

Properties of Obligate Pearls

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You have to know what to look for. Younger, definitely—stones from the elderly are heavy and black, decades of layers dulling the luster. No one wants the weight of a grandmother’s worries around their neck.

Take the young woman sitting across from me. I saw her in the supermarket, late on Friday night. She should have been out partying, or on a date; instead she was pushing a cart that was equal parts cat food, stew meat, and adult diapers. Everything about her spoke of exhaustion and embarrassment.

Even under her jacket I could glimpse the fullness of her torso, that hint of bloating directly beneath her sternum.

She was stooped and tired and looked older than she was; she was also lovely. That’s part of it, too—you can get a decent stone from a lot of people, but sometimes they have this hint of beauty about them, like a smothered light. Those stones have a little extra luster, a greater range of hues, and that can make all the difference.

I followed her home that night; I came back the next morning, before dawn, and watched her go to work, then to the hospital, then hurry home again. The neighbors said she was both caring for a father and helping her brother with some kind of treatments. That, and the father was nutty about his cats, their little apartment was full of the beasts.

It was no wonder, then, that when I asked her to lunch she accepted with a robotic *sure*. She probably couldn’t remember her last full night of sleep, much less have any instincts about going to lunch with a strange woman dressed in a suit.

“It’s a particular kind of condition,” I explain patiently, while she wolfs down her poached fish. “You have all the symptoms: bloodshot sclera, poor sleep, bloating and tenderness, yellowing fingernails, hair loss . . .”

“And you’ll pay me 50,000 to take it out?” she asks between mouthfuls.

“If it’s indeed the right kind of tumor, yes. We’re desperate for specimens to study.” I smile then, sympathetically. “I know it’s not a great deal of money, and there’s always a slight risk with surgery . . .”

“No, no, I’m definitely interested.” She gulps down her wine and leaned in close, clearly buzzed. “It would make such a difference to us, you have no idea.”

Oh, I have an idea. I have more than an idea.

But I say nothing as it comes pouring out. How her mother died suddenly and her father subsequently deteriorated. How her brother had been helping until *he* got sick, and the treatments are working but they’re experimental, they’re not covered . . . Oh, she doesn’t mind doing so much, truly she doesn’t, only the cats—! Her father refuses to give them up but half of them don’t get along with the other half, they’re always making noise, sometimes she just wants to strangle them all . . . Meanwhile she was passed over for a raise for poor performance, and she doesn’t know where the money’s all going, she budgets down to the last cent and somehow she always comes up short . . .

Listening, I’ve learned, is a lot like meditation. You have to observe the litany without reacting to it. I used to react: I used to hold their hands and offer suggestions; I used to weep for them, with them.

I used to weep for myself.

But in the end, all our stories are the same unsolvable conundrum: money that doesn’t stretch far enough and the overwhelming needs of others. It’s the latter that’s key. People who have personal crises produce tumors without centers. It’s the obligations that make it happen, that somehow gunk up the fluids into something small, hard, and incredibly beautiful.

Obligate pearls.

She comes on her day off, having told the brother she needed to care for the father and vice versa. She dresses up for it; a lot of them do, as if their appearance will affect their payout. When the

tests come back positive she takes the gown we give her and then cries in the privacy of the operating room, sobs of relief that carry through the door. The money never really changes anything, though; having more of it only means it stretches a little further for a while. Budgets are like rubber bands—sooner or later they always snap back into the same tight, mean shape as before.

I've been doing this long enough now that I'm starting to get people coming back to me, but I've never tried a second extraction. Instinct tells me it'll be more like the granny pearls: dull, black things. Something about losing hope a second time.

The surgery goes smoothly enough, as well it should, considering how many times I've done it. The woman is healthy and Ana, my perpetually somber nurse, never misses a beat. Soon enough I've got a small lump of flesh in a tray and I'm sewing the woman back up while Ana washes the lump clean and pats it dry, like a piece of meat. Then she wheels the woman out into the adjacent room to wake up and starts putting together her recovery kit: painkillers, instructions on cleaning the sutures, who to call if something goes wrong (not me), and 50,000 in two fat envelopes. I used to handle the recoveries, but there was something about how they looked, after: a kind of hollow shock, though they never said anything other than to thank me. Easier to let Ana deal with it.

