

The Canyon That Is Not a Canyon

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This is Dagan on the day after a 4 A.M. porn binge. Another. The third in as many weeks. He drifts into the living room in late afternoon, sees Tam at his computer, freezes. He pictures her neck-deep in his browser history.

And this is Tam, looking up at her husband now. The feel of a tight wincing smile on her face. She stands up from the sofa, balancing the laptop on her upturned palm. The computer like a waitress's platter, or a shot put. Tam turns the screen out to Dagan: a naked woman, leering.

Get a good look? Tam says, and hurls the computer across the room. It lands in the kitchen, breaks apart on the hard linoleum floor.

Dagan, still standing at the threshold of the room. He looks at Tam, at the computer, then back at Tam. A few minutes ago he was still asleep. Now this: his cleft computer, his wife's mouth a slit in her face.

You thought I was joking last time? Tam says. This is it, I told you. This is it, this is it . . .

She starts to lose it, covers her face. Taking courage, Dagan crosses the room and sits her back down on the sofa. Beside her, he tries to take her hands but she jerks them away. Don't touch me, she says. Her voice falters.

Dagan slides closer to her, says, Shhh. Shhh. He puts his arm around her shoulders. It's okay, he says. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Tam pulls free of Dagan and moves to the other end of the sofa. She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand. I'm divorcing you, she says, her voice hard again, regrouped. You can move in with Cory until we get things straightened out. I keep the car

and the furniture. I keep the dishes and the TV. I keep pretty much everything except your stupid baseball collection. Tam motions to the glass case on top of the hutch.

That juvenilia eyesore, she says.

The glass case on the hutch contains several signed baseballs: a Manny Ramirez, a David Ortiz, a pre-defection Johnny Damon. Before moving out to Utah for Tam to get her master's, Dagan attended Red Sox home games with his uncle Max. Uncle Max covered sports for the *Globe*, got Dagan into games for free, and sometimes, after a round of post-game interviews, emerged from the locker room with a signed ball or two.

On the sofa, Dagan smiles, says, That eyesore's not going anywhere, and neither's this one. He tries once more to hold Tam's hands. She thrusts them beneath her thighs, violently, rocks forward with the movement, drives her forehead into his nose.

Damn it! Dagan says.

His eyes flare in that familiar way. Tam starts back, a little scared. She says, It was an accident, I'm sorry. Then after a pause: And don't talk to me like that!

I'm not going anywhere, Dagan repeats, feeling his nose. You need to calm down.

I am calm, Tam says, and I am going to divorce you.

Dagan, still feeling his nose, says, Sweets, you're not going to divorce me, okay? You don't dislike me that much. Am I bleeding?

Tam starts to say how yes, she does dislike him that much, precisely that much. She hears herself moving into discourse mode now, the way she gets with her Intro to Literature students, a little cold, maybe, but zealous to analyze. She starts to say how marriage is a zero-sum game, or no, not a game, forget the game. Let him imagine instead a simple proposition in which one could walk away with a thousand dollars, sure thing, or one could flip a coin, a fifty-fifty shot, for ten thousand dollars, heads wins everything, tails loses everything, and what do most people do? Most people take the thousand bucks and content themselves with it. They buy a month of steak dinners, a Louis Vuitton purse, a flat-screen TV. Tam starts to say how she's different, though, how she wants out of the marriage more than she's ever wanted anything and how she isn't so cynical as to write off true love, that fifty-fifty coin toss, or maybe fifty-to-one, she doesn't care. She

starts to say how now, right now, where things stand at the moment, she'd gladly give up the thousand dollars for a chance at something better. That's divorce, she starts to say. That's sucking out the marrow, basic Walden, she starts to say, tries to say, but Dagan is yelling. Yelling like a car alarm. Louder and louder. And when she keeps talking, keeps raising her voice, Dagan jumps off the sofa and into the air. He jumps up and down and pumps his knees in the air and yells again, furiously, a barbaric yell (yawp? she catches herself thinking), and then a smart quick smack on the center of his own forehead. Dagan takes the butt of his palm and brings it savagely to his forehead, a loud thudding smack, and another, and another, and now Tam stops talking and reaches in for his hand, tries to stop its heavy progress back up to his forehead, now red, now bearing the imprint of a palm line, a narrow crescent of stigmata, Ash Wednesday, Annunciation, and look what wondrous things the Lord God hath done. Hath done, Tam thinks, before smack, and smack, and *smack*, and down he goes.

