

CANTUCCINI

JOHN BEST

She stared at her distorted image in the stainless steel of the Viking range on the other side of the kitchen. It was seldom used, so the housekeeper had to polish it only once a week. It shone. Her face shone in the reflection. The kitchen, like every room in the unit, had been carefully decorated, down to the silk nasturtiums in a vase on the table. She looked down at her breakfast: one soft-boiled egg, one piece of toast, no butter, a cup of tea. One egg. She'd had her ovulation pain last night—her *mittelschmerz* (she hadn't known that word until she was in college). She remembered the gynecologist telling her how lucky she was. "That will make planning your family very easy," he'd said. She ate her breakfast.

The housekeeper approached the table. "Would you like your *cantuccini* now, Beth?" she said, "before your tea gets cold?"

"Yes, Corazon, thank you."

The housekeeper had arranged a few of the miniature almond cookies artfully on a dessert plate, which was now silently placed on the table. Beth had dawdled through her morning routine, including breakfast, and her tea was cooling off quickly. Still, she slowly immersed the first *cantuccino* in the tea, watching as the air bubbles trapped within it emerged, shimmering for a second below the surface before, in a crazy rush, rising to the top and breaking. Beth sucked the tea from the biscuit; it had softened, but only slightly. Still almost as crunchy as dry shredded wheat.

Her husband, Jason Adler, now entered the kitchen, having completed his workout on the Peloton in the exercise room. Forty years old, yes, thought Beth, but ageless. No encroachment of grey hair. The still-dazzling smile. In the kitchen, Jason moved with a fluid speed, like an animal suddenly unfettered. But with the precision that would be expected of an up-and-coming cardiothoracic surgeon. He had already eaten. Now he gave one of those quick smiles to Beth, who rose to greet him, drawing herself close and whispering in his ear: She had just ovulated. "So, maybe we could, you know, get together tonight?" she asked.

Jason's grin tensed a little, but after checking that the housekeeper had retreated to another room, he pressed a hand, warm from the workout, on his wife's skirt, cupping her groin. She noted, as she had before, that his eyes could

become as beaded as a skink's when there was something he didn't want others to see in them. At other times, all she saw were the stars of a galaxy wheeling their way into infinity.

"Keep it warm for me," said Jason, his fingers pressing firmly against her. "We'll see. I still have a full day ahead of me. The VSD for this morning got delayed on a technicality. And there's another procedure scheduled for this afternoon." He withdrew his hand. She once welcomed his raw familiarity with her body. Now? Sometimes she didn't know how she felt. His fitness watch buzzed; he snapped his wrist forward and scanned it.

"The VSD is on. Gotta run," he said. "If you see Dad, tell him I said hi."

"Will do. See you later." She tried to keep her voice perky.

She put the half-full teacup in the microwave. As the timer went off, her father-in-law came into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Beth," he said. The cool tone in his voice hadn't always been there. Not when they were first married, but it had appeared soon after.

"Good morning, Joseph. I'll be out of your way in just a minute. Jason said 'hi,' by the way."

"No need to hurry. I have a very busy day of doing practically nothing ahead of me."

She managed a polite smile. Joseph had been living with them for only a month or so; company manners still prevailed. Beth mentally prepared for the already-routine scene that was about to take place as he, for whatever reason, pretended to look around on the counter for what he was after, even though the housekeeper put them in exactly the same place every day.

"Ah!" he said after a few seconds. "Here they are." The two cream-filled donuts Joseph ate every day for breakfast had arrived about twenty minutes earlier. He had a standing order for their delivery. "I'll just take these into the living room," he said as left.

Beth studied Joseph as he walked away from her down the hallway, staring at him as if she might glean the important nugget about him that had continued to elude her. At seventy, Joseph had no obvious ailments. And he was comfortably well-off. He could have continued living on his own, she knew. But, as Jason said when he persuaded her to let his father come live with them, the big house in Connecticut was no longer needed since Joseph's wife had died a few years back. The fact that Joseph was now ensconced in the

room that they had other plans for rankled Beth, but she brushed that thought aside. She took another look at her reflection in the range. Thirty-five. Still beautiful, sure. But did that matter anymore? Then she turned sideways and took a hard look at her body in the steel range's reflection. Her belly. As flat as Jason's. As flat as a boy's. It was time to go to work. Her time on the hated Peloton would come in the evening before dinner.

