

Tell Us What You Want

by Ira Sukrungruang

I don't tell Maggie about our three-year-old son failing to use the potty again. I don't tell her about the conversation that ensued, the lecture on the necessity of informing me, his parental unit, when he needed to poop and that pooping his pants was not what big boys do. I don't tell my wife what our beautiful boy said in his beautiful boy way: "OK, Dad, I'll poop next week then" or how I stood there fuming with his soiled slacks in one hand and sanitary wipes in the other and baby powder lodged in my armpit or how frustration washed over me, building first in the chest, radiating like a tsunami throughout the rest of my body until I was sure my eyeballs would burst out. I don't tell Maggie it wasn't just about our son refusing to use the toilet for the second time that day, but also, it was about the restaurant closing down; it was about this feeling that something was adrift in our lives, something uncomfortable, like food stuck in teeth. I don't tell her what I said to our son about his scheduled poop next week—"No, JJ, you poop every day. You are a pooping machine"—or how I made him go to his room and he asked, "Can I pee in my room?" and I said, "No, JJ, you pee and poop in the potty," only to find later that he did pee in his room.

I don't tell Maggie any of this because she doesn't let me. As soon as she comes home from rehearsal she launches into the narrative of her evening at the community center with the other wannabe thespians. The effects of being on the stage still must have carried over because she projects her voice, as if she's talking to an audience member in the back row of the theater, instead of to her bedraggled husband no more than a few feet away. Maggie talks with a slight French accent, even though she's not French but Thai-American, even though she has been cast as Liat, one of the lovers in the musical *South Pacific*, and Liat is neither French nor Thai but Polynesian.

"Lower your voice," I say, disrupting her. "JJ's in bed."

Maggie puts her hand to her mouth and whispers, "Sorry. The theater follows you home. That's what the director tells us." She moves as if she is gliding on a dance floor, the same way she did when she worked the restau-

rant, effortlessly, floating on the very tip of her toes. "Don't you think that's funny?" she asks.

"What?" I look out the dark window, distracted.

"You weren't listening."

"Long and messy night," I say.

"I was telling you about the new cast member." Her smile widens and I can tell the weekly whitening treatments are working. "You won't believe who it is."

I shrug.

"Bradley Custer," she says.

I don't know the name. I don't know much, only that I want to put my head down on a pillow and drift away, my wife beside me or not.

I don't tell her what I said to our son about his scheduled poop next week—"No, JJ, you poop every day. You are a pooping machine."

"My ex-boyfriend."

"Oh," I say. "That Bradley."

That Bradley. The one before me. The one Maggie almost married. The one who skipped town one afternoon and left a note saying he was heading to Hollywood to make it big and to hell with this Podunk town because he wasn't coming back even if they dragged him kicking and screaming. That Bradley.

"He hasn't changed a bit," she says and does a little spin without spilling a drop of wine. It's a dance move, I'm sure, something the director choreographed. I can't help but be irritated with anything she does. Her voice, her stories, her theatrical-ness. It's as if she is playing the role of my wife, as if she is playing the role of JJ's mother, but her real character, the one I fell in love with, is diluted in this act.

"He's gotten pudgier," she says, "but, man, he can sing. That voice of his, I swear." Maggie sits on the sofa next to me and leans back looking at the ceiling, the wine glass held between two fingers. I wonder what she's thinking, wonder whether she regrets marrying me, having JJ, the restaurant, regrets the path she has taken in her life. She's Buddhist, and she talks a lot about paths and roads and how everything is predicated on an individual's choice, and I wonder if she were presented with a choice—me or this other

life—which would she choose?

“Bradley’s taking the role of Cable,” she says, “my opposite. Donny Wilson dropped out because his mom died. Couldn’t sing to save the world. Now, the show is saved.”

“It’s community theater, not Broadway,” I say, though shouldn’t.

