

THE SOPRANOS

Every night, it was the same old thing. Betty and I would get caught up in a frenzy of work. We both taught at Honoré de Balzac High School in Nîmes, in the South of France. I was a tenured professor of literature; she taught history and geography on annual contracts. We both dreamed of getting out of teaching. Only our escape routes differed: Betty was getting a doctorate, I had chosen Literature.

“Sweetie,” she would say, “I’ve got to work on my thesis.”

“I know, and I need to start my novel.”

“I can never get to it during the day.”

“Neither can I.”

“So how about working on them every night?”

“Great idea!”

In no time flat, we had agreed to devote all our leisure time to slaving away relentlessly at our projects. Over dinner, we’d conceive a take-no-prisoners approach. From now on, after work, we’d gobble our meals and write from 8 P.M. to 1 A.M., for an output of three pages a night.

In six months, we’d have written over 500 pages each. Even with setbacks, that was enough to reach our goals. Over dessert, we’d decided to raise a toast to our certain success. By Christmas, she’d be defending her thesis, and I would be putting the finishing touches on my book.

“When do we start?” I’d ask, popping the champagne cork.

She’d give me a worried look, “Tonight?”

“It’s 9 P.M.,” I’d answer.

“So what?”

“So we’re an hour behind schedule already.”

“So what?”

“So the first day won’t be as productive as it should be. And that’s bad for morale, let me tell you.”

We'd sip our champagne, a bit put out by this small glitch. The first step in a take-no-prisoners approach was the trickiest one. It had a psychological dimension that it would be unwise to ignore.

"What do you suggest, sweetie?" Betty would ask.

I'd take my time, weighing the pros and cons. When I had made up my mind, I let her know how I felt.

"Tonight we take it easy."

"OK."

"And tomorrow we dive right in."

"OK"

"But tomorrow for sure, Beth."

"For sure, OK."

I would give her a stern look right in the eyes, "I'm warning you, no excuses."

"No sweetie, no excuses."

"Otherwise, we might as well just give up right now."

"No sweetie, we won't let that happen."

We'd drink another toast, then we'd curl up on the couch, Betty's tiny hand nestled in mine. The screen would light up, and we'd get back to basics: HBO's *The Sopranos*. We had bought the boxed set so that we could watch the whole show straight through, one season after the other.

No more than three episodes a night, that was our hard-and-fast rule. It was out of the question to let ourselves turn into those lobotomized couch-potato creatures who live on junk food and soda guzzled in front of their television set. When the third episode ended, we would lie there, wordless, staring at the DVD menu and listening to that music looping over and over, throbbing in our ears like a siren song.

"It doesn't seem very late," I'd ventured.

“That’s true, it went really fast.”

“One of the episodes was shorter, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe we started earlier.”

“It’s strange though.”

“Do you want me to check the time?” she’d ask, heading into the kitchen to look at the clock. “Ten-fifty-five,” she’d shout out over her shoulder.

“Do you think we could watch one more?”

I would answer instinctively, without thinking about it, “OK, but just this once, I’m warning you. We can’t make a habit of this, it’s out of the question.”

“Got it, sweetie.”

“I’d rather toss the TV out the window.”

“Me too, sweetie.”

I wouldn’t be kidding. I would be dying to demolish the TV set. The instant I decided to watch a fourth episode, I was overwhelmed with a violent sense of guilt and an equally strong desire to smash the screen to smithereens. I swear to God, I was going to pound it against the edge of the table and toss the pieces out the window. That would be it: problem solved.

“I can’t go on like this,” I’d be screaming. “I’ve got a novel to write!” I stood up in a fit of rage.

“Don’t do that, Sweetie” Betty would shout, panic-stricken, from the kitchen. “We’ve haven’t seen the end of the story yet!”

Her shriek would snap me out of it, and bring me back to normal. It’s true, I didn’t live alone. I had to think of Betty’s feelings too. I shouldn’t be selfish.

“OK,” I’d say, trying to calm down. “OK.”

I’d take a deep breath and sit back down.

“I guess it’s OK for tonight,” I’d mutter.

I’d grab the remote, grumbling to myself. We’d see who’s the boss

around here. The damn TV wasn't going to keep me from becoming a great writer. I'd let the opening credits roll. The mobster was driving through the streets of New York, smoking a fat cigar. I adored that bit. The music was amazing. It made you want to fly to the States that very minute.

