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Wife 22

Written by Melanie Gideon

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MELANIE GIDEON

Wife 22



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1

April 29
5:05 P.M.

GOOGLE SEARCH "Eyelid Drooping"
About 54,300 results (.14 seconds)

Eyelid Drooping: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia
Eyelid drooping is excessive sagging of the upper eyelid . . . Eyelid drooping can make somebody appear sleepy or tired.

Eyelid Drooping . . . Natural Alternatives
Speak from the chin-up position. Try not to furrow your brow, as this will only compound your problems . . .

Droopy Dog . . . eyelid drooping
American cartoon character . . . drooping eyelids. Last name McPoodle. Catchphrase . . . "You know what? That makes me mad."

2

I stare into the bathroom mirror and wonder why nobody has told me my left eyelid has grown a little hood. For a long time I looked younger than I was. And now, suddenly all the years have pooled up and I look my age—forty-four, possibly older. I lift the excess skin with my finger and waggle it about. Is there some cream I can buy? How about some eyelid pushups?

"What's wrong with your eye?"

Peter pokes his head into the bathroom and despite my irritation at being spied on, I am happy to see my son's freckled face. At twelve, his needs are still small and easily fulfilled: Eggos and Fruit of the Loom boxer briefs—the ones with the cotton waistband.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I say.

I depend on Peter. We're close, especially in matters of grooming. We have a deal. His responsibility is my hair. He'll tell me when my roots are showing so I can book an appointment with Lisa, my hairdresser. And in return, my responsibility is his odor. To make sure he doesn't exude one. For some reason, twelve-year-old boys can't smell their underarm funk. He does run-bys in the mornings, arm raised, waving a pit at me so I can get a whiff. "Shower," I almost always say. On rare occasions I lie and say "you're fine." A boy should smell like a boy.

"Tell you what?"

"About my left eyelid."

"What—that it hangs down over your eye?"

I groan.

"Only a tiny bit."

I look in the mirror again. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Well, why didn't you tell me Peter was slang for penis?"

"It is not."

"Yes, apparently it is. A peter and two balls?"

"I swear to you I have never heard that expression before."

"Well, now you understand why I'm changing my name to Pedro."

"What happened to Frost?"

"That was in February. When we were doing that unit on Robert Frost."

"So now the road has diverged and you want to be Pedro?" I ask.

Middle school, I've been told, is all about experimenting with identity. It's our job as parents to let our kids try on different personas, but it's getting hard to keep up. Frost one day, Pedro the next. Thank God Peter is not an EMO, or is it IMO? I have no idea what EMO/IMO stands for—as far as I can tell it's a subset of Goth, a tough kid who dyes his hair black and wears eyeliner, and no, that is not Peter. Peter is a romantic.

"Okay," I say. "But have you considered Peder? It's the Norwegian version of Peter. Your friends could say 'later, Peder.' There's nothing that rhymes with Pedro. Do we have any Scotch tape?"

I want to tape up my eyelid—see what it would look like if I got it fixed.

"Fade-dro," says Peter. "And I like your sagging eyelid. It makes you look like a dog."

My mouth drops open. *You know what? That makes me mad.*

"No, like Jampo," he says.

Peter is referring to our two-year-old mutt, half Tibetan spaniel, half God-knows-what-else: a twelve-pound, high-strung Mussolini of a dog who eats his own poop. Disgusting, yes, but convenient if you think about it. You never have to carry around those plastic bags.

"Drop it, Jampo, you little shit!" Zoe yells from downstairs.

We can hear the dog running manically on the hardwood floors, most likely carting around a roll of toilet paper, which next to poop is his favorite treat. *Jampo* means "gentle" in Tibetan, which of course turned out to be the complete opposite of the dog's personality, but I don't mind; I prefer a spirited dog. The past year and a half has been like having a toddler in the house again and I've loved every minute of it. Jampo is my baby, the third child I'll never have.

"He needs to go out. Honey, will you take him? I have to get ready for tonight."

Peter makes a face.

"Please?"

"Fine."

"Thank you. Hey, wait—before you go, do we have any Scotch tape?"

"I don't think so. I saw some duct tape in the junk drawer, though."

