

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

LIONEL
SHRIVER

INTRODUCTION BY
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Dear Franklin,

I'm unsure why one trifling incident this afternoon has moved me to write to you. But since we've been separated, I may most miss coming home to deliver the narrative curiosities of my day, the way a cat might lay mice at your feet: the small, humble offerings that couples proffer after foraging in separate backyards. Were you still installed in my kitchen, slathering crunchy peanut butter on Branola though it was almost time for dinner, I'd no sooner have put down the bags, one leaking a clear viscous drool, than this little story would come tumbling out, even before I chided that we're having pasta tonight so would you please not eat that whole sandwich.

In the early days, of course, my tales were exotic imports, from Lisbon, from Katmandu. But no one wants to hear stories from abroad, really, and I could detect from your telltale politeness that you privately preferred anecdotal trinkets from closer to home: an eccentric encounter with a toll collector on the George Washington Bridge, say. Marvels from the mundane helped to ratify your view that all my foreign travel was a kind of cheating. My souvenirs—a packet of slightly stale Belgian waffles, the British expression for “piffle” (*codswallop!*)—were artificially imbued with magic by mere dint of distance. Like those baubles the Japanese exchange—in a box in a bag, in a box in a bag—the sheen on my offerings from far afield was

all packaging. What a more considerable achievement, to root around in the untransubstantiated rubbish of plain old New York state and scrounge a moment of piquancy from a trip to the Nyack Grand Union.

Which is just where my story takes place. I seem finally to be learning what you were always trying to teach me, that my own country is as exotic and even as perilous as Algeria. I was in the dairy aisle and didn't need much; I wouldn't. I never eat pasta these days, without you to dispatch most of the bowl. I do miss your gusto.

It's still difficult for me to venture into public. You would think, in a country that so famously has "no sense of history," as Europeans claim, that I might cash in on America's famous amnesia. No such luck. No one in this "community" shows any signs of forgetting, after a year and eight months—to the day. So I have to steel myself when provisions run low. Oh, for the clerks at the 7-Eleven on Hopewell Street my novelty has worn off, and I can pick up a quart of milk without glares. But our regular Grand Union remains a gauntlet.

I always feel furtive there. To compensate, I force my back straight, my shoulders square. I see now what they mean by "holding your head high," and I am sometimes surprised by how much interior transformation a ramrod posture can afford. When I stand physically proud, I feel a small measure less mortified.

Debating medium eggs or large, I glanced toward the yogurts. A few feet away, a fellow shopper's frazzled black hair went white at the roots for a good inch, while its curl held only at the ends: an old permanent grown out. Her lavender top and matching skirt may have once been stylish, but now the blouse bound under the arms and the peplum served to emphasize heavy hips. The outfit needed pressing, and the padded shoulders bore the faint stripe of fading from a wire hanger. Something from the nether regions of the closet, I concluded, what you reach for when everything else is filthy or on the floor. As the woman's head tilted toward the processed cheese, I caught the crease of a double chin.

Don't try to guess; you'd never recognize her from that portrait. She was once so neurotically svelte, sharply cornered, and glossy as if commercially gift wrapped. Though it may be more romantic to picture the bereaved as gaunt, I imagine you can grieve as efficiently with chocolates as with tap water. Besides, there are women who keep themselves sleek and smartly turned out less to please a spouse than to keep up with a daughter, and, thanks to us, she lacks that incentive these days.

It was Mary Woolford. I'm not proud of this, but I couldn't face her. I reeled. My hands went clammy as I fumbled with the carton, checking that the eggs were whole. I rearranged my features into those of a shopper who had just remembered something in the next aisle over and managed to place the eggs on the child-seat without turning. Scuttling off on this pretense of mission, I left the cart behind, because the wheels squeaked. I caught my breath in soup.

I should have been prepared, and often am—girded, guarded, often to no purpose as it turns out. But I can't clank out the door in full armor to run every silly errand, and besides, how can Mary harm me now? She has tried her damndest; she's taken me to court. Still, I could not tame my heartbeat, nor return to dairy right away, even once I realized that I'd left that embroidered bag from Egypt, with my wallet, in the cart.

Which is the only reason I didn't abandon the Grand Union altogether. I eventually had to skulk back to my bag, and so I meditated on Campbell's asparagus and cheese, thinking aimlessly how Warhol would be appalled by the redesign.

