



Lavender Cream

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One February afternoon my wife and I were walking in Belmont Park when she collapsed. We had been discussing the famous golden cat. It was time for its annual tour on the museum circuit. I wanted to see it, that cat, discovered five hundred years ago in savage grass by knights of the crusade. That famous cat occupied its own room in whatever museum it graced, a tiny monument to God, sculpted by no human, but

by the divine hand. An article of history, existent and untouched.

Margaret was saying how she thought the cat was stupid. She was fed up with divine knick-knacks. Then bam, she collapsed. She was wearing fashionable boots with bad traction, so I thought she slipped on a patch of ice. But when I offered her my hand she said it was her legs. She couldn't feel her legs. Couldn't move them. Wait. The feeling came back. She sat up and cleared herself.

“How are you?”

“I'm scared.”

We walked home and I held her and we didn't talk about her fall until we were in bed. That night we performed the dark ritual where I readied my penis into full bloom and she squatted between my knees and sucked until I came. She quivered and panted and moaned. Tonight she took her mouth away from my penis before I was finished. “I should see a doctor. Don't you think there's something wrong with me? What if

God has decided to strike me with an illness? One's legs shouldn't stop working like mine just did.”

“Why would God strike you now, precious?”

Margaret's face went sour. Whatever idea had occurred to her, it disappeared. Sometimes I thought Margaret was simple. “Should I continue sucking your erection, my darling?”

“Please.”

So she did. I came on her forehead and we got into our sleep positions.

Darkness was all around us. I imagined the famous golden cat on exhibition in an empty museum, untouched and existent and I felt good all over. As I drifted into sleep the thought occurred to me that I myself was a famous gift that had once been dropped into savage grass and that someday I would be discovered too. And so I lay there existent and untouched.

Then Margaret whispered: “I always knew God would strike me. Ever since I was a girl. And I've always resented Him. I've never been like you. Loving God.”

“It’s impossible to resent God. You can’t resent yourself, precious. And that’s the same thing.”

The next evening we returned home from our respective places of work and had dinner before we went to the clinic to see about her legs. My bread and butter was information. I took phone calls and copied the necessary information into the daily logs. At the end of the week I chose the information that was still necessary from the daily logs and entered it into the weekly log. The most vital information from the weekly logs went into the monthly. And so on. Margaret embroidered designs on children’s pillows. She enjoyed her work and she was good at it.

For dinner there was breaded fish, mashed potatoes, corn. Lavender cream for dessert. Margaret enjoyed her cream a little too much. The sweetness playing on her tongue seemed to give her the same pleasure as the dark ritual. Normally I didn’t condone this. It struck me as unnatural and wrong. Tonight, because she was nervous about her legs, I indulged her. Margaret asked

me to feed her the cream from a sugar spoon. I went around the table and brought the spoon to her mouth. She put her tongue out and I knew she was thinking of the ritual. She panted and moaned. A quiver here, a quiver there.

“We should go to the clinic before the line gets long,” I told her. “The cream will be here when we get back.”

About twenty people were up against the wall of the clinic, most of them noticeably ill, spitting breath clouds and rocking on their heels. Margaret and I wore scarves. I asked her if she was still scared and she moved her head in a way didn’t mean one or the other. She wore a purple knit hat with a smiling dinosaur on the side.

She said: “There’s a woman up there. Do you see her?”

“I see many women.”

“No. Six people up. In a blue dress with the stars. She’s holding a cloth on her mouth.”

The woman was dabbing her mouth with a white cloth and when she took the cloth away it was touched

with a smidgeon of blood.

Margaret whispered: “If God strikes me with a fatal illness I will curse him until he understands he’s wrong. I don’t deserve to be struck down. I couldn’t deal with it.”

“Alright darling,” I told her and patted the back of her head.

An hour and a half later we were in the waiting room. Here we waited for another half hour until our number was called. Margaret held the card. We were thirty-seven. When thirty-seven was called we stood and walked down a hallway past door after door until we got to office 9k. Here a squat Asian man in a white coat sat in a swivel chair and had his hand in a bag of chips.

