
MAXINE ROSALER

The Missing Kidney

WHEN I WAS TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD, I had to leave Montreal, where I was in love with Steven Tomlinson, to go back to New York to have one of my kidneys removed. I had mentioned in the course of a routine checkup at the McGill University clinic that I peed a lot; the doctor tested my urine, one thing led to another, and it was discovered that my right kidney was diseased and shrunken and doing me more harm than good.

Steven was my first real boyfriend, the first boy I loved and the first boy who loved me. Once, he told me with tears in his eyes that he would love me even if I lost an arm; he would love me if I lost a leg; and now he could add a kidney to the list of missing body parts whose elimination would in no way alter his love for me. The night before I was to leave for New York, Steven shook me awake at three in the morning to tell me that he had had a dream that I wouldn't be coming back to Montreal. He made me swear that I would never leave him. We had vacated the apartment we'd been sharing for the past six months and were camping out on the living room floor of a friend of his, in a sleeping bag that smelled like the dirt of creation. I promised that I would come back as soon as I recovered from the operation, but I knew I was never coming back; I also knew that I would never find anyone to love me as much as Steven did.

My mother referred to Steven as "the *goy* boy," a name she had come up with to belittle him, which was something she had always done, one way or another, with all my boyfriends. I always thought that *goy* meant "Christian," and Steven had been brought up as an atheist, but looking at him through my mother's eyes, there did seem to be something very *goyishe* about his family—the parents were divorced; the father, whom I met one night when I went with Steven to his house for dinner, was an ice-cold professor of experimental psychology; and his third wife, Paula, epitomized a certain kind of Wasp wife. She was a timid, nervous sparrow of a woman, who kept on looking anxiously at her husband, seeking his approval for the meal, which must have taken hours to prepare, and which I was incapable

of enjoying, my extreme discomfort in the presence of Professor Tomlinson having robbed me of all appetite. The one distraction from my own unease that evening was Steven's: his green eyes were clouded over with something I had never seen in them before—a fierce look of self-protectiveness, so different from the open and, for me, slightly unsettling look of adoration that I was accustomed to seeing shining in them.

The conversation around the dinner table consisted of the professor asking me questions and me answering them at much greater length than was necessary. When he asked me what my father did for a living, for example, I didn't simply tell him that my father was the director of advertising for a small import/export company in Manhattan, I told him that my father hated his job and that he had always wanted to be an English professor but when he was at Columbia University, where his father, a millionaire who was the first Jew with a seat on the New York Curb Exchange and who had lost all his money in the stock market crash of 1929, was on the board of directors, the dean told my father that Jews couldn't get jobs as professors and so that's why he ended up being in advertising, which was a shame, since he would have been a wonderful English professor; he was a very literary man.

Next, Professor Tomlinson asked me how I happened to come to McGill. It was kind of serendipity, I told him, and in one long, run-on sentence I spoke of my nomadic college experience: first, the University of Wisconsin, which I hated, except for the cold weather (I liked the way it would make tiny icicles form in my nose and I liked the frozen look of everything); then, my transfer to Harpur College, where in place of goofy-looking Midwesterners, I found neurotic New York Jews; and finally, my decision to transfer to McGill because a girl waiting in line with me at the Harpur College cafeteria, where the food was inedible except for the cinnamon doughnuts, which were fabulous (why had I used that ridiculous word?), mentioned she was applying to a foreign student exchange program there. And so, to make a long story short (ha ha ha), here I was at McGill, where, come to think of it, it was very cold, too.

Steven never stopped smiling at me the entire time I was blabbing away, knowing that I was making a fool of myself but completely helpless to stop. I was happy to see the look of fear gone from his green eyes, but it also occurred to me that Steven probably didn't know me all that well.

The next and final question before dessert—lemon meringue pie, an all-time favorite of mine, but that night it tasted like wet straw to me—was what I planned to do with my life, which of course I had no idea about, so I reverted to the line of

bullshit that had impressed the admissions committees at my college interviews, which had something to do with the theater of the absurd.