By the time I crept back the coast was clear, and I swept up my cart, abruptly the busy professional woman who must make quick work of domestic chores. A familiar role, you would think. Yet it's been so long since I thought of myself that way that I felt sure the folks ahead of me at checkout must have pegged my impatience not as the imperiousness of the second-earner for whom time is money, but as the moist, urgent panic of a fugitive.

When I unloaded my motley groceries, the egg carton felt sticky, which moved the salesclerk to flip it open. Ah. Mary Woolford had spotted me after all.

“All twelve!” the girl exclaimed. “I’ll have them get you another carton.”

I stopped her. “No, no,” I said. “I’m in a hurry. I’ll take them as they are.”

“But they’re totally—”

“I’ll take them as they are!” There’s no better way to get people to cooperate in this country than by seeming a little unhinged. After dabbing pointedly at the price code with a Kleenex, she scanned the eggs, then wiped her hands on the tissue with a rolled eye.

“*Khatchadourian*,” the girl pronounced when I handed her my debit card. She spoke loudly, as if to those waiting in line. It was late afternoon, the right shift for an after-school job; plausibly about seventeen, this girl could have been one of Kevin’s classmates. Sure, there are half a dozen high schools in this area, and her family might have just moved here from California. But from the look in her eye I didn’t think so. She fixed me with a hard stare. “That’s an unusual name.”

I’m not sure what got into me, but I’m so tired of this. It’s not that I have no shame. Rather, I’m exhausted with shame, slippery all over with its sticky albumen taint. It is not an emotion that leads anywhere. “I’m the only *Khatchadourian* in New York state,” I flouted, and snatched my card back. She threw my eggs in a bag, where they drooled a little more.

So now I’m home—what passes for it. Of course you’ve never been here, so allow me to describe it for you.

You’d be taken aback. Not least because I’ve opted to remain in Gladstone, after kicking up such a fuss about moving to the suburbs in the first place. But I felt I should stay within driving distance of Kevin. Besides, much as I crave anonymity, it’s not that I want my neighbors to forget who I am; I want to, and that is not

an opportunity any town affords. This is the one place in the world where the ramifications of my life are fully felt, and it's far less important to me to be liked these days than to be understood.

I'd enough of a pittance left over after paying off the lawyers to buy a little place of my own, but the tentativeness of renting suited. Likewise my living in this Tinkertoy duplex seemed a fitting marriage of temperaments. Oh, you'd be horrified; its flimsy pressboard cabinetry defies your father's motto, "Materials are everything." But it is this very quality of barely hanging on that I cherish.

Everything here is precarious. The steep stairway to the second floor has no banister, spicing my ascent to bed with vertigo after three glasses of wine. The floors creak and the window frames leak, and there is an air about the place of fragility and underconfidence, as if at any moment the entire structure might simply blink out like a bad idea. Swinging on rusty coat hangers from a live wire across the ceiling, the tiny halogen bulbs downstairs have a tendency to flicker, and their tremulous light contributes to the on-again, off-again sensation that permeates my new life. Likewise the innards of my sole telephone socket are disgorged; my uncertain connection to the outside world dangles by two poorly soldered wires, and it often cuts off. Though the landlord has promised me a proper stove, I really don't mind the hot plate—whose "on" light doesn't work. The inside handle of the front door often comes off in my hand. So far I've been able to work it back on again, but the stump of the lock shaft teases me with intimations of my mother: unable to leave the house.

I recognize, too, my duplex's broad tendency to stretch its resources to the very limit. The heating is feeble, rising off the radiators in a stale, shallow breath, and though it is only early November, I have already cranked their regulators on full. When I shower, I use all hot water and no cold; it's just warm enough that I don't shiver, but awareness that there is no reserve permeates my ablutions with disquiet. The refrigerator dial is set at its highest point, and the milk keeps only three days.

As for the decor, it evokes a quality of mockery that feels apt. The downstairs is painted in a slapdash, abrasively bright yellow, the brush-strokes careless and aerated with streaks of underlying white, as if scrawled with crayon. Upstairs in my bedroom, the walls are sponged amateurishly in aqua, like primary-school daubs. This tremulous little house—it doesn't feel quite *real*, Franklin. And neither do I.

