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THE BLESSING
by Corey Fischer

My mother lay on a chaise lounge by the swimming pool humming an approximation of "Begin the Beguine". A net of light reflected by the water played over her thighs. They were not bad thighs for a woman of sixty five. This thought filled me with a sudden queasiness. I felt a rising in my solar plexus that I remembered from childhood. It reached from my navel to my teeth.

"Don't breathe so loudly, Edgar." She was painting her toe nails bright red. I had never understood toe-nail polish. Why would anyone want to call attention to those misshapen bits of extruded horn by coloring them so brightly? I hated my own toe nails and my toes and my feet. My shoulders were the only part of my body that I didn't hate. Since joining a gym, on my doctor's orders, I had actually developed some definition in those muscles and enjoyed seeing them in my bathroom mirror. Everything else — chest, stomach, legs — remained slack and unloved. My mother had better muscle tone than I did and she was certainly less pale. She had a reckless sun-tan. I would never have allowed myself to spend as much time as she did in the sun without a block of at least a 15 SPF rating. Once again, I pointed out the risks of melanoma.

She snorted. "You sound just like your father."

The nail polish smelled like banana. It exacerbated my queasiness.

"Not that I don't miss him, Edgar, but I've got to say that it's a wonderful thing to be left alone sometimes. Not be told what to do every minute? You know what I mean?"

I opened my briefcase and took out the signature cards from the bank.

"I'm not going to sign," she said.

"You said you would."

"Well, I've changed my mind. Something's come up."

I began to feel the first intimations of an ocular migraine. A bright spot, like a rip in my field of vision.

"But I thought you understood the need to protect your assets." I said. "Look what happened to your friend, what's her name, "

"Etta."

"Etta. She was only five years older than you. It happened overnight, isn't that what you told me?"

"I don't want to rehash what happened to poor Etta. Let her rest in peace. But I'll tell you dear, if anything like that happens to me, call Dr. Kevorkian. Do not, I repeat, do not put me in one of those places like Etta went to. Just tell them to knock me out. So you don't have to worry about losing your inheritance to some nursing home. I'm going to tell Manny to put it in my will."

The bright spot was growing and had begun to undulate. I knew it would pass in about twenty minutes leaving me with a headache that would get worse as the day progressed and would eventually force me to take a phenobarb and go to bed.

"You can't put something like that in a will, Mother, You can't leave instructions for assisted suicide. It's illegal."

"Manny will find a way."

Manny was her lawyer. He'd been a acquaintance of my parents since I was an infant. After his recent divorce, he had grown a small pony tail, in some ill advised attempt to appear fashionable

"He'll be coming by for a drink any minute. We can talk about it with him."

I closed my briefcase. The definitive snap of the latches gave me a brief moment of pleasure. My father had given me that briefcase a month before he died. Through the rippling migraine aura, I could almost see him sitting under the umbrella shaking his head at my mother's stubbornness, saying as he frequently had, "What can you do? She doesn't know what's good for her."

My mother had finished painting her toes. She lay back and placed a white plastic shield over her eyes.

"You're becoming a caricature of yourself, mother, you know that?" I was surprised by how bitter I sounded. She didn't seem to take offense.

"It's part of the aging process. Like sun-dried tomatoes. They taste more and more tomato-like the more shriveled they get. I'm just becoming more and more myself. The essence of myself. You can call it a caricature, I prefer to think of it as a distillation."

She reached out blindly and patted my knee. "My god, Edgar, you must be roasting in that suit. Why don't you at least take a swim since you're here? There are still some bathing trunks in your father's bathroom."

My father's bathing trunks were tight. My stomach bulged over the top of the waist band. I hoped my mother would not look at me. I quickly got in the pool. The water was the same temperature as the air. I felt a familiar relief as I fell back, letting it support me.

"Evelyn! I got the tickets. The last pair!"

It was Manny. He was wearing a loose Hawaiian print shirt and his pony tail had gotten longer since I'd last seen him. He was the same age as my father would have been but showed none of the signs of decrepitude and illness that soured my father's spirit at the end. Manny looked fit for another twenty years at least.

As I hoisted myself out of the pool, I heard the fabric of my father's trunks rip.

"Mother," I called out, "Throw me a towel, will you?"

Manny brought a towel over to me. "Hi, Edgar. How are you, boychik?"

I wrapped the towel around me. "I'm fine," I lied. The headache was progressing and my temples were pounding. "I'll be right back."

As I staggered toward the siding doors, I heard my mother say, "I was telling him that I'm not going to sign those papers from the bank."