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Dagan, coming to in the car some time later, raising his head to look out the window. A silo, a fallow field, an exit sign, slip past in the gloaming. Tam looks down at him from the driver's seat. Quit slouching, she says. You're fine. And then: I figured we needed to get away awhile.

Dagan reaches up to his forehead, feels the tender goose egg growing there. He flips down the vanity mirror and cranes his head up for a better look. A goose egg all right, and dried blood from his nose. This is comical, Dagan thinks. This is comical is what this is. He lets out a guffaw, says, Look at me. Look what you did to me, sweets.

You mean what you did to yourself? Tam says.

Dagan says, Fair enough, fair enough. He says, Where are we going anyway?

I don't know. To the woods. To Bryce maybe.

Bryce Canyon?

You know another Bryce? They say it's beautiful in the winter. And no big crowds to deal with.

Dagan thinks this over, tests his goose egg again. That's a plus, he says. Fewer Californians.

Outside, the last holdouts of evening leave the sky. The towns along I-15 south start to shrink. Smaller, more agrarian, more steeped in the Mormon past. And Dagan now, oddly, feeling closer to home. Raised in a small town north of Price—too small for Dagan—he sought out the coal crowd. Or the coal crowd's troubled sons anyway. Into drugs as a teen, slashing tires during Sunday services, until his folks, desperate, shipped him off to Uncle Max—Uncle Max the Massachusetts liberal, Uncle Max the disciplinarian à la Teddy Kennedy. To Babylon for reform, then: what irony of ironies. But reform Dagan did, and God is surely an ironic God. After high school, Dagan enrolled at UMass Amherst. He met Tammy there—Tammy who went strictly by Tam, Tam the new-shine Mormon, lately poached from Catholicism. At Amherst you could count the Mormons on two hands. Tam, Dagan decided, was by far the best. He proposed on the day they both graduated cum laude.

Three years on, then, in the weathered Volvo, and his wife now driving into full-on darkness. And Dagan saying, So, wait, you dragged me out to the car? Is that what happened?

Dagan, still slouching a touch, sunk down in the bucket seat like a sack of loose bones.

Tam looks at him, like, Oh please. Then she says it: It wasn't that difficult. Don't flatter yourself.

She flashes a quick, disappearing smile. Here one minute. Gone the next. Like a minnow.

Dagan turns on the radio. Tam glares at him, turns it off. Dagan raises his hands like the victim in a stick-up. Several minutes of silence follow, or several minutes of what passes for silence: the hum of the engine, the laboring heater, the many ticks and kinks indigenous to an '86 Volvo. Then Dagan clears his throat theatrically, says, A proposition. And no, not that kind. You're disappointed?

His wife looks straight ahead at the road, and Dagan, smiling now, sitting up, says, How about a game of the Alphabet Game instead? And do forgive the redundancy, professor.

Tam, holding her silence like a vigil.

The question wasn't rhetorical, Dagan says at length, but he knows it may as well have been, and starts in on the game alone:

an a from Mona; b from Applebee's (its neon sign just visible from the highway); c from Scipio; d, e, f from Holden/Fillmore (a mileage sign); a g from Gas & Food at Exit 167; and so on and so forth, ad nauseum, even for Dagan.

But three hours later, miraculously, he keeps on, having cycled through some ten times over the alphabet of rural Utah signage: o from Orton Tire (on Panguitch's Main Street); p from Panguitch Queen Bee Restaurant (also on Main); q from aforementioned Panguitch Queen Bee Restaurant; as well as r and s and t and u (It's a gold mine! Dagan shouts), but no v. Panguitch is bereft of v's. Dagan has to wait until a sign for Tropic announces RV parks, and another lists restaurants ahead, including Wendy's, at Exit 6, an exit that also announces Bryce Canyon National Park and, if those y's weren't enough, Ruby's Inn, where Tam and Dagan decide to stop for the night.

At the hotel check-in counter, in a move that fairly shocks him, his wife pays twenty dollars extra for a room with separate beds. Dagan can't help but scoff his surprise. This is Tam of the yellow-let-it-mellow belief, after all, Tam who sends off for ten-dollar rebates, Tam who squeezes the subatomic from a tube of toothpaste. Tam, paying extra for a room with separate beds. She does it for Dagan, of course, to prove how much she dislikes him: enough to divorce him or, failing that, twenty dollars' worth.

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Tam, an hour and a half later, lying in her separate bed in the dark. She speaks to her husband for the first time in hours, answers his murmured repeated phrase, Talk to me, Tam, talk to me. Like a mantra. Talk to me, Tam, Talk to me, Tam . . .

