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How to be Both

Written by Ali Smith

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How to be both



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For Frances Arthur
and everyone who made her,

to keep in mind
Sheila Hamilton,
walking work of art,

and for Sarah Wood,
artist.

Et ricordare suplicando a quella che io sono francescho
del cossa il quale a sollo fatto quili tri canpi verso
lantcamara :
Francesco del Cossa

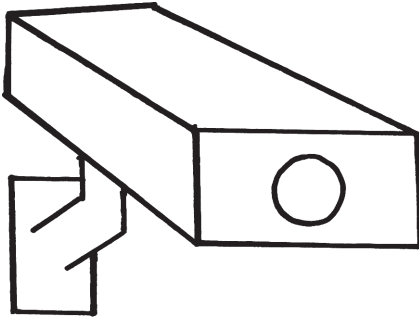
green spirit seeking life
where only drought and desolation sting;
spark that says that everything begins
when everything seems charcoal
Eugenio Montale / Jonathan Galassi

J'ai rêvé que sur un grand mur blanc
je lisais mon testament
Sylvie Vartan

Although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the
process of decay is at the same time a process of
crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks
and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a
sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes
that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited
only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them
and bring them up into the world of the living –
Hannah Arendt

Just like a character in a novel, he disappeared suddenly,
without leaving the slightest trace behind.
Giorgio Bassani / Jamie McKendrick

one



Consider this moral conundrum for a moment,
George's mother says to George who's sitting in the
front passenger seat.

Not says. Said.

George's mother is dead.

What moral conundrum? George says.

The passenger seat in the hire car is strange,
being on the side the driver's seat is on at home.
This must be a bit like driving is, except without
the actual, you know, driving.

Okay. You're an artist, her mother says.

Am I? George says. Since when? And is that a
moral conundrum?

Ha ha, her mother says. Humour me. Imagine it.
You're an artist.

This conversation is happening last May, when
George's mother is still alive, obviously. She's been

dead since September. Now it's January, to be more precise it's just past midnight on New Year's Eve, which means it has just become the year after the year in which George's mother died.

George's father is out. It is better than him being at home, standing maudlin in the kitchen or going round the house switching things off and on. Henry is asleep. She just went in and checked on him; he was dead to the world, though not as dead as the word dead literally means when it means, you know, dead.

This will be the first year her mother hasn't been alive since the year her mother was born. That is so obvious that it is stupid even to think it and yet so terrible that you can't not think it. Both at once.

Anyway George is spending the first minutes of the new year looking up the lyrics of an old song. Let's Twist Again. Lyrics by Kal Mann. The words are pretty bad. Let's twist again like we did last summer. Let's twist again like we did last year. Then there's a really bad rhyme, a rhyme that isn't, properly speaking, even a rhyme.

Do you remember when

Things were really hummin'.

Hummin' doesn't rhyme with summer, the line doesn't end in a question mark, and is it meant to mean, literally, *do you remember that time when things smelt really bad?*

Then Let's twist again, twisting time is here. Or, as all the sites say, twistin' time.

At least they've used an apostrophe, the George from before her mother died says.

I do not give a fuck about whether some site on the internet attends to grammatical correctness, the George from after says.

That before and after thing is about mourning, is what people keep saying. They keep talking about how grief has stages. There's some dispute about how many stages of grief there are. There are three, or five, or some people say seven.

It's quite like the songwriter actually couldn't be bothered to think of words. Maybe he was in one of the three, five or seven stages of mourning too. Stage nine (or twenty three or a hundred and twenty three or ad infinitum, because nothing will ever not be like this again): in this stage you will no longer be bothered with whether songwords mean anything. In fact you will hate almost all songs.

But George has to find a song to which you can do this specific dance.

It being so apparently contradictory and meaningless is no doubt a bonus. It will be precisely why the song sold so many copies and was such a big deal at the time. People like things not to be too meaningful.

Okay, I'm imagining, George in the passenger seat last May in Italy says at exactly the same time

as George at home in England the following January stares at the meaninglessness of the words of an old song. Outside the car window Italy unfurls round and over them so hot and yellow it looks like it's been sandblasted. In the back Henry snuffles lightly, his eyes closed, his mouth open. The band of the seatbelt is over his forehead because he is so small.

You're an artist, her mother says, and you're working on a project with a lot of other artists. And everybody on the project is getting the same amount, salary-wise. But *you* believe that what *you're* doing is worth more than everyone on the project, including you, is getting paid. So you write a letter to the man who's commissioned the work and you ask him to give you more money than everyone else is getting.