I dressed as quickly as I could. When I came back to the poolside, Manny was alone. He put both his hands on my shoulders and rubbed vigorously. The pain was extreme.

"You're tight as a tambourine, Edgar. You need some body work. What is with you young people? Don't you know how to take care of yourselves?"

He told me to sit down on the chaise longue while he continued to work on my shoulders and neck.

"Manny, I appreciate your concern but I don't have a lot of time right now. One of my clients had a hard disk crash and I have to do a data transfer at four. Can we discuss my mother's assets?"

"Edgar, Edgar, Edgar. I see you sitting in front of me but it's Arnold's voice that I hear. Uncanny."

I ignored his condescension and spoke as quickly as I could, trying to outpace the growing pain in my head.

"I'm only trying to protect my mother's estate. I want to transfer a portion of the savings my father left into my name, up to the legal limit each year. That way, if she should ever need long term care, she won't have so much to spend down. Meanwhile, she'll be able to live on the annuity income. If you don't feel that this is the best solution, perhaps you can suggest a different strategy."

"Edgar, how can I put this," He clasped his hands behind his neck and stretched out his legs. "I don't feel comfortable thinking in terms of *strategies* any more. That is old paradigm thinking. That's about manipulation and living in the future. I'm more interested in the *now*."

My mother reappeared wearing a skirt and blouse of white Georgia Sea Island cotton that set off her tan. She carried a tray full of fruit drinks.

"Are you boys thirsty?"

"Thank you, Evelyn," Manny said as he helped himself to a drink. I suddenly felt parched and took a bottle of plain mineral water.

"The thing is, Edgar, right *now* your mother is in perfect health. To be talking about nursing homes and catastrophes—" He let the thought trail off in a sigh. "You haven't told him yet, Evelyn?"

"No, Manny, I was waiting for you."

She sat down next to him and took his hand. I was appalled by the gesture.

"What haven't you told me? Is this about the signature cards?"

"Edgar, you don't look well," my mother said.

"Migraine," I blurted.

"Oh my," she said. "You're still getting those?"

"Oil of basil," Manny said.

"What's that, Manny?" My mother asked.

"Oil of Basil. It's an aroma therapy thing. For headaches."

I lay back on the chaise longue.

"Evelyn, I don't think this is the right time to drop a bombshell on Eddie." No one but Manny ever called me Eddie.

"What is going on here?" I could barely speak through the throbbing in my head.

"Don't call it a bombshell, Manny. It's not a *bombshell*," she laughed and put her hand on my forehead. "We wanted you to be the first to know, Edgar."

I finally realized what they had been coyly hinting at. Manny must have been working toward this for months. Of course he didn't care about protecting my mother's assets. He was busy securing his own.

The migraine-induced simulacrum of my father was still sitting under the umbrella. "Don't just shrug," I begged him silently. "Something awful is about to happen. Stop them!"

"And she said yes, Eddie," Manny said, as my father vanished with a disgusted look on his face. "I am so happy."

"We're *both* happy" my mother added, putting her arms around Manny and resting her head on his shoulder.

They sat before me with their matching tans and rapturous smiles, waiting for me to say something. I rose with difficulty from the sticky embrace of the plastic webbing. "Excuse me," I said, feeling dizzy and defeated, "I need to use the bathroom."

After fourteen hours of uninterrupted sleep, I was finally rid of the migraine and felt capable of doing some work. I was just booting up when the doorbell chimed.

My mother was standing in the doorway holding a bag of groceries. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I'm in the middle of work."

"You just go about your business, Edgar. I'm going to make dinner for you."

She began to unpack the groceries.

I was immediately suspicious. "Mother, you don't cook."

"I do now. A few months ago Manny got me to take this class with him at Conscious Foods. Cooking with Heart. It was wonderful. I realized that what I'd hated about cooking was dealing with meat. Ugh. And of course your father always insisted on his roast beef and lamb chops. You know what *that* eventually did to him."

"Oh really? You mean it wasn't the stress after all?"

My mother pulled an immense zucchini out of the bag, followed by plastic containers full of unidentifiable grains. "Quinoa, spelt and bulgar," she chanted. "This is what they eat in the Andes and in Armenia. They live past a hundred. This stuff is amazing."

"How do you know I don't have other plans for this evening?"

"Mother's intuition. This is a lovely kitchen, Edgar, very well organized."

She took a chef's apron out of a drawer and put it on.

"Why are you doing this?"

She began peeling an onion while explaining how concerned she and Manny had been about my response to their wedding plans. It seemed Manny had a theory that I was suffering from unconscious fears of abandonment.

"So I asked myself," my mother said, "What could I do to reassure you? And then this still, small voice said, 'Cook.'" She wiped onion tears from her eyes. Her mascara did not run.

