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DW ARDERN

PALINDROMES

We had just finished dinner in the farmhouse kitchen of my brother's new home in Sebastopol. A Baba-Yaga ranch in the redwood hills of the Russian River Valley—new to my brother, the timber weathered and kind of crooked with scorch marks from surviving the seasonal wildfires that now plagued the old hippie towns north of San Francisco. A quiet reunion among brothers. Fraternal twins with nothing in common anymore except that we'd once been roommates in the same womb. Now aged, like the musty red wine we drained from the bottle, content to stew over the secrets of our lives—old and new, known and unknown—and listen to the night's symphony of wild things in the woods.

Quincy had grown a ridiculous beard since I'd last seen him, bushy and mottled with rebel grey hairs. He had been begging me for months to come north for a visit and see how he and Sky were settling into country life with their four-year-old Xavier Cristo and their newborn Radar. They were both sort of pudgy and bug-eyed like their father, living the unbridled absurdity of what my brother jokingly referred to as “la vie en rosé.”

“There's a real community up here, you know, once you get away from all the summer of love tourist bullshit. Old artists and radicals living the hills,” Quincy said. “Someplace peaceful, someplace to enjoy the quiet.”

“It's almost too quiet,” I said. “It's kind of spooky.”

“You’ve been living in the city too long if you can’t listen to the trees without getting spooked.”

“It’s not the trees I’m scared of. It’s that weird screeching that sounds like someone being eaten alive.”

“Oh,” Quincy said, listening for it. “Yeah, that’s a mountain lion. You should definitely be scared of them. They are huge and terrifying.”

I was glad I’d finally accepted my brother’s offer. Vivian was away in San Diego on another one of her business trips with her co-worker Chase. No kiss goodbye on her 6 a.m. slip out of our bedroom. I’d waited for it, pretending to be asleep but watching the silhouette of her body as she dressed in the dark, her fingers caressing the silken lace of a very expensive bra I’d bought her for Valentine’s Day back when we would still whisper I love you whether or not we knew someone was listening.

Seated on a stool, Quincy talked about how good it felt to finally have somewhere to set roots. They’d been nomadic for years, up and down the coast—the campervan outpost in Joshua Tree, the beachside bungalow in Santa Cruz, the many cross-country tours on the road with their psychedelic folk band Tzara & the Astral Wind. I soaked in the conversation, feet up on the radiator, and drank too much wine, flirting with his wife, the beatific Sky, former keyboardist for Astral Wind turned somatic healer and all-round mystic mama. She was most excited about their plans to outfit the farmhouse off the grid. Solar panels, rainwater capture systems, an herb and vegetable garden in their tumble-weed backyard. I nodded through all the happy details, like they weren’t punching my bruised heart.

As always, I felt like an outsider around my brother, a yuppie from the San Francisco bubble with my crew cut, suit jacket, and oxford shoes. Right-hand dealer for the Man, Quincy liked to say, even though I was only a communications

director for a tech start-up whose sole claim to fame was a side-scrolling video game called Space Kats. We were following up our success with an app sure to revolutionize the middle-grade ed-tech market.

“Poodle Noodle?”

“Yeah, it’s a talking poodle that teaches math...with noodles.”

“You know they design those apps like slot machines,” he said. “They’re intended to be addictive.”

“It’s an educational game for kids, Quincy. Chill out.”

“That’s exactly what I am saying. Get them while they’re young. Like big tobacco,” he said. “Addicted to the screen. Slaves to blue light. You’re a dopamine pusher.”

“Yeah, says the guy who used to run a marijuana farm.” I poured myself some more wine and flirted with his wife. “That was a wonderful dinner, Sky. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” Sky said. “You should come north by more often.”

“Yes, you really should, David.”

“Well, you know, Vivian and I are homebodies. We stay in most nights,” I lied. Vivian was rarely home, and I got drunk most nights in the Mission District, spinning my tequila glass and hitting on young UX designers and social media managers.

“You should bring her over sometime,” Sky said. “I haven’t seen her since the wedding.”

