

The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart



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Olive Oil



She was busy cooking dinner, a nice ratatouille, chopping and slicing eggplant, zucchini and garlic. George Winston was on the box and the fire crackled in the stove. As she dripped olive oil into a pan a bit of it stuck to her thumb and she absentmindedly used her rather rough forefinger to rub it into the cuticle, which she noticed was also cracked. In fact, she had worked a lot over the last month putting in a winter garden; the weather most days had been mild, but it was also dry and occasionally there had been wind. Hence the extreme dryness of the skin on her hands:

Thinking of this, puttering about, putting a log on the fire and a pot of water for noodles on the stove, she touched her face, which, along her cheekbones, seemed to rustle it was so dry. Massaging the painfully dry cuticle, she swooped up the bottle of olive oil, sniffed it for freshness, and poured a tablespoonful into her hand. Rubbing her hands together she rubbed the oil all

over her neck and face. Then she rubbed it into wrists, arms and legs as well.

When John came in from splitting wood he sniffed the air hopefully, wanting to enjoy the smell of the ratatouille, one of his favorite dishes. Putting the wood down and kissing Orelia on the cheek he noticed how bright, almost burnished her skin looked. He was sorry he had a cold and could not smell her, since her sweet fresh smell always delighted him.

"Still can't smell anything, eh?" she asked.

"Nope."

To which she replied, emphatically, "Good."

One of the sad things about their relationship was that even though she loved John she was unable to expect the best from him. John sometimes thought this was solely his fault, but it wasn't. Orelia had been brought up in a family and a society in which men did not frequently *do* their best in relation to women, but rather a kind of exaggerated approximation of what their male peers told them was correct. Then, too, at a very young age, when she was no more than seven, her older brother, Raymond, gentle and loving, whom she had adored, betrayed her. Her other brothers, insensitive and wild, had designated an ugly, derisive nickname for her, "Rhino" (because even as a little girl dryness caused the skin on elbows and knees to appear gray and thick), which she had borne as well as she could until one day he called her by it. She was shattered and never again really trusted a man not to unexpectedly and obviously hurt her feelings no matter how much she loved him.

So John was not trusted, no matter what he did, and sometimes he pointed this out to her, but mostly he kept quiet. No matter how many times he proved himself different from other

men, in her eyes he always seemed to measure up just the same, and this was depressing. However, he loved Orelia and understood many of the ways she had been hurt by society and her family and empathized with her.

While they were eating he mentioned how glowing she looked and she simply smiled and forked up bowls of salad. He was surprised she didn't tell him immediately what she had done to herself—that was her usual way.

That night before she went to bed she washed herself from face to feet in the tin washbasin he had bought, a feat that regularly amazed him because she did, indeed, manage to get clean in less than a half gallon of water, whereas John felt the need each night to fire up the wood-burning hot water heater and luxuriate under a hot shower that used gallons. While he bathed in the bathhouse outside, she went wild in the kitchen with the olive oil, massaging it into her scalp, between her braids, into her face and body, into her feet. Glowing like a lamp she preceded a bewitched John up the narrow ladder to the sleeping loft.

Alas, the day must soon come when John got back his sense of smell; his colds rarely lasted longer than a week. Orelia thought about this every day as she slathered on the olive oil. She had grown to love the stuff. Unlike her various sweet-smelling oils and creams it really combated and won the battle over her skin's excessive dryness, and its purity brought the glow of honest health to her skin.

Orelia and John had been intimate for so long that any little secret kept from him was like a sharp piece of straw in his sock. One night when the worst of his cold seemed over, he took his shower early so that he could be in the room with her when she

bathed. Over the pages of his *Natural History* he watched her peel the mauve-colored thermal underwear from her dark, glowing body and fill the tin washbasin with hot water from the copper kettle, which was almost the exact color of her face. He watched her soap her cloth and begin industriously if somewhat bemusedly washing her face, neck and ears. He watched her soap and palpate her breasts, and he longed to be where the soap was, covering her deep brown nipples with his tongue. She looked over at him as she moved down her body with the soapy cloth and finally squatted over the pan. John riveted his eyes, which he felt were practically steaming, on a story in his magazine about the upside-down eating habits of flamingoes. By the time he looked up she was sitting decorously in a kitchen chair, her feet soaking in the pan. And while she sat, she was busily rubbing something into her skin.

"What's that?" asked John.

The sad truth is that Orelia considered lying to him. And a lot of memories and unpleasant possibilities went through her mind in a flash. She remembered being a little black girl with little skinny, knock-kneed ashy legs, and how every morning her mother had reminded her to rub them with Vaseline. Vaseline was cheap and very effective. Unfortunately Orelia almost always put on too much or forgot to wipe off the excess and so everything she wore and everything on which she sat retained a slight film of grease. This greasiness about herself and her playmates (most as ashy as she) eventually sickened her, especially when television and movies made it clear that oiliness of any sort automatically put one beyond the social pale. The best white people were never oily, for instance, and she knew they put down readily any poor whites and black people who were. So Orelia graduated to Pond's and Jergens, which did the job

against her ashiness, but not nearly as well or as inexpensively as simple Vaseline.

