

SEPARATION ANXIETY

by Tom Lombardi

Julie and I had been dating for almost a year when she slipped her vagina under my door on her way to work.

She was always going to work. Going to client dinners. Going to yoga. Going to meet a friend. Going to L.A. for business. Going to her stupid book club. "Going insane," she said, calling only a few days before she'd left it under my door.

"Going to have a heart attack," I told her.

"I know," she said.

"When is this going to stop, Julie? I mean, we live in the same building and never see each other. Relationships need to blossom, and this doesn't even feel like a relationship. I mean, you're married to your job. You know that, right? I mean...Christ, Julie, are you *typing*?"

"I know, I know, I know."

"For God's sake, Julie!"

"I'm sorry," she said.

Sorry. We both knew I would take every ounce of it, as I was out of work and having trouble leaving my apartment. Nonetheless, it was a relief to tell her how I felt.

A few days later, she slipped her vagina under my door. It was early morning when she knocked. I'd spent the night smoking almost a pack of cigarettes, worrying about my lack of job, or, more accurately, my lack of desire to get a job. What the hell was wrong

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with me? I couldn't answer the damn question. If I didn't work soon, I'd miss another month of rent. Proper authorities would show up to evict. Proper authorities would most certainly pound with their manly fists. "Open up!" they'd say. "Open up right this minute. We know you're in there."

"Go away!" I'd yell.

Wouldn't they laugh? Of course, since they'd have the key. "He wants *us* to go away."

It was her knock, all right, gentle knuckles she soothed with coriander lotion throughout the day. I got out of bed and hurried into the kitchen to greet her, only to spot her vagina lying there on the linoleum, its labia glistening atop the white napkin on which she'd placed it. I peered out the peephole. Gone. I thought about running after her, but the sidewalks would be filled with employees heading to the subway with purpose.

Leaning down to pick it up, I spotted my cat crouching between the wall and the stove, about to pounce. "*Git!*" I said. The cat did not git.

I brought the vagina to the sink and held it under a faint stream of water. It barely weighed a thing. I was tempted to chuck it out the window. Instead, I took it to my bed, where its familiar scent warmed my blood as I rubbed it in swirls around my nipples. I couldn't finish, so I called Julie at work.

"I'm so busy right now it's not even funny," she said, putting me on hold.

It'd be nice, I thought, if I could keep the vagina permanently on a pastel plate, encouraging it to a certain breath of life into my little home. What a stupid thought.

"Dammit!" I said into the phone. I was still on hold.

Julie came back on the line: "I've got a meeting. I'll call you back later, okay?"

"How about lunch today?"

"You don't understand," she said. "My meeting *is* a lunch meeting."

I folded the vagina inside the paper towel so I couldn't see it. "How about dinner then?"

Again with the silence, her soft breathing. I imagined her sitting there with her headset on, her perfect teeth, the bathy smell of her breath. I heard more breathing, some typing. Then: "You *do* have it, don't you? I know, leaving it under the door was pretty stupid. It's just that I was running so freaking late. You didn't drop it or —"

"Of course I didn't drop it."

"The cat didn't get it, did she? God, I totally forgot —"

"Meet me for lunch," I almost begged.

"I know how much pleasure it gives you."

"How about coffee?"

"I *told* you, I'm busy. Sounds like someone forgot what it's like to work."

"Ouch."

"I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. Listen, I'm just really swamped." The typing was getting louder. "I'll call you back, sweetie, I

promise."

Dial tone. Damn.

The vagina was drying up, as it hadn't been touched in a while. It began to shrivel a bit on the dresser, losing its gleam. I didn't know what to do with it anymore. I was flickering my tongue tauntingly in gigantic circles when the phone rang. I *knew* she'd call back!

"You stinker!"

"Mom?"

"Oh, I was talking to your father. Well, look who's answering the phone."

"I'm on my way out."

"You get a job yet?"

"No."

"Well, you should get right with the Lord so you should!"

"The hell that's going to do me." I looked over to see my cat perched on the dresser, her nose about an inch from the clitoris. "Cut that out!" I yelled.

