, curled, spiked or coloured, and you can have applied to your bare skin, in special water-resistant stickers, little Alice in Wonderland-inspired messages like FUCK ME. Although you do have to wonder about the intelligence of partners who need a landing strip and instructions too.

It was not the Brazilian itself, however, that most significantly influenced the events of the night of Paula and Will's anniversary dinner, but the shriek-punctuated conversation that took place between Paula and Mary-Joy at the time it was being performed.

'Special treat for your hubby, is it?' asked Mary-Joy, smoothing on a spatula-load of thick warm wax.

'No, I'm not married yet.'

'Oh, your fiancé then, is it?'

'Ow! Boyfriend, I suppose, is all he is.'

'Oh, that's how it is, is it? Been together long, have you?'

'Two years. Owwww! Shit!'

'Oh, is it? That's quite a while.'

'Are you married?'

'Oh yes,' Mary-Joy said, and Paula could just imagine her being the kind of tiny, dainty little bride who could easily be mistaken for a cake decoration.

'But we were married when we'd known each other for just a few months,' she added.

‘Owwwww!’

‘You just know, you know? When it’s right? You just know. Now just lift your legs a little higher and try to relax your bottom. That’s it.’

‘You didn’t live together first, or anything?’

‘Oh no. It’s like what my father said when I wanted a car. He could easily have afforded to buy me one, but he said that if I just got what I wanted for free, then I’d never appreciate it. Now, this little area around the anus here, this can really sting. One, two …’

‘Jesus CHRIST!’

There was a small silence.

In which Paula recollected her glimpse of the small, silver cross.

3. Some elementary facts of physics

According to the Ideal Gas Law (pV=nkT), the pressure that a gas is under is directly proportional to the number of molecules it contains, provided temperature and volume remain constant. So, since we can safely assume Paula and Will’s mouth cavities to be pretty much the same size, and of a roughly equivalent temperature, we need only concern ourselves with how many word-laden oxygen molecules were kicking around in each mouth to find out which set of words was under the most pressure and therefore likely to come spurting out more rapidly. A quick count would have revealed that the number of words it would take Paula, initially at least, to tell Will that it was time he seriously committed to their future together was 163. While Will was only going to need five words (Paula, will you marry me) to make an offer of serious commitment. Which means that the words in Paula’s mouth were under 32.6 times more pressure than those in Will’s, so there really are no prizes for guessing who got there first.

Paula’s voice came out in a taut little squeal.

‘I’ve been doing some thinking, and as you know … obviously … we’ve known each other for two years now, which is quite some time, and long enough, really, for a job interview. I mean, we’ve had plenty of time to get to know each other, lived together for a year, quite compatibly I would have thought. Look, perhaps it’s my fault. Perhaps I shouldn’t have moved in with you, or at least not without clearly setting out some boundaries first. But I was just happy to go with the flow. I thought it would all just happen, naturally. But it hasn’t. It hasn’t happened. And perhaps it’s my fault because I haven’t been clear enough about my needs. So I’m going to be very clear, tonight.

And just say it. I need to know whether or not this relationship is actually going anywhere, because if it isn't, then we need to make a clean break now, so that I can get on with my life.'

As Will listened to this speech, he felt his balloon deflate by four-fifths of its volume.

'Paula,' he said, for it was the only word he had left in his mouth.

Once it was gone, though, he found that he was high and dry.

Shit, he thought. After all he had done, after all his careful planning, he wanted his proposal of marriage to be just right. Perfect, in fact. He certainly didn't want to arrive at it like this, by way of an ultimatum.

'Honey,' said Will, trying to make his words sound as if they were, indeed, coated in honey. 'Could we talk about something else? It's a special occasion, lovely restaurant. Let's just enjoy it, hey?'

'No, Will. I am setting boundaries. I am being clear. I am letting you know precisely what I want, and all you have to do is provide me with an answer. There are only two possible answers, so it can't be that difficult.'

'Your soup's getting cold. Mmmm. It's very good, actually.'

