

This Sleepless Night
by Lowry Pei

Three weeks ago I saw on a bulletin board, here at the hospital, a notice about a lunchtime lecture to be given by Pan Thakur, Ph.D.: “Why Did the Giraffe Grow His Neck That Long? or, How Children Think about the Purpose of Things.” I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised that Pankaj got a Ph.D. He was a smart guy, and everybody eventually grows up. But why had he cut his first name in half? He was Pankaj when I fell in love with him, and to do that to his name felt like a rejection of me. As if it wasn’t ten years too late to think that way.

He and my other roommate, Dale, had always talked about how they would move to San Francisco or Brooklyn, but perhaps he had never left Boston after all. After I moved out I never saw them again, and when Ben and I married, we did go to California. Afterwards I came back because I wanted to get far away from there and stay away for good. Apparently I’m going to spend my life behind a desk in a hospital, and if I have to do that, Boston is as good a place as there is.

I don’t usually go to these lunchtime talks that medical people give to each other, and I thought it might be Pankaj and about six people in a little room where I wouldn’t be able to hide in the back. As it turned out, there were more like fifteen scattered in a conference room that was too big, eating their lunches. When I first came in he was standing at the lectern trying to get the computer to work; I sat off to the side, by the door. Pankaj’s hair was shorter – he didn’t need to push it back anymore – and had a few sparks of grey in it. His body was older, of course, not as slender as before, but what I really noticed when he started his talk was his ability to hold still. He did not fidget as he spoke, when he gestured it appeared he knew exactly how he meant to

come across. A pro. He must have presented at many conferences, or he taught a lecture course. No doubt some of his students had crushes on him. He was wearing a wedding ring. Allison? Given the subject of his research, I assumed he must have children, handsome like him, reasoning away about the purpose of things, growing up without interruption, living sweet normal oblivious life.

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When I was twenty-four, Pankaj Thakur had straight, black, heavy hair that a woman might envy, and he was forever pushing it back from his face in an unconscious gesture that would have been vain if he had known how good-looking he was. Dale and Pankaj became joined at the hip after he moved into the apartment, living in each other's back pockets, Dale tall and freckled, Pankaj slight and intense. A complementary pair, yet they needed me to make the picture come together. The girls they brought home looked at me sideways and then tried to pretend I didn't exist, because they could tell Dale and Pankaj trusted me in a way they never quite trusted those girls they wanted to sleep with.

Sometimes I gave them a little advice about romance. Dale was a quick learner, he applied my Ask Katie lessons and they improved his luck, which I had fun teasing him about when I wasn't coaching him. But when I went out onto our back porch during a party and saw Pankaj kissing someone, my heart seized up and I knew I was never going to help him do that again with anyone else but me.

Saturday morning, half-awake. I heard Pankaj's door open. He went to the bathroom, then back to his room next to mine. His door closed again. Silence. It was still early. Was he going back to sleep? I wasn't, I was imagining what could so easily happen until there was no choice but to do what could not be undone. I put on my bathrobe, opened the door of Pankaj Thakur's room and slipped inside. Closed it behind me. The curtains were drawn and the room was dim and it smelled like sleep. He was watching me from the bed, eyes wide. "Katie," he said, disbelievingly.

"Can I come visit you?" I said in a low voice.

"Please," he whispered.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and he reached up to touch my neck, my cheek. His fingers were next to my mouth and I turned and took his fingertips between my lips so he could not possibly not understand what came next, and then we were kissing. The first time

you kiss someone you're going to love, you know them – you know something – in a way that is like nothing else in life. The world is suddenly open to you, there are no secrets and you are part of it all, you fly out of yourself and yet you have never been your true self until that moment because your self suddenly includes the person you're kissing, who you've already begun to love.

We kissed until we had to stop and breathe. "I've been thinking about this every second," he said, and pulled me to him again. My heart was racing. I was on top of the covers and he below, I was lying on him and I could feel how hard he was through the blanket that was no longer covering the upper half of him, the half where my robe was now open and we were skin to skin. Then everything that was in the way was gone, my robe was on the floor, his boxers too. His hands were everywhere, telling me how much he wanted me, how happy and scared he was to be having what he had thought was not allowed. His body was more elegant than I had even imagined and what melted my heart the most was that he didn't realize it, he thought he was the so-fortunate one.