I consider my eyelid. "One more favor?"

"What?" Peter sighs.

"Will you bring up the duct tape after you've walked the dog?"

He nods.

"You are my number-one son," I say.

"Your only son."

"And number one at math," I say, kissing him on the cheek.

Tonight I'm accompanying William to the launch of FiG vodka, an account he and his team at KKM Advertising have been working on for weeks now. I've been looking forward to it. There'll be live music. Some hot new band, three women with electric violins from the Adirondacks or the Ozarks—I can't remember which.

"Business dressy," William said, so I pull out my old crimson Ann Taylor suit. Back in the '90s when I, too, worked in advertising, this was my power suit. I put it on and stand in front of the full-length mirror. The suit looks a little outdated, but maybe if I wear the chunky silver necklace Nedra got me for my birthday last year it will mask the fact that it has seen better days. I met Nedra Rao fifteen years ago at a Mommy and Me playgroup. She's my best friend and also happens to be one of the top divorce lawyers in the state of California whom I can always count on to give very sane, very sophisticated $425-an-hour advice to me for free because she loves me. I try and see the suit through Nedra's eyes. I know just what she'd say: "You can't be bloody serious, darling," in her posh English accent. Too bad. There's nothing else in my closet that qualifies as "business dressy." I slip on my pumps and walk downstairs.

Sitting on the couch, her long brown hair swept back into a messy chignon, is my fifteen-year-old daughter, Zoe. She's an on-and-off vegetarian (currently off), a rabid recycler, and maker of her own organic

lip balm (peppermint and ginger). Like most girls her age, she is also a professional ex: ex–ballet dancer, ex-guitarist, and ex-girlfriend of Nedra's son, Jude. Jude is somewhat famous around here. He made it to the Hollywood round of *American Idol* and then was booted off for "sounding like a California eucalyptus tree that was on fire, popping and sizzling and exploding, but in the end not a native species, not native at all."

I was rooting for Jude, we all were, as he made it past the first and second eliminations. But then right before Hollywood he got a swelled head from the instant fame, cheated on Zoe, and then dumped her, thus breaking my girl's heart. The lesson? Never allow your teenager to date the son of your best friend. It took months for me—I mean, Zoe—to recover. I said some horrible things to Nedra—things I probably shouldn't have said, along the lines of *I would have expected more from the son of a feminist and a boy with two moms.* Nedra and I didn't speak for a while. We're fine now, but whenever I go to her house Jude is conveniently out.

Zoe's right hand moves over her cellphone's keypad at top speed.

"You're wearing *that*?" she says.

"What? It's vintage."

Zoe snorts.

"Zoe, sweetheart, will you please look up from that thing? I need your honest opinion." I spread my arms wide. "Is it really that bad?"

Zoe cocks her head. "That depends. How dark is it going to be?"

I sigh. Just a year ago Zoe and I were so close. Now she treats me like she does her brother—as a family member who must be tolerated. I act like I don't notice, but invariably overcompensate, trying to be nice for both of us, and then I end up sounding like a cross between Mary Poppins and Miss Truly Scrumptious from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

"There's a pizza in the freezer, and please make sure Peter is in bed by ten. We should be home soon after that," I say.

Zoe continues to text. "Dad's waiting for you in the car."

I scurry around the kitchen looking for my purse. "Have a great time. And don't watch *Idol* without me!"

"Already Googled the results. Should I tell you who gets the axe?"

"No!" I shout, running out the door.

• • •

"Alice Buckle. It's been entirely too long. And what a breath of fresh air you are! Why doesn't William drag you to these events more often? But I suppose he's doing you a favor, isn't he? Another night, another vodka launch. Ho-hum, am I right?"

Frank Potter, chief creative officer of KKM Advertising, looks discreetly over my head. "You look wonderful," he says, his eyes darting around. He waves to someone at the back of the room. "That's a lovely suit."

I take a big gulp of wine. "Thanks."

As I look around the room, at all the sheer blouses, strappy sandals, and skinny jeans most of the other women are wearing, I realize that "business dressy" really means "business sexy." At least with this crowd. Everybody looks great. So *of* the moment. I wrap one arm around my waist and hold the wine glass so it hovers near my chin, a poor attempt at camouflaging my jacket.