She narrows her eyes. It’s the Shirley MacLaine look, the one from the movie *Terms of Endearment*. She used it a few times in the last play, *MacBeth*, as Lady MacBeth. I hate that look. I hate how her lips purse together like an unwelcomed kiss, hate the consternation etched into her forehead, hate the deepened crow’s feet around her eyes. “The director says we should never think about what we do as only a community play.” Hate her indignant voice. “He says what we do is art for the world.”

I look away. Aim my eyes at a photo of us from three years ago. There she was a plain Jane, wearing the soft flannel I loved so much, her hair straight and long and black, her face clear of makeup. The woman next to me now is someone I do not know. Her bangs are teased blond, her shirt’s low-cut, her jeans too tight, her face layered in foundation. She talks with her hands, her entire body. She says everything with the tongue of melodrama. I call this woman The Actress, stressing the slither of those two S’s at the end of the word, like those on Lifetime TV, who cry without tears, who are more spark than splendor.

Outside, the autumn breeze blows down more leaves from our hickory, and I know tomorrow I will spend two hours raking, only to have JJ jump into the piles so I’ll have to rake again. And I know tomorrow won’t be any different from today, and the thought makes me slump further into myself, into the cushions of the couch.

JJ cries in his room, loud and breathy. A bad dream cry. Maggie knows it’s her turn, knows this cry will last only minutes before he will drift back to sleep. She saunters to our son’s bedroom, The Actress, with the poise and elegance of an Audrey Hepburn, wine sloshing in her glass with each calculated step.

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Four years ago, I would’ve woken up at six in the morning, kissed Maggie’s forehead and told her I’d see her later, and then driven to Mike and Maggie’s on the main strip to prepare for the day. I’d chop vegetables. Knead dough. Start the ovens. I’d get the stock going. Weigh meat and fish into appropriate portions. Devein shrimp. Debone chicken. I’d ground up spices. Refill the salt and pepper shakers. The soy sauce bottles. The sugar containers. I’d wash windows, dust counters, vacuum floors. I’d come up with

the daily specials, which I’d write on the chalkboard by the entrance of the restaurant.

Mike and Maggie’s was an everything restaurant, which meant it served all types of cuisine—Italian, Mediterranean, Asian Fusion. We catered to the meat and potato conservatives. The eclectic foodies. The meatless vegans. My menu was seven-pages long—descriptions of dishes like erotic poetry. There was even a *Tell Us What You Want* option where our customers could order something off menu and we’d try to prepare it, try with all our power to please our customers. Sometimes, we couldn’t; sometimes we failed because we were missing an essential ingredient. But even then, our customers left satisfied.

I spent my days at the restaurant. Maggie, too. She waitressed, bartended, cooked. She played these roles perfectly. It was us and the food and how the food made people feel. We’d end each night in the bedroom—each night!—making love despite our exhaustion, despite our skin smelling of oil and spices. But what was better than the subtle taste of ginger on the nape of the neck, a hint of mint behind the ears, garlic-infused sweat? This was pleasure at its most heightened state. This was, I suppose, how JJ came to us, those passionate nights after work.

The restaurant closed for reasons restaurants close; they just do. Happiness does not pay bills. Happiness does not bring consistent customers. JJ is not the reason for the end of Mike and Maggie’s. JJ is not the reason for where Maggie and I are now. He isn’t. If anything, he is the product of the happiest time of my life, and because he is, every moment I’m with him is heartbreaking.

Like this morning.

I’m watching him in his room. He doesn’t know it. I’m watching him look at his toys, deciding which one he wants to play with: the plastic spatula, the pudgy bunny, the army man. He turns from the toys and to look out the bedroom window, where the sun is filtering dust into gold specks. He looks at the gold specks, swiping at his nose. He picks up the spatula and tries to hit the specks with the spatula. He laughs to himself and then stares at the gold specks again, mouth slightly parted, frozen, his brain computing, memory cataloguing. He smiles and then realizes I’ve been watching him all this time.

“Daddy,” he says.

“JJ,” I say.

He points at the gold dust.

I nod.

