

Lines of Communication

The marital therapist said they need to establish new lines of communication, so Carla started making Edgar rebus puzzles. The first one was easy:



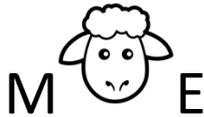
“I see you?” Edgar said at the breakfast table before he left for campus. She’d made him oats, steel-cut. He said his answer after having studied the rebus puzzle for a very long time.

“Yes!” she said. “I see you, Edgar.”

“Thank you,” Edgar said.

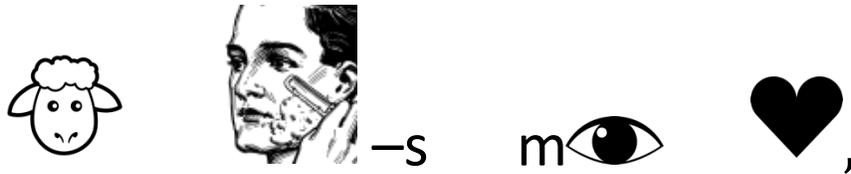
I see you was incorrect, but Carla didn’t have the heart. The answer was “I am inside of you” or “I am a part of you.” She would have accepted either.

She’d planned to follow it with the inverse—



which now she’d have to forgo. It was okay to forgo, she told herself. Marriage was an improvisation; it was making and remaking.

The next one, a sentence:





Edgar studied the rebus over dinner. Carla had made chicken tikka masala, her go-to from their trip to southern India years earlier. This replaced her gazpacho, her previous go-to from their trip to Portugal years even earlier.

“Canned tomatoes?” Edgar said, pressing the back of his fork into the chicken.

She had wanted to tell him ‘Ewe r knot careful’ but she couldn’t come up with a rebus for careful. *Nice* was close enough, and also true.

“We shave the sheep with a seeing heart butt?” he said after a long time. He was joking, and at his own expense, which was unusual for Edgar. His joking was usually about everyone else.

Edgar wasn’t good at the rebus puzzles. Carla liked this about Edgar. Edgar was a professor of history. He was the leading scholar of pre-industrial Hungary in the world. Edgar knew more about pre-industrial Hungary than all the people of Hungary.

When the marital therapist checked in about the new lines of communication, Carla said, “Great!” She loved coming up with the rebuses. They made her brave. She wished the marital therapist had suggested this years earlier, though they hadn’t had a marital therapist years earlier, the marital therapist only coming into play when the Ph.D. student in pre-industrial Hungary

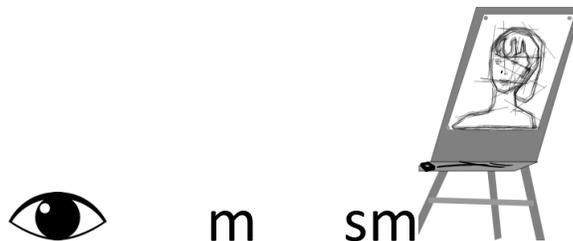
(they existed? They existed!) sent the text in the middle of the night, Edgar deaf to it from behind his C-PAP machine, Carla the one to see the three words.

“Edgar?” the marital therapist said now. The marital therapist often had to say Edgar’s name for Edgar to say.

“I don’t,” Edgar said. Edgar looked out the window. Carla turned to look. It was only a tree.

On their trip to Portugal, the boys had been so little, and Carla hadn’t spoken Spanish (still didn’t). So much of the vacation had been wrangling and herding and comforting and coaxing while only having a half sense of what was happening around her, a half sense of the beautiful churches she was supposed to be admiring, a half sense of the cobblestones that Edgar kept remarking upon, though not for the fact that the boys kept tripping and scraping their knees and the pads of their palms, Edgar with the history of cobblestone in southern Europe, it’s really a very interesting story.

One morning over scrambled egg whites (had to watch Edgar’s high cholesterol), she handed him:



and he knit his brow and shrugged and it occurred to her that maybe he wasn't bad at rebuses. Maybe he wasn't trying. That night on his pillow she wrote him:



He looked before giving a *ffh* and moving it off the pillow like one might an interloping katydid or a hotel dinner mint, not roughly, but clearing the way for the business of a pillow. He was not trying. It had been a test, the easiest rebus yet. Edgar was many things, but not a bully. Had he given it more than half a glance, he would have protested, Edgar exquisitely attuned to injustice toward himself. Instead, he kissed Carla on the corner of her lip and strapped himself into his C-PAP.

