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TRANSCENDENTAL

(1983)

“HE’S IN COMPLETE DENIAL,” Stuart Gerstler said to his mother, as he watched Jeremiah inflate a long yellow balloon and twist it into a giraffe, his third balloon animal of the evening. “I mean, he *does* realize Hannah’s getting married, not turning five, right?” His sister, busy with her bridesmaids, didn’t notice their father’s considerable supply of elongated balloons or the mini pump he was carrying around in his pocket, but to Stuart, this was a clear sign of his mental demise.

Molly shrugged. She agreed with him, but with so many wedding details to worry about, she didn’t want to make an issue out of it. “You know your father,” she said. “He thinks he’s helping, and the children seem to be enjoying it. Besides,” she lowered her voice, “he’s not great with transitions and this is a big one, so if he wants to deal with it by making balloon animals, does it really matter?”

“Okay, but it’s not even like there are that many kids here,” Stuart continued. With only two or three children on the Gerstler side and a couple more on Tom’s, each child had received at least four balloon animals by Friday night. In the lobby of the Prospero Inn, where many of the guests were staying, a red balloon dog had come undone and a green elephant was starting to shrivel. Stuart, home from his first year at film school and self-appointed videographer, panned the scene and did close-ups of the deflating balloons, wondering how long he would have to film to show a time lapse of a balloon animal’s entire lifespan. Through the lense of his BetaCam, his father’s features looked clownish, his grey hair puffing out in unnatural places, and his red, white and blue polo shirt (“in honour of Flag Day,” he’d explained that morning) too bright.

After a year away, no longer living under the same roof as his father, Stuart felt that his relationship with Jeremiah was improving. Provided his father could start relating to him as an adult, he hoped, they could transcend their earlier patterns and a mutual respect might evolve. But watching his

family now, Stuart affirmed his decision to stay in New York for the summer. His father was a kook, his mother was in drill-sergeant mode (understandable, given the stress of organizing a wedding, but still unpleasant), and his sister, well, who knew what was going through her mind? The thought of tethering himself to one person for the rest of his life held no appeal. He felt nauseous contemplating it. College and life in the city had finally given Stuart his independence and he was not interested in giving it up any time soon. He could handle his parents for a weekend—a week at most—but after that, anything was liable to set things off. Thank god he'd brought a stash of weed home with him.

“In wilderness is the preservation of the world,” Tom had quoted one of the first times Stuart met him. Hannah and Tom were introduced at an interdepartmental wine-and-cheese two years before, she, a second-year grad student in political science and he in his fourth year of comparative literature, writing his dissertation on the New England transcendentalists. The rest of the Gerstlers found Tom's penchant for quoting Thoreau a little irritating.

The Gerstlers couldn't object to Tom's credentials: smart (BA from Williams; MA from Penn; and now working on his PhD); hardworking (holding down two jobs while studying); thoughtful (bringing Molly flowers each time he visited); and liberal (from working-class Democrat stock). Stuart could imagine Hannah and Tom's parenting debates and pitied his future nieces and nephews. If their professorial father was any indication, everything would be turned into an academic exercise requiring reading, analysis and immersion in “the literature.” Stuart was not like that at all—other than a few physical traits, he and his sister were no more similar than any two random people. Hannah was a voracious reader; her grades had always been revoltingly stellar. Basically she was a stable, dependable person who rarely showed her emotions, whereas Stuart liked to think of himself as a deep feeler, a sensitive soul. The seven-year gap between them meant they weren't particularly close, although this didn't preclude occasionally venting to each other about their parents.

When Hannah and Tom's relationship had started to look serious, Stuart thought religion might be an issue for his parents. But while his father teased them about it—“you going to have a Chanukah bush or something?”—Jeremiah had surprised Stuart by taking in his stride the fact that his future son-in-law was not Jewish.

“What are you going to raise your kids as? Have you given any thought to that?” Jeremiah asked last summer, just after the engagement. They were watching the Red Sox lose to the Yankees, making Tom and Stuart groan and Jeremiah gloat. Despite living in Massachusetts for nearly twenty years, his father refused to switch loyalties.