Tam: What did you want me to talk about?

Dagan:

Tam: Well?

Dagan: Well, I'm just saying. If we came down here to talk, we should talk. Isn't that why we're here?

Tam: Around Nephi I started having second thoughts, actually, about this whole weekend getaway idea. I kept having second thoughts until about Beaver, when I decided it was definitely a bad idea. But we'd come all that way, you know?

Dagan: Huh.

Tam:

Dagan: Well, thank you for that vast improvement over silence.

Tam: You asked, I answered.

Dagan: I asked, you answered.

Tam: One of us needs to be honest. That's what I'm getting at.

Dagan: Fine. Then let me be as honest as I possibly can. Deep breath. Here we go. I love you and I'm sorry. I'm being honest about that. When I'm with you I'm happy most of the time, which is more than I can say of most people. I'm being honest about that. I know what I did makes you upset, and I won't—

Tam: What you do.

Dagan: What?

Tam: Not what you did, what you do. It's a pattern, Dagan.

Dagan: I wasn't finished, Tam. Can I finish?

Tam:

Dagan: I know what I do makes you upset, and I'm sorry, and I'll never do it again. I'm being honest about that, too.

Tam: Dagan, listen, I really do think we should just divorce. Cut our losses at three years. They've been good ones, I think.

Dagan: And if I'm still being honest? I think you're overreacting. I mean, I didn't have an affair. You do realize that, right?

Tam: Call me old-fashioned for believing in the slippery slope. Or fidelity in deed and in thought, for that matter. How passé! How idealistic of me! Grow up, Tam. Your husband didn't have an affair, he just wants to have one. He's not with another woman, he just wants to be with another woman.

Dagan: I don't want to be with another . . . Oh, sweets. Sweets, are you crying? Look, I know this sounds awful, but it's just glands. It means nothing. It's an itch and I scratch it. But I'll stop, okay? I'm seriously gonna stop this time. I promise.

Tam:

Dagan: Tam? Come on, Tam, keep talking, this is good for us.

Tam:

Dagan: Sweets, please say something.

Tam: Good night.

Dagan: No, not that. You know what I mean. This doesn't work unless both of us want it.

Tam:

Dagan: Tam?

Tam:

Dagan: Tam!

Tam:

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Dagan and Tam, on a Ranger-guided tour the next morning. Dagan, turning on the charm for Tam, feeling good somehow, willing optimism. Though sometimes it backfires. For example: as the young Ranger schools the group in a bit of the local geology. The Ranger, all in olive green, his hat brimming out to the east and west, and under it, a Smile with a face camped on the periphery. He explains how Bryce Canyon isn't actually a canyon. What carved the place was repeated freezing and thawing, not a river. Whereupon Dagan leans in close to Tam, says softly in her ear, The canyon that is not a canyon. Hmmm. Sounds sort of Zen, don't you think?

Tam, in the same half whisper: Like the marriage that isn't a marriage, you mean?

Or for example: the group stops at a high promontory overlooking the hoodoos, those great uneven smokestacks of stone, those rickety fingers grown up from the amphitheater floor, a few snow patches purchasing on cracks and ridges. And Dagan leaning in again and whispering to Tam, How do you like this, huh? Phalluses as far as the eye can see.

Be quiet, she says. I'm trying to hear this.

The Ranger is into the history now. In 1875 Ebenezer Bryce settled Tropic at Brigham Young's command. He set to farming, irrigating, built a Mormon chapel, built a life. And the thousands of alien stone towers in his backyard? Well, said Bryce, it's a hell of a place to lose a cow.

Dagan chuckles along with the rest of the group, but he also thinks, What pragmatism, what admirable pioneer spirit! Ebenezer Bryce could be his great-great-grandfather. Why can't Dagan be more normal? Well-mannered, banal. Folksy. Why not folksy? Here, a view people drive hundreds of miles to see and Dagan cracks a penis joke. Why not Beautiful, isn't it? Why not Breathtaking! Spectacular! Why not My, will you look at God's handiwork!

Dagan, resolving to talk more like a pamphlet. Or a preacher.