“My name is Dr. Bellini. I hope you don’t mind, I love to eat chips. Why don’t you sit?”

“Tell him, honey,” I said. “I’m sure Dr. Bellini will know what God has in store for us.”

The doctor nodded and licked a spot of crumbs from his palm.

Margaret: “We were walking through the park and my legs went numb. They stopped working. Then I fell down. Then the feeling came back and I could walk again.”

“Has it happened since? How about now? Can you feel your legs now?”

We both nodded.

“Yes. I can feel my legs now. I can use them and everything. It was just then and only for a minute.”

Bellini had a few more chips then set the bag on a counter and stood. He wasn’t an impressive man. I didn’t want to trust him. But he was a doctor. I didn’t have many options. He took hold of Margaret’s wrist. “Let’s go to the machine where we look inside of your body. It’s called an illuminator. Have you heard of one of these machines?”

I had but Margaret hadn’t. She didn’t understand technology. She got angry at God because she couldn’t understand Him. And because she didn’t understand technology she pretended it didn’t exist.

The illuminator was down the hallway in a room by itself. There were a couple of chairs for the doctor and I to sit in. They were stiff ones and I remember not once feeling that this was supposed to be a comfortable experience.

“We’ll have you take off your clothes,” said Bellini. “Then you should go and stand behind the illuminator. Trust me when I say it won’t hurt a bit.”

Margaret undressed and went behind the illuminator screen. Dr. Bellini went over to a panel on the wall and turned a few knobs then moved his hand down to a switch at the end. “In a moment I’ll turn on the illuminator and we’ll see what’s inside of your wife’s body that made her legs not work.”

“That’s sounds simple enough. And you promise this won’t hurt.”

Bellini practically laughed. “It’s harmless. But it’s bright.”

“I understand.” I wasn’t sure that I did.

Bellini flicked the switch. Then I understood. A sharp

light stung all over my face. I covered my eyes, lowered my head. Bellini really laughed it up. “I told you it was bright. I told you.” Then he licked one of his hands and came over to the illuminator and pulled on a string so that a black curtain came down.

“You could have done that earlier.”

“I must have forgotten.”

Bellini hunched forward and behaved like a doctor. He looked at what he could see of my wife through the curtain. Something was off. He took a pair of shades from the inside of his coat. Before putting them on he turned back to look at me and I got the impression he was ashamed.

Bellini went behind the curtain and stayed there in his dark shades for about ten minutes. Squatting. Lifting himself. Pressing his hands to the glass of the illuminator. A shadow-Margaret was visible from behind the curtain. Her eyes were closed and her arms were extended like she were waiting to be showered in grace. If Margaret believed that God gave us any

grace she didn't want it. This was a thing about her, she wanted some divine grace, but she was looking for an alternative god. Not the one given to her. She had never said this, she never would.

"Alright, get dressed," Bellini came out from behind the curtain and folded the shades, replaced them in his coat. "I think we should have a talk in my office. You can get dressed, mam. Thank you"

We went back to Bellini's office. He was nervous. I didn't like it. He picked up the bag of chip crumbs and tossed it into a tiny garbage can operated by foot-pedal. Then he opened a window. The cold danced in and swirled under our clothes. He shivered and closed the window. This was a more agitated Bellini.

"Why don't we all close our eyes," he said once we were seated. "Why don't we all close our eyes and lower our heads."

So we did. All three of us. Margaret grabbed for my hand and I squeezed her hand. We squeezed one another's hands and this made the situation all the

more serious.

"I'm afraid God has struck you with a terrible illness. It seems that your insides have been blackened by death. Your legs not working was the first instance of the death settling in. Within the next few weeks expect your legs to stop working again. Expect numbness in the back. In the arms. There will be headaches." He paused and I couldn't help but lift my head only for a moment to see him. His eyes were rolling around in their sockets and his fingers twiddled away.

"I'm afraid the Lord had chosen what we call a degenerative disorder to strike you down. I'm sorry. I'm sure you can see another doctor, he will tell you the same. It's as clear as day. Through the illuminator."

There was silence. Our heads were lowered. Bellini was a heavy breather and his breathing is the sound I remember.

