

Tarzan, Again

The land of lame nostalgia is littered with once-vital characters: Tarzan, Dick Tracy, Doc Savage, to name a few.

The New York Times

After Jane left him, Tarzan moved north and found a house-share in Berkeley. It's a big, seedy place, not far from Telegraph Avenue, where the Hare Krishnas and the homeless panhandle the college kids. Just recently he read in the *Times*, "The land of lame nostalgia is littered with once-vital characters: Tarzan, Dick Tracy, Doc Savage, to name a few." It's 1999, the cusp of a new century, and he's seen too much change too fast and, worse, too many versions of himself played too poorly. It's been humiliating.

Tarzan has custody of Boy because Jane is in L.A., trying to land a spot on a game show that features a rotating panel of marginally notable character actors and "personalities." She looks good enough still to be recognized on the street as the fetching woman who once posed for the cover of LIFE, wearing a tight-fitting leopard skin as she peered with caution from the massive branch of a baobab tree.

Some mornings, as he makes his "silverback latte" in the messy kitchen of his shared house, Tarzan pictures Jane--she never wore leopard--as she would stare wistfully into the jungle from the balcony of their then-happy tree house. At moments like that, she seemed lost in time, a sylph he'd come upon in the early morning mist. It makes him smile to think that he frightened her the first time he dropped from a tree to greet her, this blinding beauty from civilization. She wore an impossibly white blouse and khaki jodhpurs with calf-high lace up

boots, her brunette hair mussed and corkscrewed from humidity. She looked so stunning, she frightened him, though he fought hard to hide it. What did he know of women? She was lost, having wandered from her father's party. And wasn't that just like her, to wander?

Her father had been a dreamer and spent decades searching for the Elephant Graveyard and its treasure of piled-high ivory, which, in the end the old man found but refused to betray even as his once-trusted foreman tortured him with a commando knife. Tarzan imagines—still, regularly, incessantly--arriving ten minutes sooner and saving his yet-to-be father-in-law. The scene plays over and over in his head, like one of his Hollywood rehearsals, the director scolding, "This has got to look *real*, man. Don't glance at the camera!" With a flu-like ache deep in his chest, Tarzan realizes that life after forty is too much about wishing to do things over because he is convinced he could do it all better.

This morning, Saturday, he takes Boy to the redwooded trails of the Berkeley hills. The shaded trails smell of loam and minty eucalyptus. It's not jungle but it will do.

Tarzan says, "You feel like swinging a little?"

Boy showed remarkable aptitude for vines at an early age.

Now Boy wants to shave his head and be Goth like his friends at Berkeley High. He's wearing a little foam headset plugged into his Walkman music player, so loud Tarzan hears it hissing into the boy's head from several feet away. But he dare not say anything because Boy would only roll his eyes and grimace at him. That kind of dismissal can send Tarzan into a funk for days.

Tarzan pantomimes swinging. He's brought a rope as big around as an anaconda, which he'll tie to large branches for practice. He raises it like an offering. "Yes?"

Boy blinks at him as if waking from a nap. He's wearing a black t-shirt that says, "My name is Brad Majors." His sneakers look like black hiking boots. His black jeans sag in a way that makes the boy look younger and, sad to say, pathetic.

Tarzan wears a loose-fitting nylon track suit, the only thing he feels comfortable wearing these days.

The problem is, Boy won't talk about his grief. Shortly after the studio rejected Tarzan's last pitch, Cheeta was run over by a drunk driver while crossing the street, just three paces behind Boy and Tarzan. A bloody, horrible scene. And, again, Tarzan blames himself: he should have been mindful of his retinue. L.A. is a jungle. But he was distracted. He just wasn't tracking things well. He wasn't *all there*. For days after the accident, he'd walk into the dewy courtyard of their charming, 1920s hacienda-style apartment complex at dawn and he'd inhale deeply to get his bearings: but there were no bearings. He couldn't smell anything but car exhaust. Maybe that's when his depression started in earnest.

That too-sunny afternoon of the accident, with traffic stacking up behind them, and a crowd congealing on the sidewalk, Boy held Cheeta's limp body, like so many scenes the two had played on the sound stage. It was frighteningly unreal, life imitating art. Maybe that's why Boy didn't cry. At first Tarzan thought this a good thing. Tough boy! But, then, he reconsidered: had he been too hard? Had he shut Boy down?

That night Tarzan wept so loudly, Boy padded to the threshold of the bedroom and gently shut the door on him. Jane had been gone for nearly a month by that time.

The next morning, plugged into his music player, Boy ate his oatmeal in silence and never said a word about Cheeta.

“We loved him so much,” Tarzan said.

Then: “It’s going to take a while to adjust.”

Then: “It’s all right to talk about him. It’s all right to cry.”

But Boy didn’t talk about him. Boy didn’t cry. That was three months ago.

Now, hefting the rope, Tarzan says, “You like Spiderman, right?”

Boy shrugs. “I don’t read comics anymore.”

Tarzan is surprised--and gratified--that Boy can hear him through the noise of his earphoned music.

“But Spiderman is cool,” Tarzan says. Then, when Boy just stares up at him blankly, he adds, “I mean, it’s cool how outside he is, totally misunderstood and not exactly a superhero, right?”

Boy stares at him blankly.

Tarzan, feeling tiny bullets of sweat speed down his ribs, rushes to fill the void: “I mean, it’s not enough to be a hero anymore, you’ve got to be a *super* hero, right? It’s getting silly, isn’t it? Or you’ve got to be an android like the Terminator! Or Robocop!”

Tarzan shakes his head in disgust, then looks away because he’s speaking too loudly and he knows his son thinks he’s a clueless geezer and he can’t stand to see Boy’s dismay. They are near the top of the hill, the East Bay laid out below like a toy village. In the sunny distance, the green bay is flecked with white sails. Though an excellent swimmer, Tarzan is terrified of deep water. The jungle is nothing compared to the ocean and its fathomless bottom. Every time Tarzan stares at the water, he thinks of bug-eyed fish that live in total darkness, their mouths as big around as beach balls and grilled with tendril-like teeth.

When he returns his gaze to Boy, Tarzan sees Boy staring into the distance and he wonders what Boy might be dreaming. He must have dreams. Last week, Boy came home with a sky-high ACT score of 32. That's Ivy League level! But Boy has no extra-curriculars. No volunteer work. No hobbies he can boast of. That's why coming here on Saturdays is so important. Tarzan is trying to kick-start something inside Boy: if Boy swung triumphantly thirty yards across the forest, he might take stock, he might stand taller.

Just five-foot-four, Boy is a full foot shorter than Tarzan. Tarzan fears the difference between father and son embarrasses the boy. Why did Boy never grow to his father's stature? Then, with a flush of secret humiliation, Tarzan remembers that Boy is *adopted*. It gives him a pang in the pit of his stomach, like remembering that Jane won't be home when he returns. Sometimes he forgets. Then he worries that Boy carries genes that may lead him to dead-end pursuits. Would Tarzan's own genes have delivered Boy to a better end?

You could be anything! he wants to tell his Boy.

A 32 on the ACT!

He motions to boy to take off the headset.

Reluctantly, Boy does so, the music spewing as loudly as a dowsed campfire.

"Humor me," Tarzan says. "I want to try for a super swing. You remember that one when you were five, hanging on my back?"

Boy shakes his head doubtfully. Their long-ago life in the jungle is receding from Boy's memory like a childish dream. Not even Tarzan pretends that they could go back. But Tarzan remembers everything, even the early joy of clinging to his own ape father's massive back as