Am I worth more? George says. Am I better than the other artists?

Does that matter? her mother says. Is that what matters?

Is it me or is it the work that's worth more? George says.

Good. Keep going, her mother says.

Is this real? George says. Is it hypothetical?

Does that matter? her mother says.

Is this something that already has an answer in reality but you're testing me with the concept of it

though you already know perfectly well what you yourself think about it? George says.

Maybe, her mother says. But I'm not interested in what I think. I'm interested in what you think.

You're not usually interested in anything I think, George says.

That's so adolescent of you, George, her mother says.

I *am* adolescent, George says.

Well, yes. That explains that, then, her mother says.

There's a tiny silence, still okay, but if she doesn't give in a bit and soon George knows that her mother, who has been prickly, unpredictable and misery-faced for weeks now about there being trouble in the paradise otherwise known as her friendship with that woman Lisa Goliard, will get first of all distant then distinctly moody and ratty.

Is it happening now or in the past? George says. Is the artist a woman or a man?

Do either of those things matter? her mother says.

Does either, George says. Either being singular.

Mea maxima, her mother says.

I just don't get why you won't commit, ever, George says. And that doesn't mean what you think it means. If you say it without the culpa it just means *I'm the most*, or *I'm the greatest*, or *to me the greatest belongs*, or *my most*.

It's true, her mother says. I'm the most greatest.
But the most greatest what?

Past or present? George says. Male or female? It
can't be both. It must be one or the other.

Who says? Why must it? her mother says.

AUGH, George says too loud.

Don't, her mother says jerking her head towards
the back. Unless you want him awake, in which
case you're in charge of entertainment.

I. Can't. Answer. Your. Moral. Question. Unless.
I. Know. More. Details, George says sotto voce,
which, in Italian, though George doesn't speak
Italian, literally means below the voice.

Does morality need details? her mother
whispers back.

God, George says.

Does morality need God? her mother says.

Talking to you, George says still below the voice,
is like talking to a wall.

Oh, very good, you, very good, her mother says.

How exactly is that good? George says.

Because this particular art, artist and conundrum
are all about walls, her mother says. And that's
where I'm driving you to.

Yeah, George says. Up the wall.

Her mother laughs a real out-loud laugh, so loud
that after it they both turn to see if Henry will
waken, but he doesn't. This kind of laugh from her
mother is so rare right now that it is almost like

normal. George is so pleased she feels herself blush with it.

And what you just said is grammatically incorrect, she says.

It is not, her mother says.

It is, George says. Grammar is a finite set of rules and you just broke one.

I don't subscribe to that belief, her mother says.

I don't think you can call language a belief, George says.

I subscribe to the belief, her mother says, that language is a living growing changing organism.

I don't think that belief will get you into heaven, George says.

Her mother laughs for real again.

No, listen, an organism, her mother says –
(and through George's head flashes the cover of the old paperback called How To Achieve Good Orgasm that her mother keeps in one of her bedside cupboards, from way before George was born, from the time in her mother's life when she was, she says, young and easy under some appleboughs)

– which follows its own rules and alters them as it likes and the meaning of what I said is perfectly clear therefore its grammar is perfectly acceptable, her mother says.

(How To Achieve Good Organism.)

Well. Grammatically inelegant then, George says.

I bet you don't even remember what it was I said
in the first place, her mother says.

Where I'm driving you to, George says.

Her mother takes both hands off the wheel in
mock despair.

How did I, the most maxima unpedantic of all
the maxima unpedantic women in the world, end
up giving birth to such a pedant? And why the hell
wasn't I smart enough to drown it at birth?

Is *that* the moral conundrum? George says.

Consider it, for a moment, yes, why don't you,
her mother says.

No she doesn't.

Her mother doesn't say.

Her mother said.

Because if things really did happen
simultaneously it'd be like reading a book but
one in which all the lines of the text have been
overprinted, like each page is actually two pages
but with one superimposed on the other to make it
unreadable. Because it's New Year not May, and it's
England not Italy, and it's pouring with rain outside
and regardless of the hum (the hummin') of the
rain you can still hear people's stupid New Year
fireworks going off and off and off like a small war,
because people are standing out in the pouring
rain, rain pelting into their champagne glasses,
their upturned faces watching their own (sadly)
inadequate fireworks light up then go black.