My embarrassment over that evening lingered with me for a long time, so much so that when, a few weeks later, Steven mentioned that his father had noticed the necklace of hickeys I had tattooed around his neck the week before, I actually felt better: I would rather have his father think of me as a Jewish whore who was corrupting his son (true in a way, since Steven was a virgin when we met) than for him to think me a fool.

Steven was tall and beautiful. After he left my bed in the morning to go to his job as a motorcycle mechanic, I would find strands of his long blond hair on my pillow and I would kiss those strands. I made the mistake of once telling my mother about Steven's hair. "It sounds like you have yourself a stud," was her response, which struck me as being incredibly vulgar, but nevertheless had the intended effect of making me feel like an idiot for being in love with a boy who looked like he belonged on the cover of a romance novel.

Steven was three years younger than I was, and despite his perfect SAT scores had opted out of going to college, but it didn't require any brilliance for him to see right away that my mother was every bit as poisonous for me as his father was for him. Most of my conversations with her left me in tears, and Steven would sometimes try to point this out when I was busy probing his psyche to root out the pain and sorrow that his father had caused him. He never came out and said it, but I guess what he meant was, Maxine, you're damaged, too. I doubt I would have heard him had he ever been so forthright. My love for my mother was more the love of a child than that of a young woman on the road to adulthood, and it carried with it a child's blindness.

Before I could have my kidney removed I had to get health insurance, and in order to get health insurance I had to get a job, so I spent the first three weeks home at my parents' house in Long Island taking the train back and forth to the city, going to the employment agencies whose ads in the Help Wanted pages of the *New York Times* (ads with headings like "Self-starter," "Go-getter," "Excellent Entry Level Position") my mother would circle with great zeal as I sat there numb with astonishment. My mother wanted to be that girl Friday; she had that can-do spirit the business world wanted to envelop in its soul-killing arms.

Looking at things from her perspective now, I feel a little sorry for my mother, for not only did I fail to fulfill her desire to have a career, but I was also dragging

her along with me on the road to debauchery and despair. She was seeking vicarious satisfaction from the wrong person. Being me meant having my hair, my wild hair, and finding herself in clothes that only a slut or a slob would wear, and falling into bed with one creep after another, and getting fired from job after job.

My mother never expressed any regrets about never having had a career, but her euphoria over the job ads made me wonder if she wished she had done things differently, and more than once I asked her about it. Mommy, you were always the smartest kid in class, was the way I usually began. Don't you sometimes wish you had been a doctor, or a lawyer, or some kind of businesswoman? No, I loved being a housewife and mother, she would always reply. To which I would respond by saying something like, What an enigma you are, Mommy, which would elicit from her something along the lines of, What the hell are you talking about, Maxine? Why are you always saying such idiotic things? At which point I would usually change the subject or simply mumble, Never mind or Forget it or That's what I want to be when I grow up, too.

Although I remained mostly silent during my mother's explorations of the Help Wanted section, I once told her that I didn't really want any of these jobs. It was my first week back from Montreal, and we had just returned from a shopping expedition to Macy's. In the interest of peace, I had allowed myself to be dressed up like a job-hunting doll. (One dress was turquoise—a terrible color for me—with a Peter Pan collar and a small velvet bow at the neck; the other was a hideous brown plaid, with an attached vest and pleated skirt.) The next stop of the day was a haircut, which my mother declared “stunning”; for weeks afterward I avoided looking at my reflection in mirrors and windowpanes and the shiny stainless steel of those endless elevator doors, and whenever I wasn't in my mother's presence or on one of my job interviews I covered my head with a scarf. We returned home and to the Help Wanted ads. “To tell you the truth, Mommy, none of these opportunities for advancement really appeal to me,” I surprised myself by saying.

