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Get a Life

Nadine Gordimer

Only the street-sweeper swishing his broom to collect fallen leaves from the gutter.

The neighbours might have seen, but in the middle of a weekday morning everyone would be out at work or away for other daily-life reasons.

She was there, at the parents' driveway gate as he arrived, able to smile for him, and quickly sense the signal for them to laugh at, accept the strangely absurd situation (only tempo-rary) that they could not hug one another. A foregone hug is less emotional than a foregone embrace. Everything is ordi-nary. The sweeper passes pushing the summer's end before him.

Radiant.

Literally radiant. But not giving off light as saints are shown with a halo. He radiates unseen danger to others from a destructive substance that has been directed to counter what was destroying him. Had him by the throat. Cancer of the thyroid gland. In hospital he was kept in isolation. Even that of silence; he had no voice for a while, mute. Vocal cords af-fected. He remains, he will be still, out of his control, expos-ing others and objects to what he emanates, whomever and whatever he touches.

Everything must be ordinary.

Calling from one car window to the other: Has she re-membered his laptop? Some cassettes? His Adidas? The book on the behaviour of relocated elephants he was in the middle of reading when he went back to hospital? Berenice — Benni — why do parents burden their children with fancy names — has packed a bag for him. She wept while she made decisions on his behalf, put this in, take that out. But she not only re-membered; familiarity knew what he would need, miss. In one of the books he will find she has slipped a photograph of herself he liked particularly, he'd taken before their love af-fair turned into marriage. There's a snap of the boy as a baby.

His mother fetched him from the hospital. He opened a door of the rear seat of the car, to sit in there, right from the start he must begin to follow a certain conduct of

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himself, make it a habit for the time being, but his mother is like him (if that's not a reverse order of inherited characteristics), she has decided on her own code of conduct in response to the threat he represents. She leans to open the door of the pas-senger seat beside her and pats it authoritatively.

He has a wife and child.

Whose life, whose risk is worth less than these?

Parents are responsible for bringing into the world their progeniture whether deliberately or carelessly and theirs is an unwritten covenant that the life of the child, and by de-scent the child's child, is to be valued above that of the origi-nal progenitors.

So Paul — that's him, the son — he has come home — oh differently, for the time being, yes — to the old home, that of his parents.

Lyndsay and Adrian are not old. The ladder of ageing has extended since medical science, sensible exercise, healthy diet have enabled people to linger longer and younger before ascending to disappear in the mystery at the top. ('Passing away' is the euphemism, but to where?) Unthinkable that the son is preceding, ahead of them, up there. His father is about to retire at a vigorous sixty-five from managing directorship of an agricultural vehicle and equipment plant. His mother, fifty-nine looking forty-nine, a longtime natural beauty with no wish for face-lifts, is considering whether or not she should leave her partnership in a legal practice and join her other partner in this new phase of existence.

The dog jumps and paws at him, sniffs the cold hospital pungency of his bulging hold-all and the delivered suitcase with what his wife anticipated his needs might be here, in this phase of his existence. — Which room? — It is not his old room, it's his sister's that has been turned into a study where his father will follow whatever interests he's supposed to have in readiness for retirement. This sister and brother born only twelve months apart due to excessive youthful passion or a mistaken reliance on the contraceptive efficacy of breast-feeding — Lyndsay still laughs at her ignorance and the op-portunism of quick breeding! There are two other sisters, better biologically spaced. He has no brother.

He's unique.

* * * * *

The pestilent one, the leper. The new leper, that's it, how he thinks of himself, sardonically flip. His resort comes prob-ably from the advertising fraternity/sorority's facility with turn of phrase he's picked up in the company of Benni's colleagues.

