



# A New Man

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JIM DIDN'T SMELL DIFFERENT. He didn't taste different when Marilee kissed him. He talked in the usual gruff way, as if speaking pained him. He still had trouble making eye contact. He still watched TV in the blue leather recliner. His small eyes never flicked from the screen while she worked around him, and when she asked if he wanted to talk to their son Clay when he called, he still shook his head no.

Now he snacked from a bag of whole walnuts. He shattered each one against the coffee table with a ball-peen hammer from the hardware store and picked delicately through the debris for the meats. That was different.

When Marilee walked over by him to water the African violet on top of the TV, she heard it. Humming. His breath was quieter lately because his lungs were more efficient, so she noticed right away. "What are you humming, hon?" she asked.

"Humming? Who hums?"

"You do, I guess. Just now."

He grunted.

Two weeks ago, a doctor had outlined the new rules as Jim lay groggy in his hospital bed, a dressing wrapping the wound on his chest, tubes funneling anti-rejection serum into his forearm. A good diet. A strict regimen of pills. No straining. No working at the store. No leaving the house for the first few

months to minimize infection risk. Marilee wrote it all down. Jim's body could reject the lung anytime, and when it did, it wouldn't be on her conscience.

When Marilee was sixteen, she and her friends used to lean against the stage in the drama classroom before school, critiquing hallway fashions and ranking potential boyfriends. One day Jim walked in and asked Marilee to go to the homecoming dance with him. For all the girls' bold talk, their worldly knowledge ended with ruching and madras plaid. The girl beside Marilee laughed nervously. Jim looked right in Marilee's eyes, his lips twitching. Her first impulse was no, but there was no way to say it politely. Jim was quiet and tall. Well-liked. His family owned a hardware store in town. Her family was poor. There was nothing wrong with him. She said okay.

Cool, Jim had said and exited stage right. That was him. Self-assured to the point of showing no emotion. The only reason she had for saying no was that saying yes would make her life different, and she'd liked her life. But she'd said yes, and her friends replayed the scene until class began. Had he winked when he said cool? He had. No he hadn't. Yes he had and it was hot. Her friends made Jim a romantic hero, his taciturnity a product of unfathomed depths rather than a blank mind. They told her how lucky she was. Later she'd wished his eye would have fallen on another girl.

Now, Jim's friends all looked up to him. When Jim's doctor still allowed him to go to the hardware store, they'd gather there, spinning stories about ladies they'd met in bars, and Jim would sit back and wait for his moment. For example, one time Marilee overheard a guy talking about how he was sad because his goldfish had died. The other guys were comforting him or trying to ignore him, and Jim said, "Sounds like dinner. Hold on, I think I've got a really small grill in back somewhere." Everybody died laughing. Jim said one thing per every ten things each of his friends said, but when he did speak, it was really something. Since the surgery, though, he'd been even more incommunicative. Besides saying hello, who are you, and where am I when he woke up in intensive care, his lips were sealed. Sometimes his chest ballooned up and his eyes darted as if he were dying to speak, but when Marilee leaned close, nothing but air hissed out.

Marilee wondered just how much Jim did feel. What must it be like to have someone else's lung in you? The doctor said Jim would notice a bit of tightness in the new one, that more effort would be needed to inflate it at first. Soon his body would adjust. But lungs were unlike any other organs. A kidney or liver did its work whether you thought of it or not. You could monitor your breathing, though; you'd know you drew air into a dead man's lung inside you. Marilee hoped Jim never thought of it that way. It was enough to make someone never want to take another breath.

That night, after she'd tidied up the dinner dishes and Jim had finished watching his programs, Marilee listened to him snoring beside her in bed.

The humming. Now she heard it again, low and velvety. She thought she caught a word, a couple of words: "city nights...lover boy." Jim never listened to music. He'd been dividing his time between sleep and TV since he'd arrived home.

Marilee whispered, "Keep singing, sweetheart." When they first got married, they'd lie in bed at night and Marilee would talk about what she'd done that day, and what she wanted to do tomorrow, and the next week, and the next year. Jim was so patient. He'd say yep occasionally to let her know he was listening.

Marilee squeezed his arm, and he really opened up, drawling from deep in his belly, "He's a smooth operator, smooth operator, smooth operator." He coughed and flipped to his side, facing away from Marilee. How the hell did Jim know that song? He wasn't exactly musical.

She knew it because they played it at the beauty shop. She didn't know the words, so Jim couldn't have picked them up from her. The radio in his truck was broken, and he watched only reruns of *M.A.S.H.* or *The Andy Griffith Show* on television. He couldn't have heard it there. They had no CD or tape player, which, now that she thought about it, seemed silly because she for one did like music. Maybe it was a snatch of a commercial. But that didn't make sense because he knew too much of the song, way more than the thirty seconds or so a commercial provided.