“We’re going to raise them as people. Little people,” Tom said, grinning. “As *mensches*.”

“Huh! Listen to him,” Jeremiah said, gesturing to Hannah. “You’ve been coaching him, I see. You got any plans in that department? I mean, I’m not getting any younger over here. I’d like to be able to bounce a grandson on my knee a couple times before I die.”

His sister sighed and reminded their father that she was in no rush. He’d be the first to know, she promised. Hannah and Tom were patient with Jeremiah, far more than Stuart would have been. The demarcations of favoritism in the family had always been clear to Stuart: Jeremiah adored Hannah, whereas he saw his son as one big disappointment. His mother was usually the one to intercede on his behalf, to soften the punishments his father doled out. She’d taken Stuart into her realm, encouraging him to play an instrument, appointing him her chief helper in the kitchen. By the age of seven he knew how to make cookies and banana bread by himself. He was thankful he took after his mother: artsy and fun-loving, not like his sister and father, both type-A personalities.

The introduction into the family of a new, quirky person gave Stuart an opportunity to find common ground with his father. When, a few months back, the young couple mentioned their honeymoon would be “part camping trip to Acadia National Park, part pilgrimage to the White Mountains,” Stuart and his father both raised their eyebrows. They had never been an outdoorsy family, but Hannah seemed content with the arrangement. Tom explained that in the White Mountains they’d be recreating the trip Thoreau had taken with his brother, the basis for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*. “To be admitted to Nature’s heath costs nothing,” Tom quoted. “None is excluded, but excludes himself. You have only to push aside the curtain.”

“Do you think he whispers Thoreau or Whitman to her when they’re doing it?” Stuart had asked when the lovebirds left to drive back to Penn. His father started chuckling, but Molly looked dismayed.

“That’s enough, Stuart.”

“No, really, I should know, for my own edification. In case I need some good lines for the future, which one is more romantic?”

“Didn’t you hear your mother? That’s enough,” Jeremiah barked. The reprimand was for Molly’s benefit, but Stuart could see a glimmer of a smile beneath the gruffness. His father wasn’t above laughing at crude innuendos. Soon after this exchange, Stuart and his father had started referring to Tom as Thoreau behind his back.

On Saturday afternoon, Stuart’s parents floated among the wedding guests at the Prospero Inn, his father continuing to blow up balloons for anyone under ten—even hotel guests not connected to the party—and his mother making sure everyone received their hospitality baskets. Thursday night, Stuart had arrived at home in time to help stuff the baskets with fresh fruit, Molly’s homemade scones and jam and, at the request of the bridegroom, a copy of Walt Whitman’s poem, “To You.”

Molly kept sending Stuart on useless errands—to the drugstore to buy colour-coordinated ribbon barrettes for the flower girls, shuttling people to Tanglewood for the afternoon matinee, and so on. “Go talk to my cousin Sylvia,” she commanded her son. “Go see if Uncle Irv needs more aspirin.

“Maybe I should’ve gotten one of those portable helium tanks instead,” Stuart heard his father say to no one in particular.

Just as Stuart was wishing he’d brought the pot with him to the hotel, a couple of the groomsmen—Tom’s friends from high school? college?—came down in basketball shorts and asked Stuart where they could find a court. He hadn’t pegged Tom as the type who had basketball-playing friends. Stuart started to direct them to the outdoor court at the junior high when the tallest one, holding the ball and looking, with his big hands, like he’d been born to rebound, invited him to play. “Okay, sure.” Anything beat sitting around the hotel kissing elderly relatives and listening to Jeremiah make tired jokes about being the father of the bride.

As he was leaving, he passed his sister entering the lobby with her entourage of bridesmaids. “Oh, I see you’ve met the guys,” she said, gesturing to Tom’s friends. “By the way, what’s with Dad?” she asked, almost as an afterthought. “He’s acting all weird.”

Stuart shrugged. “And that’s news to you?”

“He seems a little tense.”