“So do we have any more chocolate?” I'd shout towards the kitchen, making a megaphone with my hands.

Betty would dash in with a bar of chocolate before the next episode started. We'd nibble it, snuggling on the couch while Tony Soprano tried to seduce his shrink. What a show, I'd be thinking. The guy who wrote it must not have watched TV every night.

When the fourth episode was over, we'd peek at the beginning of the fifth, just to find out what was going to happen. What usually happened was that we'd wind up watching the whole thing, meaning that we never got to bed before 1 A.M. The lack of sleep didn't make launching our take-no-prisoners approach any easier.

To tell you truth, I mostly regretted it when I woke up the next day. On the cusp of a new tunnel of work, I would rather have been a famous writer than a French teacher trying to explain Sophocles' plays to teens backlit by their cell phones. At that point, I'd regret it. But at night, it was different. At night, I couldn't give a damn.

There was nothing like three or four hours of *The Sopranos* to wash away the woes of the day.

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A WOOD LOUSE IN MY EYE

I woke up with a wood louse in my eye. The right one. The annoyance was instantaneous, as soon as I opened my eyes. I was so startled, I

jerked right up in bed. It must have been around 7 A.M. The bedroom was emerging slowly from the darkness. Everything was in its place. Everything, that is, except for an oval shape a few millimeters in diameter that was wiggling around everywhere I looked.

I rubbed my eye. It didn't go away. I turned towards Betty, who was lying next to me. I hated to wake her up. As usual, we had gone to bed late, she needed her beauty sleep.

Personally, I'm used to starting the day looking like World War II. In the morning, I need a Marshall Plan to raise my rubble and reinstate civilization. Still, I hate to see Betty's pretty face spoiled by dark circles under her eyes. So I decided not to shake her shoulder and inform her about my problem.

In the bathroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. I tugged at my eyelids without being able to see anything. There was no pain or even itching or tickling sensation. But the spot was still there, within my field of vision. I could see it flying around every time I blinked, then drift slowly over to one side or the other.

I eventually realized it was some kind of insect. It had a dark-gray carapace with translucent edges and very thin legs. The overall shape stayed a bit blurry; it was impossible for me to work out the details. It suddenly hit me that if I couldn't see it on the *surface* of my eye, then maybe that meant it has burrowed *inside my eye*. That was a terrifying thought. I pounced on the faucet and let cataracts of water wash over my pupils. But it didn't change anything. The bug seemed to have set up housekeeping, and to be like its new home.

I stared at myself, feeling dazed: my face was streaming, my eyes red. The wood louse couldn't have cared less as it floated over my forehead, cheeks, eyebrows and more.

The clock was ticking, and I was going to be late to my first class. I made myself coffee and sucked it down. I left a note for Betty, and charged down the stairs of the building four by four.

“Beth,” I wrote, “I have some big news: we’re going to adopt. I’ve had a wood louse in my eye since I woke up this morning.”

Once I was in the classroom, the concentration required to teach French to 40 Facebook and Twitter account holders distracted me from my vision issues. I got used to it the way you get used to ringing in your ears, eyeglass frames, or braces. So I had a wood louse in my eye: big deal. A lousy little wood louse, just forget about it. Except that a wood louse in your eye makes it hard for you to forget about it.

As soon as my classes were done, the pesky thing grabbed my attention again. First I saw it swimming between the rows of cars in the parking lot. Then it started skating across the windshield while I was driving. Walking down the street, it landed on women’s butts and busts. Whatever I laid eyes on, the bug was all over them too.

“What’s the business about a wood louse in your eye?” Betty asked me as soon as I got home.

She had sent me several messages about it during the day, but I had eluded the question.

“It’s nothing, nothing,” I went.

“I didn’t understand a word of your message.”

“That makes sense, because there’s nothing to understand.”

“Then why did you write it, Sweetie?”

“Oh, it was just a joke.”

She gave me a look. In turn, I was staring at the wood louse in a way that would have meant sayonara, if looks could kill. But Betty couldn’t know that.

“Sometimes I don’t really get your jokes, Sweetie.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t always either, Beth.”

“Especially not the wood louse.”

“A record low, I must admit.”

The wood louse was taunting me. It was making big loop-de-loops, like an aviator in a WWI biplane. When you got right down to it, I didn't really want to tell Betty that I had a stowaway any more.

Because I know my Betty.