"Thank you, Frank," I say, as a bead of sweat trickles down the back of my neck.

Sweating is my default response when I feel out of place. My other default response is repeating myself.

"Thank you," I say once more. Oh, God, Alice. A trifecta of thanks?

He pats me on the arm. "So how are things at home? Tell me. Is everything okay? The kids?"

"Everybody's fine."

"You're sure?" he asks, his face screwed up with concern.

"Well, yes, yes, everybody's good."

"Wonderful," he says. "Glad to hear it. And what are you doing these days? Still teaching? What subject was it?"

"Drama."

"Drama. That's right. That must be so—rewarding. But I imagine quite stressful." He lowers his voice. "You are a saint, Alice Buckle. I certainly wouldn't have the patience."

"I'm sure you would if you saw what these kids are capable of. They're so eager. You know, just the other day one of my students—"

Frank Potter looks over my head once again, raises his eyebrows, and nods.

"Alice, forgive me, but I'm afraid I'm being summoned."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you. I'm sure you have other—"

He moves toward me and I lean in, thinking he's going to kiss me on the cheek, but instead he pulls back, takes my hand firmly, and shakes it. "Goodbye, Alice."

I look out into the room, at everyone breezily drinking their lychee FiGtinis. I chuckle softly as if I'm thinking of something funny, trying to look breezy myself. Where is my husband?

"Frank Potter is an ass," a voice whispers in my ear.

Thank God, a friendly face. It's Kelly Cho, a longtime member of William's creative team—long in advertising anyway, where turnover is incredibly fast. She's wearing a suit, not all that different from mine (better lapels), but on her it looks edgy. She's paired it with over-the-knee boots.

"Wow, Kelly, you look fabulous," I say.

Kelly waves my compliment away. "So how come we don't see you more often?"

"Oh, you know. Coming over the bridge is such a hassle. Traffic. And I still don't feel all that comfortable leaving the kids home alone at night. Peter's just twelve, and Zoe's a typical distracted teenager."

"How's work?"

"Great. Other than being up to my neck in details: costumes, wrangling parents, soothing spiders and pigs that haven't learned their lines yet. The third grade is doing *Charlotte's Web* this year."

Kelly smiles. "I love that book! Your job sounds so idyllic."

"It does?"

"Oh, yeah. I would love to get out of the rat race. Every night there's something going on. I know it seems glamorous—the client dinners, box seats for the Giants, passes to concerts—but it's exhausting after a while. Well, you know how it is. You're an advertising widow from way back."

Advertising widow? I didn't know there was name for it. For *me*. But

Kelly's right. Between William's traveling and entertaining clients, I'm basically a single mother. We're lucky if we manage to have a family dinner a few times a week.

I look across the room and catch William's eye. He heads toward us. He's a tall, well-built man, his dark hair graying at just the temples, in that defiant way some men gray (as if to say to hell with the fact that I'm forty-seven—I'm still sexy as hell and the gray makes me look even sexier). I feel a rush of pride as he crosses the room in his charcoal suit and gingham shirt.

"Where did you get your boots?" I ask Kelly.

William joins us.

"Bloomie's. So, William, your wife isn't familiar with the term *advertising widow.* How is that possible when you've made her into one?" asks Kelly, winking at me.

William frowns. "I've been looking all over for you. Where have you been, Alice?"

"She's been right here, suffering Frank Potter, in fact," says Kelly.

"You were talking to Frank Potter?" William asks, alarmed. "Did he approach you or did you approach him?"

"He approached me," I say.

"Did he mention me? The campaign?"

"We didn't talk about you," I say. "We didn't speak for long, actually."

I watch William clenching his jaw. Why is he so stressed? The clients are smiling and drunk. There's a lot of press. The launch is a success as far as I can see.

"Can we get out of here, Alice?" asks William.

"Now? But the band hasn't even started. I was really looking forward to hearing some live music."

"Alice, I'm tired. Let's go, please."

"William!" a trio of attractive young men circles around us—also members of William's team.

After William has introduced me to Joaquin, Harry, and Urminder, Urminder says, "So, I was ego surfing today."