There was no way that those lyrics came from his new lung, were stored there by muscle memory of the organ's previous owner, who was a fan of Sade. That was impossible. Unlikely, at the very least.

Was Sade all the lung knew? Or was it like a fleshy jukebox? She prodded Jim a couple of times to see if he'd sing more, but he groaned and she felt guilty. She could try again tomorrow night. She hadn't looked forward to a night in bed with Jim in twenty-four-and-a-half years.

Their son Clay used to call Marilee often when he knew Jim was at work. They'd talk about how their day was going, and a few months ago, Clay had started telling her that she'd be better off without Jim. Marilee had honestly never even entertained that option. They'd been together for so long. She and Clay had one conversation where she'd said that if Jim was keeping him from coming home, Clay should just tell her, and she'd leave Jim.

Clay didn't say anything, and then Jim had gotten sick. The next time they'd talked, she explained how things were, that she couldn't possibly leave Jim while he was ailing. Get a nurse, Clay said. I can't, Marilee said. Clay didn't call for several weeks after that, and her calls to him went to voicemail. She was a little relieved that Jim's illness had settled the thing. There was no decision left for her to make. Maybe that new lung would get Jim thinking about dying, about how if everyone's going to croak ultimately, he might as well treat his only son nice.

In the morning, her enthusiasm lagged. One good night with Jim among thousands, while he was unconscious, no less, didn't mean a lot. Maybe she could make a life without Jim. She could rent a little cottage close to downtown, find a job as a secretary at an insurance office or at a law firm again. Get a kitty cat. Jim was allergic. She'd spend her free time decorating, painting the bathroom pink and the living room mint green. It'd be so quiet in there. The television would gather dust. She thought about this as she cooked Jim's breakfast—eggs, bacon, and sausage. He wasn't listening to doctors' orders regarding diet, and she was abetting him.

She took him a plate, still halfway thinking about the cottage, but then she saw him. His eyes were squeezed shut under gray lids. Jim needed her right now. She'd see him through this then think about herself. If only he hadn't started humming. That humming gave her hope, a cruel hope, she suspected, that would keep her knotted to him. And then someday there would be no time left, and all she'd have been was wife to Jim.

Jim and Marilee had started dating after homecoming. Every Friday night, he'd honk for her in his pickup truck a couple of hours before game time and they'd drive to the stadium. She sat in the stands and watched the boys warm up, knitting on a striped scarf in their school colors. Then, after the game, she waited with the other girlfriends for Jim to emerge from the locker room. She liked the girls but couldn't help but think she was above them because Jim had chosen her, and he could have had his pick of anyone. It was no real choice at all, he'd told her. Tracy was a slut, and Deena had a pinhead, and Sarah was stupid, and Julie's teeth were crooked, and Lisa's tits were too small. Luckily Marilee was perfect in his eyes. Not too dumb, and plenty pretty. She tried to think about the boys the same way but failed every time. Adam's eyes drifted toward his nose but they were the sweetest blue. You hardly noticed one of Ben's legs was shorter than the other when he ran at full speed. Nothing wrong with any of those boys.

She'd fall to imagining the boys together in the shower, soaping each other's backs and touching each other's firm pectoral muscles softly, getting caught up in the feel of the skin stretched tight over hard abs, then punching to make up for it. She could almost see the bright backsides where towel snapped flesh, the way the long snapper might give the QB a hand job after a poor game while the other players watched and smiled. The coach might say, "Circle up, boys. We've got some jerking to do." The players would spring to action, as though that's what they'd been waiting for all game. Longer, in fact. All week, since they'd last had their hands on each other. That's what Marilee thought about after the game.

Then Jim would emerge, smelling of good, honest soap and just the vaguest hint of sweat and turf. They'd drive out to Coronado Heights and draw beers from the keg someone's parents had bought. There was a lookout spot with a little castle the WPA had built in the '30s, and a bluff where you could see the rock layers that proved Kansas used to be an ocean. The sandstone was soft enough you could carve your initials in it. The hill was called Coronado Heights because that's where Coronado had become disillusioned in his search for the seven cities of gold and decided to head back down to Mexico. Marilee wondered what it was about this spot that had made him so sure that there was no treasure here. It was pretty.

One night, Jim and Marilee snuck off beneath the bluff. Marilee slid her arm up Jim's shirt, rubbing the smooth skin on his chest. She leaned in and whispered, "I think about you while I'm waiting after the game."