Stuart nodded. Despite the balloon façade, he knew this was not the good, wacky sort of weird, but the anxious kind, hinting of deeper emotions that threatened to erupt. With one Intro to Psyche class this year, Stuart had gained volumes of insight into his parents’ behaviours. “It’s a defense

mechanism. Just look at him with those stupid balloons,” he said now. “He’s clearly in denial that you’re all grown up and getting married. Or maybe it’s ‘dissociation.’ That’s when you temporarily modify your personality to avoid emotional distress.” He’d had to memorize all the defense mechanisms for his final exam.

Hannah looked at him curiously, and he silently congratulated himself on his display of academic prowess. “But why would he be in emotional distress? I mean, we’re all kind of tense, but he’s got to chill out.”

Stuart nodded in agreement. Surely, he thought, his father was pleased for Hannah and wouldn’t screw things up. He couldn’t remember Jeremiah ever getting upset or exasperated by Hannah. “He’ll be fine,” Stuart said. “Don’t worry. What’s the worst he can do? Make a few bad jokes in his speech? Get all the kids up on the dance floor and then beat them at the limbo?” At Stuart’s bar mitzvah, Jeremiah had stayed in the limbo rotation until the last round, when a wiry thirteen-year-old finally beat him.

She shook her head and sighed. “Just what I need right now. I’ll have a talk with him, maybe that will help.”

Hannah saw Stuart glancing at the basketball players, who had given up waiting for him and were walking down the street. “Go. it’s fine. See you at home later?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he called, breaking into a trot to catch up. He’d play ball, go home to shower and hopefully have a little downtime before his mother called him back into service. Who knew what family duties she’d throw at him for tonight’s rehearsal dinner?

Back at home, after the game, Stuart guzzled half a pitcher of cold lemonade, glad to be away from the hotel for a bit. He was still sitting in the kitchen, rethinking an easy layup he should have made, when Hannah entered, her eyes red, nose runny, and Molly just behind her. His mother looked exasperated and let out a loud groan.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

They relayed how Hannah had taken their father aside to try to understand what was bothering him, and to ask him (please) to knock off his peculiar conduct. Jeremiah had denied any odd behaviour, refused to admit that anything was bothering him, and requested that everyone (please) just leave him alone. And then, out of nowhere, Jeremiah started muttering sarcastic, hurtful comments about her and Tom. *Don’t tell me how to behave! I’m your father. I’m the one paying for all this! The least you can do is show*

me a little respect. I'm not acting peculiar. Why don't you ask your fiancé about peculiar? Always quoting someone or another. My god, how can you stand it?

"It's like he doesn't want me getting married at all," Hannah cried. The more she'd pleaded with him, the louder he'd responded. Molly had hurried over, trying to shush him so the guests wouldn't hear, but that had only agitated him more.

He'd started in on Molly, too. *You! Who cares if the napkins match the tablecloths and the tablecloths match the dresses? And your constant directives, 'run here,' 'run there!'* Stuart could imagine his father gesturing wildly. *You're making me crazy with this wedding!*

Molly eventually succeeded in shooing him away and Jeremiah had stormed off, leaving his car in the hotel parking lot and heading—on foot—in the direction of the campus where he'd taught for nearly twenty years.

"Holy shit," was the only thing Stuart could think to say when they finished the story. Briefly he felt gratified at hearing that someone else was the target of his father's invective, but then thought, *Poor Hannah. Why couldn't his father just behave himself for once?*

"I'm sure he'll settle down," Molly said. "He doesn't mean anything by these outbursts." Jeremiah didn't like the pressure of dealing with the extended family, and having Molly's mother around always made him uneasy. He obviously wasn't handling well the fact that his little girl was about to get married, Molly explained. "Maybe you don't remember—it was already eight years ago—but when Poppy Abe died he had a similar reaction. Anger, lashing out at the people he loves the most."

Yes, Stuart thought, sometimes his father got thrown off-balance, even by small changes.

"Yeah, but Grandpa dying and me getting married are two totally different things!" Hannah said. "That was a sad occasion, this is a happy one! That's no excuse. What if he doesn't come back before the rehearsal dinner?" She looked miserable and started crying again.

