
TRADITIONS

Brian Druckenmiller

Rex meets a woman who isn't his wife. Her name is Olivia—a name he loves, though he can't decide which syllable he loves most. Her lips and mouth taste like spring water—unlike his wife's, whose taste can only be described as mouth.

Kourtney's date tastes like the fast-food cheeseburger he must have scarfed down on the way over. She ignores the grease while her fingers crawl along the creases of his chest. He grabs her wrists and pins her to the wall, jostling the painting hung behind her, an oil painting of wilted lilies. He presses against her, and the frame digs into her back. His body is hard—unlike her husband's, whose gut juts out a bit too much.

Evan can't sleep. With Dad out of town and Mom having a sleepover down the hall, no one sang him his lullaby.

Instead of dreaming, Evan worries about the monsters in the dark of his room, baiting him to come out from under his plaid comforter. He clenches his teddy to his chest, and his pajamas cling to his sweaty skin. If he can reach the nightlight, he'll be fine, for monsters are afraid of nightlights. But the light is all the way by the door. He should be safe on his bed, though he knows he won't dream until the monsters go away.

Rex enters the hotel bathroom and unfurls his condom, tossing it into the black, bag-less garbage can. He grabs a washcloth and wipes Olivia off of him. He throws her a fresh towel.

“Thanks.” She wipes herself and tosses it back, Rex adding it to the used, wet towels piled next to the toilet.

“Hungry?” Rex asks. He walks to the nightstand and thumbs through the glossy room-service menu.

“Lay with me.”

Rex apologizes with his face, forgetting that Olivia isn't his wife, who would have already moved on to her next necessity. Right now, he guesses, his wife is either thinking about food or lighting a cigarette.

Rex sets the menu back on the nightstand, nudging a tall, thin vase of silk roses. He joins Olivia on the bed, and she places her head on his chest, her hand on his belly. He turns toward the window where, outside, the city plays a symphony of chaos: horns, cars, whistles, music, people. The noise eases Rex to sleep while his slow, rhythmic heartbeat serenades Olivia.

Kourtney lights up a Parliament, the bright ember sizzling with every pull.

“Can't I finish, too?” her date asks, sweat beading down his face like tears.

“You can go in the toilet,” she says. Smoke rises from her mouth.

His face reddens. He enters the bathroom, spikes the condom into the garbage can, dresses, and leaves.

Kourtney takes long, saliva-soaked drags from her cigarette, dampening the recessed filter. She flicks the ash into an empty coffee mug that her husband brought home from one of his regular out-of-town conferences. She looks to her left at the permanent husband-shaped depression in the memory-foam. He would always sleep with his back to her. She wonders which direction he's facing tonight, though that depends on which side of his hotel bed has a window.

Kourtney doesn't need help falling asleep once she hears the car rumble out of the neighborhood. All she needs is silence.

Evan decides enough is enough. Once he hears screams from Mom's sleepover and footsteps down the hallway, he remembers how Dad taught him to be brave. He needs to stop the monsters. For Mom. For Dad.

Slowly, he pulls the comforter from his six-year-old face. He's outnumbered, hundreds of tiny eyes strewn like fireflies. Snarls linger in the dark.

With one hand, he grips his teddy, both black-button eyes digging into his pajamas. With the other hand, he grabs his pillows. While hanging off the side of the bed he sets them on the floor, parting the mass of tiny beasts. He connects the two ends to construct a bridge long enough for him to reach the nightlight. Only then can he make his monsters go away before saving Mom from hers.

"Don't look down," he tells himself. His feet sink into the fluffy bridge as he loosens his grip from the bed. Monsters growl at his feet, but he stays focused on his slow, tip-toed steps, his sight never leaving the unilluminated light.

He arrives, squats, and presses the switch. The dull glow reveals the plastic spaceship encasing the bulb—a white spaceship with three red fins blasting across an orange moon, leaving behind a trail of colorful stars.

When he turns, the eyes and growls are gone. He reaches for the knob to his bedroom door, though Mom has stopped crying. The light must have saved her, too. The night finally feels like night.

But, after he walks back across the bridge—picking up pillows as he passes—and nestles underneath his comforter, he still can't dream. No one is there to sing to him. Even the bravest act could not replace his lullaby.

The sun rises and sets like it always does.

When the garage door roars open, Evan bolts from his Legos and waits. His toes pogo until the side door opens, and he jumps into Dad's arms, his curly blonde hair nuzzling Dad's smiling face. Dad kisses Evan's cheek and tells him how much he missed him. Evan runs back down the hallway yelling "Mom! Mom!" She comes around the corner and Evan runs into her arms.

"How was your trip?" she asks, bending down to kiss Evan's other cheek.

"Same as always," Dad responds, pulling a water bottle from his bag. "Here?"

"Same."

Evan opens his mouth as he smiles, waiting for Mom and Dad to kiss like they always do, though his parents are looking everywhere except into each other's eyes.

They know what Evan is waiting for. So, Kourtney kisses her husband, and Rex kisses his wife.

As they part, Kourtney is drawn to Rex's belly, which stretches the fabric of his tucked button-up.

Rex unscrews his bottle of spring water and takes a sip, the liquid crisp as it slides down his throat. He sets the bottle on the counter, grabs his rolling suitcase, and walks past Kourtney, the plastic wheels on the hardwood echoing through their home.

Evan has billions of questions for Dad who, as always, answers every one.

"Were there bridges?"

"Quite a few, kiddo."

"Did you go over any?"

Dad pulls Evan in for a hug.

"You have to go over one, eventually."

Questions turn into yawns, and Evan knows it's bedtime. He knows he'll fall asleep monster-free, probably before Mom and Dad even finish his lullaby.

Rex snugs the comforter around Evan. Then, he begins "Golden Slumbers"—the bedtime tradition. As always, Kourtney watches, her slender frame moored to the doorway. As always, she joins in after the first verse, her rasp a welcome substitute for Paul McCartney's snarl. As always, Rex and Kourtney sound beautiful together. This hasn't changed since they first sang to Kourtney's babied belly nearly seven years prior—one month before they had to sing their wedding vows.

Evan falls asleep smiling. Kourtney and Rex know that nothing makes their son happier than his lullaby. That's how traditions become traditions: when happiness depends on them.

Kourtney leaves and Rex follows, making sure he powers on the spaceship nightlight before closing the bedroom door.

In their bedroom, the radiator rattles like marbles trickling down the vents. Kourtney sits on her side of the bed, removes her earrings, and drops them onto the wooden nightstand. One clanks against the ash-filled mug.

Rex leaves the bathroom with his face scrunched, passes the crooked painting, and walks to his side of the bed where he peels the blue jeans from his legs. He lies down with his back to Kourtney, settling into his spot in the memory foam.

"Next time, Kourtney," Rex says, her first syllable scratching the back of his mouth, "the least you could do is change the garbage."

"What for?" she replies, her back to Rex.

From above, their bodies look like a bottomless vase.

"Goodnight," Rex says. The words bounce off his windowed-wall and scrape the side of his face before reaching her.

"Goodnight."