"Yeah?" Jim said.

"You with all of those other men, all naked in the showers. I like to imagine what you do in there." Jim pushed her away hard. She hit her head on the bluff and must have lost consciousness for a few seconds. The roar of an engine woke her. She lay on her face snorting dust. Her nose was skinned. Her scalp had a damp spot. When she scrambled up the hillside, Jim's pickup was gone. She parted her hair on the other side so the blood wouldn't show and joined her friends around the keg. They asked what happened. She said she must have fallen. They said no, what happened to Jim. She said she didn't know.

A month later, she thought she might be pregnant, and two months later, she was sure of it. Five weeks after that, Marilee and Jim married. She was sixteen. He'd done that one bad thing, pushing her, but so frequently men did worse. And they inherited that hardware store so they didn't want for money.

The night after Jim sang for the first time, Marilee waited for him to sleep. She anticipated Sade again, but instead, he sang, "Life is a mystery. Everyone must stand alone." Madonna! She and Clay used to sing along to that song in the car on the way to his T-ball practices. Toward the chorus, Jim's voice turned hoarse and he tripped over some words. Marilee snuggled up to him and put the weight of her legs on Jim's so he couldn't flip over. She whispered the lyrics in his ear. It was thrilling how their voices wove. After verse two, Marilee let him rest. His body was hot. She turned on the bedside lamp to see him better. His face was bright red. She lifted his shirt and warmed her palms on his skin.

Her family hadn't been that poor. If only she hadn't been pregnant. She could have gotten a scholarship. A good job. She wouldn't have stuck around contending with Jim for so long if they hadn't had Clay, that was sure. Was Jim that bad, though? That was the part that always tripped her up. She knew he wasn't ideal. They couldn't talk to each other, but no one could, really. Not in any sort of perfect way. There would always be misunderstandings, like at Coronado Heights. Clay couldn't stand him.

Clay had moved out to the east coast a week after he finished high school, had graduated from a liberal arts college at which he stayed every summer, and had taken a job in finance in New York City. The long hours prevented him from keeping in touch as much as he'd like. Marilee hadn't seen him since his best friend's wedding last year, an occasion he couldn't miss. When she'd called to tell him about the transplant, he'd asked primly, "Is it absolutely essential that I'm there?" Marilee admitted that it was not. A few days after the surgery Clay had posted online some pictures of himself and other fit young people on a boat. They were labeled "Kanopolis Lake Reunion 2001!" Kanopolis was twenty miles away from where Jim lay ailing.

Marilee started to tease Jim, singing snatches of songs they'd covered the previous evening as she dusted or did dishes. At first it disappointed her that he never reacted, but then she came to appreciate their secret life, she and sleeping Jim with that magical lung. Even awake Jim improved. Most of the time when he sat in front of the TV, he didn't even watch. His eyelids drooped, his pupils dilated, his hands hung at his sides. The only things that seemed to move were his chest and the lungs inside it, which never stopped their rise and fall.

She considered calling the doctor to report Jim's singing, but she didn't. There was nothing unhealthy about song, and she was afraid that the doctor would make it go away. She noticed that Jim performed better at night when he had the anti-rejection dose early in the morning. One day she didn't give it to him at all, and in return she got "Tiny Dancer." Now she tried to stagger the days without a dose, so there weren't too many in a row. Anyway, Jim was certainly capable of remembering for himself to take his medicine. Maybe the lung would reject Jim, pop out of his throat, don a hat and grab a cane, and do a soft-shoe routine. Maybe the lung could go on tour.

One day Marilee ran some errands and returned to find Jim scrunched in his chair cradling the cordless phone to his ear with both hands. He made warbly sounds into the receiver. She took the phone, raised it to her own ear, and said hello.

"What happened to Dad?" Clay asked.

Marilee bent over Jim and said, "Jesus, Jim, what have you been saying?"

“No, he’s like a zombie,” Clay told her. “He said, like, ‘Hello,’ and just stopped talking. I heard this humming noise. Was that him?”

Marilee took a closer look at her glassy-eyed husband. She waved a hand across his field of vision. He blinked twice but didn’t follow the movement. “Well, yes, actually. He’s different since the operation. He hums now. Doesn’t talk but hums.”

“Maybe you should talk to the doctor.”

“Well, I hadn’t thought about doing that, really. It’s pretty pleasant. He hasn’t said anything mean in weeks.”

“As long as you’re happy,” Clay said.

“You know what? Yes I am.”

That night, the two of them tore up “I Will Survive.” Afterward Jim cried.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Marilee asked, rubbing his back.

“So sad. So so sad,” he mumbled. “I don’t know where I am.”