"And the day before," says Joaquin.

"And the day before," says Kelly.

"Will you allow me to finish?" asks Urminder.

"Let me guess," says Harry. "1,234,589 hits."

"Dumb-ass," says Urminder.

"Way to steal his thunder, Har," says Kelly.

"Now 5,881 sounds pathetic," pouts Urminder.

"10,263 definitively does not sound pathetic," says Harry.

"Or 20,534," says Kelly.

"You're all lying," says Joaquin.

"Don't be jealous, Mr. 1,031," says Kelly. "It's unbecoming."

"50,287," says William, silencing everybody.

"*Dude*," says Urminder.

"That's because you won that Clio," says Harry. "How long ago was that, boss? Nineteen eighty—?"

"Keep it up, Harry, and I'll take you off semiconductors and put you on feminine hygiene," says William.

I can't hide the startled look on my face. They're having a competition over how many hits their names bring up. And the hits are all in the thousands?

"Now look what you've done. Alice is appalled," says Kelly. "And I don't blame her. We're a bunch of petty narcissists."

"No, no, no. I wasn't judging. I think it's fun. Ego surfing. Everybody does it, don't they? They're just not brave enough to admit it."

"What about you, Alice? Googled yourself lately?" asks Urminder.

William shakes his head. "There's no need for Alice to Google herself. She doesn't have a public life."

"Really? And what kind of a life do I have?" I ask.

"A good life. A meaningful life. Just a smaller life." William pinches the skin between his eyes. "Sorry, kids, it's been fun, but we've got to go. We have a bridge to cross."

"Do you have to?" asks Kelly. "I hardly ever see Alice."

"He's right," I say. "I promised the kids we'd be home by ten. School night and all."

Kelly and the three young men head for the bar.

"A small life?" I say.

"I didn't mean anything by it. Don't be so sensitive," says William, scanning the room. "Besides, I'm right. When's the last time you Googled yourself?"

"Last week. 128 hits," I lie.

"*Really*?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Alice, please, I don't have time for this. Help me find Frank. I need to check in with him."

I sigh. "He's over there, by the windows. Come on."

William puts his hand on my shoulder. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

There's no traffic on the bridge and I wish there was. Heading home is usually something I relish: the anticipation of getting into my pajamas, curling up on the couch with the clicker, the kids asleep upstairs (or pretending to be asleep but likely texting and IM'ing away in their beds)—but tonight I'd like to stay in the car and just drive somewhere, anywhere. The evening has been dislocating, and I'm unable to shake the feeling that William is embarrassed by me.

"Why are you so quiet? Did you have too much to drink?" he asks.

"Tired," I mumble.

"Frank Potter is a piece of work."

"I like him."

"You *like* Frank Potter? He's such a player."

"Yes, but he's honest. He doesn't try and hide the fact. And he's always been kind to me."

William taps his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the radio. I close my eyes.

"Alice?"

"What?"

"You seem funny lately."

"Funny how?"

"I don't know. Are you going through some sort of a midlife thing?"

"I don't know. Are *you* going through some sort of a midlife thing?"

William shakes his head and turns up the music. I lean against the

window and gaze out at the millions of lights twinkling in the East Bay hills. Oakland looks so festive, almost holidayish—it makes me think of my mother.

My mother died two days before Christmas. I was fifteen. She went out to get a gallon of eggnog and was struck by a man who ran a red light. I like to think she never knew what was happening. There was a screech of metal hitting metal, and then a gentle whooshing, like the sound of a river, and then, a peachy light flooding into the car. That's the end I've imagined for her.

I've recited her death story so many times the details are stripped of their meaning. Sometimes when people ask about my mother I'm filled with a strange, not entirely unpleasant nostalgia. I can vividly summon up the streets of Brockton, Massachusetts, that on that December day must have been garlanded with tinsel and lights. There would have been lines of people at the liquor store, their carts packed with cases of beer and jugs of wine, and the air would have smelled of pine needles from the Christmas tree lot. But that nostalgia for what came immediately *before* is soon vanquished by the opaque *after*. Then my head fills with the cheesy opening soundtrack to *Magnum, P.I.* That's what my father was watching when the phone rang and a woman on the other end gently informed us there had been an accident.

