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## THE LIVER SPEAKS

**T**HE LIVER CANNOT LIE. It cannot cover up or make excuses. It cannot charm, and it cannot love. It can only work or not work. When the woman has abused it for too many years, it tells. Her skin turns yellow.

Her husband watches her change shades and says nothing. It's their son, the one who lives nearby, who makes a scene, who says, "We are going to the emergency room now. This is serious." Eventually, the liver always makes itself heard.

The doctors discuss the liver. They test it. The liver will either fail or regenerate. It's that simple. The husband listens, his mouth agape. For years, he has ignored the liver.

The son calls the other son and daughter, who live in the Midwest and the Southwest. "Her liver," he says, and they both sigh, unsurprised. "Obviously," the son says, "she's not a candidate for a transplant." Each child lets his statement hang in the air and take shape.

For days, they call each other. The father will only talk to the nearby son, who must relay the information to the others. Will the liver fail? No, it is clear now that the liver will regenerate. If.

"Well," the daughter says, "At least now it's out in the open." They find many ways to say the same thing. Each time they say it, it sounds true. The liver has become one of them: the one who dared to speak.

Both children fly to see the woman. She is a much lighter yellow now, the son who lives nearby tells them. The father can't see it. They swarm around her and she takes their hands. They inquire after the liver. They want to know numbers and levels. They trust the liver more than they trust her.

The phrase they cannot stop saying is: lifestyle change.

It's a question.

They have grown so used to praising the liver that they do it in front of her. "Now we can finally talk about all this," the daughter says, and the sons agree.

The woman gets the feeling that they would like to slap the liver on its back and shake its hand. Or even buy it a beer, if circumstances were different.

When the woman was a child, she loved liverwurst until she understood what it was. Then she refused to eat it. Now she would like some, because she remembers the dark, metallic taste of it, the soft, spongy texture. And it would be informative, a way to get to know the liver on her own terms. She is jealous of the familiar relationship her children have developed with it. But then, they have never hurt the liver, and it has never betrayed them.

"Do you think you could get me some liverwurst?" she asks.

They all turn to stare. The husband, unshaven, looks at her with blood-shot eyes. It's the first thing she's requested since the liver told.

One of the sons smiles. The daughter begins to laugh, and both sons join in. Their father stares. Their mother meets his gaze.

The husband looks down. His shoulders rise once, twice, in quick succession, but he hides his face. The children's laughter, which was nervous to begin with, winds down. They seem ashamed.

The husband is crying because there is nothing funny about twenty years of knowing that your wife is killing herself. There is nothing funny about not only failing to mention it to her, but also pouring her a drink and one for yourself while you're at it, because you are too cowardly to make a scene. He knows her liver can't tell on him, but he also knows that his might. It can't be trusted.

The room is silent except for the heart monitor. One of the sons says, "We'll get you some liverwurst. It will be good for your iron levels."

Their mother smiles and nods, and all the children leave in search of liverwurst. Their father shifts in his chair, but cannot seem to raise his head.