Arts & Humanities

Fiction: "Here or There"

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The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is now. The African proverb had been with Peter when he awoke in his hotel room in Saint Rémy, the words softly and insistently repeating themselves, and they were still with him while he sat at an outdoor café with his daughter Jennifer. Peter was a professor of medicine and director of AIDS programs at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, and he had stopped in southern France in order to visit with Jennifer, and to try to persuade her to accompany him to South Africa.

Jennifer had been staying in Saint Rémy by herself, on leave from her job, for more than two weeks now. She pointed to the large parking lot that took up most of the town's center, and said that several mornings a week it was transformed, along with many of the side streets that radiated from it, into a market rich in fragrances and colors: oranges, apples, grapes, sausages, fish, cheeses, flowers, linens, soaps, spices...

"I could be happy living here," she said.

"Who wouldn't?" Peter said.

"It's a real *village* — a place where you can shop every day for the things you need for that day, and where you know the shopkeepers, where their children are friends with your children —"

"You don't have any children."

"It has all the perks of a larger city, too," Jennifer continued. "Museums, music festivals, art galleries. Lots of writers and artists live here — it's not far from major cities, and from the sea — even from the Alps, if you travel inland a bit —"

"You're in a good mood, aren't you?"

"What could be bad?" Jennifer said. "I'm far from my phone, my computer, and my law office. I'm in a beautiful village in the south of France where, lucky me, I'm having a fashionable late-afternoon drink with my father."

"And you're pregnant."

"Oh *that*!" Jennifer said, and waved the subject away.

"You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't *ask* a question."

Peter leaned across the table. "Jennifer," he said.

"*Dad*," she said, leaning toward him in the way he was leaning toward her.

"Look. We've *got* to talk about what you're going to do. I have no intention of telling you *what* to do, of course, but —"

“But nothing, okay?” Jennifer said. “So how about, instead of you telling me the-choices-are-mine-but-you-just-want-to-make-sure-I-understand-the-consequences, you be your usual self and tell me what you think. How about — even better —you tell me *what to do*! It would be a relief, believe me, to have somebody just take over.”

“I need more data,” Peter said. “What week are you in? Have you had an ultrasound yet? Do you love the guy? Does he know?”

“Last questions first. He doesn’t know *and* I don’t love him. I surely had the *hots* for him, but I’ve concluded that if I never saw him again, that would be just fine.”

“Do you miss him?”

“No.” She sipped her wine. “Plus — my brilliant judgment once again — he’d make a lousy father. He’s the kind of guy who’d say, ‘You deserve to have your career, dear, so I’ll play Mister Mom for our kids,’ and I’d arrive home to find him zoned out in front of the TV — yes, he’s a pothead, too — the house a wreck, the baby ass deep in poop and puke, and —”

“Do you want the child?”

“Maybe.”

“Not good enough,” Peter said.

Jennifer set her wine glass on the table. “I probably shouldn’t be having any alcohol,” she said. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“You’re a big girl,” Peter said. “And one drink won’t cause birth defects. All things in moderation.”

Including moderation, right?” Jennifer sighed. “Look, I know you think it would be good for me to go with you to South Africa instead of staying here and worrying my decision to death, not to mention causing my loving parents unnecessary anguish, but —” She stopped, waved her hand in front of his eyes. “Dad? *Dad*! Are you *listening* to me?”

“Of course. You think I think it would be good for you to come with me to South Africa and that —”

“*No!”* Jennifer slammed the table with the flat of her hand. “No. You can parrot my words back well enough, but you’re staring at that woman over there. It’s rude.”

Peter *had* noticed a woman sitting a few tables away: an attractive, dark-haired woman, her short hair parted to the side — in her midforties, he guessed — who was drinking coffee and reading *Le Monde*.

“I thought she might be someone I knew,” Peter said. “She looked familiar.”

“They *all* look familiar,” Jennifer said and, nearly knocking over her wine glass, leaned forward and slammed her hand on the table again. “I hate it when men do that — I absolutely hate it when they pretend to be listening while ogling another woman, and when a guy does it to me what I’d like to do is pull an ice pick out of my handbag and jab it in one of his eyes —”

“Stop it. People are staring at *you*.”

Jennifer sat back, put on her sunglasses. “Okay,” she said. “I’m done for now.”

When Peter had asked Jennifer to consider going to South Africa with him, and explained why, she had replied, in her best lawyerly manner, that she would take the question under advisement. He doubted that she would say yes, but if she did, he realized, and for the first time, that her presence would damage his chances of being with Khuthala, who had been his companion during his visit to South Africa the previous summer.

Khuthala was a nurse, trained in Durban, and it was while the two of them were working together in a clinic in Tugela Ferry that Peter became concerned about several HIV-infected patients who had died from a strain of tuberculosis that was proving resistant to all known drugs. When he returned to the States, he informed the CDC of his discovery. They told him that what they needed was a live culture of the bacteria in order to determine if other strains like it existed. Their attempts to acquire samples, they explained, had been thwarted by the South African government, which would not permit representatives of the CDC to enter the country, and so they had asked Peter if, when he was in Tugela Ferry again, he could obtain a culture for them. Peter said he would try, and thought that perhaps he would be able to persuade Jennifer, who would arouse considerably less suspicion than he would, to go with him, and to transport the sample. Perhaps, too, the assignment — its adventure — would distract her from her situation.

“And yes,” Jennifer said, as if he had just questioned why she’d chosen Saint Rémy, “I came here because of van Gogh — because he spent the last year of his life here, before he killed himself — but you can rest assured that I am not necessarily suicidal.”

“I know that,” Peter said.