She thought about men's need to have sweet-smelling women, too, while she waited to answer John. Of John's enjoyment of her body when it was perfumed, especially. Actually, as she thought about it, either of them was likely to come to bed in a cloud of Chanel.

Then she gazed into his eyes, veritable pools of trust. Whatever else John expected of her, he never expected her to lie. He expected the best. Fuck it, she thought.

"You got your smell back?" she asked, as she dried her feet.

"Yeah," said John.

"Well, come here then."

John came toward her, appreciating her glistening body with its full breasts that had nursed children and now gently sloped, and then stood in front of her. She raised herself against him.

"Smell," she said. If he fails me it will be just as I expect, she said to herself, waiting for Raymond's betrayal to be duplicated by John.

John sniffed her cheek and neck and rubbed his nose longingly against her shoulder. "Um," he said, somewhat fervently.

She held up the bottle. "It's olive oil."

"Olive oil, eh?" he said, peering at the bottle and scanning its fine print. "From Italy. It sure looks great on you."

"What do you think of the smell?" she pressed.

"Earthy. Like sandalwood without the sweetness. I like it."

"You do?" She was suddenly radiant. Her love of John flooding her heart.

He looked at her, puzzled. He never knew what was going to make her happy. Sometimes he felt he just blundered along by the grace of God and hit the jackpot.

"I can cure your dandruff problem," she said briskly, picking up a comb. "Sit here between my knees."

"Which a way you wants me to turn my face?" said John slyly, sticking out his lips and grazing her belly button as he kneeled to put a pillow on the floor in front of her chair.

Orelia carefully covered John's shoulders with a towel and soon she was scratching huge flakes (embarrassingly many and large, to John) off his scalp and explaining how dandruff, especially among black people, was caused not only by a lack of moisture, but a lack of oil. "We're dryer than most people," she said, "at least in America we are. Maybe in Africa our diet takes care of the problem." She advised that he throw his Tegrin and Head and Shoulders away.

As careful as a surgeon she divided his hair into dozens of segments and poured small amounts of oil between them. Then, using her fingers and especially her thumbs, she massaged his scalp vigorously, humming a little tune as she did so.

After she'd thoroughly oiled and massaged his scalp (which for the first time in months did not itch) she amused herself by making tiny corkscrew curls, "baby dreads," she called them, all over his head. She explained that tomorrow he could wash out any excess (though surprisingly the oil seemed to have soaked in instantly and there didn't seem to be any) leaving his scalp comfortable and his hair shiny but without any resemblance to the currently fashionable Jheri curl, which relied solely on harsh straightening chemicals and grease and which they both thought made black people look degraded. "Hyena-like," as Orelia described it.

It was all wonderful to John, sitting between Orelia's knees, feeling her hands on his head, listening to her hum and softly

talk to him, an intimacy he'd longed for all his life, but one he had assumed would never be for him. His sisters, with their unruly locks, had enjoyed the haven between his mother's knees and between each other's knees, and between his aunts' cushiony knees, as they fiddled with each other's hair, but he, a boy, had been excluded. He imagined himself as a small child and how much he must have wanted to get between somebody's knees; he imagined the first few times being cajoled and then being pushed away. He knew that if he went far enough back in his memories he would come upon his childhood self weeping and uncomprehending over this.

But now. Look.

John knew there was a full moon, he could feel it in the extra sensitivity of his body, and the fire made a gentle droning sound in the stove; the leaping of the flames threw heat shadows across his face. He felt warm and cozy and accepted into an ancient women's ritual that seemed to work just fine for him too. It turned him on and gave him an idea.

"Let's continue this on yet another plane," he said.

"Say which?" said Orelia, smiling.

While Orelia sat with hair comb dangling John went and got the futon off the guest room bed and flung it on the floor before the fire; he threw down pillows and covered everything with large towels. Throwing off his robe he entreated her to stretch out on the futon, where he immediately joined her, olive oil bottle in hand.

Soon they were oiling each other like children forgotten among the finger paints. Orelia oiled John's knees and elbows especially well, and as she did so she felt the hurt from Raymond's betrayal disappear from her heart. John, who had long

ago learned that we massage the spot on other people that most hurts in us, went to work on Orelia's knees, rubbing a lot but then nibbling and kissing a lot too. Soon they were entwined, the olive oil easing the way to many kinds of smooth and effortless joinings. They laughed to think how like ratatouille and sautéed mushrooms they both tasted, and giggled to be slipping and sliding against each other's bodies like children in mud. And much, much later they fell happily asleep in each other's arms, as oily and contented as any lowlife anywhere. And she was healed of at least one small hurt in her life, and so was he.