Yet I do hope that you're not feeling sorry for me; it's not my intention that you do. I might have found more palatial accommodation, if that's what I wanted. I like it here, in a way. It's unserious, toy. I live in a dollhouse. Even the furniture is out of scale. The dining table strikes chest-high, which makes me feel underage, and the little bedside table on which I have perched this laptop is much too low for typing—about the right height for serving coconut cookies and pineapple juice to kindergartners.

Maybe this askew, juvenile atmosphere helps to explain why yesterday, in a presidential election, I didn't vote. I simply forgot. Everything around me seems to take place so far away. And now rather than pose a firm counterpoint to my dislocation, the country seems to have joined me in the realm of the surreal. The votes are tallied. But as in some Kafka tale, no one seems to know who won.

And I have this dozen eggs—what's left of them. I've emptied the remains into a bowl and fished out the shards of shell. If you were here I might whip us up a nice frittata, with diced potato, cilantro, that one teaspoon of sugar that's the secret. Alone, I'll slop them in a skillet, scramble, and sullenly pick. But I will eat them all the same. There was something about Mary's gesture that I found, in an inchoate sort of way, rather elegant.

Food revulsed me at first. Visiting my mother in Racine, I turned green before her stuffed dolma, though she'd spent all day blanching grape leaves and rolling the lamb and rice filling into neat parcels; I reminded her they could be frozen. In Manhattan, when I scurried past the 57th Street deli on the way to Harvey's

law office, the peppery smell of pastrami fat would flip my stomach. But the nausea passed, and I missed it. When after four or five months I began to get hungry—ravenous, in fact—the appetite struck me as unseemly. So I continued to act the part of a woman who'd lost interest in food.

But after about a year, I faced the fact that the theater was wasted. If I grew cadaverous, no one cared. What did I expect, that you would wrap my rib cage with those enormous hands in which horses must be measured, lifting me overhead with the stern reproach that is every Western woman's sly delight, "You're too thin"?

So now I eat a croissant with my coffee every morning, picking up every flake with a moistened forefinger. Methodically chopping cabbage occupies a portion of these long evenings. I have even declined, once or twice, those few invitations out that still jangle my phone, usually friends from abroad who e-mail from time to time, but whom I haven't seen for years. Especially if they don't know, and I can always tell; innocents sound too roisterous, whereas initiates begin with a deferential stutter and a hushed, churchy tone. Obviously I don't want to recite the story. Nor do I covet the mute commiseration of friends who *don't know what to say* and so leave me to spill my guts by way of making conversation. But what really drives me to make my apologies about how "busy" I am is that I am terrified we will both order a salad and the bill will arrive and it will only be 8:30 or 9:00 at night and I will go home to my tiny duplex and have nothing to chop.

It's funny, after so long on the road for A Wing and a Prayer—a different restaurant every night, where waiters speak Spanish or Thai, whose menus list sevice or dog—that I should have grown so fixated on this fierce routine. Horribly, I remind myself of my mother. But I cannot break with this narrow sequence (square of cheese or six to seven olives; breast of chicken, chop, or omelet; hot vegetable; single vanilla sandwich cookie; no more wine than will finish exactly half the bottle) as if I am walking a balance

beam, and with one step off I will topple. I have had to disallow snow peas altogether because their preparation is insufficiently arduous.

Anyway, even with the two of us estranged, I knew you would worry about whether I was eating. You always did. Thanks to Mary Woolford's feeble revenge this evening, I am amply fed. Not all of our neighbors' antics have proved so anodyne.

Those gallons of crimson paint splashed all over the front porch, for example, when I was still living in our nouveau riche ranch house (that's what it was, Franklin, whether or not you like the sound of it—a *ranch house*) on Palisades Parade. Over the windows, the front door. They came in the night, and by the time I woke the next morning the paint had almost dried. I thought at the time, only a month or so after—whatever am I going to call that Thursday?—that I couldn't be horrified anymore, or wounded. I suppose that's a common conceit, that you've already been so damaged that damage itself, in its totality, makes you safe.

As I turned the corner from the kitchen into the living room that morning, I recognized this notion that I was impervious for codswallop. I gasped. The sun was streaming in the windows, or at least through the panes not streaked with paint. It also shone through in spots where the paint was thinnest, casting the off-white walls of that room in the lurid red glow of a garish Chinese restaurant.