Maybe it rubbed off on me, maybe that was my fatal error, to believe that I actually was the greatest of all gifts he could ever receive. Was that why I didn't realize how much I loved him? Or was I just too young to understand that this was what everyone is looking for and mostly never finds . . . it matters what you say and don't say, especially to yourself. What the fuck was I afraid of?

He made love to me with a tenderness I never experienced before that, and never have since, and then other nights he owned me, I don't know how else to say it. It was like he was trying to see how much pleasure I could bear. More than I ever realized. But I think just as often of us sitting in our pajamas with our feet on the scratched-up coffee table and watching a movie and eating Chinese takeout. Pankaj had a blog about . . . what was it about? Being twenty-something. That was enough of a subject in those days. We would make deadpan little anthropological videos of daily life in our apartment, solemnly narrated by me, and post them for the snarky entertainment of our friends. "Note the ritual arrangement of the beer bottle collection, with its subtle commentary on consumer culture." Maybe they're still on the Web, lurking on a server somewhere along with all of the other stuff that refuses to ever go away. But I'm not going to look for them. What was not posted there was our dreams, secret from others but not between us.

I knew we were close, but maybe I didn't believe enough in what I knew. Maybe I didn't understand how close we were. The first time you

feel something, how can you really know what it is you're feeling? You don't have anything to compare it to. I should have just taken my life in my hands and jumped. Everything's clear when it's too late.

What happened after that was like the dream in which it's a matter of life and death to be a certain place at a certain time, but you can't remember where it is, or why you have to go there, and as you frantically search for the all-important thing that you must bring but cannot find, the clock is already repeating *it's too late, everything is lost*. And yet what was needed was right in my hand, and the place and time was there and then, where I already was. I managed not to know that. Worse than ignorant. I must have imagined the world would be this way for me from then on. Pankaj, I've come to believe, knew that it would not, that a person gets one or two chances at best and many people get none at all. Not understanding what matters is a crime that punishes itself in the end.

After it slipped away from us there was a horrible period of mumbled words and avoided glances. I wanted to move out but I didn't have a girlfriend I wanted to live with, and I couldn't afford a place by myself.

I had a life, at work, apart. Everything was much clearer there at the clinic, in the world where everything was clean, keeping the doctors' impossibly complicated schedules, talking calmly to the parents who were beside themselves with worry about their children and who could blame them? Helping them juggle the tests, the x-rays, the blood draws, the CT scans, we'll catch the attending when she comes off rounds, the resident who is on call will see you as soon as he gets a chance. I never let them see me get flustered. For their sake I believed, despite the obvious evidence, that what needed to happen that day would because it had to, and that if it didn't it would not be the end of the world. Except when it was. I saw the children whose skin was purple from chemotherapy as if they had been steeped in grape soda, 4-year-olds dragging IV's on poles, and I knew some of them would die, I knew their parents were enduring things I hoped never to go through. Just live, I kept telling myself, if you're lucky enough to.

Eventually I started going out again. After a while there was a guy named Ben who I didn't call my boyfriend, who sometimes slept over our place and sometimes I slept over his, who grunted at Dale and Pankaj in the morning in a half-friendly way, who knew I had slept with Pankaj. Ben was okay with knowing that because he thought that he,

Ben, relegated every other guy in my life to insignificance, tiny in the rear-view mirror. That made it much easier for me, that he felt that way. He was low maintenance. Little did he know what I told Dale and Pankaj, when we were all three together and had a few drinks in us. I said it as if it were about the three of us: I know you both love me, you know I love you both, it's so funny-sad-ironic, it'll never end. A cowardly, muffled version of what I had not said to Pankaj when we were alone. I meant for him to hear the original behind my words, but it was too late.

Pankaj fell in love with a girl named Allison who I thought was the cover version of me by a second-rate band; he could have had me, he did have me, and all I could think was didn't he see what he was doing? She looked way too much like me, she even liked the same music I listened to. It didn't matter what I thought. He started calling her his girlfriend. He hid her from his immigrant Indian parents, and then he stopped hiding her and they claimed he had broken their hearts. I didn't talk about what he was doing to mine. He didn't talk about what I had done to his.

One night the week before Pankaj moved out to live with her, Dale was doing the sound for some band's gig in Somerville, and Allison was in Connecticut visiting her parents. Pankaj and I had a few glasses of wine and we were sitting on the couch with our feet up on the coffee table, reminiscing about stuff the three of us had done, and I kissed him on the cheek because something he said about me was sweet. He kissed me on the cheek as well. "Thank you so much," I said.