Usually, with my mother—and unlike with the rest of the world—I thought before I spoke. In fact, much of what I said to her was a prevarication of one sort or another, but I suppose after an afternoon of having submitted myself to various forms of neutering, I had reached my limit.

“What the hell are you talking about, Maxine?” she said. “What did you go to college for?”

“I don't know,” I said.

“You don’t know? You don’t know? That’s just great. You’re an idiot. What do you want to be when you grow up? A dishwasher? A maid? A token booth clerk?” And then, as though I hadn’t said anything, she went back to circling the Help Wanted, but the pleasure seemed to have gone out of it for her.

The experience of going over the Help Wanted ads with my mother was a familiar one for me. Every summer since I was eighteen, I had lied my way into office jobs, pretending that I had never been to college or that I had dropped out of college or that I had no plans to go to college. Now, for the first time, I was not misrepresenting myself. At last I could say, in all honesty, to my prospective employers: This is my life, while thinking to myself, This is the end of my life.

For me, all those summers spent in line at a Xerox machine, or sitting at a receptionist’s desk, or crouched in front of a filing cabinet were slices of my youth that had been lost forever. I would have much preferred to have spent my summers doing the kinds of things other teenagers did—making those magnificent swirls of ice cream at Carvel; or operating the drawer of a cash register at Waldbaum’s, making it open and close and listening to it ring; or being a waitress with an apron tied around my waist and a pencil stuck behind my ear.

Where did my father stand in all this? My father, for whom the world of work turned out to be one long suicide mission? Right beside my mother, as disgusted with me as she was: You’re an adult now, Maxine, he would say. Stop living in a dream world.

Those first three months back in New York were the most miserable of my life to date. Living with my parents, dressing in clothes my mother picked out for me, sleeping in my old bed, being so sure of what I didn’t want but having no idea of what I wanted, I stood helplessly on the sidelines, watching my youth expire, bit by bit.

I had no friends. My sister was back at Vassar, having taken her senior year off to have a nervous breakdown, and Steven turned out to be my only source of consolation. I would write him long letters, complaining about how miserable I was; he would write me short letters back, saying I should come back to Montreal. I would respond by reminding him about my shrunken kidney. In his letters Steven always told me he would never stop loving me, no matter what. It should have comforted me to know that there was someone who would love me if I lost an arm or a leg or a kidney, but for some reason it just made me sad.

I would read Steven's letters hungrily—letters my mother handed me with a look of disapproval when I returned home from a day of job hunting—yet I was starting to feel that I should let him in on the secret that I was going to break up with him. For reasons I could not understand, the idea of going back to Montreal was even more frightening than my mother's enthusiastic calcification of my life.

I might not have understood why I didn't go back to Steven, but there was a little woman residing inside my head who had figured everything out. Her voice was very soft and muffled, but now, after the passage of so many years, I can hear what she was saying quite clearly. All this other stuff is temporary, she said. No office job can ever take you as far away from what you want as going back to Steven could. Since you're too much of a coward to confront your parents now, listen to them for a while. It's no big deal. But Steven is not for you. All this other stuff is just temporary, she repeated. If you go back to Steven, that could be permanent.

Every interview at an employment agency began with a typing test. Once, I was so flustered I forgot to put paper in the typewriter and I typed my thirty-five words a minute onto a bewildered, endlessly revolving black cylinder. Another wet and rainy day, I walked down the streets of Midtown with newspapers and paper bags draped over my head. I had never owned an umbrella; the idea of buying one had never occurred to me, and that afternoon the rainstorm that had been promised all week came thundering down. Realizing the futility of the *New York Times* that was disintegrating in my hands, I stood on the sidewalk with my eyes turned up toward the magnificently raging sky and I allowed myself to get totally soaked. It felt wonderful, standing there in the middle of Midtown Manhattan, dripping wet. I started to sing and dance my way down the street, in revolt against the job-hunting shoes that pinched my feet and the job-hunting dress that made me feel so ugly and sexless. But then the rain stopped, and the sun came out, and I started to panic at the thought of what was to become of me with no job and no money. I made my way to the next employment agency on my list. I don't know what I could have been thinking, going there with water dripping down the ends of my hair and into my eyes. Perhaps, like the beggar I had seen earlier that day, sitting in his wheelchair with the bare stumps of his amputated legs exposed, I just wanted someone to take pity on me.

