

“Like A Bowl in A China Shop” by Hillary Leichter (from *The New Yorker* – Aug. 23, 2017)

Tradition dictates paper for the first anniversary. Brian gathers all their receipts, to show his husband, Jeff, how well he has prepared for taxes. Jeff gathers all the tiny paper wrappers from under the cushions of their couch, to illustrate that they have been sitting on tiny paper wrappers for a very long time. They are in love, sandwiched on the freshly excavated couch, Brian lying with legs across the lap of Jeff, falling asleep on this couch, the couch they found on the sidewalk that one summer when it hailed.

The second anniversary is dust, not to be confused with the fortieth anniversary, ashes. Jeff sweeps the apartment with the broom of Brian, a broom from his parents’ garage. He corrals the mites of dust, the dust bunnies, the tendrils, and loosens the lid of a jar for their keeping. Then under the pillow goes the jar, for Brian to find later that evening, just before he snores himself to sleep. Jeff knows that the dust is made of dry skin, toenail detritus, dandruff, and gunk from the corners of eyes. He imagines the jar as a collection of their former selves.

The third anniversary, moss, followed by the fourth, stones, on which it may gather. The fifth, of course, cardamom pods, accompanied by the pulverization ritual. Brian is pumped for the occasion. Their friends Stephanie and Mike said that it was their favorite anniversary by far, their house perfumed by the spice for nearly a year. People buy dozens of packets of pods for Brian and Jeff, for they inspire the devotion of many friends, pods arriving by the pound, and then sitting in a cupboard, because they cannot find the time to grind it, until their sixth anniversary, and on through the seventh and eighth and ninth, at which point Brian lies, disappointed, “I hate cardamom. Please, can we throw these away, for the love of God?”

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves!

Their sixth anniversary is when they think they will have a child. They do not. The child passes through them like an idea that comes before waking and then slips away. They occupy themselves with lottery tickets, the accepted gift of year six. Brian wins five dollars.

Sitting on the train, Jeff reads that every cell in the body is eventually replaced by a new cell. After seven years, he reads, we are made up of entirely different cells than before. We are turned into strangers, again and again. This is why the seventh anniversary is when you give your partner a stranger, just for a week. Brian and Jeff enjoy traditions, and they follow them all.

Brian’s parents die after their own fifty-second anniversary, one right after the other. Brian doesn’t cry, but insists on driving to both funerals. He has not driven a car since high school. He and Jeff clean out Brian’s parents’ garage, the place that used to house their once and current broom. They box up boxes filled with smaller boxes. Jeff finds gifts from his in-laws’ bygone anniversaries: the dust, the paper, the set of coffee spoons Brian gave to his parents when he was still a child, now returning to the giver. The slippers, the hard-soled shoes. The customary trinket for fifty-two years—an empty locket on a long, long chain.

On their ninth anniversary, Jeff does not acquiesce to Brian’s request to throw away the cardamom pods, nor does he agree to pulverize them just yet. “Don’t be wasteful,” he says.

On their tenth anniversary, Brian reserves a boat, for ten years is usually celebrated at sea. But Jeff has made other plans. “Don’t be so elaborate,” Jeff says. “And you know how I feel about oceans.”

Brian sits down on their couch, freshly stuffed with paper wrappers. Who knew that their lives could accommodate the opening of so many small candies.

“Is there something else that would make you happy?” Brian asks.

“Just get me whatever.”

“Whatever what?”

“Like a pen. Like a mug,” Jeff says. “Like a bowl in a china shop.”

“Like nothing at all,” Jeff adds, hours later from the other room.

The bowl is dainty and handmade, barely big enough to hold a berry. Brian finds it in a store that Jeff loves, and he wonders about that word, “love,” the rooms that it holds, the stuff the rooms accumulate, the stuff the stuff is made of. He leaves the bowl by their bed, next to the jar of dust.

Then the eleventh anniversary, marked by a mammal. Jeff tolerates Brian’s sloth, then, suddenly, he doesn’t.

The twelfth, a gift of a secret. Brian tells Jeff that, sometimes, he loses the ability to read, words falling away from his memory like comets.

Jeff tells Brian that he has continued to see his stranger, the one they agreed on for their seventh anniversary.

“Divorce?” Brian asks.

“It’s just”—Jeff sighs—“I don’t want to start with a whole new list of things.”

They skip thirteen so as not to tempt the fates.

On their fourteenth anniversary, they have been brand-new people two times over. Every cell is a reminiscence and an awakening. They give each other the gift of friendship. Brian bestows his very best friend, Claire, upon Jeff. Claire is decreed awesome, and now she is Jeff’s best friend, too. She gives Jeff a better understanding of Brian, and they have in common a love of organization, of basketball. Jeff gives his best friend, Gregory, to Brian. Gregory is solid and kind, and nods exuberantly when Brian confides his fears about Jeff. Claire and Gregory become great friends with each other, and go for long, marathon dinners, for long walks between boroughs. They conspire on anniversary gifts for Jeff and Brian. The four of them have breakfast together every Sunday morning. Sometimes Gregory brings his three nieces; sometimes Claire brings one of her graduate students.

After one such breakfast, Jeff and Brian make out like teen-agers all afternoon on the couch, a new couch, every cell replaced.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Belt buckles, feathers, environmental responsibility. Eighteen, dumbbells, nineteen, the gift of a new skill. Brian learns to skydive and Jeff learns to watch without feeling afraid.

Claire brings a student who is new to the city to breakfast one week. Jeff and Brian invite her for Thanksgiving. She sends them e-mails. They help her move into a new apartment. At her wedding, she calls them her parents. Brian has started to forget more words, other things, too.

Twenty, brand-new coats. Twenty-one, brand-new shoes. Twenty-two, brand-new china, the matching kind.

Thirty, a fire in a fireplace. Forty, ashes from the fire.

(Hilary Leichter received a 2015 fellowship in fiction from the New York Foundation for the Arts. She is currently writing a novel about the surreal life of a temp.)