"You just go about your business. I'll call you when it's ready."

As I opened the door to my study, she stopped me. "By the way Edgar, Manny and I discussed it and I've decided I *will* sign those cards from the bank."

She said it as casually as she might say, "I'll have the filet of sole."

"What made you change your mind?"

"Manny feels that—let me see if I can say it the way he did—that we project our *real* desires onto money, so if I don't sign, you're going to always feel that I'm withholding something precious from you. Something like that."

I understood. Manny had convinced her to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. I was not unaware of the irony in this situation. If I let her go ahead and sign, I would be entering into a tacit alliance with Manny. If I changed my position, my behavior would seem arbitrary and willful. He had won. I saw a future filled with Manny's soft triumphs and my brittle defeats.

My mother took a cassette out of her purse, put it in the tape player on the kitchen counter and began to hollow out the long green squash.

Sounds of Tibetan bells and synthesizers wafted through the apartment. It was too much for me. I went to my study, closed the door and began to download my e-mail.

I could not concentrate. I was overcome with a sense of intense *strangeness* knowing that she was in my apartment, cooking. I opened my door as quietly as I could and, through the crack, watched her moving around my small kitchen. She was absorbed in her task, sautéing the onion and zucchini, measuring the grains. Almost dancing. The amber bracelets she was wearing slid and clicked as she worked. Seen from this angle, it was not hard to imagine her as someone other than my mother. An older woman friend. A friend's mother. A friend's lover. I quickly stopped that train of thought.

The dish was surprisingly tasty. While we ate she told me the plot of a mystery she had been reading.

"It's not the story that's so great though," she said, "It's the setting. It made me really want to go to New Mexico. I'm trying to convince Manny. He wants to go to Bali." And then she added "For our honeymoon."

As I finished a second helping she said, "Well?"

I began to tell her, once again, how ill-advised I thought the whole idea was.

"No," she said, "The *food*, did you like it?"

"Oh."

I hadn't really tasted much of it. I rarely notice what I'm eating.

"It's very good, Mother, thank you."

"You really liked it?" Her face was glowing.

"Yes, I really liked it. It was absolutely delicious."

"Good. Now, you know what I want in return?"

I got up to make some coffee. She followed me into the kitchen.

"I want your blessing, Edgar."

The decaf began to drip. "I'm afraid that's a little too biblical for my taste."

"You know what I mean, dear. I want you to stop pouting and sulking and wish me and Manny well."

"You're obviously going to do exactly what you want to, Mother. So let's not belabor it." I handed her a cup of coffee.

"Yes, I am going to do what I want. Finally. But I want to do it with your good will. Edith and Harry are flying out."

Edith was her older sister. "She had some reservations at first, but she understands how much this means to me. I want you to understand too."

I felt cornered. I seemed unable to convince my mother that my suspicions about Manny had any validity. If I withheld my approval, however, she would continue trying to impress me with all of Manny's wonderful attributes: his sensitivity, his gentleness, his

tolerance. Everything, in short, that my father had lacked. I needed more time to consider the situation.

"I am trying very hard to understand, Mother. But I do need to get back to work now. "

"It's going to be a very simple ceremony. No best man or bridesmaids. Just a few friends and family — Manny's brother, his father, Edith and Harry. You."

I took her empty cup. "Really, mother. I have to finish this project tonight."

"What are you working on, dear?"

Her question was a signal that she would soon be on her way.

"It's for the UCLA Medical Center."

"Really? What are you doing for them?"

"I'm working on a relational database that can track lab tests for people with aplastic anemia."

Her eyes began to glaze over. "That's terrific," she said.

"The tricky part is maintaining field integrity."

She looked at her watch. "Oh my god, I didn't realize. I have to go sweetie. I'm meeting Manny at nine."

Before I washed the dishes, I took the cassette she had forgotten out of the tape player and replaced it with Glenn Gould's recording of the two and three part inventions. Tonight, however, the ease I usually felt when I listened to his strong and steady fingers do their work would not come. The music sounded overly precise and very distant.

The wedding took place on the grounds of an ashram in the foothills of the Santa Monica mountains. Manny had found a woman rabbi who incorporated Native American motifs into her ceremonials. When I arrived she was waving a bundle of burning herbs around Manny and my mother while chanting something in Hebrew. I was somewhat out of breath from the climb up to the clearing where the ceremony was to occur and before I could escape, Manny's very large half-brother, Arthur, accosted me. Whatever aversion I felt for Manny was completely eclipsed by my feelings for Arthur who was around sixty and sported a bushy beard full of gray streaks that looked like candle drippings. He was weeping. "Edgar, isn't this an amazing event? Could they have found a better place? I'm telling you, this is the happiest I've felt since I stopped the prozac."