I told them she’d love to come, busy, busy, all the same excuses. Vivian refused to set foot outside the city limits, not even the East Bay. She equated hippies to the homeless because in her mind they shared the same hygiene and fashion sense. The peace, love, and heroin of crust punks on Haight-Ashbury.

Xavier Christo ran into the kitchen with a colander on his head, a djembe tucked under his arm like a teddy bear. The toddler stood dwarfed in the doorway, waving a picture book

of the *Tao Te Ching*. He beat the drum in a tribal demand for a bedtime story. It's not that he couldn't talk. He just preferred to communicate through percussion.

Sometimes I did fear for my nephews. I wouldn't trust my brother with a Chia pet, let alone the responsibility of raising children. While I don't mean to judge outright, I do think it's unfair to damn innocent kids to a life of occultism, oddball characters, and spontaneous nudity by telling them bedtime stories about the eternal Tao and branding them with names like Radar, a name they picked from the Scrabble board on the night Sky told my brother she was pregnant again. Further proof of my brother's obsession with palindromes.

Sky lifted the toddler onto her hip. "Guess it's time for you to go to bed now, huh, cuddle bear?"

Xavier banged on the drum in agreement. Sky kissed Quincy on the cheek before ferrying the kid and his djembe off to bed.

My brother and I went into the living room. He put on a raspy jazz record. Early Jackie McLean, he said. A brilliant saxophonist, hard bop at its best. He showed off the new additions to his library. Hundreds of books lined the walls on built-in shelves sharing space with hanging plants, antique farm tools, paint brushes, toy ships, world globes, jars of marbles.

"You got to read this. Kundera is a genius. Love, life, revolution, and why men and women never cease to misunderstand each other."

I paced about, half-listening, shaking off my queasy nerves. The real reason I'd come to see my brother was gnawing at my gut like a squirrel working an acorn. I distracted myself, admiring his oil paintings, wine glass in hand like a wealthy patron of the arts. They were mostly cubist abstracts—landscapes, cloudscares, cityscapes inhabited by thousands of tiny figures. I wondered what it felt like to be a forty-year-old artist, with no savings, no security, nothing to show for

his years of work except his art. He'd never held a steady job, moving from band to band, side gig to side gig, all the while composing, playing, painting. And for what? None of his pursuits had ever earned him any real money. Somehow, for some reason, I was still jealous.

I never told him what I thought of his art, how I often thought about his paintings after I left, how I must have listened to Astral Wind's first album at least a dozen times driving up and down through the lonely mist of San Francisco. Since he scoffed at my success in the tech world, I pretended not to be impressed by him.

"So have they chased the last artists out of the city yet?" my brother asked. "Has Google turned Coit Tower into their own Eye of Sauron? A giant surveillance outpost with live-stream cameras, broadcasting 24/7 on social media?"

"You bet," I said. "Although their proposal to convert Alcatraz into luxury condos has stalled with the planning board. So they might just blow it up or use it for housing servers."

Quincy laughed. His Burmese cat, Francis Herman Murray Mozart the III, leered from the couch. The cat refused to concede any territory. I sat down anyway.

"There's something I need to talk to you about. But it's private, okay? Between us."

Quincy lit a joint and passed it over. "I was wondering when you'd get around to it. You're my little brother. I know when something's bugging you."

"Little brother?" I toked and coughed. "We were born two minutes apart."

"Time is relative. Consider the life of a gnat."

"I'm thinking of leaving Vivian."

He sipped his wine judiciously. "Well, that is serious, isn't it? Did you just decide this or—"

"I haven't decided anything."

"You two always seemed so happy."

“It’s the sex!” I shouted, surprised by the rise in my voice.

“Shhh,” Quincy wagged a finger toward the left wing of the farmhouse. “The baby...”

“Oh, sorry. I mean, we have great sex. Sometimes I think that’s all we have in common. And no, we were never really happy. She just perfects the illusion day by day.”

“Then go,” he said matter-of-fact.