Beth exited their building on East 86th Street and immediately blended into the street scene—just one more young, professionally dressed woman walking through the Yorkville neighborhood on a bright September morning. Calling it a neighborhood was the height of something, she thought. Was it supposed to imply a sense of community? That was false. She didn't know any of their neighbors, and neither did Jason. Some of their acquaintances came from other parts of the Upper East Side, but most came from elsewhere in Manhattan.

She boarded the Q Train at 86th and found a seat. At 50th, the person sitting beside her disembarked, and a mother who had just boarded with her daughter in tow quickly seized the vacated spot. They fell into the seat as the train took off with a lurch. Beth slid over a bit. The logo of the American Girl store was emblazoned on the plastic bag the little girl held on her lap. And from this bag, the girl extracted a doll, still in its packaging, obviously just purchased. Beth noticed the girl's eyes studiously scanning all the details of the doll as if they might contain some secret knowledge.

"Maryellen Larkin," Beth said, tapping the package. "That's one of my favorite American Girls too!"

The little girl sharply broke her fixation on the doll and pivoted her head to Beth, with eyes now as guarded as those of any seasoned New Yorker's. Then the girl swiveled her head the other way to the blasé mother whose gaze remained locked on her phone. Then back to Beth, who saw the girl was obviously impressed that she knew the doll's name.

"Do you have one too?" the girl asked in a conspiratorial voice, as if admitting Beth to a secret society on the basis of this shared bond.

"No, honey, but I did have one when I was your age."

"I'm seven," the girl replied.

"I thought that was about how old you were. When I was seven, my doll was Kirsten Larson."

"I like Kirsten too."

The train had come into the station at 34th Street. “Let’s go, Hayley,” the mother said abruptly, her kohl-eyes showing no emotion as she flicked her gaze at Beth for less than a second. “You’re bothering the lady, and this is our stop.”

As the doors closed, the girl smiled from the platform and waved goodbye, hair flowing behind her as her mother pulled her along. Dark hair, Beth thought. Dark like mine.

The train made its screeching way south to Fulton Street, where Beth customarily disembarked. The station was a block away from the World Trade Center site. She remembered the video footage: people, strangers really, holding hands, jumping from the opened windows and disappearing forever into the billowing black smoke below. All those lives, taken away before their time. Just like that. She hurried around the corner to her office on John Street.

Beth had been working for an NGO, Water for the Children of Africa, for almost two years. After getting her Master’s in social work from Northwestern, her first job had involved field work in Namibia. When this NGO job opened up, it had seemed like a natural fit for her. She knew the Board thought she was their rising star. That had a lot to do with her recent promotion to Director of Development. Not only could she write a grant, but she was effective with the wealthy donors, who considered her one of them.

September flew by, but the weather remained warm in New York City. In early October, the leaves on the trees of Manhattan had still only just begun to turn. One day Beth arrived at the office before a meeting with the philanthropist who had most recently expressed interest in the charity’s work. Beth scanned her office to make sure every detail was in place, including the diploma behind her desk. Elizabeth Linden. Had it really been only eight years since she was known as Beth Linden? It felt like she’d been married to Jason for much longer than that.

The receptionist rapped lightly on the door and opened it. “Beth, Mrs. Lefebvre is here.”

“Yes, please show her in.” Beth rose to greet the middle-aged woman who followed the receptionist. They all had a certain sameness: their expensive suits in whatever color was that year’s prescribed fashion, their hair, their nails. “Please have a seat, Mrs. Lefebvre. So good of you to come in. Would you like a cup of tea before we get started?”

“No, that’s quite all right. May I call you Beth?”

“Yes, I’d prefer that you do, actually.”