After an amateur eye exam by the weak light in the kitchen, she'd be off and running for an hour of theories about the reasons for my failing. The cold, the heating, dust in my eye, fatigue, poor eating habits: she'd share her 2 cents worth about everything. And I knew ahead of time that I wouldn't appreciate it, because I didn't like the idea of having a failing. From failing to failure was just one little syllable, and I refused to write that particular one.

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“What we need,” I went on, “is a change of scenery.”

“You think so?” she asked listlessly.

“Definitely. We need to build something together.”

“You think so?”

“We need to move.”

She turned towards me, “Now you want us to go live in the suburbs?”

“Never! You *can't* be serious!”

“Well then, what are you suggesting?”

“I'm suggesting that we go back to nature. I'm suggesting that we go live in the country with books, records, flowers and everything that can be saved. I'm suggesting that we flee, get the hell out of here, take French leave and hole up somewhere.”

I saw her features light up. She snuggled up against me. I had found the words to shake off her depression.

Life in the country, what a great idea. I wasn't such a dimwit after all. Nor such a boor. I knew Betty like the palm of my hand. And I was able not to be selfish, when I wanted to, and to put her first.

Silence fell once again. Images flashed through my mind. Newspaper

headlines: DON DECHINE FLEES FAME FOR THE SAKE OF ART — DON DECHINE MOVES TO THE COUNTRY TO WRITE HIS NEXT MASTERPIECE — DON DECHINE: THE GENIUS NEEDS ROOM TO THINK

A few minutes later, I heard Betty's deep, steady breathing. She was asleep. I carried her into our bedroom. Once I'd laid her on bed, her fragility and grace were even more moving to me. I took her shoes off, stroked her ankles and left gentle kisses on her dainty white feet.

REAL-ESTATE LISTINGS

The next day, Betty started searching. She scanned all the real-estate listings on line. By dinner time, she was effervescent. As for me, I was chewing my mac and cheese and having trouble keeping up with what she was saying. Her voice was barely getting through, muffled by the fog of my thoughts. Coming back from school, I had run into Mr. Morteza on the stairs. He had told me about the work he planned to have done on the building. It had put me in a bad mood.

"Take a look at this one," she went.

She had turned on her laptop and was scrolling through the listings with her left hand, while wielding a fork with her right. Every place she saw seemed perfect to her, she could already see us living there. I raised my eyes to each new page in bad grace, dropping them right back down to my plate.

"Too far," I went. "Too close."

"Too big." "Too small." She kept on presenting them, unperturbed.

It's good practice, I thought. Excellent preparation for defending her thesis. The idea filled me with gentle affection for myself. As overwhelmed as I was, I was self-sacrificing and still worried about her.

"Too ugly," I went. "Too nice." "Too flashy." "Too expensive."

There were over 200 ads in the region. I have to admit, she'd done a good job of paring them down. She had only kept 14 of them. But she'd done it indiscriminately. Impulsively. That was so like Betty. Well-meaning, but impulsive, irrational. Unable of weighing the pros and cons, the good and the bad, and of looking for a balanced solution.

In a way, we suited each other perfectly. I was cool, calm and collected, and had a Cartesian mind. I applied an irrefutable, quasi-mathematical method. I like it or I don't, those were my only criteria. No room for subjectivity. I like it or I don't, it came out all by itself. I justified it afterwards. The human element was completely eliminated from my reasoning.

"Too flat," I went. "Too steep." "Not enough land." "Too much land." She listened to me patiently, but after a while, she'd had enough.

"Sweetie, make up your mind!"

"What do you mean?"

"First, you say 'Not enough land'..."

"Well, sure. How are we going to go back to nature if we can't have some fruit trees, grow a few vegetables, and adopt two or three hens?"

"Fine, but the next one, you say, 'Too much land.'"

"Well, think about it! How am I supposed to stay on top of all that? An orchard, a vegetable garden, a chicken coop! Are you trying to turn me into a farmer?"

She acknowledged that. I had a masterpiece to write. Betty was young and still had a lot to learn. I scrutinized her kitten-that-fell-from-the-basket face. She looked like she was willing to learn, so I would show her.

"We should have defined our criteria first," I went.

"And looked for the house afterwards?"

"Exactly."

"That's so Cartesian, Don."

"The only valid method I know, Sweetie."

We cleared the table, got out some paper and pencils and set to work. After an hour, we had established the criteria of our ideal house.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” I went.

“It’s true, that really wasn’t very hard,” Betty said.