Molly rubbed her daughter's back and told her everything would be all right. Jeremiah would calm down, he wouldn't ruin the wedding. Stuart wasn't convinced. "Go get some rest," she ordered, back in drill-sergeant mode. "He likes Tom. I promise. He'll come around. Now go." Hannah was too tired to argue. She wiped her eyes and headed to her childhood bedroom.

His mother spoke to Stuart in hushed tones. “Okay. I need your help. You’re the only one he’s not upset with at the moment, so you need to find him and talk to him.” Assuming Jeremiah had gone to the campus, she said, he’d probably be in one of two places: either the bench by the footbridge over the Housatonic or in the gazebo behind the main library.

Jesus, this was not what he’d had in mind when he left New York on Thursday. Talk his father down from some irrational place and convince him to act sensibly? He was the last person in the family his father would confide in. But his mother was wringing her hands and rubbing her temples, exhaustion and anxiety coursing out of her. In the three hours before they were scheduled to leave for the rehearsal dinner, Molly had to pick up more guests arriving via Amtrak in Pittsfield, plus shower and get ready. The dinner itself wasn’t scheduled to begin until another hour after that, so they had a bit of leeway, she said. “Thank you, sweetheart,” she added.

Molly went upstairs to retrieve one of her checklists, and when she came down three minutes later, she seemed disappointed to find Stuart still sitting at the table. “What are you waiting for, Stu? You should get going!” She grabbed her car keys and, as she headed back outside, she called out. “Stuart? I think there are some extra scones. Take them with you—he’s probably hungry, and food will help him relax.”

“Okay.” He’d finished the last three scones in a burst of hunger after the game, but now wasn’t the time to tell her. She was right, though: in Jeremiah’s case, the way to his heart was through his stomach. Something sweet. He remembered that Molly kept cake and brownie mixes in the second pantry downstairs. As his mother’s baking assistant, Stuart had been let in on the stash long ago.

“Holy shit,” he blurted out to an empty room. He felt inspired, his mind hatching a beautiful plan. His sister would owe him one.

He showered while the brownies baked. Still no sign of his father. Less than an hour later, he walked out the door carrying the entire batch.

He found Jeremiah exactly where Molly said he might be: in the gazebo behind the library. His father was dozing, a *New York Times* magazine spread open on his lap. The balloon pump lay on the ground by his feet. Given such a setting, Stuart’s plan suddenly seemed a little insane.

“Dad.” He gave Jeremiah a gentle shake and he awoke, disoriented. His eyes seemed to widen as he remembered his whereabouts.

“You!” he said when he saw it was Stuart. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yup.” He yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Just dozed off for a bit.”

His father appeared to be acting normal. “Here, brought you something,” he said, unwrapping the tinfoil covering the tray.

“Mmmm ... your mother’s?” he asked.

“Yup,” Stuart lied. “She thought you might be hungry. Fresh out of the oven.” He took out a plastic knife and started slicing them.

“A good woman,” Jeremiah said, biting into a brownie. “Sometimes I don’t know why she puts up with me.” He laughed at himself. “I’m a lucky guy.”

“Uh-huh.” Stuart watched his father finish the first brownie and reach for another. That was his cue to pop one into his own mouth. He wanted to stay a step ahead of Jeremiah. “These are good, aren’t they?”

“The best.” Jeremiah sighed. “This whole wedding business. I don’t know why, but it hasn’t been easy for me.” Between mouthfuls, Jeremiah started reminiscing about his own wedding, back in 1955. A grand affair—Molly’s mother knew how to put on a party. But Jeremiah and his parents had felt a little out of place, surrounded by all those *machers*, lawyer friends of Papa Mickey, with their money and connections. His parents were simple people, immigrants. It wasn’t that Molly’s parents made Jeremiah’s parents feel inferior, but there was a sense that they were from another world. The Kellmans had a private phone line and black-and-white television set long before his parents; as soon as colour TVs became available, they bought one of those too.