“I just like the peace and quiet — the beauty of the landscape that inspired him, even while he was locked up and out of his mind — and I like being far from everything and everyone I know, and it was probably a mistake for you to visit me. Correct that. It was probably a mistake for me to say yes when you said you wanted to stop by on your way to do more of God’s work.”

Jennifer forced a smile, then leaned back.

“I’ll be fine in a few years,” she said.

“I’m counting on it,” Peter said. Then: “Any morning sickness?”

“No.”

“Been to a doctor?”

“Sure.”

“Okay,” he said. “What I think, then, is that you should have the child.”

Jennifer grinned. “I was hoping you’d say that,” she said. “So okay: here or there?”

“There.”

“You’re not paying attention,” she said. “If not here in France, then there *where*? And please be specific — there in the States, or there in South Africa?”

“In the States — you’re not at the end of your first trimester yet, and you don’t know anyone here or in South Africa.”

“Okay,” Jennifer said. “So here’s another one: Do I tell the father?”

“Not necessarily. If he finds out, there could be legal consequences. We need to know more first — to inform ourselves.”

“What if I don’t do what you say — what if I don’t have the child?”

“Then you don’t.”

Jennifer cocked her head to the side. “You *are* a good man, you know,” she said. “Mom always said so, even when she was pissed at you. Maybe not the best dad in the world — you were *away* so damned much, and playing around, and —”

“Now wait a minute, Jennifer —”

“Oh, Dad, it doesn’t matter. It may have mattered to Mom in the beginning — she never said anything to me, but —” Jennifer stopped. “When I think about marriage, about finding a guy I’d want to have children with, and when I think about my age — past thirty — *wow!* — I mean, the idea of making love to one man and one man only for the next twenty or thirty years, it seems utterly ridiculous. I don’t get how people do it.”

“Sometimes they don’t.”

“But then there’s all the secrecy and lying and sneaking around and hurt feelings. It all seems so stupid.”

“What’s the alternative?”

Jennifer shrugged. “Living in France?”

Peter laughed.

“I’ve been angry with you, sure, but not for that,” Jennifer said. She removed her sunglasses and placed them on the table. “I mean, you were working so damned hard all those years, going out to save lives every day, and when —”

“*Save* lives? Not at all. Mostly they *died*. For every life I saved — prolonged, at best — at least a hundred died. Look. At last count in Tugela Ferry alone, fifty-two HIV-infected people have died from the strain of tuberculosis I was telling you about. And in just the short while we’ve been sitting here and talking, thousands of *children* have died of AIDS. More than eight thousand people a *day* are dying of AIDS —”

“I don’t *need* to hear this now, okay?” Jennifer said, covering her ears with her hands. “You talk to me as if you’re lecturing one of your first-year med students. You

don’t get it, Dad.”

“Don’t get what?”

“That you spew out lots of facts and questions, but all along, even though you say you’re letting people make up their own minds, *you* really know what’s best. *That’s* the problem. I mean, are you ever wrong?”

“Evidently — to judge by your anger — I’ve been wrong lots of times.”

Jennifer leaned back, let her left hand rest lightly on her stomach. “But not today,” she said, smiling. “So let’s have another drink, you and me.”

Peter sat at the same table where he and Jennifer had had their drinks — to his invitation to eat together, she had pleaded fatigue — and ordered supper: *blanquette de veau*, a salad, wine. The café was half full (the dark-haired woman was gone), and Peter ate in silence. For dessert he ordered his favorite — a *tarte tatin*, carmelized apple pie served upside down — and while he ate the pie and sipped his coffee, he recalled telling Jennifer how, from the plane, the first time he had flown into Durban, the city’s harbor had reminded him of Miami Beach: golden beaches, sunbathers, surfers, fishing boats, cruise ships, modern hotels, skyscrapers . . .

He would not, of course, tell her about Khuthala, who was only three years older than Jennifer, and whose two young daughters were half Jennifer’s age. The first time Khuthala had visited Peter at his Durban apartment, she told him that most South African women with HIV had had only one partner: as men moved around the country to work where their labor was needed — in gold, diamonds, sugar — they acquired the disease, which they took home and unknowingly passed on to their wives, who passed it on to their children. And since Khuthala’s husband, who had left his family four years earlier to work in the diamond mines in Kimberley, had never returned, Khuthala could count herself among the lucky ones. To reassure Peter of this, she had, on this first visit, brought her medical records with her.

Morning and evening, before and after work, Peter had walked with Khuthala through the markets, where the pungent fragrance of curries filled the air, and where most vendors and shoppers were dressed in bright Indian garb — swirling reds and yellows and greens — that made them look like enormous parakeets. And

walking with her to villages and encampments that neither cars nor motorbikes could reach — backpacks of medicine and equipment on their shoulders, umbrellas raised against the sun — he had been happy, had felt something which in another time and place he would have hesitated to state aloud for fear of sounding pompous, or sentimental: that he was once again, as he had been when the AIDS pandemic erupted two decades before, doing the work he believed he had been put on earth to do. At the same time — and it saddened him to realize he would never share these thoughts with Jennifer — he had been acutely aware, while in bed with Khuthala, that the act that gave them enormous pleasure, and comfort, was also the cause of great suffering and death.

Now, drinking the last of his coffee, he imagined walking across a valley lush with tropical greenery, heading toward a Zulu compound near the Tugela River, in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. Jennifer was with him, and she was helping him explain to the patients how to take the antiretrovirals. He saw the two of them leaving the hut and being shown, with pride, a stone-fenced cattle crawl in which there was one large cow and a scattering of chickens. And as the people, some holding infants in their arms, grasped at his wrist in gratitude, he could see strands of hair falling from their skulls and drifting into the air, skin falling away from their bones in patches, teeth dropping from their mouths and landing one at a time, in tiny puffs of dust, on the dirt of the cattle crawl.

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