My anxiety over the job search had the effect of irritating my sensitive bladder, and my first stop at every employment agency was always the bathroom, which

was usually located down a dark, ugly hallway and accessed by a key attached to a heavy block of wood.

After my return from the bathroom, I would sit with the other applicants, all of us with brown clipboards and pale-green application forms in our laps. The employment counselors—I think that’s what they called themselves—were always women, and when it was my turn I would follow the click of their high heels down the corridor to a room full of metal desks, where they would tell me that with my lack of experience I would be lucky to get whatever I was offered. There was never any mention of the opportunities for growth that had beguiled my poor, naïve mother. Those meetings always left me with the feeling that youth was something to be ashamed of, something to be disposed of as quickly as possible.

Despite everything, I put on a terrific show, and it wasn’t long before I found my first real job, which was answering letters for the readers of *Parade*, a syndicated magazine that appeared as a supplement in second-rate newspapers in towns and cities across the country.

I had my own office—there was no window and no door; it was more of an alcove than an office, but it was all mine—and, having been hired by the head of the personnel department, as far as I could see I had no boss. So I would sit in my little office writing long, heartfelt responses to the readers of the magazine. In reply to a woman who asked how the magazine got its ideas for articles, I wrote that the editors mostly got their ideas from newspapers and other magazines. Once, a reader wrote in to thank *Parade* for having run a story about a woman who had given up her career as a schoolteacher to take care of her ailing mother, because that was exactly what she had done. I wrote back and told her that although I thought it was admirable what she was doing, the story the magazine had run was mostly made up and that she shouldn’t use a fictitious magazine article to justify throwing her life away. “You have only one life,” I reminded her. “Only one life.” Sometimes I would have to go through back issues of the magazine and send copies to the readers. The recipes, which usually included canned soup manufactured by one of the magazine’s advertisers, were especially popular.

Occasionally, instead of writing letters readers would call the magazine with their questions, and the receptionist would send those calls over to me. Once I got a call from a reader interested in an article *Parade* had run about a female arm wrestler. He seemed very anxious to get in touch with the woman in the article, and when I mentioned, in the course of our conversation, that I myself happened to be a very good arm wrestler and that I had beaten many men, he shifted his focus

to me, and would continue to call me at the magazine for the duration of my stay there.

My health insurance wasn't scheduled to go into effect until three months after I started working at *Parade*, and after I had been at the job for three months, on the dot, my parents took me to see my father's urologist, who, when he came out of his office to fetch me, announced to the waiting room: "Who would have thought such a beautiful girl could have such rotten insides?" Although men were always telling me I was beautiful, I never got tired of hearing it, and that was all I heard. But the "rotten insides" part registered with my mother, and she had a big fight with my father about it in the car going home.

"What kind of a doctor would say a thing like that?" she exclaimed. My father sat quietly, gripping the steering wheel as she went on and on about what a crass idiot the doctor was. She ended by accusing my father of feeling a loyalty to his urologist that superseded his loyalty to his own daughter. It bothered me to see this weakness in my father. It was, I realized years later, the same weakness that had kept him tied to the same job for thirty-five years and allowed him to put up with my mother's endless fits of anger and abuse.

"We have to get a second opinion," my mother said. "I don't want that lout taking out Maxine's kidney."