We looked at each other ironically. "It was the least I could do," he said.

"That's for sure."

I picked up his hand that was lying on the couch between us, laced my fingers through his. He gave me another look, not as ironic. "Still fits," I said.

"Don't get me in trouble."

"Nobody ever has to know."

There was a longish silence. He didn't take his hand away. "Why are you doing this?" he said.

"Why are you? I was in love with you." I stopped myself from adding "and I still am." Why I did that I'll never know. He wouldn't meet my eyes. "Didn't you know that?"

He closed his eyes as if it hurt to be asked that.

"Didn't you?"

“I don’t know, Katie,” he said in such a sad voice, letting go of my hand, and then he reached for me like we were still lovers. We made love in his room whose walls were now bare, the room I would move into after he left, in the bed he wasn’t going to take with him, which would be mine. Light from a streetlamp shone in between the curtains and made an orangey stripe on the ceiling. I could see how he was looking at me and I willed him to remember this when he was with Allison, to think of me when he entered her, to still want me whether he should or not.

After hours in bed, I kissed him goodbye and went to sleep in my own bed so Dale wouldn’t find us together. “You always know where to find me,” I said to him as I left his room. I was so full of having him again that I couldn’t feel the loss. So happy I didn’t even seem to know what I couldn’t help but know, that it was the last time.

In the morning it wasn’t so easy.

When I left that apartment Ben helped me move out, and once we got my mountain of stuff piled into my new room, I was too tired to try to organize it. We closed the door on it and went back to his place, flopped side by side on his bed; my legs were ready to give out after climbing the stairs over and over with heavy boxes, and Ben had carried twice as much as I had. “Remind me to be out of town next time,” he said, with his arm over his eyes.

“Yeah, me too.”

We slept for a while, and when I woke up he wasn’t there. I heard the refrigerator door, then something thrown clattering into a kitchen drawer. “Ah,” he said. Beer, no doubt. He turned on the TV. After a few minutes he opened the bedroom door and peered in, saw me looking back at him. “Want something to eat?” he said.

“Not right now.”

He came and sat down on the bed, beer in hand, leaned back and stretched his legs out beside me. I was still sleepy; I moved a little closer to him. The TV was still talking in the background. He smelled good, like a guy. His hand fiddled with my hair. All of a sudden I wanted to cry. Maybe he could tell how I felt. I heard him put his beer down, and then he slid down in the bed and put his arms around me. A couple of tears leaked out, but I don’t think he noticed. “I’ve got you now,” he said, and I nodded my head against him; I knew he could feel me do it. We had never said anything like that to each other, had always avoided the topic of what we were, and now it seemed that it was all said, all decided. The important things in life take forever to come,

and then when they come, they catch you unready and they've happened before you even know it.

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When Sylvie was born I was finally anchored; I was part of all the aliveness before me, and around me, and that would come after me. Before that I had been floating somewhere just to the side of my own life; even marrying Ben had not really changed that. But as soon as Sylvie was there, I couldn't imagine that I could ever have been anything but her mother. Nothing else was thinkable. Ben felt the same way, I know, and so I was, as a side effect, finally his wife.

Mostly I picture Sylvie as a toddler or a three-year-old, always busy. When she moved from place to place she didn't walk, she ran; that was her natural speed. If she stubbed her toe and tripped and set up a wail that filled the house, that didn't slow her down any once she got up again. I didn't know what geniuses toddlers are until I watched Sylvie learn to talk. One day when she was two and a half we were having some silly conversation, and she said without batting an eyelash, "I have no pockets." How could she possibly have said that? A few months before that, she hadn't even known to say "I." It would be "No! *Sylvie* do it." From that to "I have no pockets" was too far to jump by anything but a miracle. I miss her every day. I miss myself, too, alive with her. Like hers, my chance at life came and went.

When Sylvie was three years and three months old, the Rio Vista earthquake happened and the earthen levees in the Delta turned to mush. Our house fell on her and the babysitter, and it took three days before the recovery team could dig their bodies out of the mud. Eleven other people were killed that night. But Ben and I were having date night at a restaurant in Lodi and we survived. I was there when they found Sylvie; I saw her pulled from the wreckage, motionless and covered in mud. I never look when they show footage of disasters on TV.