Why am I thinking about this tonight? Is it, as William asks, a midlife thing? The clock is certainly ticking. This September when I turn forty-five, I will be exactly the same age my mother was when she died. This is my tipping-point year.

Up until now I've been able to comfort myself with the fact that even though my mother is dead, she was always out in front of me. I had yet to cross all the thresholds she had crossed and so she was still somehow alive. But what happens when I move past her? When no more of her thresholds exist?

I glance over at William. Would my mother approve of him? Would she approve of my children, my career—my marriage?

"Do you want to stop at 7-Eleven?" asks William.

Ducking into 7-Eleven for a Kit Kat bar after a night out on the town is a tradition for us.

"No. I'm full."

"Thanks for coming to the launch."
Is that his way of apologizing for how dismissive he was tonight?
"Uh-huh."
"Did you have fun?"
"Sure."
William pauses. "You're a very bad liar, Alice Buckle."

3

April 30
1:15 A.M.

GOOGLE SEARCH "Alice Buckle"
About 26 results (.01 seconds)

Alice in Wonderland Belt Buckles
Including the Mad Tea Party buckle, Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum buckle, the White Rabbit buckle, Humpty Dumpty buckle . . .

Alice BUCKLE
Boston Globe archive . . . Ms. Buckle's play, *The Barmaid of Great Cranberry Island*, Blue Hill Playhouse "wan, boring, absurd" . . .

Alice BUCKLE
Alice and William Buckle, parents of Zoe and Peter, enjoying the sunset aboard the . . .

GOOGLE SEARCH "Midwife crisis"
About 2,333,000 results (.18 seconds)

Urban Dictionary: Midwife crisis
The act of dropping a newborn on its head shortly after birth.

GOOGLE SEARCH "MidLIFE crisis"
About 3,490,000 results (.15 seconds)

Midlife Crisis—Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia
Midlife crisis is a term coined in 1965 . . .

Midlife Crisis: Depression or Normal Transition?
Midlife transitions can mark a period of tremendous growth. But what do you do when midlife becomes a crisis that develops into depression?

GOOGLE SEARCH "Zoloft"
About 31,600,000 (.12 seconds)

Zoloft (Sertraline HCl) Drug Information: Uses, Side Effects
Learn about the prescription medication Zoloft (Sertraline HCl), drug uses, dosage, side effects, drug interactions, warnings, and patient labeling . . .

Sertraline . . . Zoloft
Let me tell you about my experience with Zoloft. I was released from the psych ward yesterday afternoon . . .

GOOGLE SEARCH "Keys in refrigerator Alzheimer's"
About 1,410,000 results (.25 seconds)

Alzheimer's Symptoms
The Alzheimer's Association has updated its list of the . . . putting the keys in the egg tray in the door of the refrigerator.

GOOGLE SEARCH "Lose weight fast"
About 30,600,000 results (.19 seconds)

FAT LOSS for Imbeciles
I have lost twenty-five pounds! The fact that I feel like fainting most of the time is a small price . . .

GOOGLE SEARCH "Happy Marriage?"
About 4,120,000 results (.15 seconds)

Hunting for the Secrets of a Happy Marriage—CNN

No one can truly know what goes on inside a marriage except the two people involved, but researchers are getting increasingly good glimpses . . .

Thin Wife Key to Happy Marriage! *Times of India*

Researchers have revealed the secret of a happy marriage—wives weighing less than their hubbies.

INGREDIENTS FOR A HAPPY MARRIAGE

1 cup kindness, 2 cups gratitude, 1 tablespoon daily praise, 1 secret carefully concealed.