I'd always made it a policy, one you admired, to face what I feared, though this policy was conceived in days when my fears ran to losing my way in a foreign city—child's play. What I would give now to return to the days when I'd no idea what lay in wait (*child's play* itself, for example). Still, old habits die hard, so rather than flee back to our bed and draw up the covers, I resolved to survey the damage. But the front door stuck, glued shut with thick crimson enamel. Unlike latex, enamel isn't water soluble. And enamel is expensive, Franklin. Someone made a serious

investment. Of course, our old neighborhood has any number of deficiencies, but one of them has never been money.

So I went out the side door and around to the front in my robe. Taking in our neighbors' artwork, I could feel my face set in the same "impassive mask" the *New York Times* described from the trial. The *Post*, less kindly, depicted my expression throughout as "defiant," and our local *Journal News* went even further: "From Eva Khatchadourian's stony implacability, her son might have done nothing more egregious than dip a pigtail in an inkwell." (I grant that I stiffened in court, squinting and sucking my cheeks against my molars; I remember grasping at one of your tough-guy mottoes, "Don't let 'em see you sweat." But Franklin, "defiant"? I was trying not to cry.)

The effect was quite magnificent, if you had a taste for the sensational, which by that point I certainly didn't. The house looked as if its throat were slit. Splashed in wild, gushing Rorschachs, the hue had been chosen so meticulously—deep, rich, and luscious, with a hint of purplish blue—that it might have been specially mixed. I thought dully that had the culprits requested this color rather than pulled it off the shelf, the police might be able to track them down.

I wasn't about to walk into a police station again unless I had to.

My kimono was thin, the one you gave me for our first anniversary back in 1980. Meant for summer, it was the only wrap I had from you, and I wouldn't reach for anything else. I've thrown so much away, but nothing you gave me or left behind. I admit that these talismans are excruciating. That is why I keep them. Those bullying therapeutic types would claim that my cluttered closets aren't "healthy." I beg to differ. In contrast to the cringing, dirty pain of Kevin, of the paint, the criminal and civil trials, this pain is *wholesome*. Much belittled in the sixties, wholesomeness is a property I have come to appreciate as surprisingly scarce.

The point is, clutching that soft blue cotton and assessing the somewhat slapdash paint job that our neighbors had seen fit to

sponsor free of charge, I was cold. It was May, but crisp, with a whipping wind. Before I found out for myself, I might have imagined that in the aftermath of personal apocalypse, the little bothers of life would effectively vanish. But it's not true. You still feel chills, you still despair when a package is lost in the mail, and you still feel irked to discover you were shortchanged at Starbucks. It might seem, in the circumstances, a little embarrassing for me to continue to need a sweater or a muff, or to object to being cheated of a dollar and fifty cents. But since that *Thursday* my whole life has been smothered in such a blanket of embarrassment that I have chosen to find these passing pinpricks solace instead, emblems of a surviving propriety. Being inadequately dressed for the season, or chafing that in a Wal-Mart the size of a cattle market I cannot locate a single box of kitchen matches, I glory in the emotionally commonplace.

Picking my way to the side door again, I puzzled over how a band of marauders could have assaulted this structure so thoroughly while I slept unawares inside. I blamed the heavy dose of tranquilizers I was taking every night (please don't say anything, Franklin, I know you don't approve), until I realized that I was picturing the scene all wrong. It was a month later, not a day. There were no jeers and howls, no ski masks and sawn-off shotguns. They came in stealth. The only sounds were broken twigs, a muffled thump as the first full can slapped our lustrous mahogany door, the lulling oceanic lap of paint against glass, a tiny rat-a-tat-tat as spatters splattered, no louder than fat rain. Our house had not been spurted with the Day-Glo spray of spontaneous outrage but slathered with a hatred that had reduced until it was thick and savourous, like a fine French sauce.

You'd have insisted we hire someone else to clean it off. You were always keen on this splendid American penchant for specialization, whereby there was an expert for every want, and you sometimes thumbed the Yellow Pages just for fun. "Paint Removers: Crimson enamel." But so much was made in the papers about how rich we were, how Kevin had been spoiled. I