Finally Margaret spoke. "What should I do in the following weeks? Doctor? How can I spend them? This is new to me."

There was a single deliberate breath from the doctor. He rubbed the palms of his hands together. "I'm afraid I can't answer that, mam. It's between you and He."

"You mean God," she said.

I patted the back of her head. "That's right, precious. It's in God's hands."

I took some time off from work. My boss wasn't thrilled, but when I told him that my wife was slowly dying he dropped it. He told me he would sign a form then he gave me a pursed lip expression that spoke to all of the information that would accumulate in my absence. Either the weekly log would be thin with not enough vital information or would not be finished well into the next week. Regardless the quality of the monthly and the annual was bound to be affected.

And Margaret, she quit her job.

She wrote a letter to the children's pillow firm asking for her final pay. She wrote: "I am sorry to inform you that God has struck me with an unfortunate degenerative

disorder and that I won't be returning to work. My body will soon fail. I will be dead within months. While I will no longer be of use to you I hope I will be remembered fondly." After she sealed the letter in its envelope she told me that the children's pillows would forever be a little bit different without her.

"I don't want to think about it," she said. "What if we had some cream. Just a little. It cheers me up."

"Not me. But you. Yes, darling. Of course you can."

We still performed the dark ritual. She didn't have to if she didn't want. Margaret insisted. Afterwards she liked to walk around the house awhile. She liked to be alone. I knew that she was in the kitchen in the dark with dripping sink, spooning sweet lavender cream into her mouth. The thought of her alone in the darkness, panting and trembling while the cream played on her tongue, I didn't think this was the right way for my wife to spend her final days.

Then she cursed God for the first time about a week and a half later. She woke and rubbed her face against

my arm. "It's happening again. I can't feel my legs. They're numb all over."

"We'll get through it," I told her, though we wouldn't.

"If God has already decided to strike me then what am I trying to get through? Do you understand that, dear?"

"But you are in His hands," I reminded her. "And you have no idea what treasures He has in store for you."

"Like a famous golden cat. I don't accept Him. I'll spend the rest of my life not accepting Him. You realize that's something I can very well do."

I agreed. This was very well something she could do.

The feeling was in her legs. Then it left. Then it came back. Then it left again. This was the cycle we lived by. I stopped keeping track of days and nights. Hour after hour spent in the sanatorium of our bedroom, the two of us on the edge of the mattress. I rubbed her back a lot. My instinct was that I should be touching her as

much as possible. "Can you feel them?" "Yes. A little. No. Maybe I can't. I can't tell anymore I'm thinking so hard about them." "How about now?" "No. Not now. I can't feel them at all now. Darling. What if the feeling doesn't come back?" "There will be a time when God decides it doesn't, darling. Is that something we should be thinking about?" "Now. They're completely numb, darling. I'm scared. I have a feeling this is it. It's not coming back. After this." "Alright, honey. Let me bring you some cream and you just lie here and relax."

She woke up one morning pounding on the bed and struggling with the air. She'd had trouble bringing out her voice recently and my guess was that she was trying to scream. A confused animal. This is what my wife looked like to me. "My back. The feeling's gone in my back. "

"I'm sorry darling," I said. "But God has struck your back."

"Stay out of my back."

She turned on her side so she could face me. "But I

can move. You see.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“It is. Will you please bring me some cream. I know, darling, that it’s so early. But I want some. You know. It would make me feel better. My back is so numb.”

So I brought her a bowl of lavender cream with a sugar spoon. I held the bowl out to her and she only looked at it.

“Feed it to me, please.”

“But I don’t know if that’s right.” I had been good at keeping out of Margaret’s cream pleasures. I brought her the cream, but I did not let us get dark. I vowed to myself that if she were following that path I would not go down with her.

“Is it not right?”

There was silence in the darkness. Until she asked again.

“Please feed it to me, darling. I know I enjoy it too much. I do. But please.”

“Listen. You’ve chosen to curse God, precious. I

understand you. I can’t come along.”

