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Kenneth Bernard

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Lil Doesn't Ask A Question

ONE OF THE disconcerting things in life is that if you ask, you often get answers. For example, "How are you?" "Terrible." Or "What are you doing Thanksgiving?" "Nothing." Or "Do you like it?" "No." Often such questions and answers are followed by momentary silence, as if one is saying, "But that is not what I wanted at all." And everything after that is false. Nothing can be retrieved. The most frequent exchange, in one way or another, is "Do you love me?" or, after some indefinable point in a relationship, "Do you *still* love me?" All of these questions are risks. They court pain, bother, or boredom.

One couple, deeply sensitive to the pauses and the wrong or false responses, has worked out a stylish system. When he, say, asks, "Do you love me, Lil?" *she* might answer, "Like a stuffed rat." On the face of it, not too appetizing. But how can you be sure? In its very outrage it harbors many possibilities, including "I love you madly." If Lil, who is nothing if not svelte, asks, "How do you like it?" *he* might answer, "Like a barrel with lace." If she is feeling playful, she might then ask, "Do you really think so, David?" As he, once, three days later, asked, "What kind of rat?" At that point, pause is all right. The dangerous moment has been passed; metaphor is all. "Spotchy," she says, "a bit wobbly on its feet, and cross-eyed." That particular exchange leads to a bit of bedroom horseplay which ends well for all.

But surely there are moments when even cleverness and fear are thwarted. What does Lil say when Dave asks her, "What did the doctor say?"—"I probably have a grotesque green cancer?" David's next line is rather important. If he carries on as usual with something like "Cucumber green?" Lil might burst into tears and they will have some very difficult moments. If he says, "Lil, are you *serious*?" she might let out all her raw fear in anger because he is not playing the game. More difficult moments. This situation has many variations. Add children, for example. There is, of course, the possibility of silence. Lil *says* nothing, and Dave *asks* nothing. Lil dies, and Dave buries her. Not really so good. Plain talk, no games, is another possibility. But who could bear it these days? Certainly not Lil and Dave alone. But who else is there? Dave and Lil could *not* marry each other and play games alone. That would eliminate most awkward occasions. Or Dave and Lil could kill themselves, a radical but sure way out.

Dave and Lil are at the moment young and healthy. They have no children. They are handsome, educated, and well employed. Somewhere, far in back of their minds, they know, for example, that people die, that chance is a silent partner to every life, that total *control* is impossible. They know

about groping in the dark for a hand. Just the other day Lil visited the dentist and Dave asked, "What did he find?" "I have a weird fungus," she answers. With his "special" look, Dave asks, "Is it contagious?" Lil blushes. And this becomes another one of their happy occasions. But sometime later, spent, Dave is staring up at the ceiling with certain thoughts. Lil sees him staring at the ceiling. She says nothing.

The first title for this story was "Dave and Lil and Life." The second was "Dave and Lil Hold Hands." The third was the one I have.