“And do what?”

“Whatever you want. It’s your life, your journey. Follow your bliss.”

“I’m at a crossroads here,” I tried to explain. “I love her, but I feel trapped. It feels wrong.”

“The sex?”

“No, not the sex. The whole relationship.”

“Oh, I thought you said that was the whole relationship.”

“I was exaggerating.”

I told him everything. Almost. The wordless dinners, the curt pageantry of our boring life. Our heated arguments over banal, mindless matters like color-sorted laundry and mutual funds. My suspicions about Chase, his small clammy hands and, or so I imagined, his smaller clammier penis. Maybe I painted myself as the victim, the white-knight hero of a doomed marriage. I knew I was partially responsible. My absurd devotion to my job, late hours at the office and cancelled date nights, fielding emails in bed way past midnight with our programmers in Hong Kong. It was difficult to say which of us had given up trying first. But the undeniable truth was that after seven years the passion between us had petered out, reignited only in moments of drunken lust, usually in public places like the belle-époque bathroom of a five-star restaurant or the honeyed ham aisle of Costco.

Quincy sat down in an armchair. He stroked his chin like he always did before he imparted his brotherly wisdom. There was a showmanship to these conversations that somehow

made them feel more authentic.

“Have you read any Ignacio Torres?” Quincy said. “His latest book is all about interdependency versus codependency. If you stop growing together, then you start growing apart.”

“Don’t give me any of that new age bullshit.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I need you to look me in the eye and tell me I’m not making the biggest mistake of my life.”

“I can’t do that. You have to trust your intuition. It never fails if you are truly listening.” He snapped with a quick flick of his wrist. Francis Herman Murray Mozart tumbled off the couch and leapt up onto his lap. “That said, if you are really feeling at a loss for guidance, we could always consult Radar.”

“Talk to the baby?”

“He’s hardly a baby. He’s almost six months old.”

“You’re suggesting I talk with your newborn son about my love life.”

“He can’t talk yet, of course. However, he’s learning how to communicate.”

“What on earth are you saying?”

Quincy gave a creepy smirk like some demented clown. I didn’t know why, and it frightened me. He rose from the armchair without a word and walked off down the left wing of the farmhouse. A silk curtain hung over an archway. Inside, dozens of candles flickered in the dark, a midnight forest of tiny flames. A definite fire hazard. I followed him behind the curtain.

My brother tiptoed about the nursery and lit more candles, illuminating the blue dresser hand-painted with cute bunnies and stacked with cloth diapers. There, in a wooden crib, my baby nephew slept in the middle of this weird séance.

“Now you have to be very quiet. He’s sleeping.”

“I can see that. So is this some Eastern thing? You always sacrifice your second born to Ra or something?”

“Ra is Egyptian, and no, don’t be silly,” my brother said. “We’re simply training young Radar to talk with the beyond. Shaman Zoya says that from an early age, babies have an innate connection to the intelligible world, the outer life force. In shedding memories from their past lives, they have complete understanding of the universe. Time is not yet delineated, and therefore it’s very possible for infants to divine a number of different paths like, say, a psychic.” He lit one last candle, cradled in the many hands of a golden Krishna sculpture. He blew out the match. “It’s called baby divination.”

Wind rustled the branches outside, an owl hooted in the night like a foghorn. My baby nephew slept by blue candlelight, bathed in the numinous glow of these archaic night lights.

“Ask him.” Quincy reached behind the dresser and pulled out a roll of canvas. “Excuse me?”

“Ask him.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“Why not?” Quincy said. “Come on, he hasn’t had much experience, and it would be an honor to have my son divine your future or non-future with your wife.”

“This is ridiculous.” I turned to leave and froze, startled by phantom ripples in the curtain. A half-naked man in stripped boxers peeked through the fold.

“Oh, cool, you’re showing him the psychic baby thing,” the half-naked man said. “Do you want me to light some incense?”

“This is Larry,” Quincy said. I remembered him, vaguely, as the former drummer of a short-lived punk band my brother had in Los Angeles a long time ago. “He’s renting out a room in the basement.”