Only when I have the operating room to myself do I turn my attention to the tray. I fit the pick onto my thumb—it's a little apparatus of my own design, a few guitar picks fused together and the edge carefully shaped, then attached to a ring. With this I start digging into the tissue, without fear of scratching the stone inside. At last I feel that little click as the plastic touches its surface, and I start cutting away the outer layers until I can work the pearl free.

Before me sits three years of anxiety and grief, its surface shimmering opalescent beneath the fluorescent lights, its colors shifting from a powdery blue to a near-violet cast, the whole thing the size of a gumball. So much sadness. So much disappointment.

They say wearing one relieves you of your own sorrows; the

pearl continues to build layers through contact, siphoning off your fears and anxieties, your sorrow and grief. As always, I'm tempted to keep it and put the theory to the test. To sleep through the night again, to move through the day without that small fluttering panic in my belly? To not feel like everything, *everything* is eggshell-fragile, and my slightest mistake will shatter it all?

Oh, I'm tempted. But as always, the money wins out.

It's too late to sell the pearl tonight so I bring it home with me instead. Even on the short journey from my office, I could *feel* it, feel myself becoming a little more empty, as if I'd had a good cry on the bus back here.

Or am I just imagining it?

In what had been our bedroom, Dana is sitting propped up in bed watching the silent television, and I relax a little. The last nurse we had insisted on a regular bedtime, regardless of whether I was home or not, which always agitated him. He likes to wait up for me, likes to make sure I get home safely.

His face is grey with pain, and even as I kiss him I'm checking his levels, but they're right where they should be.

"Think I've built up my tolerance again," he wheezes.

I open up the drip a little before curling up in the bed next to him, wadding my coat to pad his bony shoulder. I can no longer remember how he felt before he got sick, save for flashes of a firm, muscular bicep, the pillow of a healthy belly. I'm losing him, little by little, moment by moment; it makes my stomach knot, and I try to focus instead on the screen before us where a woman is defiantly striding out of a house, flinging her wedding ring into the hydrangeas as she leaves.

"Was it a good one?"

I hold the pearl up before him. He touches it, stroking its smooth surface; it seems to turn a shade darker, though it's probably just a trick of the light. Still I wrap it in a tissue before slipping it back into my pocket.

“After I sell it,” I tell him, “I’ll see the doc about something stronger.” Though I’m not sure what’s left to try; I’m not sure there is anything left to try. But Dana nods without protesting, which tells me it must be bad.

“Do you want me to open it up more?”

“I’m all right,” he says, though his jaw is rigid. Then, “your mother called, before. Left a message ‘for my daughter Rachel.’ Old bat’s getting bolder.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Like hell you will.” He moves his hand over mine. “You do you, babe. Talking to her’s brought you nothing but grief.”

I say nothing, but I press closer to him, squeezing his hand as much as I dare with the IV.

“You’re beautiful, Ray,” he wheezes. “*We’re* beautiful. Anyone says otherwise, send ‘em to me.”

My throat is pin-tight. If I start speaking now I’ll just start crying, which will only upset him in turn. I reach for his other hand, closing my fingers over his. On the screen the woman is driving away as the credits roll, into open countryside bathed in sunlight. Dana can’t bear to leave me alone and vulnerable; I can’t bear to hurt him by telling him to go. So we linger here, spending every cent on painkillers and medications, prolonging the inevitable. There isn’t a pearl big enough to take it all away. Not even my own.

My dealer calls herself Babette but Dana calls her Madame B;

she’s a Madame kind of woman, the kind you can’t imagine as anything but her polished middle-aged self, the kind you can’t imagine owning a pair of sweatpants. *Pearls*, she told me when I started out, *are a woman’s game. Men never know how to handle them right, just as a pearl from a man always fetches less than one from a woman. They lack a certain depth, a grief without name.*

Which is bullshit. I’ve sold her pearls from men before and lied about it, and she never remarked on some kind of missing mystical grief. But she knows her stones—and she’s got the clientele to buy

them. As long as I've been doing this, she's had a near monopoly on the market.