4

SPAM Folder (3)

From: Medline
Subject: Cheap, cheap Vicodin, Percocet, Ritalin, Zoloft discreet
Date: May 1, 9:18 AM
To: Alice Buckle <alicebuckle@rocketmail.com>
DELETE

From: Hoodia shop
Subject: New tapeworm diet pills, tiny Asian women
Date: May 1, 9:24 AM
To: Alice Buckle <alicebuckle@rocketmail.com>
DELETE

From: Netherfield Center for the Study of Marriage
Subject: You've been selected to participate in a marriage survey
Date: May 1, 9:29 AM
To: Alice Buckle <alicebuckle@rocketmail.com>
MOVE TO INBOX

5

It occurs to me that I am the Frank Potter of my own small world. Not the social-climbing Frank Potter, but the in-charge Frank Potter—I am the chief drama officer of Kentwood Elementary. The anxious Alice Buckle that showed up at William's vodka launch is not the Alice Buckle who is currently sitting on a bench out on the playground while a fourth-grader stands behind her and attempts in vain to style her hair.

"Sorry, Mrs. Buckle, but I can't do anything with this," says Harriet. "Maybe if you combed it once in a while."

"If you combed my hair it would be nothing but frizz. It'd be a rat's nest."

Harriet gathers up my thick brown hair and then releases it. "I'm sorry to tell you, but it looks like a rat's nest now. Actually, it looks more like a dandelion."

Harriet Morse's bluntness is a typical fourth-grade girl trait. I pray she won't outgrow it by the time she gets to middle school. Most girls do. Myself, I like nothing better than a girl who says what she thinks.

"Maybe you should straighten it," she suggests. "My mother does. She can even go out in the rain without it curling up."

"And that's why she looks so glamorous," I say, as I see Mrs. Morse trotting toward us.

"Alice, I'm sorry I'm late," she says, bending down to give me a hug. Harriet is the fourth of Mrs. Morse's children to have cycled through my drama classes. Her oldest is now at the Oakland School for Performing Arts. I like to think I might have had something to do with that.

"It's only 3:20. You're fine," I say. There are still at least two dozen kids scattered on the playground awaiting their rides.

"The traffic was horrible," says Mrs. Morse. "Harriet, what in the world are you doing to Mrs. Buckle's hair?"

"She's a very good hairdresser, actually. I'm afraid it's my hair that's the problem."

"Sorry," Mrs. Morse mouths silently to me, as she digs in her handbag for a hair tie. She holds it out to Harriet. "Honey, don't you think Mrs. Buckle would look great with a ponytail?"

Harriet comes around from the back of the bench and surveys me solemnly. She lifts my hair back from my temples. "You should wear earrings," she pronounces. "Especially if you put your hair up." She takes the hair tie from her mother and then reassumes her position behind the bench.

"So what can I do to help out this semester?" asks Mrs. Morse. "Do you want me to organize the party? I could help the kids run lines."

Kentwood Elementary is filled with parents like Mrs. Morse: parents who volunteer before they're even asked and who believe fervently in the importance of a drama program. In fact it's the Parents' Association at Kentwood that pays my part-time salary. The Oakland public school system has been on the verge of bankruptcy for years. Art and music programs were the first to go. Without the PA, I wouldn't have a job.

There's always some grade that has a cluster of high-maintenance parents who complain and are unhappy—this year it's the third—but most of the time I consider the parents co-teachers. I couldn't do my job without them.

"That looks lovely," says Mrs. Morse, after a few minutes of Harriet pulling and tugging on my head. "I like the way you've given Mrs. Buckle a little pouf at the crown."

Harriet chews her lip. The pouf was not intentional.

"I feel very *Breakfast at Tiffany's*," I say, as Carisa Norman comes flying across the playground and hurls herself on my lap.

"I've been looking all over for you," she says, stroking my hand.

"What a coincidence. I've been looking all over for you," I say, as she snuggles into my arms.

"Call me," says Mrs. Morse, holding a pretend phone up to her ear as she and Harriet leave.

I take Carisa inside to the teacher's lounge and buy her a granola bar from the vending machine, then we go sit on the bench again and talk

about important things like Barbies and the fact that she's embarrassed that she still has training wheels on her bike.

At 4:00 when her mother pulls up to the curb and beeps, I watch with a clenched heart as Carisa runs across the playground. She seems so vulnerable. She's eight years old and small for her age; from the back she could pass for six. Mrs. Norman waves from the car. I wave back. This is our ritual at least a few days every week. Each of us pretending there's nothing out of the ordinary about her being forty-five minutes late to pick up her daughter.