“A temporary situation,” Larry said.

We didn’t shake hands.

My brother unrolled the raw canvas. It was inscribed with a series of ancient Chinese hexagrams in brush calligraphy. He hung it from a brass hook on the wall over the dresser.

Little Radar plucked open his bright blue eyes. Chances were the baby had no idea why his father, uncle, and a strange man in boxers were huddled around his crib in the middle of the night. And if he was at all aware, it would at least make for interesting conversations on the therapist's couch later on in life.

Rader didn't fuss. He just studied us in the dark, his cupid mouth gumming at nothing. "Beautiful kid," Larry said. "He's got your eyes."

"You think?"

Quincy wiggled his fingers down into the crib like minnows. I couldn't help but feel a little sentimental when Radar clasped his tiny hand around his father's giant index finger. A sort of *Creation of Adam* moment. It made me wonder whether that's what religion was all about, whether the desire for spiritual connection was the equivalent of raising your desperate hands toward the heavens in hopes of taking hold of that holy digit as an act of existential affirmation, as a sign that everything's going to be okay. Or maybe when an infant latches onto their parent's hand to understand their world, maybe that's just a small example of divine love.

"Well, now that you've woke him up, you have to ask him."

"No, I don't actually," I said. "You and your hippie friends might find this crap amusing, but I don't. I'm not interested."

Radar scrunched his chubby face, as if to cry or poop or both. Instead he spit up a puddle of white goop and rolled over on his side. Quincy wiped away the mess while gently rubbing the baby's back.

"You know what your problem is, David? You're really judgmental. You come here to my house, snubbing your nose at my life, my family..." He threw the soiled cloth in the hamper and stomped about the nursery, blowing out candles. "Whatever, forget it."

"Wait, hold up. If it means that much to you, I'll ask him,

okay? Obviously, I'm not used to baby séances, that's all."

Radar's googly eyes bounced around the room. Up and down, up and down, marveling at the rafters, then pinging back at me. I always found the pure innocence of children unnerving and hoped for an easy exit from this uncomfortable communion with my nephew. "So what do I do? Should I chant something?"

"You're mocking me again, aren't you?"

"Not cool, man."

"Shut up, Larry."

"Don't talk to Larry that way."

"Look," I said. "Just give me a second."

Strangely, I did seem to have Radar's attention. My nephew gazed up, eyes bobbing, struggling to register my face. I hunched over the crib and thought to myself: Why not? Why not raise psychic babies? Was it such a crazy idea? We could train them to be cosmic super-babies and battle each other in space with their minds. A great Olympic Games of paranormal babies, floating in zero gravity and moving shuttle pucks with their meta-cerebral energies. The babies of the new millennium will all be psychic warriors.

I stared at my nephew and his wispy curlicue of hair, dreamily baffled by the world outside his crib.

"All right, Radar. Seems your father is really excited here to show off your new talents, so tell me..."

I asked the question. I asked whether or not I should leave my wife. And in the asking, a confession of an ugly feeling, that something was wrong with our marriage, an awkward distance of intimacy. Sometimes I think we never really knew each other. Married at twenty-six, another fulfillment of expectations that weren't my own. Quincy was the wild child, the artist. I was the responsible one, gainfully employed straight out of Stanford. I was determined to make our father proud.

I remember, in the early days of our relationship, before

everything became so complicated and full of recriminations, Vivian and I were strolling through Golden Gate park, holding hands, maybe for the first time. I was nervous, my palms were sweaty, the warmth of her touch as radiant as the sun. She'd asked me what I wanted out of life. You know, besides the career bullshit, she said. I don't know, eternal youth? I replied. She laughed. Don't you think maybe that is love?

She was beautiful. We were young. We had everything we supposedly needed to make us happy. Where had we gone wrong to become so lost in our own loneliness?

A chorus of crickets quavered in the night's serenade. Radar sucked his thumb, peacefully drooling.