She sizes up my latest now, loupe stuck in her eye, fingers stroking the surface. At last she nods with satisfaction. "A stunning one. I'll give you 300 for it."

"400," I say. She'll get 500 for it easy, perhaps more if she puts it in a fancy setting, or if she already has a buyer lined up. And she usually has a buyer lined up.

She makes a face at me but I fold my arms. I need the 400, and I'm her best source now. The others are all teams, one to choose the person, one to do the surgery; but there's something about doing it all yourself, about seeing the whole process through, from selection to open wound, from outer implication to inner truth.

"Very well," she sighs, "but you're robbing me." She digs into her desk drawer and starts laying out 100,000 bundles. "You're not paying out more, are you?" When I shake my head she exhales. "Good, because I think our little enterprise might truly be coming to an end, Ray. First that exposé, and now a group of psychiatrists has started putting out feelers—legal extractions with a guaranteed payment. Only for small ones, mind you, but it's only a matter of time. I hope you've been socking it away."

I feel suddenly as if I'm in a tunnel, everything hollow and echoing. Something must have shown on my face, because she asks more quietly, "No improvements, then?"

I swallow hard, and again. "No," I finally manage.

"You know it's true, about these." She holds the pearl up to the light. "That's why the shrinks are so keen. A client the other day told me the trick is to wear it below your breasts, where your own would grow? Do that for a night and you wake up feeling like you've wept for days. That empty feeling, like everything's been washed away."

"I don't think it would work for me," I say, rubbing beneath my breasts.

"I wasn't thinking about you," she says. Before I can reply she continues, "so how much will you want for yours? Dana's been ill for,

what, three, four years now? It's 400 easy, probably more, minus whatever you'd have to pay for the extraction of course. Sam's probably your best bet for that, his hands are good, it's just his eye that's shitty."

I can't think of what to say. Months of quiet panic, of everything feeling like eggshells, waiting to reach this precipice; yet now that it's come I feel utterly blindsided.

Madame B looks at the pearl, rolling it between her fingers. "I've been thinking I might keep yours, you know," she says. "For the personal connection."

"I can't see that you need one," I mutter; I'm still rubbing my torso, I have this urge to cover the spot with my hands, like a child.

But she only laughs, soft and bitter. "Oh my dear Ray," she says. "I've never met a person who didn't. I'm no exception; I'm the rule."

I lie in bed that night next to Dana who's sleeping at last, as peacefully as he can these days. His face exhausted in the dim light of the monitors, jaw still clenched with pain. The last painkiller we haven't yet tried. After this it's back to the beginning, going through the list again . . . and his meds are "temporarily unavailable," no one can tell us what that even means, we cannot waste a dose until they come in next week, and there will be new side effects now, and how much more of it all can he even take . . .

The pearl money all but gone now.

I press and press at my torso, teasing out the faint curve beneath my skin. Just the hint of a presence; I can't even see it save from certain angles. The shock when I first discovered it. So many times I'd been told *I never knew I had this* and thought it impossible; I figured they must feel something, they just didn't know what. But here I was utterly unaware of it.

What does my pearl look like? Whose sorrows will it feed on, when it ceases to feed on mine?

Beside me Dana mumbles, "If I wasn't here to look after you,

what would you do?"

I look at him but his eyes are closed, his breathing regular. Talking in his sleep. And I want to ask him, I want to awaken him and ask him if the question was rhetorical, or does he want me to answer?

"It's the nature of the game," Sam says expansively. "We knew this day would come, didn't we? It was just a matter of how long we could ride the gravy train for. I'll be damned if I'm going back to the hospital, though. Plenty of other work for a good surgeon, if you're not fussy about what you do."