At the restaurant in Portugal—she remembered it exactly, tiny, dark walls, sconces, a handsome waiter with dark skin and dark hair—it was the second to last night, the boys exactly the right amount of tired and at the same time, sedate in their chairs, an event as rare and notable as an eclipse, the end of the trip near enough for Carla to be buoyed from her exhaustion and disappointment and unshakeable sense that everything was impossible and she was getting it all wrong. When the handsome waiter set down the soup, and she tasted her first taste, the gazpacho moved her in ways she didn't know she could be moved by soup. She'd never had anything like it: cold, sharp, dense, spicy, smooth. It had filled her.

Carla stopped saying anything except the rebuses to see if Edgar noticed. At breakfast:



Two days later, before bed:



The marital therapist checked in. Carla let Edgar go first. Edgar shrugged. “I don’t—”

“You don’t what?” the marital therapist asked.

Edgar shrugged.

“I said lettuce fuck and he ignored me,” Carla said.

“What?” Edgar said. “What are you—?”

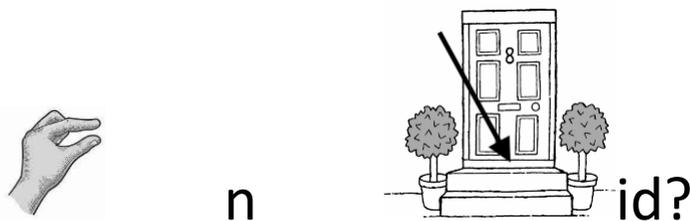
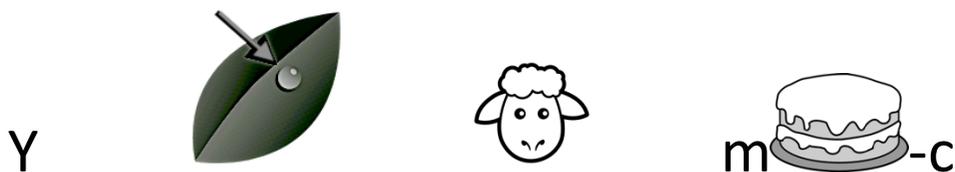
“What disinterests you about making love to Carla?” the marital therapist asked Edgar.

“She never said!” Edgar said, exquisitely attuned. “She never!”

There’d been a crystalline moment in Portugal, Carla nearly finished with the gazpacho but not quite, she slowing to savor the last of it, even then knowing to slow down for the good things when they came, and she took in her husband and her boys, in the half-lit tableau of the restaurant, half a world away from home, and thought: all this for a guileless gal from Sioux Falls, who’d gone bananas for her Intro to World History TA, he so handsome and sophisticated, she so fat with his first baby before she could see the other side of sophomore year. What she felt was lucky and grateful and full.

She made him his goulash for dinner, his favorite. Edgar pronounced it gulyás, always, so many gulyáses over so many years. “Good,” he proclaimed (Gulyás, if it hit Edgar at the right moment, made him expansive) “girl.”

Tonight she had a single question.



“The sheep,” Edgar said. “Always with the sheep. Good to see we’re letting it eat cake now. And peas. And allowing it an eel.”

She'd tried with gazpacho over a number of years, well past when she understood gazpacho to be exotic or even particularly novel. For years, the issue was too much garlic and then not enough garlic, followed by a period of "vinegar" and "more vinegar" until finally, one night Edgar said "Uch," at a first, vinegary spoonful. The boys had found that funny, the noise and their father's screwed-up face. They weren't so young by then, old enough to know better, but excited utterances were not like their father, displays of emotion either. Carla watched Edgar, seeing his dawning surprise. He hadn't meant to clown, but his face bloomed at the boys' reaction, tickled and pleased with himself, as if realizing for the first time these were not shrunken men at the table, but children, and his. He screwed his face even screwier. "Uch!" he said loudly. "This is terrible soup!" and the three of them laughed.

Carla had a rebus in her head for a long time. First, it was:



which she knew was too obscure for Edgar—or anyone. It didn't matter. It was a secret to herself.

Eventually, it turned into:



which Edgar could understand, were he willing. She pictured Edgar finding the rebus on the table and waiting for his breakfast and wondering what was taking so long, getting up from the

table and backtracking to the bedroom to be sure she wasn't still there, hidden beneath the blankets, Edgar calling her name, peeking in half-open bathroom doors. "Carla!" he would call, a scratch to his voice, his throat always dried out in the morning from the C-PAP. She pictured Edgar returning to the table, flummoxed, picking up the paper for the first time, really studying it.

She pictured and pictured this for so long, she thought she would keep picturing it after. She thought it would become the crystalline moment of her next era, since she had no way of knowing the next era would be taken up by entirely new things—a zing of chili in her dark chocolate, a Pomeranian with an incontinence problem but such a sweet face, a dwarf bonsai she knew to keep humid from the very detailed instructions, so she spritzed and spritzed it dutifully and happily, several times a day.