“No. No. That’s not what I said.” Margaret was worked up. She tried to sit and it was too much for her. An invisible ball was stuck in her throat, she struggled to breath. Gurgled. I smoothed her hair and helped her to relax. The change in her health had been sudden and drastic. I set the bowl of cream on the bed beside her and excused myself. The same instinct that had been to continually touch Margaret told me to make her as happy as she could be. So I spoke to God.

My relationship with God had always been pleasant so I never had reason to. I appreciated the famous gold cat, this was enough for me. Now I imagined that cat in an empty museum in a dark exhibition room. A spotlight showed on the golden statue and I imagined myself kneeling before it. “I have always been frightened about what may happen when I find myself in your hands, Lord. Now is the time. What Margaret said is true. You have already decided to strike her. Shouldn’t I make her happy even though my actions would be wrong and

unnatural? Would you excuse me and understand that I am not cursing you?”

She interrupted me, called in a cracked whine that sounded like it belonged to another room in another house for a miserable old man I would never be. I tried to hold my thought and to even ignore her. But she called again and I couldn't continue resisting.

She said: “You shouldn't leave me anymore. But you should feed me.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. Dipped the sugar spoon into the bowl then brought it to her mouth. A curtain of sweat had developed on her forehead. She slipped her tongue out. The tongue, it nipped the edge of the lump of cream. “Are you happy?” “Yes. Mmmm.” Her limp body quaked with new life. Her tongue bobbed between her lips. “I'm not so numb. You see? I feel dark. I want to be dark. I want to perform the ritual.”

“That's something I can't do, precious.”

“Please. Let me. It will make you feel so good. And you've been so kind to me.”

She curled her body so she could put her mouth to my penis, but she was not well enough to bend that far. Besides, I was not going to get erect. I pulled her head back. “Darling. Why don't you eat some more of your cream.”

From this point on Margaret's decline was in full swing. It was literally as if God had cut her string. She was falling. There was a sense of motion to her stillness. She stopped getting out of bed. I offered to carry her. I knew that wheeled chairs existed, but Margaret didn't want one. So I brought her lavender cream. Bowl after bowl. Forty percent of the time she asked me if I would help to incorporate the cream in the dark ritual, and I refused.

At the end of a day when a film had grown over her eyeballs and her nostrils whistled with her every breath I sat in a chair and watched her feverish sleep. One thought I entertained was the empty museum. And the spotlight. But the famous golden cat was not there. The sickly whistling of Margaret's breath. The darkness in

our room. It was probably an illusion, but I felt existent and unwatched. My instinct said that for once there was only Margaret and me.

I woke my wife by gently shaking her arm. A dumb smile cracked on her face. “Yes, my darling?” “Why don’t you wake up for awhile and have some cream.”

I stood at the foot of the bed and readied my penis into full bloom while she tasted the cream. She was weak so she took one spoonful at a time and let it play on her tongue. The bowl sat on a tray that came right up to her chin. This way she wouldn’t have to strain her arms. Her tongue bounced around between her lips. “Mmm.” She quivered. It was the most movement I’d seen in her since her back went.

“I can feel the cream all over my mouth. And it rushes all through my body. So it’s like I’m not really numb.”

“It’s almost like it.”

“Let me apply the cream to your penis. It would make me happy.”

“I couldn’t do that, precious. That would be the dark

ritual. It would be wrong. It wouldn’t be natural.”

“But this is the dark ritual. You’re with me.”

One day I found blood swirled in a half-eaten bowl of cream and knew that her insides were going. This was the day she received a package in the mail. I brought the box up to her and tapped lightly on the bedroom door. I bought disposable plastic bowls and they were stacked on the dresser. A short stack sat on her tray. She was in half-sleep. She was always in half-sleep. The package was a large box, but it was light. I tossed it onto the bed beside her and her eyes opened. They were swollen and pink. Her arms twitched.

“Look at this, precious. You got a box in the mail.”

She licked some cream from her lips. My final memories of Margaret. All of them with cream smeared around her mouth.

“I’ll open it for you.” And I did. I pulled my keys from my pocket to break the tape on the box.

“A pillow, darling. Would you like to hold it?”

There was some whistling from her nose and her

throat made a swampy sound.