“Mommy,” he says.
 “At the bank. Work.”
 “Me and you again.”
 “Every day, buddy.”
 “Hungry,” he says.
 “Carrots?”
 “No.”
 “Peas?”
 “No.”
 “What then?”
 “Cookie.”
 “Cookie?”
 He nods.
 “Of course.”
 “Daddy,” he says and reaches out for me.

And this is what I miss—to be needed. To be wanted. To matter. Because to this beautiful boy, I do, despite what the day will bring—frustration, annoyance, fatigue—this keeps me going.

I pick him up. I kiss his cheek. I get him a cookie.

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I despise the sound—the ting of Maggie’s phone indicating another text message. The ting is sharp and I feel it vibrate in my bones. She’s holding JJ in her lap, as he watches Saturday morning cartoons. JJ doesn’t like the sound either, and turns and glares at her—that Shirley MacLaine indignation.

“Sorry,” Maggie says. “Mommy’s friend needs help.”

Mommy’s friend always needs help. Mommy’s friend is “depressed.” Mommy’s friend is “broken hearted.” Mommy’s friend’s dream came crashing down on him because he failed as an actor. Mommy’s friend has been needing help for the last two weeks because Mommy’s phone tings every minute, because Mommy is on the computer typing long emails. Sometimes Mommy’s friend calls and I listen to Mommy’s laughter. I listen to Mommy’s side of the conversation that always sounds like she’s consoling a baby deer.

JJ points to the phone. “Quiet phone,” he says.

Maggie doesn’t see or hear him, but is rapidly tapping away at a message.

I pull JJ on my lap and hold him tight. He smells like dirt.

“Poor guy,” Maggie says more to her phone than to anyone in particular. “Some floozy ripped his heart out. Just what he needs right now.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

JJ crawls off my lap to get closer to the TV. He takes the remote and turns the volume up. I don’t like how close he is, don’t like what it is doing to his eyes, but I let it go this time.

“He tells me he vomits hourly,” she says.

“Poor guy,” I say.

“The director says to use that sorrow, and Bradley has, and his performances have been phenomenal, but all that sadness. It’s hard.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

“He’s come back broken.”

“Poor guy,” I say.

Maggie looks at me and tilts her head. She opens her mouth to say something, but the phone tings again—that fuckin’ ting!—and I’ve lost her.

I move to the kitchen. I take out the cutting board. I try to imagine myself inside Mike and Maggie’s again. That small kitchen. The warmth from the burners. The smell of bread and curry and grilled meat. I work on JJ’s

Keep going until you've hit someplace, and that someplace will provide all the answers you've been searching for, and that someplace will love you and need you, and you will know why you exist on this planet.

afternoon meal. I take out the carrots and chop them into two-inch sticks. I slice cheddar cheese into small squares. I cut a hotdog into four pieces and slice little X’s into the ends, so they’ll flower open when cooked. I pour milk and chocolate syrup into a sippy cup. All for JJ. My boy.

I’m retreating, I know. I’m not saying what I need to say, afraid to say, afraid of what I might hear.

Maggie’s on the phone now, repeating, “It’s OK, it’s OK,” and I want to say it isn’t OK. None of this is OK. I want to say I need you, not JJ, but me, the other poor guy, whose dream came crashing down on him too, who now is unemployed and unhappy, who feels alone and adrift.

“You have every right to feel this way,” Maggie says to the phone.

No, I don’t. This sadness, this deep, deep well, is not anyone’s right.