“Not at all! So how many listings are left?”

“Just two, Sweetie.”

“OK, let’s see the first one.”

Her dainty little hands skittered over the keyboard. “Don’t show me the photo, it clouds one’s judgment.

She started reading the description, “This stand-alone 1600 sq. ft; country home has spacious rooms and 2.5-acres of land. Two bedrooms, a study, a large living room, eat-in kitchen, two full baths, a veranda and a basement. Wine cellar, spring, orchard, barn. Off-grid thanks to solar panels. Could use a fresh coat of paint.”

“It sounds perfect,” I went. “Exactly what we need.”

Betty puffed up with pride. I was pretty pleased too.

“You see,” I told her. “With my method, it goes faster.”

“But I’m still the one who found it,” she said.

“Yes, but using my method, Darling.”

“If I hadn’t pre-selected it, would we be discussing it?”

“Of course not, that’s a silly question!”

“So then I’m the one who found it, Don.”

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RUTHLESS BUSINESSMAN

The real-estate agent was rather odd looking. In his late fifties, with graying temples, he dressed like a Sicilian mobster. But he had slanted eyes and his name was Yakita Yamazaki. He wore his hair slicked back, a dark suit and white shirt open to a hairy chest. Where did all that hair

come from? I thought the Japanese were smooth-skinned. When he shook our hands, I caught a glimpse of his signet ring, black onyx in a solid-gold setting.

He looked like an Asian Tony Soprano. The intensity of his gaze seemed to be making it clear that you'd better understand him implicitly if you didn't want to wind up taking a ride through the woods in the trunk of his car. I liked him right away.

"Pleased to meet you," he went. "Pleased, Mr. Dechine."

He had Marlon Brando's low, rasping voice from *The Godfather*. And his meticulous courteousness, too.

"Please come in." "Would you care for a cup of coffee? A cigar?" "Thank you for the honor of your business." We were meeting him at the agency. He'd warned us that the house we wanted to see was about 15 miles away.

"Why don't I drive you?" he suggested. "It's in the woods, in the middle of nowhere."

Betty shot me an alarmed look. No need to read her eyes to understand what it meant. 'Oh my God, Don! He's going to put us in the trunk! You know what that means!' I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. There was no reason to panic. We didn't know anything compromising about him, nor did we owe him money. There was no reason for us to ride in the trunk.

In the street, we followed him to his car. A guy stopped us on the way. Greasy hair, summer shirt, snide look on his face. They hugged each other in greeting, slapping each other on the back and exchanging a few sibylline words. It was all getting more exciting by the minute.

Betty tugged at my sleeve. "Sweetie, this is making me nervous," she whispered.

"There's nothing to worry about, darling, just relax."

"You're sure there's nothing fishy about this guy?"

“100%, darling. Everything’s fine.
“I’d swear he’s in the mafia.”

I stared at her, stunned. “Beth,” I managed to stammer out, “he’s a real-estate agent! Who do you think you’re dealing with?” She stared at me like I’d just given her stunning news. Some days her naivety amazed me. Yakita Yamazaki ushered us into his Mercedes, which reeked of tobacco. During the ride, he kept the conversational ball rolling. So we liked old houses and country living? His phone rang. He took the call and kept driving. He had a slight Sicilian accent. I was on cloud nine.

“Here we are,” he went, as he yanked on the parking brake. We were in the middle of the woods. The house rose before us in a green gap in the woods. The real-estate agent gave us the keys and strode across the clearing to make a phone call. We visited the place on our own.

It was a converted barn, cozy and in great shape. The hook-up to the electric grid was the only concession to the outside world. A natural spring provided water. A fireplace insert took care of the heating. As we went from room to room, Betty’s excitement grew. We’ll put our bedroom there, the study there, the guest room there. What do you think, sweetie, in the living room, should the couch be facing this way or that?

“Hold on, Beth.” “Let’s not get carried away, Beth.” “You’re forgetting something, Beth.” She was forgetting the structural checks. An essential element of any real-estate purchase. I didn’t blame her. She couldn’t know, she’d never done anything like this before. I hadn’t either, for that matter, but I had a fertile imagination. I went from room to room, a worried crease in my forehead, examining shutters, sounding walls, checking out the double-glazing on windows.

