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The Philosopher's Wife

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So, Kant's talking about this empirical realism thing, right? Well, he makes a point of combining that with transcendental idealism using this new thing he came up with called, um, the transcendental unity of apperception. Pretty cool, huh?"

Oh, no, I think as we step into the grocery store, here we go. In case you couldn't figure it out from all that highbrow mumbo-jumbo, my husband is a philosophy major. Yep, that's right—not only does he read Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saint Augustine, and Husserl, but he enjoys reading them. And, lucky for me, he loves to talk about them too—constantly, in fact. He calls it pontificating. I call it intellectual diarrhea. Fortunately, I learned early on in our relationship that if I nod my head about every fourth sentence, add an occasional "uh-huh" when his verbal stream slows to a trickle, he doesn't even notice I'm not listening.

This is the technique I immediately employ after hearing the phrase "empirical realism," leaving his words to brush over my shoulder and float down the salad dressing aisle, where hopefully Paul Newman is more interested than I am. With that taken care of I'm left to focus on something much more important—where my grocery list ended up. As my hand wanders blindly around my purse, brushing against keys, melted chapstick, some still juicy a.b.c. gum, and a nail file, I wonder how Mary Poppins ever found anything in that bottomless carpet bag of hers. After examining three
or four different crumpled sheets of paper, I look up at Lane to give him the intermittent head nod and notice a small white triangle poking out of his breast pocket.

“Earth to Lane,” I say, yanking the grocery list from his pocket. “I’ve been looking for that for the past five minutes. Look, Hon, I have a ton to do tonight and I really just want to get through this. Do you think you could focus for just a few minutes?”

He looks at me, startled. “Oops, sorry about that,” he says, smiling sheepishly. “It’s just that I was still thinking about Kant and the whole empirical realism thing. The guy had some great ideas. Every time I go to that class I end up thinking about it for hours afterwards.”

I push a cart towards him.

“Well, actually,” he continues, absentmindedly fingering the handle of the cart, “that’s not entirely true. There was that day that Dr. Pope dressed up as a woman to demonstrate Kant’s belief about the discrepancy between appearance and reality. I can honestly say I’ve tried as hard as possible to never think about that class period again. Talk about a terrifying experience.”

“I know, I know. ‘Spandex is a privilege, not a right,’” I recite, rolling my eyes and giving him a gentle push in an attempt to establish some sort of forward momentum.

“Exactly,” he says as he begins walking toward the produce section. “And that goes for everyone,” he adds, eyeing a portly woman clad in biker shorts at the deli counter. I giggle, in spite of myself, and place my arm through his.

“I suddenly feel inspired to knock sausage from our list,” I whisper. “I second that motion,” he replies.

We continue toward the produce section and I double check the list as we go.

“Do you remember what we needed canned artichoke hearts for?” I ask.

Lane, however, is busy examining a green bean and doesn’t respond.

I repeat the question, louder this time. Still no response. The corner of my list begins to crinkle as the pressure between my thumb and forefinger increases.

“What is it this time?” I ask, folding my arms tightly against my chest. “The metaphysical qualities of linoleum?”
Lane looks up at me startled, dropping the green bean. "Oh, sorry," he says, grinning. "Actually, I was thinking about how all the ancient philosophers used to do brain push-ups by going around trying to find the essence of stuff. It wouldn't be a bad thing to try. So, what's the essence of a green bean?"

For a moment I wonder if black stretch pants, a turtleneck, and a beret wouldn't suit my husband better than the loose jeans, the t-shirt, and the baseball cap he's currently sporting. I also wonder if maybe he should be at Berkeley instead of UCLA. I mean, did he just ask me about the essence of a green bean?

"It's green. It's a bean. There's not much else to it. Let's get on with our shopping," I say, pulling him away from the produce and towards the meat section, hoping he'll feel less inspired by shrink-wrapped fish with eyes still intact.

"C'mon Brooke, there's a lot more to it than that," he says, refusing to follow my lead in the direction of the fish. "Socrates set up a whole method for determining the essence of an object. I'll explain it to you, and you can try it."

"Don't bother," I say, cutting him off. "I told you, I don't have time for stuff like this today. I have a ten page paper to write tonight. I just need to get the shopping done and get home. So do me a big favor and grab some of those beans you're so fascinated with and some milk, and meet me up front," I say, shoving a plastic veggie sack into his hands.

"Sorry," Lane responds, his arms dropping to his side. "I thought you liked talking about stuff like that."

"Yeah, well right now I have more important things to worry about," I retort. "And, all this theoretical bull doesn't get us much of anywhere."

Lane gives me a long, silent stare, then turns and begins slowly placing beans into the bag I gave him. Feeling guilty, I reach out to put my hand on his shoulder, but he steps forward, avoiding my touch. I quickly jerk my hand back.

I don't have time for this, I think as I grab the cart and head for the canned goods. It's his fault anyway, I add, bumping a tomato soup display as I round a corner.

Fortunately, I arrive at the front of the store in a much better mood having been able to finish without interruption and place a neat check next to each of the items on my list. Lane, who beat me there,
avoids eye contact and starts placing our items by the register. I walk up without a greeting and busy myself with reading the magazine headlines around us.

“That’ll be $43.37,” the cashier informs us. Lane hands him our card. I start loading the groceries into the cart.

“Um . . . .,” the cashier begins after a moment, “Sir, I can’t take this card. It keeps coming up as ‘insufficient funds’”

My face feels warm and I give Lane a questioning look. He shrugs and asks the cashier to run the card again.