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I go on car rides in the middle of the night because I can’t still my brain, which whirls and whirls and whirls, and I become angry that Maggie is snoring softly beside me, oblivious to everything. I think I can drive off,

Fiction Fix

take the highway out of town and not turn back. It would be that simple, an act of the body without the brain. Press the accelerator. Don't look in the rearview mirror, no matter what. Not even if you see your son back there waiting for you. Not even if you see your wife. Your restaurant. You keep going until you hit someplace and that someplace will provide all the answers you've been searching for and that someplace will love you and need you, and you will know why you exist on this planet. It's a bit existential, I realize. Maggie would evoke the great director. She would say, "The director tells us we should never run from what we fear, but face it head on." The director is a tool. He is a half-balding man who teaches part-time at the community college and drinks too much. And I think this is stupid. She's stupid. Bradley is stupid. The play. Our life. My whatever. Just stupid. But I always reach a certain point on the drive where I round back, and then I sit inside the car in the driveway, looking at our home, noticing how tall the grass is, noticing JJ's toys scattered in the yard, and sometimes I nod off, waking when the sun butters the horizon, and sometimes, like this morning, Maggie finds me before she heads off to work. I think I'm dreaming because there is a cloudy haze around her head and she says something I'm not hearing. I roll down the window, and for a split second, I think she's come to me and this is the very moment I wake from this bad dream, like the ones JJ often has, the ones that jolt him into tears.

"JJ is hungry," she says. "He peed his pants, too."

"OK," I say.

"I'm late for work," she says. "I would've cleaned him if I wasn't late."

"OK," I say. I get out of the car and close the door.

"I'll call to check on you guys later."

"OK," I say.

"Bye," and Maggie doesn't move to leave but stands there, looking at the ground, and I have the urge to hold her, to reach out and touch the back of her neck, but my hands remain deep in my pockets.

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It's been raining, and JJ wanted to go the park, but I told him it would be muddy. He has Maggie's fastidiousness, so he cringes at the word muddy. He doesn't like wet messes. Ironic.

I take him on a car ride instead, and in the backseat, he stares out the window, naming things. Car. Tree. Sign. Leaves. Clouds. I sneak glances at him, and he's content with where he is and what's he doing. Contentment comes easy for him.

I turn down the main strip. I point to the large brick building on the

corner. "Library," I say.

"Library," JJ says.

I point to the gas station.

"Gas station."

"Gas station," he says.

I point to grocery store.

"Grocery store."

"Grocery store," he says.

I know this area well, know it for the 1,098 days I had driven these streets, past these places en route to the restaurant, and I know that on the 1,098th day, I drove away from the restaurant for the last time.

It is up ahead. I can see the red-tiled roof in the distance, the blinking neon sign that says open. It's now a flower shop.

"Mommy," JJ says.

I look to where his finger is pointing, and it is Maggie. She's sitting on a bench, outside the bank, a purple sweater wrapped around her shoulders. The rain has eased up, spitting, and she's eating a sandwich.

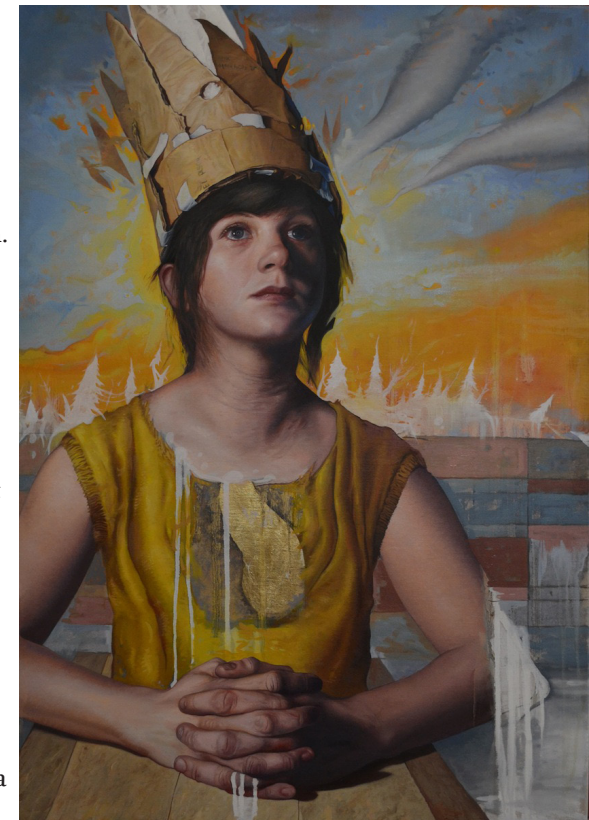
"Mommy," JJ says.