Marilee held him tight. “It’s okay. You just cry. I’ll always be here beside you.” He struggled for a second, but then he snuggled his head into her breasts and his body relaxed. She rocked him back and forth, blowing softly in his hair, which, when she nestled her nose in it, smelled of good honest soap and turf.

Jim was different now, Marilee was sure of it. All the bad times were over. They slept that way, with Jim’s head tucked against her chest, their legs entwined, all night long.

When Marilee woke, Jim was staring at her. He sat up in bed and pulled her arm. She got up. He led her into the garage and pointed at the car. She heard him go back inside, and drawers opening and shutting in the kitchen. She sat down in the passenger’s seat. Jim always insisted on driving. He came out holding a balled up sweatshirt.

“It’s not that cold, Jim,” she said.

He opened the driver side door and walked around to the passenger side, where he opened that door, too.

“You want me to drive?”

He nodded. Marilee got in the driver’s seat and pulled the car out. “Where are we going?” she asked. He just pointed the way with a stiff arm like a dowsing rod. Whenever he wanted her to turn, he’d grunt and swing the arm to the left or right. At first Marilee tried to guess what he was after. “You want a

milkshake at Bogey's, Jim? Maybe we're going by the hardware store so we can see how the guys are doing without you?" He ignored her.

Soon they were running out of town. Halfway to Lindsborg, he pointed to a little road leading up a hill.

Coronado Heights. They hadn't been there since that night he'd pushed her down. The place hadn't changed. The castle looked just the same, a little pathetic all by itself on the hill. The day was one of the first warm ones of the year, and Marilee rolled down her window as they drove up to the parking area. Theirs was the only car. The wind blew strong, whipping Marilee's hair in her face as she helped Jim out of the car. She told him again it was too warm for a sweatshirt, but he wouldn't put down his little bundle.

"Let's go see if we can find our names on the bluff," Marilee said, but Jim pulled her away, into the castle. There was one big room of twenty by twenty feet with some concrete picnic tables. The only light came through slit windows high up the walls. Jim's face looked odd in the shadows. His eyes had widened and his cheeks were thinner. The nose wasn't right. This one made a straight line, while Jim's ended in a bulb. The lips were thinner than Jim's. Marilee couldn't feel her feet and hands for a moment. She dropped the keys and Jim picked them up. Sensation rushed back. She held out her hand for the keys, but Jim ignored her. What's this, she thought. Outside the wind whistled.

In one corner of the room were steps leading up to the tower. Jim climbed and gestured for her to follow. She did. The wind nearly knocked her back down the stairs. When she regained her balance, she saw Jim was leaned against a turret breathing heavily. His pajamas, which she'd bought special for his hospital stay, snapped in the wind.

"Jim?" she said. He turned. His face was just as it had always been. She rushed toward him, but he motioned her back. "Did you overdo it?" she asked. "Those stairs were tough on me, too."

He breathed more and more rapidly. Marilee tried to pat his back or rub it—anything to calm him. But he pushed her away and kept on, panting almost impossibly fast. She counted three breaths a second. Surely he would pass out. He hadn't had his medicine that morning or the night before.

His eyes rolled up behind the lids. Marilee positioned herself to catch him when he fell. But he didn't. His torso swelled. At first Marilee thought he had just shifted his weight so it looked bigger, but then the pajama top stretched

across his inflating chest until the fabric could no longer take the strain. The buttons popped off. Under the cloth the flesh was red. Marilee touched it but had to tear her hand away before it scorched. The torso vibrated. The eyes rolled down to their normal spots, but now they were all pupil.

Jim's body bounced as though it were too buoyant to stay on the ground for long. His feet left the ground, and returned, and left again. He floated two feet high. The torso's girth dwarfed his arms, legs, and head. He spun so his feet were pointed up and his head down, which seemed to be the most comfortable position for such a body. He floated up higher so his head was level with Marilee's, his arms dangling. "Goodbye," he said. "No more I love yous. Goodbye, woman." He rose higher.

Marilee caught at his arms to draw him back, but the sweatshirt he'd been carrying fell away to reveal a ball-peen hammer. He swung it. She retreated. A current caught him and he lifted into the sky. He waved the hammer at her. She watched for a long time as he drifted across the prairie humming a sweet melody she didn't recognize. He got so small she could barely see him, except for little gleams from the hammer, which he still seemed to flourish.

And didn't she feel light, too. Didn't she draw air into her perfect lungs and hold it until she felt like she might float right away, and push it out like spring cleaning, like giving birth, like a visitor who overstayed his welcome. "Your daddy is gone, Clay," she'd tell her son the next time he called. "He's left me."