Outside, I scratched at the mortar on the front wall. Betty described the state of the roof to me. I studied the gutters, tested how sturdy the cistern was. Betty scrutinized our surroundings. No high-voltage lines in the sky, no relay antennas on the horizon. I cocked an ear. No engine noises. A vegetable patch, an orchard, a spring, acres of woodland. I stroked my chin. Betty couldn’t hold on any longer.

“So, sweetie?” she went. “So, what do you think?” “So?”

I refused to deliver a verdict. I had a theory about how to handle a real-estate transaction.

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Rule Number 1: NEVER LET YOUR FEELINGS SHOW IN FRONT OF THE REAL-ESTATE AGENT. Better yet: look blasé, displeased. Furious, even. Seem disgusted with what you’ve just seen. Ready to punch him in the face. Don’t hold out the slightest hope. Abandon him to bottomless despair. Make him wonder if he’s cut out for this line of work. Then call him back a week later, and that’s when you bludgeon him with your offer. Twenty-thousand euros less than the asking price. Otherwise, for you, it’s ciao, and for him, suicide.

Even I was impressed. What a cold, calculating mind I possessed. What *sang-froid!* I was a ruthless businessman. But Betty might compromise my strategy with her spontaneity. The least smile, a show of enthusiasm, a, “So, sweetie?” and the real-estate agent would know what are intentions were. Conclusion: KEEP BETTY OUT OF IT. It was key to the strategy.

“I don’t know, Beth,” I went. “We’ll have to think about it.”

Yakita Yamazaki was strolling nonchalantly back towards us, his hands jammed into his pockets.

“So, what do you think?” he asked?

“This house is amazing,” I shot back. I felt Betty shudder. I didn’t glance her way.

Never let your feelings show. A monument. A monument to indifference.

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THE PERFECT PLACE

We found a house ten days later. It wasn't a granch. It wasn't our dream house. But it was far from the city, way out in the country. It was good enough for us, good enough to get us out of town and away from all the Mr. Mortezes on the planet. We would have done anything to get way, breathe, put as much distance as possible between those people and us.

Betty's the one who found the listing. It was noon on a Saturday. I was sitting on the couch, with empty hands and empty eyes. An empty bottle was standing on an empty table. I was down way past the dumps.

Sitting next to me, Beth's fingers were beating time on the keyboard of her laptop.

"I think I've got one, look."

She showed me a picture. I could make out a white box in the woods, like a giant sugar cube laid out amidst the trees to lure trolls. Recent construction, no soul, nothing traditional, nothing. I wasn't taking the bait.

"Wonderful," I said. "Exactly what we need."

I have no idea why I said that. It was just one more mystery in my life as Mr. Morteze's neighbor. In my insolvable-problem-strewn existence as a co-op owner.

Betty dashed to the phone to call the agency.

"You're wasting your time, Beth. It's Saturday today."

But against all expectations, the real-estate agent answered his phone. He was available for a visit right away. All that was left for us to do was to head off in search of a house that didn't appeal to me at all.

It was about 20 miles away.

"You're sure it's not too far for you?" I asked Betty once we were in the car. "You're not worried about driving on these country roads?"

Betty drove with one hand on the gear stick. We sped from steep hill to sharp turn. She was constantly shifting gears, accelerating. The engine roared, the car leapt forward.

“I’m only asking for your sake,” I added, hanging onto the door for dear life.

The steering wheel was spinning like a top between her hands. Braced against my seat, I was slamming on an imaginary brake with both feet. We got out of the car near a little chapel in the countryside, where the agent was waiting for us. The sun was shining. A cold wind was making the clouds shiver. Betty was rosy-cheeked; I was drenched in sweat.

The path to the house went through a grove of oak trees. The house was set in the midst of what used to be a terraced vineyard, but had now been replanted with trees. A stream ran along the edge of the land. Seen from the outside, the building was massive – designed without the slightest imagination. A megalith dropped from the sky.

“At least it got us out of the house,” I mumbled, thinking about how I could negotiate driving on the way back.

But the minute we got inside, I stopped thinking about the trip back. Once inside, going back was no longer on the agenda. The place was huge, light-filled, airy. The windows overlooked lush greenery, the house felt like it was perched amongst the trees. The sky stroked its blue pillow case like a mother’s hand tucking you in to sleep. A sense of harmony, equilibrium and power radiated from it.

I looked at Betty. Betty looked at me. It was the perfect place. The perfect place to write a best-selling book and to make a radical change in our lives. Here we would be protected, sheltered from the sound and fury of the world (and of Mr. MorteZ).