We're sitting at lunch, at a restaurant he chose. It's chic and expensive and I'm eating a salad and drinking tap water. I've put my only dress on because I know the suits annoy Sam; as it is he can't keep from grimacing every time his eyes alight on my crewcut. I need him to help me, not be repulsed by me.

After all, he has the best hands in this business. Better than mine.

"Still, you've done all right for yourself, haven't you? Babette never shuts up about you." He cuts into his meat, raises it rare and dripping to his mouth, and chews thoughtfully. "She even thinks she can tell yours apart," he continues around his mouthful. "In society photos and the like. Always pointing them out to me, *that's one of Rachel's, you can tell by the size, by the glow they have.*"

I have to swallow my response; we both know full well Madame B would never use that name, not anymore. "I need to know if you'll do this for me," I say.

"What's to keep me from keeping yours?"

"I've already told Babette, and no one else will give you as much for it."

"Of course, of course. Just making sure you have a buyer, and I'll get my fee." He lays his cutlery down and taps at his wristband, eyeing the projected calendar. "So perhaps, say, Thursday morning—"

"End of the day," I interrupt. "As soon as possible."

"If we do it in the morning, you'll have time to recover and then

see her—”

“End of the day,” I repeat. “At my office. I’ll go home that night, and bring it to her in the morning. It’s how I do things.” When he looks at me with the grimace I sigh and explain, “I want to show Dana before I sell it.”

“Ah, of course. How is dear Dana?”

“He’s dying,” I say, and get up before he can say anything more.

There is nothing stranger than being on your own table. At last seeing what the others saw, all those tired people, looking up with hope and trepidation. I am looking up with hope and trepidation. I don’t think Sam will do anything, but he’s always been far more cut-throat about it all—and while Madame B is powerful, she’s not here. If I die on the table, there’s nothing she can do about it.

I told Ana: if anything goes wrong, just go along with Sam until you can get away, then go to Madame B. Make her pay you something; this is as much her idea as mine, she can pay out and chase Sam for the pearl. Make her pay enough that Dana has a choice at least. About how to go forward, about how to end it all.

He won’t leave me because he thinks I need him and I can’t let him go because he needs me to need him and I need him to love me and I can’t bear to hurt him, I can’t—

but maybe I can take something away, enough to let us both do what must be done.

And when I awaken I’m utterly, utterly empty. I feel like I’ve been hollowed out; I hardly feel anything at all. In the tray Sam holds out to me is a massive pearl as blue as twilight and as lustrous as silk and I think, *That’s the closest thing I’ll ever have to a soul. The damn thing is everything but my obligations.*

It’s late when I come home. Dana’s half-asleep, the television flashing images of vacation paradises with a muted commentary, the glow painting his drawn face in sharp relief. I take a moment to look,

to really look at him, before I slip off my shoes and painfully ease myself onto the bed, nudging aside the tubes and wires that surround him like a nest.

He stirs, and I sense the effort it takes for him to turn his head, to lift his hand enough to touch my arm.

“That kind of a day,” he rasps.

I nod, careful to keep my bandages hidden. Instead I take his hand and nestle the pearl in it.

And there are things I had thought to say now. Stuff about how this pearl is different, stuff about how he doesn't have to worry. Stuff about what will become of me once he's gone, that everything will be okay.

Stuff about how he can let go now.

But all I can think of is the awful, aching emptiness in my belly, so I merely close his fingers over the pearl and press his fist to his sternum, just below his breasts.

“Nicest one yet,” he whispers. “Beautiful, like you.”

“Like us,” I say, but the words sound hollow.

It takes a while, but at last I feel it: his body softening against mine, the tension in his face easing. He sighs deeply, a shuddering breath, and I think he's about to cry but he only relaxes more. I open up the drip completely and he sleeps at last, truly sleeps, and I doze as well, sliding in and out of awareness, and we're no longer pressed together on the narrow bed but lying on a twilit beach, *Not a care in the world* the television whispers. Lying twined together in silky-soft sand, *Not a care in the world*, slowly sliding down, down into a cool, damp darkness that wraps around us like a shroud.