"Well, that was a lot of fun. And super helpful," I said. "I really do have to get going. Some of us have work in the morning, in the real world."

"Wait." Quincy pointed at the crib. My nephew had rolled over onto his back, glaring straight up at us. He plucked out his slobbered thumb and flapped his arms in the air like an octopus. My brother hung a wire mobile of wooden crows over the crib. Radar batted them, setting off a spinning carousel of winged shadows on the wall.

Quincy chased after the phantom birds as they flew over the brush strokes on the canvas. Larry had somehow produced a pencil and steno pad, from where I didn't ask. Quincy tapped the symbols in a decisive, jumbled order. Minutes later, Larry tore off the page and handed it over.

"Yes!" Quincy said.

"Yes, what?"

He shook the paper triumphantly like a missive from the gods. "The answer to your question is yes. Or more precisely: *to ford a great river, the red donkey rides an ox.*"

"I forget what I asked."

"You asked, 'Should I stay with my wife?'"

"No, I think I asked, 'Should I leave my wife?'"

“Are you sure?”

Quincy reviewed his notes and stroked his beard. Delicate snores rose from the crib, the rise and fall of the baby’s chest. My nephew had conked right out like a revivalist who’d whipped himself in a frenzy before collapsing in a sweaty heap before us, his dumbstruck witnesses.

“Good show,” Larry said. “Your kid is amazing, man.”

“Darling, isn’t he?” Quincy said.

Nothing was solved. The answer was meaningless. I felt cheated.

“We need to wake him up,” I insisted. “We need to find out what I asked.”

“I think he’s had enough excitement tonight,” Quincy said. “Let’s go back to the living room.”

“No way. The damn baby didn’t answer the question. Wake him back up, Quincy. Let’s do it again. Let’s do it right this time.”

There came an abrupt rustle from the crib, Radar moving his lips in a silent chant, waving his floppy hands and feet, almost gracefully like a conductor, to unheard ethereal music. Quincy snatched the steno pad, tracking the shadows, scribbling as fast as he could.

“Ask the question. Ask him now. He’s caught some preternatural loop.”

“Wow,” Larry said. “I think he just read my mind.”

I bent over the crib. My baby nephew was indeed in a sort of catatonic fugue state, his sweet face haloed by candlelight. I asked the question again.

“Radar, or whatever spirit I’m talking to, should I leave my wife?”

Radar stared with no distraction this time, his blue eyes fixed as if he were looking through me at something within or beyond. My mind raced with thoughts of what my own child might look like and how he might look at me. Vivian and I had

decided to put the issue to bed after a heated disagreement on who had the bad genes between us. I hadn't visited the conversation since. And there I was, in the middle of this bizarre and questionably ethical ritual, imagining Vivian in a meadow of golden brome and wildflowers, with a florid glow in her cheeks, her long hair floating in the soft breeze. She was happy, full of hope for the future. She was joyful. I realized I hadn't seen her smile like that in very long time. All around us in the meadow were children, everyone we'd ever loved except shorter and much cuter, playing together, lying in the tall grass, daydreaming in the clouds. Relatives, friends from high school and college, ex-lovers and old acquaintances, work colleagues and neighbors. Far off in the hills, I spotted two young boys chasing their wild imaginations through a forest glen of the most surreal green.

Then everything surrendered to one of those San Francisco fogs that sweep in so fast you lose yourself in a noir mist like something out of a Hitchcock movie. I fumbled through the greyness, searching for Vivian, for some return to this flower-child fever dream of happiness. Why had we isolated ourselves? And for what? Too busy for life, too busy even for each other. It seemed so sad and stupid. I reached out for her in the thickening fog, my fingers cold and stiffening to stone.

Radar's lips moved without a sound, and then there came a voice. "What's going on in here?"

The lights flicked on and blinded us. Sky slipped through the curtain. She crossed her arms. "This better not be what it looks like."

"I was just—"

Radar let loose a phlegmy high-pitched wail, reaching out for his mother. "I don't care," Sky said. "It scares the baby."

