

nonfiction

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More Pleasure for You

YOU LOVE YOUR daughter so intensely it sometimes shocks you. Equally shocking is the anger she can elicit in you: When you discover her taking black magic marker to the living room wall you've just painted, your first instinct is to scream.

Oh no no no no no, you say gently instead, trying to remain cool as she resists your attempts to wrest the pen from her grasp (she's surprisingly strong for a three-year-old), the struggle causing more indelible ink to ricochet onto the wall. Finally, you get smart and say, *Okay, honey, just one or two more marks, then Daddy takes the pen because we should save some of the ink for later . . .*

To which your daughter, feeling no compulsion to repress her instincts, replies by screaming, "I WANT ALL OF IIIIIIIIT!!!"

This is something of a mantra for her, this wanting to devour everything she's absorbed in as she learns to sort through the mad onrush of her emotions. After an ear-shredding crying jag and Daddy getting whacked in the face with a wooden ruler and respective angry marching to neutral corners, things finally die down until you leave her alone for a moment, only to find her in front of the bathroom mirror squeezing glue onto her hair as if it's frosting and she's the red-headed cupcake. At which point you repeat the whole process, breathing deeply, resisting the urge to give her an old-school spanking, calmly telling her, *That's okay, sweetie, let's use just a little more glue, and then we will . . .*

ALL OF IIIIIIIIT!!!"

It's somewhere between these moments and later, when your daughter stomps in her own poop, smearing it into a sort of de Kooning on the bathroom floor, that you decide it's time to go condom shopping.

It's been years since you've had to buy any. Because first there was the trying-to-get-pregnant sex, very fun indeed until the experience of several painful miscarriages, which you discover few people really know

how to talk about. Then, at long last, there was the joy of your wife being and staying pregnant and the arrival of your multimedia artist. Then, in turn, there was the using-up-the-last-of-the-old-rubbers sex, the not-sweating-it sex, and the actively-trying-to-get-pregnant-again sex, which was followed by an odd, building feeling of relief each month when your wife's period would arrive.

Then one day you're exhausted as your daughter gleefully foot-paints with her own excrement, and you're reminded of lines from Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, "Sunday Afternoons":

We were born between Oh Yeah
& Goddammit.

SO MAYBE THIS cozy triad of mother-father-daughter is just right and you should stop messing with the messages coming from your bodies and the great beyond. Go buy condoms.

First, you procrastinate. What's wrong with you? You've bought plenty of them before. You're not a teenager anymore who has to ask a balding pharmacist to go behind the counter to procure even one desiccated prophylactic. Perhaps appropriately, the only time you think to buy one now is when you're near the university where you work, surrounded by eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, but you avoid the drug store for fear you'll bump into one of your students who will say, "Hey, professor, what's up?! What are you . . . ? Oh."

Thus you willfully forget your errand. Your wife asks, not unkindly, *What's the holdup, what's your problem, are you going to get some or not?*

The condom is comedy and tragedy rolled into a greasy circle. In this modest package are embodied desire and denial, risk and caution, spontaneity and premeditation, fear and euphoria. It is both rakish imp and earnest health-care worker. Similar to what Shakespeare writes of drink in *Macbeth*, the condom "promotes desire and takes away the performance." It is, depending on one's point of view, a symbol of love's labors lost or a deep expression of love. Or both.

But you're not thinking about any of that after a romantic dinner one night when you've finally braved the drug store, you're thinking, *Jeez, lady, quit staring at me, it's not like I pry when you're buying feminine napkins*. There is no balding pharmacist. Instead, the display of self-service condom

offerings towers above you, twice again as wide as you are tall, each of them neatly arrayed on hangers in their little boxes, a colorful periodic table of safe sex options.

You can't decide which one to buy. Your memory of your last condom purchase has been erased by several years of parental sleep deprivation. You spend an inordinate amount of time contemplating the natural lambskin condoms. *These were good before, right? Gentler on the feminine flora, maybe?* My, aren't you a most considerate partner.

The box is so small, though. How many are in here? You check the price: three condoms for twelve bucks?! *Dang, these must be good!* You have just enough cash in your pocket; it feels like destiny.