“I must say, Beth, when you discussed your work at that function the other night, my eyes were opened. I had no idea the problems children in Africa face just to have clean water.”

Beth nodded. “I think you’ll find this brief video very informative.” She used the remote to lower the screen behind her, while she took a chair beside Mrs. Lefebvre. Then she dimmed the lights and started the carefully crafted performance. The parade of children, their large eyes filled with despair as they looked away; the ravaging effects of cholera and dysentery shown in minute and unsparring detail. Then the brigade of young and confident engineers discussing how clean water could be brought to the villages, “if only there was support.” Finally, the children again, their needs met, forgetful of their previous plight, bumptious, and jostling to appear on camera.

Beth brought the lights up after the video ended. Mrs. Lefebvre’s eyes were moist. Without comment, Beth handed her a tissue.

“It makes you realize, Beth, how terribly lucky our children are to have been born here, where they have every advantage, instead of someplace like that. The circumstances of life are so chancy as to who gets what, are they not? I’ll discuss this with my husband, but I’m sure he’ll want to help just as much as I do.”

After the woman left, Beth went over their meeting. Mrs. Lefebvre had assumed that Beth had children of her own. Had she projected some kind of unintended signal? She thought back to that night almost eight years ago. It was shortly after they were married. Jason always took the responsibility for contraception, which she appreciated. She had offered anyway, but Jason countered with his usual logic. “Why take an unnecessary pill, Beth, with its side effects like nausea or headaches?” But that night, for whatever reason, he had skipped the condom.

The intercom on her desk blinked. It was the receptionist. Alex wanted a word. The debriefing with the COO following a meeting with a potential donor was protocol. Beth left her office and walked to the glass box in the middle of the open floor plan. It was unoccupied. She looked around and saw Alex Brodhaus conferring with an associate several desks away. When Alex saw Beth, he waved her into his office. The interior was quiet, unadorned, ascetic. A spreadsheet glowed on the monitor. Beth saw her reflection in the glass wall, the vibrancy of her lipstick contrasting with the monochromaticity of the space. Alex had furnished the office with a small stereo on which a song

was playing from what Beth figured were Alex's younger days. She listened for a moment. The singer pledging his never-ending love, the couple planning their future together: pretty thoughts.

Alex's arrival jolted her out of the reverie she had slipped into. "Well, Beth," he said, "I saw Mrs. Lefebvre at the elevator. She was still dabbing her eyes. Looks like you knocked it out of the park again. I'm sure we'll be receiving a major donation soon. Might as well get my gratitude speech ready for the reception." He smiled.

Beth acknowledged the compliment. She knew the organization was doing good work, and she was grateful for the opportunity to make the contribution she did. It was just that she thought she'd be a little farther along with some of the other things that mattered in life. She was in her mid-thirties, after all. And, she thought, her good works did nothing to assuage her guilt.

That evening, Beth hurried off the train at 86th Street as usual. Daylight Saving Time had not yet ended. The sun rode low in the sky, but it was still light and the air was mild. Ahead, the tall trees of Central Park beckoned. She hesitated, but just for a second. The Peloton could wait a little longer. She walked past their apartment building and found a bench in the park. The sun's gentle light scattered itself through the waving leaves. Traffic noise was muffled and indistinct as the birds' ceaseless chattering came to the foreground. Some of them would overwinter in the park; most would soon be departing. A few people, seniors, padded cautiously along the pathway, smiling and nodding as they passed. Her senses blurred as if covered with a sweet glaze. Her breathing slowed. She turned her face to the light, and, refreshed, she rose.

At the corner, the cacophony on Fifth Avenue again assailed her. A squirrel scampered from a tree and into the street. A taxi immediately ran it over, the animal's vital blood spurting onto the cracked asphalt. Alive a second ago, now just a piece of gooey offal in the street.

"Why do you want to see it, Beth?"

"I don't know. I just do. I want you to see it too." She remembered how he nodded, but wouldn't look at her.