After Sylvie's funeral, we moved to a place on higher ground near Sacramento. And after the months of being on emergency reserve power all the time were behind us, and it was time to take up everyday life again, there were no more defenses and it became impossible to bear being seen. I don't know what the voice in Ben's head said when he looked me in the eye, and I didn't dare ask. Mine said to me, You were reading the menu when your daughter died. The depth of that depravity was unspeakable. How could he look at me, how dare he say that he

loved me, how dare anyone love a person who had done that? “All we can do is live,” Ben said. “We don’t have a choice.”

It seems cruel that people are programmed for survival at all costs. Why is there not something inborn that lets you get it over with? Ben was right, but just living was what I couldn’t bear to see myself fall back into. I had to start to forget but that would be one more unforgivable. I had to make dinner at least once in a while, ignore it if Ben watched a football game, find a way to listen to him talk about his workplace where the engineering of wind turbines went on as if nothing had changed. I had to resume taking online courses in health care administration. I had to agree to try again to get pregnant. I could not do any of these things. Ben took me by the hand and virtually dragged me out the door, made me take a walk with him in a park around the corner from our apartment, hoping for the last time that something would open my mouth, or my heart, so that I would say all of the unbearable things and then we would be able to leave them there, to dissipate in the air, and walk home and re-begin our lives. I was hoarding the loss of Sylvie in some irrevocably stubborn part of myself, where words and forgiveness could not reach it, and I clutched it all the tighter because there was a playground in the park. He should have known better than to take me there. But America is a mine-field of playgrounds, toy shops, Sesame Street . . . what was he supposed to do? Very gently, because he is a good person, he said, “I can’t just stay stuck forever, Katie.”

There are times when it’s easier to have everything be your fault.

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I found it very hard to pay attention to what Pankaj was saying from the podium, though I’m sure it was interesting enough. I was distracted by thinking about how Sylvie had her own ideas about the purpose of things at age three, and the lack of purpose in her death or, perhaps, in my survival. I wasn’t hearing Pankaj’s words but rather the sound of his voice, which was, despite the difference in his appearance, the same voice I had known, had lived with for nearly two years, had heard in the dark, in the middle of the night in bed. I had heard that voice say my name while we made love.

When he finished there was perfunctory applause, and a female med student who looked about fifteen hurried to buttonhole him and ask him questions. I lurked by the door while the room emptied out. Pankaj logged out of the system, the screen was blank white for a moment and then winked off, he and the med student drifted toward

the door, the student thanked him and left in a rush to be somewhere else. "Pankaj," I said. He was only a few feet away but he seemed not to have noticed I was there; he stopped and stared at me, on guard.

"Nobody calls me that."

I let him stare for a few seconds, but nothing happened. "Do you really not know who I am?" Too humiliating, I should have known better.

"Holy crap," he said. His face changed, it was no longer frowning and professional. I could feel myself smiling at him. "That's more like it," I said.

"You work here?" Of course I had my I.D. on a lanyard around my neck and he was eyeing it.

"For a couple of years. What about you?"

"B.U."

"You have a lab there?"

"It's not my lab, I'm a post-doc."

"Did you marry Allison?"

His eyes slid off to the side evasively. "No."

"None of my business?"

"It's a long story. No, I married a nice desi girl, just like I was supposed to. And you?"

"I'm not married." Easier by far to stop there. But I could see he knew I was holding out on him. There was a frozen moment of awkwardness. Just say it. "I was. You remember Ben, the guy I – " Pankaj nodded impatiently as if he didn't want to hear any more about him. "We got married, but . . ."

"You don't have to tell me," he said gently. I felt exposed, transparent, he could read how I felt.

"Can we have lunch?"

He glanced up at the clock over the door. "I have to go."

"I don't mean right now."

He regarded me steadily, with the same impressive stillness. Oh. Wait, was that what I meant? I lost track of my body. I wasn't there all solid and breathing, with the blood always circulating. Just an unattached awareness watching him and waiting for whatever he was going to say.

"Okay," Pankaj said. "I'll give you a call. You must be in the hospital directory, right?"

"I am."

"Okay. I gotta go," he said, as if he needed me to release him from the moment.

I nodded. "Okay," I said, and he was out the door and I was standing in the conference room alone, heartbeat back in action, blood circulating again. Would he ever make that phone call? No. Yes. What if he did? The thought scared me and I was almost certain it scared him too.