"Why're you yelling? Precious blood of Jesus be upon you."

"I can't take that talk anymore, Mom. I'm late for work."

"I thought you just said you were out of work."

"How's Dad?"

"Oh the doctor put him on new heart medication, and now they think he's got a gallstone. *And* there's his diabetes and blood pressure. You know your father, still eating hot dogs in the morning."

"Yeah?"

"What's new in your life?"

I placed the vagina inside the leather eyeglass pouch my ex-wife had left along with the cat and some cappuccino mugs, the last of which she wanted back, according to her latest postcard. She lived within fifteen minutes walking distance and had the nerve to send postcards.

"Sweetie," my mother said, "you there?"

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On the subway, I pulled the eyeglass pouch out of my coat and held it. At the other end of the car sat a dark-haired couple. The guy whispered something into the woman's ear; she shrugged. They both laughed. I assumed his girlfriend's vagina remained where it belonged. The thought of him taking it to his parents' house for the weekend had probably never occurred to either of them.

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The office smelled of new carpet. I gave the receptionist Julie's name. "It's important," I said. The receptionist, who couldn't have been older than twenty-one, was wrapping the phone cord around her fingers. She wore a tight T-shirt and skirt and had slim hands. I imagined her gently rubbing her clitoris with those delicate forefingers.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," the girl said into the phone.

I wondered if my mother was okay. If my father, getting older and sicker, was still yelling at her. If my sister's husband had been obeying the restraining order. All of a sudden I wanted to soar off a bridge. Not fall and die and cause a scene. Just soar.

Finally the girl hung up. "She didn't answer."

"Did you reach her assistant? That motherf— I mean, he always answers."

"Sorry, not this time."

"Yeah, well, I have to drop something off to her." I felt like holding the whole place up at gunpoint, but what the hell would I ask for?

"Tell you what," she said. "I'll put it in an interoffice envelope and make sure she gets it. How's that?"

"That wouldn't be a good idea," I said.

Outside, the sun was beaming. I was about to light a cigarette when I saw Julie step out of the elevator next to a guy with a thin mustache. How much care had gone into the trimming of his mustache! Why hadn't I thought of that?

They headed up the street. Julie laughed, her dark red hair bouncing all happily. Was the man a colleague or a friend? Or maybe her assistant, the guy with the panties-dropping deep voice who took my messages. She grabbed his arm and leaned in to laugh. I followed at a safe distance. They led me into a restaurant, where they sat at a table under a gigantic hanging frying pan.

I sat at a table to their far right and buried my nose in the eyeglass

pouch, breathing. The vagina smelled faintly like my ex-wife's underarm at the end of the day, a wonderful mixture of human scent and baby powder.

Suddenly Julie let out a big "*HAH!*" the way she does. Mustache Man laid his hand in the middle of the table, and she cupped it like a baby bird.

I could have sat there for hours. It was the thought of leaving her behind that terrified me. In fact, my muscles began to relax. Sunlight entered the room, touching the various copper pans which hung from the ceiling. A Mexican busboy with remarkably white teeth filled my glass with water, which spilled onto the bread plate. "So sorry, sir."

"Don't worry about it," I said, taking the pouch off my nose. I was tempted to just hand it to him and run. What would the busboy do with it, I wondered. Would he take it to the bathroom and play with it? Would he give it to someone as a gift, or drop it in the lost-and-found box with all the hats and umbrellas? I was helping him clean up the water when I overheard the mustachioed guy say to Julie, "There's a great flea market downtown. Want to go?"

"For a scarf?"

"We can buy scarves."

"My grandmother used to knit them for me."

"Really? My grandmother canned pickles."

Neither of them seemed to care about the whereabouts or status of Julie's vagina. I couldn't get over this conversation!

On *my* second date with Julie, on the other hand, after we'd downed

four or five pineapple margaritas, I asked if she'd go to the bathroom and remove her panties. She got up and left without saying a word. Moments later, she returned with a grin and handed over her purse. I peered inside, saw the yellow bunch of cotton and instantly went hard.

I marched over to Julie's table and said, "Hey."

"Oh," she said. "Hi."