It was only a few days after Beth's respite in Central Park when her father-in-law paused on the verge of enacting his breakfast ritual. Glancing at Beth, he took a chair at the kitchen table across from her.

“Beth, I know you think that I’m just caught up in the past, in my own little world. I admit I’ve been very, let’s say, reticent these last couple of months. But still, I want you to know how much I appreciate that you’ve taken me in. It’s given me the chance to observe so much about you and Jason in my time together with you.”

“I’m sure you have, Joseph.” His entrée was new, but his forthcoming message was not. When they were first married, Jason’s parents seemed to adore her. But they cooled. Now, Joseph often hinted vaguely about what she might do to improve her life with her husband. She tried to think of a way to get out of a lecture, but there were no openings.

“I know you’re committed to your work, Beth. And that speaks volumes about your character. But do you really want to grow old knowing you’ve given your whole life away for people you will never meet? There’s more to life than work, after all.”

Tell your son, she thought. “Jason and I have talked all about that, Joseph.” She made her voice soothing, as though she were speaking with a donor. “And I can also tell you that Jason is so glad you’re here.” She realized her mistake as soon as the words had flown from her mouth: “*Jason* is so glad,” not “*We’re* so glad.” Joseph caught the mistake, and smiled at this small victory.

“Thank you, Beth. That means so much to me.”

But on the way to work, Beth thought about what Joseph had said. She and Jason *had* talked all about the future. And Jason was always positive, even after what had happened. “Sure, someday,” he’d said. “When the time is right. But kids are a lot of trouble, and they’re expensive, too. For now, let’s just keep this between ourselves, okay? We need to be sure before we go ahead with something we might regret.”

Might regret. Did Jason ever have any regrets? The occasional lights in the tunnel whooshed past the subway car.

The crisis came just a few weeks later, in early November. Joseph entered the kitchen at breakfast, but instead of the little theatre piece with the donuts, he complained about the limited mobility and weakness in his arm. He demonstrated it for Beth. He couldn’t move his arm freely, and his grip was weak. “I must have slept on it funny,” he said. “It’ll go away in a little while.”

But it didn’t. The problem was still there at dinner time.

“It’s been like that all day?” Jason asked.

“Yeah. It doesn’t hurt. It’s just annoying.”

“Dad, you can’t pick up a coffee cup. You’ll have to be seen. I’ll set it up.”

Joseph looked as though he might be on the verge of a protest. But he stifled it. Two days later, smiling broadly, he gave Jason and Beth a thumbs-up as he was rolled into the MRI.

When Oncology called just a few days after the scan, it was clear that Joseph’s situation was urgent. Jason exuded a tension in the oncologist’s office that Beth had rarely seen. Now the oncologist entered with a printout. Both Jason and Beth moved forward in their chairs ever so slightly.

“Dr. Adler,” the oncologist began, “we’ve identified the cause of your father’s impairment. There’s a tumor in the frontal lobe of his left hemisphere.”

“How big is the tumor? Is it operable?”

“I’m afraid not.” The oncologist hesitated. “We can radiate the brain area, but that’s frankly just palliative care, because there’s a bigger problem. As the scan shows, the brain tumor is most likely a metastasis from his lung. And unfortunately, there are numerous other anomalies and suspicious irregularities in his bones and organs that are consistent with extensive cancer. You can review this report later; I’m sure it will be comprehensible to you.” He handed the document across the desk.

Jason quickly scanned it, then slowly put it down. “How long?” he said.

“I think we’re probably looking at weeks, rather than days.”

“Weeks!”

But the oncologist misunderstood. “That’s right. He’ll have some time to tie up whatever loose ends there may be. Most of the time the seniors are pretty well prepared for that anyway.”

“Does he know?”

The oncologist slowly shook his head. “We’ve found it’s best if they hear it from the family. I’m sorry the news couldn’t have been better.”

In the corridor outside the office, Beth put her arm around Jason. He didn’t seem to register it. “How am I going to tell him?” he wondered aloud.

“We’ll find a way,” she said. Jason nodded, but he kept his gaze focused straight ahead.