“Let me hold the pillow. Give it to me, darling,” she said

I took the stack of plastic bowls from her tray and set the pillow there. She let her face fall onto it. “It’s warm. I can feel it on my face.”

“That’s wonderful. Did you read the pillow?”

I sat on the bed and lifted her head so she could read. “Can you see it?”

“Read it to me. I can’t concentrate. Everything is spotty.”

“It says ‘Margaret. Pillows will never be the same.’”

“It does.”

“Yes.” And I was lying to her because it said, “Georgiana, employee 263, get well soon.” As someone who dealt in information I understood how names could be mixed up. So many came in at once. Why spoil a thing for her, I thought. “You were right. Children’s pillows will never be the same.”

Again that night I let Margaret look at my erection

while she ate her cream before bed. Tonight I didn’t think she could see. I wasn’t sure she was always awake. But she understood that I was there. “Mmmm,” she went. I knew she was too numb to be taking pleasure in the cream. She put on a performance for me. “Darling. Please put some, some, oh. Darling. I’m so tired.”

About a month after Bellini’s diagnosis I woke up and there was more fresh blood than normal on the sheets. Margaret’s nostrils weren’t whistling. “Would you like your morning cream?” She did not answer. “Oh, precious. God has finally come for you.” I rubbed her hair. She was cold, stiff. Just like dead people are. The image I remember flashing in my head was of the famous golden cat in the museum. Now the museum wasn’t empty, all the people had come in and were crowded around. I was one of them. We were all staring at the cat and the cat was staring back at us. The famous golden cat wasn’t saying anything. And we all agreed without having to speak that this sounded right to us. That even in silence something right had taken place.

I called the organization for deceased persons before breakfast. Sometime in mid afternoon a big fellow in a hunting coat came over. He lingered in my kitchen for a few minutes and drank a couple glasses of water.

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the bedroom. She’s in bed. She hasn’t moved in days.”

The fellow nodded. He had a third glass of water. “You don’t mind that I’m drinking your water.”

“No,” I said. “No. It’s fine. Help yourself to another.”

“It’s just that this is hard work and most people don’t know that. They think we’re ugly people. But it’s not our fault. It’s just an ugly job.”

“I understand that.”

“And if we don’t do it who is? Let me ask you something. What’s your bread and butter?”

“Information.”

The big fellow nodded again, just like when I had told him that Margaret was in bed. He processed all of

his information in the same way.

He was upstairs for about ten minutes or so. He came down the stairs holding Margaret like she were a child and for a moment I was envious of him. I felt angry. The fellow must have seen it in my eyes because he turned to face me and showed me the fire in his own.

“You’re not going to go crazy on me. You’re not that kind of guy. That understood?”

I just went on staring at him.

“Listen pal. It’s like I was telling you before. It’s not my fault. I do a job. Now what you’ve got to do is think about going to back to work. Back to information. It looks like you treated her well. I saw all that cream.”

“She loves cream,” I said. “Her name is Margaret.”

“Now why don’t you go upstairs and rest in bed for awhile And I’ll bring her back in just a bit when I’m done with her.”

This last part threw me off. “Is that true? What you just said? You’re bringing her back.”

“Sure enough. All you’ve got to do is go upstairs

and lie down. And think about getting back on track. The worst of it's behind you now, you understand. The illness is done. God did what He had to do. It's over."

"And then you're bringing her back. I don't understand."

He nodded, just as before. Then he took an arm off of my wife's back so he could open the front door. I watched him from the window. He drove a truck. He opened up the back and laid Margaret down in there, shut the doors. Then he paused in the street with his hands on his waist. He looked at me looking at him. Then he shook his head and came back up to the house. I met him at the door.

"Listen, buddy. You seem like a reasonable fellow to me. You do. What I just said about me bringing your wife back, that's not going to happen."

"There was no reason for you to tell me that."

"It was just that I was afraid you were going to go crazy on me."

Then he went back to his truck and he drove away. I

went upstairs and lay on the bed that was warm with the impression left by Margaret's body. The big fellow from the deceased organization had knocked over stacks of cream bowls and made a mess when he was taking her away. So in the morning I'd have to begin cleaning up.