In response to the question I hadn't asked, he said, "Side effects, Edgar, you wouldn't want to know."

The rabbi, who had hair down to her waist and wore a white shift, produced a ringing sound by rubbing a stick around the rim of a brass bowl. This seemed to be a signal to gather. I found myself standing next to my mother's older sister, Edith and her husband, Harry who had come directly from the airport. She kissed the air next to my face and said, in a stage whisper, "So you couldn't talk any sense into her, huh?"

I shrugged. I could no longer avoid looking at my mother and Manny. They were both dressed in white. My mother had small shells and beads elaborately braided into her hair. Manny wore a garland of leaves. My mother saw me and began motioning for me to take a spot closer to her.

"Let's form a circle," the rabbi said, "A circle to mirror the wholeness of creation, of the world-egg, the womb of the goddess."

My aunt growled out of the side of her mouth, "Where did they find *her*?" My uncle Harry muttered, "For this we flew across the country?"

The rabbi suddenly called out, "Ephraim Ben Avram!" In the silence that followed, I realized that was my Hebrew name. I had not heard it spoken since my Bar Mitzvah. My mother and Manny were motioning me to come forward. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me. To my enormous relief, it seemed that all I had to do was hold one corner of a tie-dyed wedding canopy over the radiant couple. The other three corners were held by Manny's brother, my aunt Edith and Manny's ninety year old father, supported by his nurse, a muscular young man in a black turtleneck.

The rabbi made a speech about marriage as a union of the masculine and feminine sides of God, a vessel in which to work out unfinished relationship karma from past lives.

When she finished speaking, my mother and Manny stepped on the wine glass. It took a few stamps to actually break it and everyone laughed. The rabbi invited people to speak their hopes and wishes for the couple. Manny's brother was the first. He was weeping even more than ever. "I was going to read a poem I wrote," he sobbed, "But I feel so much joy to see my big brother finding such completion in his life, the words just can't contain it."

Manny walked over and embraced him. I realized that Arthur was now my step-uncle. I shuddered.

Manny insisted his brother read the poem. Arthur took a piece of crumpled yellow legal paper from his pocket.

"Brother, you beat the shit out of me when we were kids

I hated you for years

*I carried my woundedness into the mocking world and howled under the ashen sky
And when my throat was as bloody and torn as my heart
I could hear in the silence the sound of your pain
It was the echo of my own. We are brothers in our woundedness
Blood brothers, piss brothers, shit brothers, semen brothers
our innocent cocks hungry sad animals looking for love..."*

He paused. It was difficult to know whether he had finished or was simply overcome with emotion. My aunt Edith wasn't going to wait to find out.

"All I can say is I wish you health and happiness, may you live to a hundred and twenty. *Mazel tov.*"

My mother looked at me imploringly while other friends and family members mouthed the expected sentiments. Manny was tireless in his effusions of gratitude for each rhetorical offering.

Finally there was a silence, in which I realized that I was the only one who had not spoken. The rabbi asked if anyone else wanted to share anything before the dancing started. Everyone was looking at me.

I cleared my throat. I had no idea what I would say. I felt my father's inconsolable presence muttering and cursing in some corner of my mind.

"It's no secret that I've had some reservations about this marriage." Bodies tensed. Foreheads knotted. "But my mother and Manny seem to be...happy." I heard some relieved sighs. "I suppose I should be grateful that my mother has found someone so soon after she lost my father. Perhaps *soon* is not the correct word. I know it's been two years since he died —" I broke off suddenly when I saw the look of disappointment pass

over my mother's face. "I shouldn't be saying this, should I? This is supposed to be a celebration."

Manny's father said to his nurse "What? What's he saying?"

The guests began to shift restlessly where they stood. I summoned all my strength and made a final attempt at something that might pass for generosity of spirit. " May you both be happy in your new — lifestyle. I mean, I wish you all the satisfaction you deserve. And you deserve — everything."

The ordeal was over. The rabbi signaled to the musicians who began to play what sounded like an Hungarian–Cajun waltz. Manny and my mother began dancing. She held a corner of her white dress, fanning it out. He had both hands on the small of her back and they waltzed in circles. Manny motioned the musicians to play faster and louder which they did with enthusiasm. He and my mother began whirling around, holding each other by the hands, leaning back, counterbalancing, faster and faster, until they collapsed on a patch of sunlit grass laughing like lunatics. I waited for disgust to well up in me at this sight but as I watched them I felt only wonder at how easily their pleasure seemed to come.

