

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

they hurtled through the jungle canopy, birds bursting from them on every side in explosions of color and song.

Just last week he got an email from his former agent who wrote, "FIY, T. Somebody's bought your name on the internet: Tarazan.com. Sorry, man. We should've seen that coming. They'll sell for \$10K if you're interested."

"Yeah," says Tarzan, "wait till Y2K hits, then we'll see."

"What are you talking about?" Boy asks.

Tarzan feels his ears burn. He didn't realize he was talking to himself. "I'm thinking about Y2K," he says. "It's gonna be a mess."

Boy half-shrugs. "It's hippo shit, Dad."

"What's hippo shit?"

"Y2k ain't gonna happen. It's just hype." Boy says this with admirable certainty.

"I guess I've been hyped then."

"*Duped* is the word," says Boy.

Jane taught Tarzan English. How he adored her patience, the way she cupped his chin with one hand to help him enunciate. And still he hates using articles. It was so easy back then:

"Jane don't go!" "Tarzan love Jane!" "Jane fuck Tarzan?"

She taught him more dirty words than she'll admit.

Years later, after the movie company refused to renew his contract and Jane was working cameos to help make their rent, she yelled at him: "You're such a throwback!"

She meant this as an insult. That's what stunned him. Everything good about him, everything that had made him a millionaire early on, everything that people had once loved, was wrapped up in his being a *throwback*!

Now he's working with a promoter to market a diet plan that is all about eating like a wild man. It would mean doing the TV commercials himself. He'd have to get in shape. He's been indulging in Dinky Donuts, sometimes as many as a dozen a day.

But, thank God, he can still swing a wicked vine. Even Boy, with his world of distractions, watches him with interest, if not awe. As Tarzan arcs high into the eucalyptus branches, kicking them away with his bare feet, he's tempted to holler loud and long. But he forbears. That's the lesson of the civilized world: keep your cool.

Talk about hippo shit.

Gravity pulls him back with a vengeance. He hurtles to the hillside. This part always gives him chills, his scrotum tightening like a tiny fist. He imagines parachutists feel a similar devastating thrill.

He's a world-class athlete. Why can't he remember this when he's waiting for the bus or picking up his unemployment check?

He lands so hard and fast, he springs forward and sprints for several yards before he can stop. Then, with a gulp of air, he straightens himself, careful to stifle his gasp of effort, before he turns back to Boy.

Boy gives him the thumbs up. His approval makes Tarzan's heart collapse with gratitude. Some things still hold!

Boy takes up the rope, having tucked his music player into his back pocket. Before Tarzan can give him a word of advice, Boy is already airborne. Despite his recent weight gain, Boy has enough upper body strength to hold fast. He has superb form, his legs straight out, his toes pointed, his chin up.

Tarzan hears himself utter a whimper-sigh of satisfaction and admiration. If only there were a way to translate Boy's ability into an advantage. A college scholarship. A role on a TV show. Traction: he and Boy need *traction*.

Jane sent Boy a cell phone so that he and she can talk any time he needs to. She's as worried as Tarzan. It was thoughtful of her, he admits, but a cell phone? "Pretty soon everybody will have one," she said. "You'd better get used to it, T."

She mocks his reluctance to join the modern world. But he has his reasons, she knows: Lotto! Not so long ago, the seductive promise of lottery cards made him dizzy with anticipation, the way he had been as a child, perched on a branch as he watched for a nighttime shower of falling stars. That thrill, that wondrous illumination, seemed to be in every Lotto card he purchased. At his worst, he bought over 100 a day. The same naïveté that had enchanted Jane at the beginning made her disdain him in the end. By the time he joined Gamblers Anonymous, he was ruined and Jane was gone.

On the walk back to the house, Tarzan is thrilled that Boy is not listening to his music player. He wants to talk with Boy about important things--he wants to tell him that it's going to be okay, that he's a good Boy, that things will work out. Deep down, Tarzan doesn't really believe this, but he wants to believe it. He wants to believe in all good things for Boy's benefit. But he is afraid of being a bore or overbearing, so he lets the silence settle between them.

