

## MOT

A man cursed a man on a plane. The curser was my husband, Mark. The cursee was thing altogether. We'd been sitting on a plane for five hours, in upright Egyptian god plane posture, arms rigid at the waist, staring into the eternal headrest. Mark had just woken up as we landed. He sprang to his feet. He was an amateur boxer in his youth and would sometimes wake up swinging. "Glass jars?" I asked him the first time he mumbled in my ear. But we've been married a long time now.

We were returning from a conference in reproductive endocrinology, Mark's specialty. Once he was telling me a story about a couple of patients and I stopped him and said, "Hold up, who and who?" Mark continued to eat pickles, with uniform speed. Devi, our daughter, who wants to be an architect, calls him *a machine for eating*. "Did you just tell me two men were in your consulting room, talking about fertility issues?"

Mark's eyes filled with tears. In my childhood anyone crying and eating pickles out of a jar must be wearing a tampon. That's why, when I married Mark, I married both up and out.

"Pete is one of seven boys, big Catholic family; he is terrified they'll have a girl."

"Who?"

"Pete and Greg—Oops, gotta go." He kissed me and drove back to the hospital. This is Mark. He doesn't care who you are, or what hairy wristed hand you're holding, life is his life.

A few seats ahead of us sat the indie rock sensation, Bark Smith, lead singer. The plane was small, without a first class. The place had been buzzing since we took off, everyone hunched over their camera phones. Mark had conferenced for three days without a break, a middle-aged, near-sighted Buddha, answering koans about sperm motility. My point is that he was eager to get home, had possibly punched an imaginary cut man, and may have ingested some free ear plugs. Across the aisle a woman struggled to pull her bag out of the overhead and as Mark reached up to help her, Bark got up and took off, a fellow with dead white hair, trying to get his luggage, fell back into his seat as Bark pushed past, followed by cA\$\$ and Rita Rhododendron and I have to apologize that I know their names, several of the favorite sexual positions, and their typical Star Bucks order. I lack the mechanism in most humans that is able to turn off celebrity. My adoptive family, who believed Satan was announcing End Days by placing He-Man in Toys Backward R Us had forbidden all media consumption to me as a child. So my immunity is shot. Maybe somewhere my birth mother is sitting in front of multiple screens, with magazines spread out like a buffet, wondering what happened to the daughter she gave up, but it is too late for that.

Mark, who had no idea who Bark was turned and hissed a phrase. "Did you just say something to Bark?" I asked.

"No, I didn't see any dogs. Just that fellow who was rude as hell and..." he pointed to the man now hobbling down the aisle. "To that poor albino!"

“You did. You said something in Yiddish?” Mark saw the glint in my eye. Yiddish just does that to me. So it wasn’t until later that I shook Mark awake. “Kiss your canvas?” he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

“Mark. *Mark*. What did you say to Bark on the plane?”

“Wat?”

“You cursed him in Yiddish.”

“My grandfather taught it to me, but only to be used for really rude people” Then he rolled over and fell back asleep.

And that was that. Until it wasn’t. Because a few weeks later I was at an open house with Kathy, my decorator neighbor She has the glasses, ego and opinions of a master builder but the clientele of a Lego builder. We live in Oregon. At most people want a hutch for their artisanal chickens. When her marriage collapsed she guilted me into being her project manager, an easy job as there were no projects to manage. She haunted McMansion open houses for clients who wanted their domestic footprint Big Foot.

At the Open House a magazine caught my eye. “Bark: STFU” it read. This does not mean Studies Tibetan Flute at University. The story detailed the off-the-cuff caught on camera followed by a centipede’s worth of feet in mouth; then the cell video, then the Tumblr tumble, then the Reddit regret, then the twee tweet and the sound of multiple label droppings. It was an old story with new speed. One minute he’s flying home from a legendary set that is guaranteed to shoot him to stardom and the next thing he’s, well, cursed.

I drove home and turned on the radio, hoping for some soothing music but instead there was an interview with one of those celebrity hanger-ons, now a respectable and full time profession. The hanger-on was speaking about the starlet they currently hung onto: “You know she’s got her finger on the pulse because she was the absolute first one to date albino.”

I arrived home and cooked dinner. Mark systematically consumed everything on his plate, while smiling up at me. He is a joy to cook for. Devi rushed in, opened the fridge and took out a bottle of seaweed and said yes, she’d finished her homework and no she wasn’t staying because she and Rachel were going to plan the climate change intervention whilst watching a twitter war unfold on the big screen.

“Between Rita Rhododendron and Bark?”

“Mom, I am alternately *aww* and *euww* that you know those names but one thing is, I am not surprised.” Then she kissed some of the air near our faces and left.

I turned to Mark. “Look, what happened with your curse.”

“What curse?”

“The one on the plane. The wires got crossed and now one person falls as another rises, as if they were on a kind of cosmic tetter-totter. What was that curse?”