The idea that I might end up not having the operation disappointed me because I had been kind of looking forward to having my kidney removed. I wanted to have a scar. I wanted to have physical proof that I suffered. My sister had a scar that ran in a diagonal line across her entire stomach, her appendix having burst when she was a baby. She had always been very proud of that scar, and I had always been a little jealous of it. The possibility that I might die during the operation was another thing that appealed to me. I enjoyed thinking about my funeral and imagining the eulogies and the tears.

As it turned out, the doctor we went to for a second opinion agreed with the first doctor that my rotten kidney had to go. He, too, praised my beauty, but with an altogether different approach: After telling me that it made him ache to see me dressed the way I was (in a flimsy tank top that did little to conceal my braless nipples), he informed me that I had a small urethra and that he would have to stretch it surgically every two months. He concluded by telling me that he, too, had a small urethra, even though his penis was rather large.

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When I woke up the morning after the operation, my father was sitting at my bedside, leaning his head gently on my chest, checking to make sure that my heart was still beating. “I’m OK, Daddy,” I reassured him. I felt bad to see him there, in such distress; he was the one person in the world I didn’t want to worry about me. It was very early in the morning, and he was dressed in his business suit and tie, having stopped to see me before he caught the 7:45 train to work. I was in a lot of pain, and to comfort me he told me that pain leaves no memory.

I hadn’t told Steven the name of the hospital but somehow he had figured it out and he reached me in my room the morning after my kidney was removed. It confused me to hear his voice on the other end of the phone. It was not a voice I expected to hear. I don’t think it was a voice I expected to hear ever again. It wasn’t the morphine drip that made the sound of Steven’s voice so disorienting—it was Steven himself. He felt like a stranger to me. It was as though now that I had lost my kidney, I had lost Steven, too. But he didn’t seem to notice, and he ended the conversation, as he ended all our conversations, with the proclamation that he would always love me and that soon we would be together again.

I spent two weeks recuperating at my parents’ house. My mother made me hot chocolate with whipped cream for breakfast, and I would lie in bed with her, watching old movies on TV. Those were the best two weeks I ever spent with her, and when, near the end of my convalescence, my cousin Joan called to tell me that her boyfriend’s apartment on East Thirty-Third Street would be available to sublet for three months while he was doing a medical internship in England, I didn’t want to leave my mother. Ever.

But I forced myself to leave, and I started my life as an independent young woman in my cousin’s boyfriend’s dark and horrible apartment. Except for a sprinkling of old people who refused to die, the building was primarily inhabited by young doctors. The one thing that had attracted me to the apartment was the big color TV and the expensive stereo system that my cousin’s boyfriend had set up, but when I went to claim the place, it turned out that he had locked them both away in the hall closet with two large padlocks, the kind used by store owners on the streets of the city to close up the gigantic steel gates covering their glass windows.

Steven continued to write me letters when I was living in that first ugly apartment, and then, after my cousin’s boyfriend returned from England, when I was living in a replica of it on the third floor, whose thin, pasteboard walls would let in the incessant coughing of my next-door neighbor, an old woman with skin the color of

death. The garbage chute was the only thing that ever got her out of her apartment, and whenever I saw her, she was always dressed in the same ragged bathrobe and the same dirty bedroom slippers with the same disintegrating pom-poms.

Now it's time for you to come back, Steven would tell me. I miss you. I can't live without you. Once he even enlisted the help of his mother and grandmother; they called me at work and begged me to return to Montreal. Steven's mother had left Steven and his father when Steven was a baby, and she lived with her mother in small house in Ottawa. He had taken me to visit them once. It occurred to me then that maybe Steven needed me even more than I had once thought I needed him, and I started to wish that he wouldn't love me anymore so that I could feel free to get on with what I wanted to do with my life, whatever that was.