His father started to guffaw as he reminisced about his inlaws and the early days of his marriage. “Would you believe it—I worried that your mother and her family would think I was no fun because I didn’t smoke! Can you imagine?”

Stuart rolled his eyes; he’d heard the line before.

“I don’t know why I’m finding this so funny! You know what, Stu? I’m feeling better already. By god, I’m starving. I could eat this whole tray.”

“Better not, Dad.”

“Have you seen your sister?”

Stuart shook his head no, lying again. Better to feign ignorance.

“Well,” Jeremiah started, his tone turning sober, “she’s probably not very happy with me. I ...” he paused, cutting himself another brownie.

Apologies and admissions of guilt did not come easily to him. “I probably said some things I shouldn’t have. Thoreau’s a decent fellow. Maybe a bit too transcendental for my taste, but I’ve got nothing against him. Even the religion thing—maybe it would have bothered me more if my parents were alive, but I’m not going to get all worked up about it.” He paused to chew. “What it comes down to, I guess, is that marrying off Hannah ... feels kind of like we’re losing her.

“Why? She’s not leaving the family, just bringing Tom in.”

“I guess so. It’s all a bit muddled in my head. When you have kids, don’t have girls, okay? Boys are easier. There are these emotional ties with a daughter ...”

“That you don’t have with a son?”

“Exactly.”

“Bullshit,” Stuart said, annoyed that, just when he was starting to feel a buzz, he felt the familiar anger at his father pushing through. “I know plenty of guys who are close to their fathers. Did you ever think that maybe it’s you? Why is it that *you* don’t feel any emotional ties with me?” He felt his voice breaking. Damn it, it was a question he thought about often, and now they were both too stoned for a reasonable discussion. Or maybe it was better this way.

“That’s not fair. Of course I do. Maybe there’s more inherent worry with having a son, so there’s a distance.”

“You’re not making any sense.” He pointed his finger at his father.

Jeremiah closed his eyes, threw his arm around his son, and let out a sigh. “I mean, if you’d been born ten years earlier, there’s a good chance you would’ve had to go to Vietnam.”

It was very fuzzy, this logic, but if he stretched his brain, maybe Stuart could see his father’s point. All of a sudden he felt like a character in a comic strip, light bulb over his head, experiencing a cosmic moment of enlightenment. “Is that what this is about? All these years, you allowed yourself to feel close to Hannah, to shut me out, or at least make me feel like I was never good enough, because one day—if I’d been born ten years earlier—I might have come home in a body bag, like Uncle Lenny? That’s messed up.” A concept from his psyche class floated into his head.

“Actually you’re nothing like Lenny. If anyone is, it’s Hannah.”

“You’re missing my point.” The concept came into focus. “I learned in my psyche class, there’s this thing called ‘displacement.’ It means you’re

separating emotion from its real object—the loss of your brother, which, I guess, you’ve never really come to terms with—by redirecting this intense emotion towards me.” Stuart hoped he sounded erudite; his father should be impressed.

“Huh.” Jeremiah considered this for a moment. “Maybe you’re not so far off. Who knows? Sometimes your mother likes to point out that I’m not always fair in the way I treat you versus your sister.” He buried his head in Stuart’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, that’s bullshit. You could if you tried harder.”

His father looked up and pointed his finger at Stuart. “You said ‘bullshit’ again,” he said, starting to chuckle. “Good thing your mother’s not here.”

Oh, his father was definitely a head case. With Hannah too, displacement was at work; his father lashing out in anger at her when what he was really feeling was loss. Or was there a different name for that neurosis, because the object was still the same? Perhaps if he learned a bit more psychology, he could be a sounding board for his father. He could heal him and, in doing so, get him to admit he’d been wrong about Stuart all these years. Today was a start. Another idea started forming in his brain, inflating in slow motion, something about transferring out of film school and becoming a shrink. He’d aced his psyche final, after all.