I slow the car down. Park it in front of the hardware store across the street.

"Mommy," JJ says.

When the restaurant first closed, the two of us did not do anything for a week. We held each other. We sobbed. We lamented. We were a we. After a week, Maggie said she was through with the sad sap mentality. She said it was time to put our lives back together. She wrote a list of rules for herself, and has been following that list ever since. But I was stuck. What were our lives without the restaurant? What were our lives when our dream no longer existed? Perhaps I'm projecting. Perhaps it wasn't her dream at all. That week, Maggie found a job at the bank, tried out for *Grease* and got the lead part of Sandy, and from then on our lives changed.

I remember Maggie telling me about her sadness once, a time before



me, before JJ, before even Bradley. “Sometimes you have to look inward,” she said, but as hard as I’ve tried, I see nothing.

Maggie doesn’t notice us. She doesn’t raise her eyes up from her sandwich, and when she finally does, she turns toward the restaurant and takes another bite. Right now, she’s the girl I met five years ago. I thought then, as I do at this moment, that this woman was/is miraculous the way miracles are. I should tell her this. Instead, I watch. JJ watches. Even he knows this is what we are meant to do. Eventually, she rises, brushes the crumbs from the front of her blouse, and returns to work. There is nothing more for us here, so I turn the car around, head back home, the red of the restaurant disappearing in the distance, and JJ, again, begins to name the things he sees along the way.

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The play opens in two days. *South Pacific* posters have found their way into every open space in town, onto the bulletin boards at the cafes and grocery stores and stapled on the telephone poles. Maggie’s in character most of the time, talking with a soft Asian accent that makes JJ laugh and say, “Funny talk.” She asks that I make Hawaiian food for the week, so I prepare luau pork, poi, lomi lomi. She asks if it’s OK if she sleeps in the other room to mentally prepare. “The director says immersion is what makes successful actresses.” And there she emerges, The Actress, who floats across our house, who sings melodic tunes, who brings a guest with her after rehearsal before opening night.

“This is Bradley,” The Actress says.

“Brad,” I say, sticking out my hand.

“It’s Bradley,” he says and takes it firmly.

“My apologies,” I say.

Brad turns from me. “And this must be the little man,” he says.

JJ hides behind my leg. Brad is big and blond and without a chin. Brad kneels down and his knees pop and he groans. “Can you give me five?” he says, and puts his hand up high. JJ shakes his head. I love him in this instant more than any other time in his life.

“JJ,” says The Actress. “Be cordial.”

JJ shakes his head.

“He’s shy,” I say to Brad.

“He normally isn’t,” says The Actress.

Brad rises and grunts. “That’s cool, you know. I’m scary looking.”

“Don’t be silly,” The Actress says and gently puts a hand on his shoulder. “You’re wonderful.”

Brad is kinda scary. He looks like a baby man child. Put a bonnet on him, stick a pacifier in those pouty lips, put him in a diaper, and that’s what he’d be—baby man child. This thought makes me smile.

JJ tugs on my leg. He wants me to lift him up. I do. He points at Brad. “Tell man to go.”

“JJ,” The Actress says. “That’s not very nice to say.”

“Man go,” JJ says.

“You’re not being a good boy,” The Actress says.

“It’s OK,” says Brad, smiling his baby man child smile. “I’m not offended.”

“You’re going to think we’ve raised a heathen,” The Actress says.

“Never,” says Brad.

“Our son is not a heathen,” I say. “Isn’t that right, JJ?”

JJ nods, though he doesn’t know why.

The Actress stares at me, as if this is my fault, as if I have implanted this behavior into our son. “He’s not normally like this,” she says. “He’s normally a good boy.”

“He is a good boy,” I say and kiss his cheek. He squirms and giggles.

“Kids, you know,” Brad says. “Maybe I should go.”

“Sit.” The Actress points to the couch. “We need to practice.”