A week passed and Pankaj didn't call. I looked him up online and found the abstracts of articles he co-authored, the lab he worked in, his B.U. email address. I hadn't really desired anyone since Sylvie died. Maybe it was only the memory of him that I wanted. Or was it to be what I was then? To have been that young felt like a far-fetched story – to have been that naked with him, wanting him that openly, having him in a way that felt like nothing could ever be secret between us again – did such things really happen to me? Or to anybody, or was that just something I read about once . . . why even remember such moments if they could never happen again. I gnawed at each day like stale bread that satisfied no need.

On the subway I saw a young couple, early 20's, in a state of love so complete it was apparently unconscious. They were standing; he was leaning against a handrail, and she was leaning against him. Most of the time his hand was curved around her side, and she kept one hand or both on him, sometimes leaning her head against him, resting her cheek against his upper chest. They had no expression and they only now and then talked. Their air was mostly one of being lost in thought, in a shared privacy. At times his hand, instead of holding her, held the wide shoulder strap of her bag; the bag was an extension of her, the way they were part of each other's body. They did not seem any more aware of touching than they were of breathing. I was not the only passenger who noticed them, but they had no air of knowing they were being seen; it wasn't a performance, even for themselves. It was the only way they could imagine being, this state of grace.

I emailed him, suggesting we could have lunch at Elephant Walk. It was close to B.U. and not too far from the hospital. An innocuous email that would incriminate no one if anyone else should read it over his shoulder. The restaurant was also close to my apartment, but the email didn't mention that. A week passed; no response. So nothing would happen and probably that was for the best.

I picked up the phone at work and it wasn't a patient or a doctor, it was Pankaj Thakur.

By the time we finished our lunch he knew how Sylvie died, which is not something I would even begin to tell most people. I wasn't sure if I could say it to him without losing control completely. But I got through it; I needed him to know. I learned that he had no children, yet. An uncomfortable look crossed his face when I asked him that, and when I asked how he liked being married. I knew he was on edge, he alternated between devouring me with his eyes and trying not to look at me. I saw the elegant boy I had made love to in the man sitting before me, the scientist and citizen in clean, rational armor. I needed to pierce it. "Did you ever tell Allison about the last time you and I slept together?"

He flushed slightly, with anger perhaps. "No," he admitted. Then he signalled to the waiter and asked for the check.

As we were walking out side by side I was almost sure he still wanted me. I had always been the one to make it happen, but it was easier then.

We were standing awkwardly on Beacon St. outside the restaurant and I said, "I live about three blocks down, on the other side."

His lips compressed in a barely noticeable way. "What do you want from me?"

"Can't you tell? You always did know, I never could hide it."

"Stop," he said.

I was dizzy with recklessness. I hadn't felt fully alive in several years and I had nothing to lose. "I still love you," I said; I had been waiting ten years to say those words.

He half-turned away and breathed out, then looked back at me. "Kate, I'm married." He kept his voice low as if he was afraid someone would overhear us. But over the fence of marriage he was looking at me with sadness and desire. Or else I was deceiving myself, and how would I ever know the difference? "If you love me don't fuck up my life." I thought he wanted to turn and walk away but couldn't quite do it.

"I'm only telling you the truth."

"Sometimes it's better not to."

"Really?"

We regarded each other. Hope that I shouldn't have had anyway drained out of me. "You can afford to tell the truth," Pankaj said, "but I can't afford to hear it."

"You're okay with that, like, being your life?"

"So long," he said, and left me standing there.

Three days later he sent me an email:

I intended not to contact you again, but I want to say one thing as an old friend. You need to think seriously about what a good life would be. You need to take other people seriously, their lives, their feelings. People have lives separate from yours. Other people aren't about your happiness. Or your unhappiness. You need to understand that. – P.

It was like picking up a skillet with my bare hand and realizing, too late, it just came out of the oven. I was already burned before I could drop it. I deleted the message, as if I could unread it by doing that. Then I moved it out of the trash back into my inbox. I knew I would have to read it again and again, whether I wanted to or not.

He's right of course. I know nothing about how to live, nothing at all. All I know is I wouldn't trust anyone who claimed to know how I should go about existing on this earth, including Pankaj, who I guess is holding onto a semblance of innocence. Why shouldn't life desire itself? If it didn't, we wouldn't be here. And as long as we are, what's the point of pretending to be something we're not? So I continue, without certainties, not knowing who to tell my truths to, or if they'll ever be true to anyone but me.