By the time Steven's mother and grandmother called me, I had a Moroccan boyfriend, Said, who made me shave my pubic hair, decades before women shaving their pubic hair became the fashion. Said was very possessive; once, he spotted me from the street while I was writing a letter to Steven at the kitchen table near the one window in the apartment that didn't face an airshaft, and he ran up the stairs in a jealous rage and accused me of writing a letter to my old boyfriend. His extraordinary jealousy had given him the gift of second sight about such things. But the truth was he had nothing to be jealous about, because I was in fact telling Steven that he shouldn't wait for me, that the only thing I was sure of was that I didn't know who I was or what I was doing, and that I didn't think it was fair to embroil him in my confusion any longer. I was responding to his last letter in which he told me that I was very mixed up but that he still thought I was the most wonderful person in the world and that he loved me with all his heart.

Steven had visited me in New York just once—during those first three miserable months when I was subletting my cousin's boyfriend's apartment. I was so happy and so sad to see him that I couldn't manage to put in my diaphragm and had to call him into the bathroom to help me insert it with his long fingers. He had no interest in me giving him a tour of New York City—he said that ever since I had left him he couldn't even bear to watch movies that were set here. We spent most of our time in bed, and one day when we left the apartment to get groceries we came back to find the bed made, the dishes washed, and my diaphragm, which I had left lying on the bed, back in its case. It was the work of my cousin's boyfriend's mother, who would occasionally come in to check up on the apartment—perhaps

to make sure I hadn't picked the padlocks—and whenever she made one of her surprise visits, she always straightened up the place.

On the day he was leaving to fly back to Montreal, Steven walked me to work and the editor of the magazine caught us making out in front of the elevators in the lobby. I had been thinking that this would probably be the last time I would ever kiss Steven, and this inflamed my desire for him beyond all reason. Mr. Gorkin called me into his office later that afternoon to fire me. He didn't mention that he had seen me making out with a tall blond boy in the lobby. All he said was that I was overqualified for the job. That was the line all my bosses used when they found out that I was not the girl who had made such a terrific impression on them during the interview.

I would spend a lot of my time between jobs walking barefoot down the streets of Manhattan, singing torch songs to myself, taking strange men I met on subway platforms back to my apartment, and writing poems about how lonely and miserable I was, all the while being haunted by the knowledge that I was wasting my youth.

After Said, I had a series of boyfriends, each as bizarre as, or even more bizarre than, the one who had preceded him. I never mentioned any of these boyfriends of mine to my mother, but she knew about them all the same. And they knew about her. At one point or another there would always be a time when they would see me in tears on the phone with her, and then, after I had ingested my prescribed dose of venom, they would see me helplessly railing against her, recounting all the horrible things she had said to me.

She was right about all those boyfriends, except for Steven; she should have approved of him. Out of all my boyfriends—and there were so many I have forgotten some of their names—Steven was the only one who shared the vision of the life she had in mind for me. Once, for example, when he was visiting me in New York, we were watching television, and when Judy Licht, a perky newscaster, got on, he told me that that would be a great job for me. My stomach turned, because my mother loved Judy Licht and on more than one occasion she had told me that could be me if only I weren't so determined to throw away my God-given gifts.

That moment in front of the TV with Steven gave me some insight into why I could turn my back on a boy who loved me so much. The incident that clinched it for me, however, occurred after he went back to Montreal. He called to report that he had quit his job as a motorcycle mechanic and was now fixing computers for

a branch of IBM in Montreal. It was a job with “opportunities for advancement,” but that in order to get ahead he would have to go to college, so he had started attending night classes at McGill.

“Now am I good enough for you?” he asked me. My heart sank at the thought that he would think that this would make me want to come back to him, when it had precisely the opposite effect. He told me that as soon as he got his second paycheck he was going to move out of his father’s house, where he had been living since I left, and get his own apartment. He spoke with pride about a teak coffee table he had just bought and the three-piece suit he wore to work every day.

He was so proud of his new life, and happy, and the fact that he was happy on top of everything else had the effect of immediately transforming him into the kind of person I would spend a lifetime avoiding. Still, he loved me, and the idea that I could break up with someone who loved me as much as Steven did was something that would remain a mystery to me for many years.