Then others began dancing. Arthur tried to pull Edith and Harry into an awkward line dance. Edith went along with it but Harry stood to the side, lit a cigarette and commented to no one in particular about the inanity of Californians.

Manny, out of breath, came over and put his arm around me.

"You don't have to force yourself to try to feel something you don't, Eddie. I know you're not happy about us getting married. I have no problem with that. Your feelings are your business."

It occurred to me that he might be telling the truth. This struck me as a novel idea. I tried to brush it aside.

"Manny, my name is Edgar. No one but you calls me Eddie. I really can't stand it when you do that."

"All right. Edgar." He grinned. "I appreciate your sharing that with me. I want you to trust me enough to be honest."

I wondered how great his appetite for honesty really was.

"Well, Manny, if you mean that, let me ask you something."

"Anything, Edgar."

"Why are you marrying my mother?"

"Why do you think I'm marrying her?"

"I imagine you've been lonely since your wife left you. You have similar interests. And she has a fair amount of money."

"That's all true, Edgar, but I wouldn't get married again if that was as far as it went. I love her and I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

He seemed sincere, but of course Manny *always* seemed sincere. It was his *modus operandi*. I was not convinced.

"I feel more like myself when I'm with her," he went on. "Do you know what I mean? I can talk with her all day and not get bored. I feel like I've waited all my life for this."

"That's very touching, Manny. Your vulnerability is really sweet. That's something women can't get enough of, right? I just can't help but wonder how in love you'd be if my mother had no money."

He laughed. "Edgar, look at me! You've known me all your life. I am not a con-man who preys on helpless widows. Didn't she tell you that I suggested she go ahead and sign those accounts over to you?"

"There's still the house, Manny, and the annuities."

"Edgar, as far as I'm concerned she could sign it *all* over to you tomorrow. I might suggest that Mother Theresa could put it to better use, but it's all the same to me. It's between you and your mother."

"The only thing that's between me and my mother is *you*, Manny. She won't do anything without your *input*."

"Listen to me very carefully, Edgar," He put his hands on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes. "I'm 68 years old. I only have time for essentials. Money is not on the list."

He kept me locked in his intense gaze. He reminded me of the ophthalmologist I had gone too when I started getting the ocular migraines. At the same time, I realized it was as easy to believe him as it was to disbelieve. I glanced over at my mother who was talking to Edith and Harry. Whatever she was saying made them both laugh. Even *I* could not deny that she looked extremely happy. There was a good chance everything I had been insisting upon was completely wrong. I tried not to panic

"Now, let me ask you something, Edgar," Manny said.

"Fair is fair," I braced myself.

"You're — what? — thirty-three?"

"Thirty-two."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Of course," I answered automatically. My panic surged.

"Tell the truth, Edgar," he said.

Just then, Arthur whirled by with the musicians behind him and grabbed my hand. I was too surprised to resist. Manny, *espontaneo* that he was, grabbed my other hand. I was nearly lifted off the ground by the two of them.

"Tell the truth!" Manny repeated.

An inventory of strained and problematic couplings flashed through my mind.

"Probably not," I shouted over the music, "Not the way you describe it. Always — got — bored." And then it became too difficult to speak.

Arthur and Manny lunged and turned. I wondered where these two men, with a combined age of more than a hundred years, got their energy. Manny pulled my mother into the dance. She, in turn, pulled Harry along, giving him no time to resist. Soon everyone except Manny's father and his nurse had joined the dance. Edith was shrieking, either in distress or delight. The rabbi's long hair flew around her face. We snaked over the countryside with the musicians following. Everyone was doing a different step but somehow we kept time to the music. I could feel the ground under my feet with an acuteness that surprised me.

As we approached the edge of the clearing, some trick of the light convinced me that my father was standing in the shadows under an oak tree. He shook his head sadly and walked off into the surrounding darkness. I sensed that I would never see him again.

Just then, a tremendous turkey vulture, startled by our noise, flapped into the air. I was struck, in the same moment, by the ugliness of its engorged head and by the beauty of its flight.

We danced our way back to the center of the clearing. I was sweating and my heart was pounding. The sensation was not unpleasant. I caught my mother's eye. Strands of her hair were flying loose. She blew me a kiss. We ended up in a circle around Manny's father. He sat in his wheel chair, waving his upraised arms to the music. Then he grasped his nurse's hand, pulled himself to a nearly upright position and shouted, "*A los intrepidos, el mundo!*"

As the last chords of the music resolved, Manny said. "He was in Spain in the thirties, fighting the fascists. It means "The world belongs to the fearless.""