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Paul Bannerman is an ecologist qualified academically at universities and institutions in the USA, England, and by ex-perience in the forests, deserts, and savannahs of West Africa and South America. He has a post with a foundation for con-servation and environmental control, in this country of Africa in which he was born; an employee presently on extended leave for health reasons. Benni/Berenice is a copywriter, ad-vanced to management in one of the international advertis-ing companies whose campaigns operate all over the world and whose name is globally familiar as a pop star's, keeping its form without need for translation, part of every language's vocabulary. She earns more than he does, of course, but that s no matter for imbalance in the mating since the role-casting of male as the provider is outdated, as the price of feminist freedom. It is probably the contrast in the context and differ-ent practices of their working lives that keeps for them a sense of the unknown, even sexually, that usually gets lost in habit after a few years of marriage. Familiarity; if she knew him well enough to anticipate his common needs learnt in five years of intimacy, this did not mean his comprehension of what the world is, how it functions, his intuitions, were not different from hers. Always something to talk about, a frustration, an achievement to trade, always the element of the stranger, each perceiving something, with the third eye, in the orbit of the other.

When the verdict came from the specialist oncologist through the general practitioner who was of their genera-tion and in their group of friends, she was the one who an-swered the early morning call. Every day he left their bed first, accustomed to early rising on fieldwork. He came from the bathroom and found her pressed back against the pillows with tears leaking down her cheeks as if something inside her had suddenly given way. He stopped at the open door. Before he could speak she told him. There is no looking for the delay of an appropriate time for such… what? News, information.

— It's cancer. The thyroid. Bad. Jonathan couldn't make it sound anything else. — The dissolve ran down to her lips, trembled on her chin.

He stood there. His mouth stirred, as if about to speak. Stood, alone. Such news belongs only to the one from whose body the message has come. Then he closed the mouth in a tight line, distortion of a smile in some attempt at recogni-tion of her presence.

— Well. Could get run over by a bus. You have to die sometime. —

Freshly shaven, his face shone in the slicked suntan of a week's trip in the coastal wetlands from which he'd returned a few days ago, ignoring the wait for doctors' decision on the result of tests.

But at thirty-five! Where had it come from? No cancer in his family health records! Nothing! Healthy childhood, no illnesses — how? Why? She could not stop herself gabbling accusations.

He sat down on the bed beside the shape of her legs under the blankets. Moved his head in denial, not despair, for a mo-ment, then got up automatically purposeful and

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pulled his trousers over the minuscule underpants that held — unaffected, that end, anyway — his manhood. While he dressed and she lay there he asked his questions. — So what did Jonathan say is to be done? — He didn't continue, but everyone knows that doctors, even your close buddy, won't pronounce a clear death sentence.

— They'll operate. Should be right away. — Both were confronted with what would be the evidence to challenge, postpone whatever this mutilation was going to be: look at the man, the clear architrave of the rib cage con-taining the rise and fall of life-breath beneath the muscular pads of pectorals, the smooth hard contour of biceps, the strong lean forearms — nature's complete evolutionary con-struction for all functions. There's a pretty phrase for it that's obsolete: the picture of health.

He could not avoid her holding his presence as if keeping a statue in vision while he strapped on his watch, went about the business of dressing. The victim is led to the scaffold — there are doctors to do it if there are no jailers — without the one who loves him. That one shut out. He must do something for her. He turned back to where she lay, bent to put his arms round her against the soft give of the pillows and kissed each wet cheek. But she pulled her hands free roughly and seizing his head pushed his mouth hard against hers, opened his lips with a stiff tongue and the kiss was about to become a pas-sionate prelude when the child was heard demanding from the adjoining room, calling, calling. He lifted himself from her, they awkwardly disentangled and she ran barefoot to answer the insistent summons of the life they had passed on some night from an embrace in this bed.

Everything evolves into what has to be done next. There were more specialist consultations, more laboratory tests and the wise men in surgeons' white coats, if not wizards reading the firmament or sangomas reading the bones, made their decisions. All one had to do, oneself, was comply, present one's body. It belonged to the men in white coats (in fact, one of the specialists is female, so the body is taken over by a woman in a manner never before, asexual. Not something in a healthy young male's experience!) While the preliminary processes for surgery were going on, he and the real woman, Benni, made love every night. Only at night, and in this way, could fear bury itself. The unbelievable become one flesh.