“Mommy,” JJ says. “Man go home.”

“You aren’t being hospitable,” says The Actress, “He’s our guest.”

“I want Mommy and Daddy,” JJ says.

Brad sits crossed-legged, laughing and holding the bridge of his nose. It’s an actor’s laugh—fake, controlled.

“JJ,” the Mom eyes come out, “you’re being disrespectful. You know what happens to disrespectful boys?”

JJ’s little forehead crinkles.

“No cookies. Forever.”

JJ begins to cry and I start rocking him. His cry has never sounded so beautiful. It’s like the sizzle of garlic, the bubble of boiling broth. It’s loud and messy, full of snorts and snot.

The Actress looks at me, widens her eyes. “Can you do something?”

“I can,” I say, but I don’t. I stand there with my crying son, bouncing him up and down, as he hides his face in the nape of my neck, and I can feel the wetness run down my back, and I’m OK with this. More than OK. This is my exclamation point. This is my message.

“I’ll go,” I say after a minute. “Nice to meet you, Brad.” I turn with JJ in my arms to the kitchen for a box of cookies, and for the rest of the day, we

will gorge ourselves in crumbly delights until our bellies ache.

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Later that night, after I put JJ to sleep, I check on The Actress and her friend only to see him crying on her shoulders, the baby man child, and I'm almost tempted to ask if he needs a pacifier. My wife rocks him, her arms around the fleshy parts of him, and I'm left in the silence of the house, watching.

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On opening night, JJ and I sit in the front of the theater, in a special section reserved for family members of the cast. He is in a shirt and tie, though he's been wiggling the tie around so it's askew. The Actress has been nervous the entire day, pacing the house, reciting her lines over and over to herself. She's like this before every play, a ball of unraveling yarn. She's so frantic that I think there's no way she'll get it together, but when the curtain parts and the music begins, she is the most elegant character on stage, the lights kissing her white skin, reflecting off her black hair. JJ claps and points and says, "Mommy," and I shake my head and say, "Liat."

I'm moved, despite off tune singing, despite fumbled lines. I'm moved by Bradley, and understand how he thought he might make it because he is damn good. I'm moved by this community play because somehow I feel it is singing to me some essential lesson.

When I used to cook at the restaurant, I sometimes cried during the busiest moments of the day, not because I felt overwhelmed, but because I mattered to people. What I was doing mattered, and I remember Maggie passing me in the kitchen and giving me loving touches before delivering plates or making another drink, and how at the end of the day, she would sometimes cry, too.

"Why are you crying?" I'd ask.

"Because," she'd say. "Sometimes a girl has to cry."

And sometimes a boy does too. Like at this moment, when Bradley's character dies and Liat is left to mourn her lost love, and I'm thinking it isn't Bradley's character, but me, on stage, and I'm thinking I have died, and Liat, Maggie, no matter how hard she sings, I won't wake because there is nothing in me to wake.

"Daddy," JJ whispers, "I pooped my pants."

I hear him.

"Daddy," he says again.

It is as if he's at the other end of a tunnel.

"I pooped my pants," he says.

I don't move.

"I pooped my pants," my son says, louder and louder and louder. There are shushes and grumbles, but I remain unstirred.

"I pooped my pants! I pooped my pants! I. Pooped. My. Pants!"

He is so loud the play stops and the ushers are asking me to take care of my son. "Sir," they keep saying, "Sir," and Bradley's man child face peeks from backstage, and the actors and orchestra are looking at one another, not sure what to do because the director never prepared them for this situation, the one where a three-year-old boy is screaming that he has pooped his pants and the father absolutely does nothing because he has recognized something in himself, his life, his marriage, and that recognition has stopped his heart, his brain, his every extremity. Maggie rushes off the stage to JJ, who is crying, and she is in costume, and her face is layered in makeup and it is smeared because of her very real tears, and she says in a voice that is her own and it is loud and anguished, and worst of all, ashamed: "What's wrong with you? Goddammit, what's wrong with you?"