'I want to have children. I'm sorry, but that's just a fact. You're lucky. You don't have a use-by date, but I do. And if I miss the bus, it's not like there's another one coming along in a minute. What you have to do, Will, is you have to shit, or get off the pot.'

'Honey, can we talk about something else?'

Paula was incredulous. 'No! I want to know. Now. Whether you think this relationship has any future. Or not. I've drawn a line in the sand. And this is it. We've reached it.'

'I respect that. I do. But can we just not have this conversation tonight? Canwenot do it right this minute? Could we defer for a day, for an hour even, and just …have a good time?'

'Which is all you ever want to do with me, isn't it?' she said, crossing her legs and wondering if the Brazilian had been a total waste of time, money and excruciating pain. 'You don't want to make a commitment to me, or …marry me. And don't think that it's not hard for me to say that word out loud. What girl wants to have to demand it?'

'Come on, try the soup. It's quite peppery. You'll like it.'

‘I do not want to talk about soup, Will. I want to talk about us. And I want to know how it’s going to be. Do you want to be with me, permanently, or don’t you? That is all I want to know.’

‘Not now. Please?’

‘Yes. Now. I’ve decided.’

‘Well, I haven’t. Please. Just drop it, hey?’

‘No. I want to know. Are we going to do the whole thing? Or is this it? Is this the end?’

‘Trust me. Please? And drop it?’

‘This is not about trust. It’s about commitment.’

‘You know, you’re like a terrier sometimes. See something with fur or feathers and you just will not rest until you’ve got it between your teeth.’

‘I take it that it’s over, then?’

‘No, no, not at all. Not at all. I did not say that.’

‘So you do want to marry me?’

‘Can we drop this line of questioning?’

‘Oh God, how bloody hard is it? Yes, you want to marry me. Or no, you don’t.’

‘How about at nine o’clock? And we just relax and have a good time until then.’

‘What difference is forty-five minutes going to make to you? If you don’t know by now, you’re not going to get hit by a lightning bolt in the next three-quarters of an hour, are you?’

‘Please just drop this.’

‘What is it about men that makes them go spastic when a woman — even a woman who lives with them, who cooks their dinners and irons their shirts and scrubs their disgusting skid-marks off the back of the toilet bowl — asks whether or not a relationship is going anywhere?’

‘I said “drop it”.’

‘Don’t use that tone with me. I’m not yours to tell what to do. I have things I want to do with my life and I don’t want to waste one more minute in a relationship with you if it’s not serious. I think that’s perfectly fair. Absolutely reasonable.’

‘Come on, Paula, shut up.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Please shut up. Darling, shut up. Sweetheart, shut up. Trust me, you do not want to have this conversation now.’

‘I don’t even know why I’m still sitting here, why I’m bashing my head against this brick wall when it’s clear that you just don’t know how to say it. If you don’t want to marry me, then what’s the bloody point of us sitting here, all dressed up pretending that there’s something to celebrate, when —’

‘For fuck’s sake!’ Will shouted, standing up. ‘Here. Look here. See this? It contains an engagement ring. Happy? Are you happy now? Is this how you wanted to get engaged?’

Hush spread through the restaurant in a rapid, unfurling circumference from the epicentre of Paula and Will’s table. Other diners fell silent, cutlery suspended, mouths open. They stared at Paula’s stunned and silenced face, and at Will, who stood, looking defeated, with a black velvet cube in his fingertips. They watched the cube move away from his fingers, tumbling through the air, a die that landed numberless, with a splash, in Paula’s soup.

‘I … Will!’ she called after him as he threaded his way through tables and chairs to the exit. ‘Will! I will!’

But he was already through the glass doors, the thin fabric of his white shirt plastering to his shoulderblades in the breeze. And as the door closed behind him, the hush rolled itself right back up to Paula’s feet, allowing her to hear a snicker ricochet from table to table in its wake. There was nowhere for her to look but down at the table, where the splatter-pattern of beef consommé on white linen clearly spelled out just how badly she’d fucked up, and where the mounded shape of the velvet ring-box was resting, like an already-looted treasure chest, in the shallows of her soup.