DECLINED.

I notice the man behind us in line rolling his eyes. The woman behind him is giving us an appraising look as if to determine whether we’re poverty stricken or just plain stupid. I quickly turn my gaze to the parking lot, trying to avoid their stares.

Lane, however, is unfazed. “Maybe could you try it one more time?” he asks. I groan inwardly.

DECLINED.

“I’m sorry, sir. We can hold your groceries at customer service for an hour or so if you want,” he says, handing the card back to Lane.

I grab Lane’s arm and give it a violent tug, barely giving him a chance to decline the cashier’s offer before dragging him out of the store.

“Lane, why isn’t there any money in our account?” I ask as soon as we reach the car and are safely out of the hearing range of our fellow shoppers.

“I have no idea, Brooke. I got paid four days ago. I told you we should switch banks. This one keeps screwing up our records.”

I sigh and start the car. The friendly customer service representa­tives at our local bank branch would be hearing from me. Lane opens his wallet to put away the worthless card.

“Oh damn,” he says. I look over to find him holding a check.

“Please don’t tell me that’s what I think it is,” I say, tightening my grip on the steering wheel.

“Uh, Brooke, honey . . .” he starts out, and I know it’s going to be bad. Terms of endearment are always a tip-off with Lane.

“I may have forgotten to deposit my paycheck.”

I bite my lip and look for a place to pull over, remembering the lessons I’d had in Driver’s Ed. You should never drive when angry because you might come across a small child on a tricycle and want to take it out
on him. Their advice had been to get out and kick a telephone pole. I have something else I want to kick.

I swerve the car into a nearly empty church lot and come to a stop. Lane tentatively places his hand over mine.

"I was really busy that day and I must've just forgot."

I stare out my car window. The yellow parking lot line I'm staring at begins to blur.

"Really, Brooke, if you think about it, it's not that big of a deal," he says, attempting to lighten the mood. "I mean, we don't even know if what we perceive as reality is real anyway, so something like this is entirely insignificant."

"You really are unbelievable," I snap back. "You know, after two years of marriage I still have not ceased to be amazed at how inconsiderate, how out of touch with reality, you really can be."

"C'mon, Brooke," he says, rolling his eyes. "Don't be all fatalistic on me. I know I screwed up, okay? But it's not like we can't fix it."

This is where I lose it.

"You don't get it, do you?" I yell, suddenly very grateful there isn't a bike-riding child around because I really might have gone for him. "I mean, not only was what you just put me through a totally humiliating experience, but it's not going to stop there. I've written checks, Lane, checks that are now going to bounce. There's going to be fees, and fees on the fees, and our credit rating will be hurt. Oh, and seeing as this is our second offense, our landlord will probably blacklist us and start making us pay cash. It's going to end up costing us so much in the end that I can forget about a new coat. So, damn it, Lane—it is a big deal!"

Lane shrinks back against the car door, looking shocked and stung. The force of my anger pushes me forward anyway.

"Look, I'm not your babysitter. I'm not up for that task. I have too many things to worry about without the electricity getting turned off because you forgot to pay the bill or the car brakes going out because you kept putting off getting them fixed. I'm tired of the laundry molding because you forget to take it out of the washer, and I'm sick of never getting messages because you're too involved reading Nietzsche to write them down. I can't deal with it anymore, Lane. Something has got to change."

I pause, catching my breath, and wait for him to retaliate—wanting him to retaliate. I want him to lash out at me, so I can demand that he show me more respect. I want him to try and justify himself, so I can tear
apart his attempts. I want to hold onto my anger, to savor it, to make him feel as bad as I do. I want to keep fighting him.

But Lane doesn’t yell. He doesn’t defend himself. He doesn’t retaliate. Instead, he apologizes.

“I’m sorry, Brooke,” he says softly. “I mean, you’re right. I guess some of the stuff that should be priorities in my life just aren’t. Philosophy is what I love and sometimes it takes over, you know? I just never realized it bothered you so much.” He pauses for a moment. “Anyway, I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’ll fix it, okay? I’ll fix it.”

He does fix it, in fact he fixes it good. The car is now washed regularly, the dishes get done, and the bills get paid—all without a word from me. It’s beautiful.

Beautiful and kind of quiet.

Lane doesn’t really talk about philosophy anymore. I tell myself it’s good riddance to bad rubbish, and I’m pretty convincing—most of the time.

A few weeks have passed like this and, after finishing one of our now weekly family finance discussions, we are heading to bed a little earlier than usual. I have an exam tomorrow. All I want to do is fall asleep and be free of the facts I’ve been cramming into my head all day.

Lane wants to talk.

“Hey, you asleep?” He asks.

I grunt something unintelligible that I hope will come across as a yes. He doesn’t seem to notice and keeps talking.

“Remember when we used to stay up all night just talking?”

I am jolted by the question. Of course, I remember. It seemed like we always used to have stuff to say. We’d talk about how much I hate the Romantic poets or about how incredibly pedantic Husserl is. We’d complain about teachers, classes, and tests. We’d argue about stupid things, things like who deserved to win the World Series or what the best Ben & Jerry’s flavor is. For some reason, we couldn’t get enough of each other back then. Somehow I had forgotten about all that. Thinking about it now made me want to curl into him, rub my stocking feet against his and ask him, as I always used to, to tell me something exciting. Tentatively I reach out my hand, searching for his. I find only the cool sheet that lies between us.

So, turning my back to him, I whisper, “Goodnight, Lane.”