Joseph received the news with a somber equanimity. “I could tell by the way my body has been feeling, there was something seriously wrong with me,” he said. “It’s okay, really. I’ve had a great life. And I’m not gone yet, after all!”

But his condition began to deteriorate almost immediately. A hospital bed appeared in their home, along with a commode. Their routine revolved around the fentanyl patches; Beth saw the dosage levels increasing every few days. Joseph began toying with his food, and when he stopped eating altogether in the first week of December, both Jason and Beth knew that his needs had finally exceeded their ability to care for him. They were exhausted.

The windowpanes of the hospital room were blurring as the sleeting rain blasted against them. In the parking lot below, the accumulating water meandered in a slow-moving river, hissing and spiculed in the pelting frozen drops. The Christmas ornaments on the bordering trees danced crazily in the wind. Jason and Beth had hurried to the hospital on that grey December morning; Jason hadn’t eaten. When the nurse assured him that it probably wouldn’t be today, he decided he had time to get breakfast.

“Call me if anything changes, okay? I won’t be gone long.”

“Sure. He seems to be resting comfortably right now.”

Beth opened her laptop and began to work. But a minute later, she felt something and looked up. Joseph’s eyes were open and fixed on her with an intensity she had never seen. He raised a palm weakly. She went to the bedside. He searched for his voice; finally a phlegmy, congested whisper emerged. “Where’s . . . Jason?”

“He just stepped out. He’ll be back soon.”

Joseph closed his eyes for a second, then reopened them. “Would have been better . . . Beth, if you kept the baby . . . the way Jason wanted you to . . . he . . . so heartbroken.”

“What? What did you just say, Joseph?”

“The baby . . . you terminated seven years ago . . . we never let on we knew . . . Jason still protected you . . . Don’t tell Beth you know . . . sore subject . . . time’s not right, she said . . . her job . . . Beth, why didn’t you want the baby? . . . Beth, why didn’t you?”

Her hands rested lightly on the rails of the hospital bed as if an electric current might erupt from it without warning. Her thoughts were like jagged

lightning bolts fractaling down to fragments before extinguishing themselves into blackness. She looked out the ice-covered window and saw nothing. Finally, her voice came to her from a million miles away. "Let's not discuss that now, Joseph. Why don't you rest for a bit?"

He closed his eyes and seemed to relax into his pillow. Jason returned twenty minutes later. "Any change?" he asked.

"He opened his eyes and mumbled a few things."

"Things? What things?"

"I don't know. I couldn't make them out."

"Well, did you try? Christ, Beth!" He ran his hand nervously through his hair.

But Joseph Adler did not speak again that day, nor the next. And on the evening of the following day, he died without ever regaining consciousness.

A week after the funeral, they had not yet begun to sort out any of the remnants of his life. Beth sat at breakfast alone. She glanced at the wavy image of herself in the polished range. The cream donuts lay uneaten in their usual place on the counter; no one had thought to cancel the standing order for their delivery. The housekeeper asked Beth if she wanted her *cantuccini*, as usual.

Beth paused before replying. The donuts were only a few feet away. "No, Corazon, not today. But I think I'd like one of the cream donuts instead, please." It was now placed silently on the table.

Beth hadn't had a cream donut since college. It was larger than she remembered. This must have four hundred calories all by itself, she thought. She picked up the donut, surprised at its palpable, almost organic softness. She bit into it with tenderness. The donut yielded immediately to her teeth, the cream filling, gelatinous and unctuous, jetting into her mouth even with the tentativeness of her first bite. The filling coated her tongue with a sweet, oily uniformity. She took a sip of tea to clear her mouth, the cooling tea that was astringent and bitter. Yes, of course, she thought, as she bit into the donut again more forcefully.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Best is professor emeritus of cognitive science from Eastern Illinois University, where he taught for 34 years. His current academic project involves an analysis of the theory of moral reasoning of Immanuel Kant from the standpoint of its applicability to certain principles and findings from cognitive science.