You're worried about the line now, the embarrassment of the purchase, but you're in luck. The cashier is all alone, a bored man lost in thought, the drugstore vest slipping from one shoulder. You palm over the box of condoms to him like you're consummating a drug deal. He looks at you funny, then scans the bar code, does a double take at the price, says "Whoa! These are expensive!" and sends you packing.

You're all set. To have safe sex three times.

You return to your car to share this good news with your wife. She's frowning at the little package in your hand. "What kind did you buy?"

"Lambskin."

"*Lambskin?* What? No. Those were gross, remember?"

"They were? I thought they were gentler or something. Like . . . less abrasive?" You somehow think saying this will make it true.

"And what is this? Three condoms? We'll go through this in no time."

If you were paying attention, you'd be enthused by this announcement, but you're mostly imagining the ignominy of having to go back into the drugstore to return this purchase. You seal the deal by admitting, "Yeah, three for twelve bucks."

"Four dollars a condom?! Oh, no, I don't think so."

She's right, of course, and you're out the door, annoyed that you have to go back in, annoyed at yourself, at your boyish embarrassment. It's not like you're buying hemorrhoid cream. You go straight to your periodic table of condoms, no hemming and hawing this time. You grab a box of twelve made of reliable, basic latex and march back to the cash register, practically waving your pack of rubbers in the air for anyone who cares to see.

Only your old cashier is gone, and in his place is a young woman with a line of twelve customers, one for each of your pending fornications. Suddenly shy again, you press the two boxes of condoms against your thigh and wait for the crowd to disperse. At last, it is your turn.

You announce your intent to exchange the lambskin three for the latex twelve, and the cashier smiles warmly. It is just you and she and the store's middle-aged security guard, who stands behind you in line as he waits to buy a soda and flosses with a toothpick. This relaxes you, the smiling and the casual tooth-picking. You're an adult making a regular old exchange without any deep symbolic meaning whatsoever.

"Sure, that will be no problem," the cashier announces as she keys in numbers. When she gets a load of the price, she exclaims, "Three for twelve dollars?!"

The security guard grunts his assessment: "Mmmmph, 'spensive." He works the toothpick like it's a bone.

"What are these?" the cashier asks, eyeing the box and then crinkling her nose. "Lambskin?! Ohhh, blech!"

"That's what my wife said."

"They thinner," the security guard announces, jogging your memory with each waggle of his toothpick. You look at him, nodding, remembering.

"Oh, but they're yucky!" the cashier protests.

"Yeah," you agree. "They're a little funky. Sort of crinkly and hard to work with." All of a sudden you're a condom critic with a wealth of knowledge he's willing to share.

"More pleasure for you, though," the security guard says. The truth of this statement, fully returned from the recesses of your memory, makes you laugh out loud.

"Well, on behalf of women everywhere, I thank you," the cashier says, and you execute a small bow.

As you take the new condoms out the door, the guard tips his toothpick at you, wishing you Godspeed, and the cashier gives you another big grin at your apparent willingness to put a woman's pleasure ahead of your own, even though this may not be true.

On the way back to the car, you are feeling relieved, punchy, and yes, a little randy, too. But then the memory returns of why you've come to buy condoms in the first place, the active decision to have just one child, and you also experience melancholy, resignation, worry, and

doubt, along with a host of sociocultural pressures telling you that you are lacking in some essential capacity. All of these feelings circle as your wife looks back at you through the other side of the windshield. She wonders if you are mortified that it has taken so long inside the store; she imagines all of your worst schoolboy's fears of buying condoms have come to pass.

But what she doesn't know is that you now understand something about your daughter that up until that moment you had grasped only intellectually. As you sort through all of these conflicting emotions, wondering which one has primacy and experiencing the frustration of not knowing, you are reminded, not for the first time, of the many ways in which you and your daughter are alike. The further realization hits you, in a quieter key than your daughter's, that you don't have to make the choice between one or the other emotion, you don't have to leave any of these feelings behind. In that moment, you want exactly what your daughter wants: all of it.

