

Sarah Pascarella
Pith

A patch of sandpaper sat on the left side of Dara's throat; heavy tarps replaced her eyelids. Her thoughts floated like dust motes, languid and slow.

Sick, she thought, and left work a little early, said good evening to Noel, the doorman, and hailed a taxi. It was raining and the traffic-choked cars sat like slugs, shiny in the precipitation and headlights. Dara nestled into the backseat and leaned her forehead against the cool glass, grateful she wasn't smooshed on the subway. Whenever she felt under the weather, she treated herself to a cab. It was one of her few indulgences.

Her driver talked, fast and continuous, but not to her—his cocooned earpiece had a flashing blue light, and his words were unfamiliar but beautiful, with a lilt and swoop that conjured visions of musical notes, bouncy along a staff. Soothed, she listened—was that the right word? She listened, yes, but didn't comprehend. Ami was his name, according to his taxi license ID, and she watched the miniature blue bulb flick on and off, on and off, as he spoke.

Suddenly, in English—"Ma'am! Wake up, please! Please to wake up now, thank you!"

Startled, she opened her eyes. She had slumped into the door frame, her chin on her chest, and quickly sat up straight. "Excuse me," she said. Her adrenaline faded, then shifted to alarm. Since when did she fall asleep in cabs?

"Excuse me," she said again. "I'm not feeling well."

They were outside Haymarket, the vendors just inches from the car: crustaceans piled atop wagons of crushed ice and tables bowed under heaps of too-ripe vegetables. Even congested, even through glass and metal, Dara could smell brackish seawater and fermented produce. She realized Ami was quiet, that his phone call had ended. She met his gaze in the rearview mirror and her eyes felt watery.

He cut the wheel and went into a little alleyway just behind a green-grocer cart, then killed the engine. He pressed a button on the dashboard meter and the numbers paused. "You wait—no charge."

She watched him approach the seller, then select two oranges and a pomegranate.

Back in the car, he slid open the little door in the plexiglass partition that separated the front seat from back. "My good health gift to you," he said, his hand outstretched with fruit. "The oranges you eat now, while we get through traffic. Then, at home, slice the pomegranate in half, soak in a bowl of water, thirty minutes, one hour. The seeds then easier to get. Will make you better."

"Thank you." Dara peeled the first orange. The shock of juice, sweet-tart, turned her tastebuds into electrodes across her tongue.

The little partition remained ajar, and she leaned forward to return

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a few wedges to the front seat. Without turning, Ami reached over his shoulder to take them, and they ate together.

"You really didn't have to do this," she said.

"Is a need," he said.

After he dropped her off, Dara went upstairs and sliced and soaked the pomegranate. Half an hour later, as promised, the weakened rind yielded, not quite pliable, but easier than when she made the first cut. The seeds looked like little teeth, red with blood, and she thumbed them out, some coming loose alone, others in clusters. As she ate, a few stuck between her own teeth, and she could feel their elixir, cold and bright, transmitting some new energy.

A few days later, after she had mended, Dara got a call from her father's nursing home. He too had taken ill – nothing serious, just a cold, most likely, but his spirits were low. On the way to see him, Dara stopped by the neighborhood supermarket and picked up the same fruit Ami had given her.

Her father had been especially ornery during her last visit, the causes varied and interchangeable – intrusive staff, bland food, uncomfortable thermostat, idiot neighbors. Even though he was aware his living arrangements were their best option, he was still angry about it. She was his only child, his next of kin, and didn't have the resources to care for him the way he needed. He knew this, but didn't fully accept it, and that willful misunderstanding made him cruel. When she last stopped by, she'd listened attentively to his complaints but had no solutions, so he called her useless. In response, she skipped the past three weeks' visits, thinking a little distance would be mutually beneficial. She'd have stretched it to a month, maybe more, but his sickness made her reconsider. If he were under the weather, Dara reasoned, he may be muted, even tolerable.

He was sleeping when she got to his room. Against the pillow, his thinning hair sloped in jagged peaks, like a meringue. A grey scarf loosely circled his neck. Dara recognized its chunky garter stitch, her mother's signature technique, the first knit she'd learned in retirement, a few years before she'd died. Back home, Dara had a few similar iterations, purple and green versions, tucked into her bedroom bureau and hall closet.

Dara quietly unrolled the grocery bag and retrieved the fruit, then found a bowl to soak the pomegranate. The running water from the bathroom sink startled him awake.