Larry slinked into a corner. "Hi, Sky."

"Hi, Larry. Where are your pants?"

She scooped up the crying child, then glared at the wooden

mobile of crows. “Quincy, what on Earth...? Get out, all of you.” She blew out the flames. “And you’ve been using my tranquility candles for this? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She stormed out of the nursery. Quincy followed behind her angry mutters.

“Wait, honey. I can explain. I was trying to help Radar become more in tune with his cosmic synergies...” The argument faded outside the curtain. Wisps of smoke twisted from the wicks in the dark.

“...OUR BABY IS NOT A OUIJA BOARD...”

The disagreement grew louder in the other room. I glanced over at Larry for a shared moment of comradery. I wished I hadn’t. Averting my eyes from the grotesque pallor of his potbelly, I pushed through the curtain.

In the living room, Quincy rubbed his head uneasy. He’d clearly ended up on the losing side of the argument, unnerved by the defeat. Sky slammed the bedroom door.

Xavier Christo came out of his room, patting his djembe in a sleepy rhythm.

“Xavier, go back to bed,” Quincy said. “It’s very late.”

The toddler banded morose in three-four time.

“I’ll get you a glass of water in a second. Be a good boy and go to bed now, okay?”

Xavier drifted back to his room with a slow funeral-march beat. Through the open door, I watched him tuck into bed and pull up his moon-and-starbeam comforter. Then the door swung shut, as if pushed by some unseen hand.

“Ah, kids.” Quincy shrugged. “Well, I think it’s time we hit the hay here, huh?”

I walked out through the creaky farmhouse with Larry’s sweaty boxers leading the way. He disappeared down a stairwell into the basement. We didn’t say goodbye. I stepped outside and lingered on the front porch, not yet ready to confront the material world. It was eerie and calm in the prehistoric stillness

of the redwoods, the stars wreathed by a giant canopy.

My brother grinned. "You believed it there for a moment."

"Yeah, yeah. Good luck with your psychic son. I'm sure that'll go over well in daycare." I clicked the fob on my key chain and walked off toward my Mercedes.

"You sure you don't want to stay the night?" Quincy hung out the screen door. "We have a guest room."

"Where? In the chicken shed where you and the kids sometimes conduct blood sacrifices with the cat? No, I want to forget this night ever happened and sleep my own goddamn—"

That's when I stumbled over a root and landed face first in the mud. Quincy rushed out to help. I tried to lift myself up and fell again, my ribcage bruised, my wrist throbbing, metallic taste in my mouth. I swatted away his hand, yelled that I was fine, and pulled myself back onto my feet, standing firm on the soft squishy ground with the night still spinning. My khakis were caked with mud. I brushed them off, whipped off my ruined suit jacket.

"You're bleeding." Quincy took a handkerchief from his pocket. It was crusty with dried paint. I took it anyway and dabbed my lip.

"David, I'm sorry this is so tough. You know, you always have a home here, right? No questions asked. Whatever you need."

I tried to look away, I tried to stop the flood, but my heart had somehow sprung a leak. Quincy gave me a big old bear hug like he used to when we were kids. I felt self-conscious, even though there was nobody watching us but the owls. He held me there until I softened like clay, my anxiety thawing to something else. Something old, something new. Something I didn't know I'd been missing.

I pulled away and wiped my eyes. "I've gotta go."

"You'll be okay?"

"It's just allergies. I'm probably allergic to everything out

here.” I breathed deep of the fresh country air and looked up through the trees at the stars. “You know that first Astral Wind album was pretty good.”

“*Breath of Gaia?*”

“Yeah...I listen to it a lot. Your second album, well, whatever it was your sophomore album, right? It’s supposed to be kind of overlayered and moody.” I flicked a piece of mud off my shoulder. “Maybe you could a start family band with Xavier on the drums and Radar on the synths.”

My brother smirked, hanging by the door. “And what would you play, David?”

“Tambourine,” I said, flexing my wrist to tease out the pain.