Her own parents were divorced and both farther and fur-ther separated by the seas between the Southern and North-ern Hemispheres; she did not know whether to write to one or both about what had invaded her — the dread, certainty — she put off the attempt at composition of such a letter. Her mother flying back to the country of her outlived past to sup-port her daughter — the idea brought recoil at the vision of the airport where that composite figure of childhood and ab-sence would appear. Her father, there he was reading out to his third wife the letter of this daughter from a failed episode in his life who had made — he'd decide? — his way of dealing with it — an unfortunate marriage to some fellow who turned out to be seriously ill at thirty-something.

Lyndsay and Adrian. His parents. The parents. Benni had to admit to herself and the few intimate friends to whom she was willing to disclose what had fallen upon Paul like the wrath of an Almighty neither he nor she believed in — his parents were

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marvellous. Although he was their son, she and Paul had had an even relationship to them, he didn't see them more intimately, or more often than he and she did to-gether and mainly on occasions of family gatherings, the birthdays, Christmas, a treat out at a restaurant or round the table, siblings and their attachments, where he and his sisters had grown up; the next generation, the grandchildren, urged to play together because they were something called cousins. No closeness to his parents, really. But now as if there were a normal course of events to be provided for in closeness, Lynd-say and Adrian offered — went ahead and made — practical arrangements the son and his wife had no thought for. Lynd-say absented herself from chambers of the legal firm where her name was one of So-and-So & Partners and took charge of the child, fetching him from playschool to care for him for the end of each day in the house where his father had run about at this same lively age, while Benni, her clients, com- puters, and copywriters left to others, accompanied Paul to the waiting rooms of clinics and pathology laboratories where the pre-operative test rituals were performed.

After recovery from surgery, thyroidectomy's the scientific term, he was allowed to go back to the ordinary: Benni, the small son, work. Recovery: an interim four weeks while an obligatory period passed before the radioactive iodine treat-ment the doctors had found, by means of a scan, was neces-sary to what's their word, ablate residual cancerous tissue. He, and Benni and his parents under the unspoken sacred au-thority of the life-threatened one, lived the four weeks as if they were the usual progress of daily preoccupations. Ordi-nary. He timed a field trip that brought him from the wilder-ness the day before he presented himself back at the hospital for this ablation process.

He and his wife were told, in the most tactful way such Outer Space instructions may be conveyed, that when he was discharged after a few days of total isolation in hospital he still would be radioactive and a threat to those in contact with him. His wife came to tell Adrian and Lyndsay, who were together in the family home, the old house. It was not for a moment necessary to wonder what to do. Lyndsay spoke at once, for both of them, and it was there, in the tightening of Adrian's forehead and his darkly fixed eye, that she was certainly so doing. — He'll come to us. Until it's safe. —

Taken for granted.

It would have been somehow intrusive to bring up the risk to them; clearly that final of all matters, the value of life and death, had long been discussed ultimately and privately, and resolved between them. Don't break down in emotion of gratitude. What decision other than this should she have expected a mother and father make? What conception of their own parenthood did their son and his wife have, then.

Only when they saw her off at her car did she turn with-out knowing what she was doing or as if to pick up some ob-ject left behind, and put her arms round Adrian, her head coming only to the level of his chest, a first-time embrace after five years of the peck on either cheek at Christmas and birthdays. Then to Lyndsay, two women touching breast-to-breast for a moment. The three had not spoken to one another on the walk from the house to the car. The last exchange had been as Adrian stood back

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to let the women pass through the front door: he had asked when was the probable date of Paul's discharge, and she had told him maybe two days, still.

Lyndsay's spread hand shaded her eyes from the sun. — Well, soon as you know… I'll fetch him from the hospi-tal. — Only logical, she was already committed to being in contact with whatever it was that he would represent.

Benni with slow precision contained, restrained herself with the seat belt, turned the key in the ignition, slotted the gear, released the brake. Nothing else for her. The car had automatic transmission, at once moving over the gravel with the sound that came to her as grit grinding between clenched teeth, the doors snapped locked. Shut out of the process that was taking him over, herself detained in the prison of safety. She could not imagine what this kind of isolation would be like. For the first time since she took the call with his diag-nosis, she was thinking not of him but of herself, herself. If there had been tears now as she drove they would have been for her.

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