"Oh. It's you," he said.

She couldn't read his sleep-masked expression, whether her presence was a comfort or annoyance.

"What's that?" he asked, lifting his stubble-flecked chin in her direction.

"I brought something to make you feel better," she said.

By his bedside, she peeled the oranges, and he ate while watching TV. His breathing was labored, and he smelled medicinal, his nostrils

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and upper lip shiny with Vicks. After one episode of Wheel of Fortune, she unfolded a card table and set down the bowl, careful not to splash as she worked. He watched her husk the seeds into the water, and looked perturbed when she presented them a few minutes later, cleaned and drained, in a small dish.

"Try it," she said. "They worked wonders for me."

He tried a spoonful and shrugged, just his left shoulder, as if both would be indulgent. "Seems like a lot of work for not much."

It's a need, she thought, but kept quiet. Deliberate, he chewed a few more bites. "That's enough," he said, his attention on the screen, and handed over his cup. The final contestant guessed the phrase and squealed at the prize announcement: a trip to Hawaii.

"A vacation—just for guessing words!" her father said.

"A little bit of work for a lot," she said.

Midway through Deal or No Deal, her father dozed off again. Silent, Dara stood and went to the communal kitchen. She was about to toss the leftover fruit when an aide, Marie, intervened.

"You don't want those?"

"Help yourself," Dara said.

"My favorite." Marie took a full palmful of seeds. Her joyful smile, tinted slightly pink, made Dara think of Ami, how he'd made her feel the same. How sometimes—maybe often—certain strangers could be kinder than your own kin.

"I'll bring more next time," Dara said.

Her father was awake when she returned to his room. "I thought you'd gone," he said.

Did you want me to? she thought, but instead said, "just to the kitchen. Can I get you anything?"

"A blanket."

On the screen, a gentleman frowned over numbered suitcases. The camera cut to his family in the audience, a wife, three freckled children, tense with stiff smiles and clasped hands. After a few moments, against ominous bass tones and lowered laser lights, he selected suitcase number 11. A pretty woman in a copper sheath dress opened it to reveal \$25. The crowd went wild – the grand prize was still in play. The wife bounced in place, her expression somewhere between fear and delight.

"And the remote," her father added.

Unplanned, Dara had arrived more than a decade into her parents' marriage. She was a late-in-life baby, a what-do-we-do-with-this accessory shoehorned into a well-established life. Along for the ride, as a young girl, she entertained herself at dinner parties and after-school conferences with word games, jumbles, and puzzles focusing on elementary math, but by her teenage years had become perplexed at the introduction of graphs and symbols, the required extrapolations and leaps of logic. Those later

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puzzles felt like entering a narrow corridor, her focus centered on one door she could never unlock. Despite being blocked, she was aware other corridors and exits existed, but had no concept of how to get to them – that, indeed, they might seem obvious once pointed out, but on her own she could not determine the way.

On the TV, the game show host waited for the man to make his next move.

“I’m cold!” her father barked.

Dara lifted the spare afghan from the armchair and tucked it around his torso, snug under his arms. He sighed and seemed content. Against his chin, she noticed a few flecks of ruby juice. She didn’t wipe them off.

As an adult, Dara found that blocked awareness could return, sometimes with serious matters, like work disputes, or trivial ones, like Sudoku, but always with her father, across all interactions. His disapproval as default, his brusqueness, had always been the problem she could not crack. With him, her vulnerabilities were a chicken-and-egg puzzle: was he their cause or did he exploit what already existed?

She checked the thermostat, set at a pleasant 70 degrees. In her peripheral vision, Dara could see the flicker of blue light from the TV, off and on, against her father’s profile. His breath rattled, but in anticipation or discomfort, she wasn’t quite certain.

The contestant deliberated about the remaining suitcases, just a few left, while the audience buzzed and rippled in wait. The host held up his palm and they instantly settled.

“Which one would you pick?” Dara asked.

“23,” her father said.

“My birthday,” said Dara.

“Yes. That’s why.” He sounded a little exasperated.

The man selected suitcase 12. The adjacent starlet clicked the latch and the jackpot appeared – \$1 million, now eliminated, out of reach. The crowd groaned. The entire family looked completely pale.

Her father clucked his tongue, his breathing less labored. “Should have gone with you,” he said.