Mark continued eating. I felt a rare emotion as I looked into his eyes. I felt angry at Mark. I got up and slammed the door, then threw some pillows in the hall and slammed it again

This was Friday. By Tuesday my anger had not abated but spread like an Oklahoma dust cloud, covering everything. Mark had taken to passing the bedroom door whispering softly what a *shtunk* I am, to see you *ungabluzum* but to no avail. On Thursday Kathy called. Her antennae for miserable menfolk were as sensitive as a Geiger counter.

“He’s a doctor, for chrissake.” She hissed over the phone. “He’s going to dump you for his nurse any day!” Actually Marks’ nurse was Miss Aimee, a Haitian who had arrived, minus papers, twenty years ago. Mark hired her, sponsored her citizenship and she has ever after ruled over his office with an iron fist. Her grasp of medical codes is Talmudic. I tried to imagine her seductively bent over a desk, but all I could hear was her distinct *Uh-huh* as men in black socks and shaved chests, slunk away in shame. When I converted—three times, once Reform, once Conservative and once Modern Orthodox—Miss Aimee was the only person I took into confidence about whether any of them were going to take.

So Kathy set me up on a date. She said, I was “separated.” I guess I had been separated from Mark for seventy-two hours. These are accelerated times. Kathy seemed so happy, I hated to disappoint her. I arrived at La Chic Beaver, a French bistro in Oregon City. The man who rose when I walked in had salt-and-pepper hair, a face like a steak and an impeccably fitted sports coat. He looked like an architect, which is to say he sold insurance. He took my arm and led us to dinner.

“What happened between you and your ex?” he asked, though I had been advised against this date topic once by Anne Hathaway. Not directly but you know, universally, to millions.

“He shouted at someone on a plane.”

“I abhor violence,” said the man, whose name I was struggling to remember. Ryan? Dan? Juan? “Unless a safe word has been established first.” I had never been to Le Beaver before. The menus were the size of colonial shutters. The man said “I’ll have the steak and my lady will have the halibut a la Roscoe.” I put down my menu. “And I’ll have salmon,” I said. As we waited for our food, the man suddenly took my hand across the table. “I feel our connection,” he said. “I’ve really never felt this way about a woman before.”

“Sure,” I said.

His smile broadened. “I am so glad,” he whispered. “I love a female who takes what she wants sexually.” I felt this person was going to have a hard time getting dates, but then realized I was on one with him, so maybe not. Across the snowy tablecloth, he regarded his salad. He used his fork to turn over a couple of leaves before settling on a crouton. The bus person who was filling my goblet mutter to follow her, pronto. In the foyer, she grabbed my hand. “Devi,” I said, “You got a job! I’m so proud!”

“The Beav? Eww. I just came to get you out of here. We’re having a family meeting.” Well, I usually call the family meetings, but Devi hadn’t taken my hand since she was twelve.

On the way she lectured me. “Mom, you are going to be terrible at dating. I just know. Come home.” We went into the house where Mark, pasty-faced, was reading a cereal box. Devi turned on her laptop and our son, LaMotta’s handsome face appeared. I have no idea how Mark and I produced such attractive children. Then I told everyone what had happened and as I was telling the story, I realized what should have been obvious all along. I needed to reach out to Bark and tell him he had been wronged.

“No,” said our handsome, disembodied son, “Dad needs to do it. He’s the one who screwed up.”

“If he’s famous how will we reach him?” asked Mark. Even in misery, his natural practicality shone. “Devi could always IM Rita Rhododendron,” I said. Devi put her head in her hands and groaned. “Mom. Stop.” “I’m sorry. It’s due to my upbringing. Because I have no natural kinship systems, I reach out to celebrities.”

Devi took LaMotta into the living room and I moved one inch closer to Mark. He began a long, blubbery apology, which I was enjoying when Devi returned with her brother now folded away.

“Rita Rhododendron, no,” said Devi, “but cA\$\$ is chill and I am an A\$\$tronaut.” My phone rang and it was Kathy, wanting to know if it would destroy our friendship for her to date my former lover, Edgar.

“Who?”

“Who? The man you had a relationship with, after Mark.”

“He orders a lot of food,” I offered insightfully. “But doesn’t really eat it.”

A week later Devi came into the living room and waved an envelope in my face. I said, “Is this the address for Dad to write to Bark?”

“*Write?* That’s totally weird. No, Dad skyped him last week. They had a long chat about boxer briefs. This is for you. I did some research and this is the sealed address of your birth mother, Mom.”

“But it’s opened.”

“Whatever. I did all the work. But, it’s so exciting—look at the name. See? She might be Jewish! You can learn your own curses and won’t have to depend on Dad.”

Was that really the lesson here? That I can now curse? Maybe. But if I walk in, open my arms to my natural mother and see a TV, radio, cell phone, laptop and a big stack of magazines, I may say: You have family now. Raise up your eyes and bless us instead.