Then he thinks: *Yes, this is what works best, a companionable silence.*

“How about a samosa?” he says when they reach the university.

“Sure,” Boy says.

Vendors crowd the sidewalks on Telegraph Avenue. They sell used record albums and CDs and scented candles and incense and hand-painted coffee mugs and tie-dyed t-shirts and rock posters and home-made jewelry and other inconsequential things that students and tourists might like. Tarzan is carrying his big rope coiled over his shoulder. He knows he must look odd, but Berkeley is crowded with odd people.

The samosa stand is a two-wheeled cart parked at the curb. It’s run by a small African man named Smithe, a name he pronounces “Smitty.” He wears a beaded skull cap and a dashiki whose pattern looks like the paw prints of a big cat.

He grins and says, “Tarzan and Boy, two of my favorite customers. Good day, Gentlemen!”

His grin seems genuine.

Tarzan reads faces well. That’s how he knew, long before she said it, that Jane was done with him. He took her for granted, he’ll be the first to admit. He regrets that he failed to treasure her later as he treasured her at the beginning. But this happens to every couple, doesn’t it? It’s like the wear of a waterfall on a rock. Even the most durable things give way over time.

An excuse, he knows. He’s full of them.

Boy orders a lamb samosa. Tarzan orders potato. He’s been vegetarian since leaving L.A. He thought he’d feel more energetic but there’s been no change one way or the other.

Tarzan loves the warm-baked aroma of the samosa, the crisp sound of the wax paper, the heat and heft of the treat in his large hand.

“That rope you’re carrying,” Smithe says, “it’s as fat as a python, man.”

Tarzan takes a bite of his steamy samosa, then nods his head. “Yeah, weighs about fifty pounds.”

Jane taught him to eat with his mouth closed. Then to wipe his mouth after he was done.

“Is the rope a new addition to your wardrobe,” Smithe asks. “Like you carry it around everywhere?”

“Why would I do that?” Tarzan asks. He wipes his mouth with the wax paper.

“Image building,” Smithe says. “It’s why I wear this soul patch.” He points to his chin. “You’ve got to have an *ensemble*, big guy.”

Tarzan smiles as if this were a joke. But it’s not a joke. Image was everything when he was a star. Look at Boy: he’s wholly remade himself. Nobody has ever guessed Boy’s identity. Tarzan, on the other hand, has the bearing of a man who once mattered. People take notice. Sometimes they insist on an autograph, even when they don’t know who he is exactly.

Oh, yeah, Tarzan! Wow! Whatever happened to him?

Farther down Telegraph, Boy stops to look at some CDs. Tarzan leans over to pet the vendor’s ratty little dog: a Chihuahua. These seem to be popular now. Women carry them like fashion accessories. This dog looks old. It barks its small cough of a bark. Barks and barks and barks. Tarzan reaches down with one finger to pet the dog. He is masterful with animals. He expects the little dog to calm down the moment his finger touches its hot little head. He nuzzles

its wet button of a nose. Then, with the speed of a mouse trap's snap, the dog bites the tip of his finger. Hard. With its tiny razor-like teeth. Tarzan recoils with a jolt and a yelp. He whips the air to abate the pain.

"Sweet Jesus!" he says.

Still hopping in pain, he feels something give way: the soft heap of rope slips from his shoulder, slides speedily down his arm, and drops coil after coil on top of the dog. And abruptly there's no more barking. It happens so quickly, Tarzan steps back, startled. It's like a magic act-- his rope has buried the dog!

"What the fuck!" the vendor says. He's one of those scruffy young men with a sunburnt face and dirty fingers, so close to homelessness he might as well be begging with an upturned hat in hand.

Tarzan grabs at the rope and Boy helps but it takes longer than it should and when, at last, they have uncovered the dog, Tarzan sees the animal curled in a ball, not crushed but smothered. As inert as a woman's winter muff.