Suddenly Stuart felt tired. He wasn’t listening completely, but he encouraged his father to keep talking. He was starting to feel relaxed, a rising, out-of-body sensation, glad the pot was finally kicking in. Let his father prattle on about marriage and kids, responsibility and life’s imbalances. It made no difference to him. What an excellent idea this had been.

“Yup, boys are easier,” Jeremiah said again, skittering back to the earlier topic and throwing his arm back around Stuart, which caused him to wake up a bit. “You’ve turned into a good boy. After all that mischief you used to cause. Remember when you toilet-papered the Kravitz’s house on Hallowe’en and then bragged about it the next day?” Jeremiah started guffawing as he reminisced. “Mrs. Kravitz invited you over for a clean-up party—a stroke of genius! Ha!” he laughed. “I don’t know what made me think of that.” Stuart recalled his father taking the punishment further, offering the Kravitzes his son’s leaf-raking services every Saturday for two months. “I’m glad you’ve gotten those pranks out of your system.”

“Yup, no more pranks for me.” Stuart was trying very hard not to snicker.

“We should have these talks more often. I haven’t laughed this hard in a long time,” Jeremiah chortled. He started jabbering about all the mischief he’d caused himself as a youngster. And again Stuart started tuning out, but soon he became aware that his father was asking him a question.

“Do you want to get married, Stu?”

“I’m only eighteen!”

“I don’t mean now, schmoe, I mean when you’re older.”

Why ‘schmoe,’ why did his father always have to call him that? He’d try to remember to bring that up in one of their future sessions. “I can’t really see the benefits, to be honest with you.”

“Oh, there are plenty of benefits, especially for men. I’ve come to the conclusion that men are much more dependent on their wives than vice versa. I know this goes against all sorts of economic realities, but women, they’ve got this inner strength. In the first few years of a relationship, maybe we men have it okay. But a word of warning: once the children come along, it’s ‘see you later.’ I could be trying to tell your mother something, but if one of you kids came in and needed her for something, she would just tune me out. See?”

Not really, Stuart thought. “So what you’re saying is that you regret having us?”

“No, don’t twist my words! I guess it’s just advice I wish I’d been given. For a long time I thought maybe your mother had grown sick of me, but then I looked around and saw a lot of other men in the same boat. After the children come, men are second fiddle. Period. But once the kids are grown and out of the house, if you’ve treated your wife okay all those years, she’ll come back. It’s all a bit of a power game. But you’ve got to let them think they’ve got all the power, see? Shhhh ...” he put his finger to his lips and started giggling again. “Don’t tell the women we’re onto them, okay?”

Stuart would need to mull over this new piece of wisdom, if that’s what it was. He considered the possibility that the old man could teach him a thing or two. Share some of his life experience and talk man-to-man. As he contemplated this, he remembered the real reason he was here and reminded Jeremiah it was time to leave. A quarter of the brownies remained and Stuart wrapped them up; if need be he’d give his father the rest before the ceremony tomorrow.

Now that Jeremiah had shed his cantankerous mood, Stuart made a suggestion he would never have made if either of them had been straight. “Maybe you should apologize to Hannah, so she doesn’t think you don’t want her to get married.”

“Sure, sure,” he replied. “I’m happy for her. Thoreau’s a good man. And you’re a good boy, Stuart.” He kissed him on the forehead. Stuart let the words float over him and wondered why Tom was a man and he just a boy? Why couldn’t his father have told him this more often? A topic for a future session, but for now Stuart tried to concentrate on his feelings of triumph. He knew his father would give Hannah a big bear hug and find a way to smooth things over. His mother would be relieved and grateful and say, *let’s move on*. His sister would forgive. That’s the way things worked with Jeremiah: a never-ending cycle of blowups and forgiveness. Perhaps with Stuart’s involvement, that could change.

“Hey, do you think they’re going to move to Walden Pond?” Stuart asked.

“I’m feeling a bit transcendental myself,” Jeremiah said, bursting with giggles.

In one last stroke of genius before they made their way back, Stuart kicked the balloon pump off to the side. Jeremiah didn’t notice a thing. He helped his father up and they left the gazebo, holding their sides, hooting like maniacs.