"Did I startle you?" I extended my hand to the guy at the table. His eyes were the same color as his stupid-ass chocolate mustache.

"Hi," he said, grinning. "I'm Peter."

"Nice to meet you, Peter."

Julie's arms were folded. She was no longer offering cute, pickle-related smiles. I felt so comfortable in her presence, though, I could have joined them. I couldn't stop smiling.

"So what's up?" Julie said, chewing on the insides of her gums, a habit she'd picked up after quitting smoking. She looked annoyed, as if I were her younger brother following her around.

"You know me," I said, "just loafing around. Anyway, you left this, remember?" I handed the eyeglass pouch to her. She peered inside it and said, "Ha!"

A pink map appeared on her neck. These blotches would bloom on her chest when we made love, which we hadn't done in two weeks. When we did, Julie loved to be on top. I'd lay under her, clutching her arms, whimpering, biting into her shoulder to keep myself from wailing in joy. In the morning, she'd jump out of bed and dress hastily. I'd lie there with the sheets pulled up to my neck, staring.

We'd have the same conversation over and over. "What?" she'd say, tying her sneakers, anxious to hurry back to her apartment upstairs. "Nothing." "What, what's wrong?" "Nothing." "Oh I'm sorry, sweetie. It's just that, I have to go to work, you know that." "I know, Julie, I know."

Now I was staring at her in a midtown diner, of all places. She stood up and I could smell her breath — as warm as soup — and I wanted to hug her husbandly. She just looked at me as if to say, "But I am not your wife."

I returned the look as if to say, "Believe me, I know that."

She returned the look as if to say, "I lost interest in you because you lost interest in yourself."

I returned the look, as if to say, "I know, Julie, it's not your fault. I'm a fool for wanting to keep all this. You never had time for me, anyway. But someday you'll really need someone. Someday I swear you *really* will."

Her nostrils opened wide and she gave me one of those stares that said *lucky we're in public, otherwise I'd slap the shit out of you*. I tried to picture what her father looked like. My throat went dry. Even though I knew I should leave, I just stood there.

"Excuse me," she said, hurrying off to the bathroom.

Peter held a glass of red wine to his lips.

I sat in Julie's seat and said, "I'm just giving back her vagina."

He laughed. Then he stopped laughing, rubbed his mustache with two fingers and said, "Come again?"

* * *

I stepped outside into a massive shadow. No reason to go home. I followed a throng of mothers into the park, their butts wobbling in unison as they guided their strollers along the paved path. They convened around a bench, breaking into diaper bags. I took a seat on the grass not too far away.

My heart started beating quickly, as if it'd just been replaced by a new one. For some reason, I couldn't stop picturing a toothpick embedded inside it.

"Looks like someone's stinky," one of the moms said. Another one made a comment. They all laughed.

Clouds passed by in mashed-potato mounds. Perhaps my own mother at that moment was praying for me, as she had an addiction to do. Maybe my ex-wife was thinking about me. Chances were slim.

When I was a kid, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw a man sitting on my brother's bed. It didn't seem like a dream. He was handsome, with dark hair. I wasn't scared of him, the way I might have been, say, terrified of seeing the devil at the foot of my bed, as my brother had once claimed. ("He had orange teeth," my brother had said.) I went over to the bed and sat beside this man. I even ran my hand through this strange man's hair as if I were the mature, consoling person in the room. That's all I remember. The next day, I told my mother. "Praise the Lord," she said, "that was your guardian angel!"

Orange teeth.

Maybe my guardian angel had dissented. Satan had, right? Who's to say it couldn't happen to another? Maybe, as I lay on the grass in the park, he was being robbed in a brothel somewhere in Southeast

Asia, wondering what had become of me.

My ex-wife and I used to tell each other we'd be friends forever. We used to tell each other we'd go away together when she had time, when I found a job, etc. I imagined all the people in the city at the same time, on street corners, in their beds, in bathrooms, restaurants, subways, offices, hospitals, delis, parks, stairwells, cabs, gyms, planes, on phones. So many of them on the phone, all telling each other things, because, I guess, it's just what we do.