Or some combination of the two. The tour starts to move again as he says, A geologic wonder of God's creation, isn't it? Tam nods without looking at him. Dagan follows behind her. The group moves away from the railed path and into a stand of woods. Speckled snowdrifts cling grimly to tree roots, to shaded ground, and even these are not long for the world. It's warm for February. The Ranger leads the group into a dry, sunny clearing. He stops, turns around, waits for the stragglers. Presently he begins, One of the wonders of Bryce is its ecological diversity. He gives a Vanna White sweep of his hand. A broad smile. We're only a few hundred meters from the rim now, he continues, but already we've moved into an entirely different ecosystem. This swath of grassland we're standing in—and he motions behind him at the long, treeless corridor—is the result of what we call a prescribed burn. It's not a controlled burn, remember. Some people use that term, but who can really control fire, am I right? So we call this a prescribed burn. Does anyone know why we did it?

A man wearing a red flannel jacket and an earflap hat raises his hand. He says, To get rid of excess tinder? The woman next to him offers, Or maybe to clear out some grazing space for wildlife?

Right and right, the Ranger says, smiling. In fact, one of the rarer species, one of the endangered species we try to accommodate here, is the Utah prairie dog. Where we're standing right now is one of the last habitats for Utah prairie dogs. An open stretch of grassland like this is exactly what they need to survive. They poke up out of their little burrows and canvass the landscape for predators. And though the prairie dogs might disagree with me on this, a predator like, say, a Cooper's hawk is a very important thing. An essential part of a healthy population. Here at Bryce we're lucky because we can conserve the population in a natural environment. In other places with threatened prairie dog populations—say in Boulder, Colorado, where I'm from—you can get a bunch of very aggressive preservationists, with very aggressive tactics, but in the end there's only so much you can do. In urban areas like Boulder, you can pass laws setting aside land for dog colonies, like they've done, but you can't make the predators come back. You can't impose that balance again. What's happening in Boulder is that they're protecting the prairie dogs, but there's no natural predators anymore, so the population ex-

plodes, gets out of balance. I think eventually they'll have to poison a good many of them to get things under control, and I don't think my hometown will take too kindly to that. Unfortunately it's just another example of what our carelessness can do. You come into an area and build and build and build, and pretty soon you've tainted the place, and you can never get it back to how it was.

The Ranger finishes, his eyes downcast. His bit of ecologizing seems to have sobered him, and everybody else. Silence settles on the group like fallout, and nobody talks for what seems like a long while. Then Tam clicks her tongue. Rather loudly, Dagan thinks. People are morons, she mutters. And clicks her tongue again.

And Dagan, wondering how many people heard her.

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Tam and Dagan, on the road that night, after dinner at Panguitch Queen Bee Restaurant. Tam drives, keeps quiet until Dagan says, An a from Alpine Village, here we go!

No! Tam says. No more of that. I'll veer into oncoming traffic, I swear.

Dagan says, I thought that just might work. So, what do you want to talk about?

Tam:

Dagan:

Tam: It's getting dark later now. I guess spring's not too far off.

Dagan: It still gets too dark too early for my tastes. Did you get to see everything in the park you wanted, sweets?

Tam: Basically.

Dagan: Mission accomplished then. Marriage saved. Right?

Tam:

Dagan: I shouldn't be flippant about it. I'm sorry. I really did enjoy myself today. And listen, I was thinking I might see a counselor or something? Would that help things, do you think?

Tam: We don't have to talk about it now, okay? Let's just watch the scenery.

Dagan:

Tam:

Dagan: Fine by me.

Tam:

She scans the landscape through the windshield. The scene is vast and burnished red, as if it's baking on low heat: the sun already sunk down below the horizon and the big slab of desert sky somewhere between medium and medium rare. Tam smiles at the thought. Who knows if the Apocalypse won't look this pretty. The sun turned to blood, and setting for the last time, and taking down every last color in the world with it, a blaze of unspeakable, terrible beauty.

Tam keeps driving, keeps watching the sky. She tries to anticipate the moment when the color will drain from it, when the sky will go black and the world in front of her will shrink to a pair of lighted cones, but somehow the moment comes and goes without her marking it. A strange disappointment attends this failure.

Dagan's head lolls against the seat-back beside her. He is breathing out slow, ponderous breaths. Tam turns her attention back to the road. The tracks of glowing asphalt running homeward like conveyor belts.

Miles off to the east and west, little farm towns, little spreading squares of light, float on the darkness beyond the highway. The towns slide by, and occasionally a power plant, and they put Tam in mind of far-off cruise ships gliding along on a moonless sea.

Tam, picturing the people on the ships, picturing them all at a midnight ball. On the top deck. Under mounted lights. The women's hair lifting gently in the breeze. And their tans. And their smiles. And their bright, bleached faces.