"OH MY FUCK-ING GOD!" the vendor hollers. "YOU FUCKING KILLED MY DOG!"

Tarzan's vision blurs for a moment and he thinks of Jane's father, knifed in the jungle before Tarzan could save him. Then Cheetah splayed bloodily across the asphalt. Tarzan lays a hand on Boy's shoulder to steady himself. Vertigo! He feels the heat of Boy's body, maybe shame burning through Boy's shoulders. Tarzan opens his eyes. The vendor has fallen to his knees. He is wailing over his pet's ratty little body.

A voice in Tarzan's head says, *Now, Tarzan, now!*

Tarzan snatches up the dog, then cupping the animal in both hands, presses his face to its fur, sniffing, listening. He hears no heartbeat. Quickly, efficiently, he pries open the tiny snout, meets it with his lips, then, holding a finger over the dog's still-wet nostrils, he breathes into the animal.

"What the FUCK!" the vendor wails. "Get AWAY!" He claws at Tarzan.

But Boy steps between him and Tarzan, one hand against the vendor's heaving chest.

"Wait," Boy says.

The vendor sputters, breathless, his face contorted with anguish and puzzlement. "Wha th-!"

CPR on such a small animal feels nearly impossible, like swimming a straight line against a strong current. But then Tarzan catches the rhythm of the slow, careful work. He imagines oxygen fueling the dog's blood, synapses jerking awake its raisin-sized brain, nerve endings tingling.

Then, like a spark igniting a fire, the ratty little dog hiccups and bucks. Abruptly, it rights itself in Tarzan's massive hands. The dog looks around, blinks, then barks, as if to announce, *I'm back!*

With a gasp, the vendor lunges forward and gathers his dog in both hands, then buries his face in the now-wriggling animal: "My god my god my god my god!" he blubbers.

Tarzan motions for Boy to walk on. They walk in silence for several blocks. Tarzan does not look back. Then Boy says, "That was freaky."

"I'm sorry," Tarzan says.

"You've got nothing to be sorry about!" says Boy.

“You’re kind to say so, Boy.”

“It was an accident! The dog’s alive!”

“I should have been more careful,” Tarzan says. “I haven’t been careful.”

“Shit happens,” says Boy.

“No,” says Tarzan. “People *make* shit happen when they’re careless.”

Hearing this, Boy seems to settle into a sulk. Then, as they arrive at the house, he says, “You don’t have to be so hard on yourself, Pop.”

Tarzan nods okay, because he doesn’t want to say more than he has to and he’s already said enough. He’s grateful for what seems to be a break in the clouds of Boy’s mood.

Later, his bloodied finger bandaged, he makes Boy’s favorite breakfast for supper—a sunnyside up on fried toast, called “toad in a hole.” He turns to watch Boy squeeze fresh oranges for juice. Boy is wearing his earphones again, the music hissing from his head.

Tarzan buys oranges by the case at the Oakland wholesale market once a week. He has to get up before dawn for the errand. It’s one of his favorite things to do. He loves how the city streets are nearly empty at that hour and the world has yet to crowd and elbow itself into his life. He loves striding through the messy aisles of produce, the sellers calling out their bargains, the air grassy sweet with the smells of fruits and vegetables. He has offered to take Boy before school one day, but Boy isn’t a morning person. It’s all Boy can do to get out of the house in time to skateboard the six blocks to Berkeley High and still he’s late half the time.

Soon, he’ll be gone to college or trade school. Tarzan promises himself that his own life will be on track by that time. He fantasizes about living in one of those cool custom tiny homes

made from a shipping container, maybe up the coast somewhere. He'd like a pet. Not a chimp. No, never again a chimp. But *some kind* of furry friend.

At the thought of Cheeta, he swallows hard to keep down his grief. He spatulas the eggy toast in the skillet to distract himself, then feels a wave of regret snatch him up and tumble him in memories. But, before Boy notices, he talks himself out of it or thinks he does: *Boy still swings great. And he scored 32 on the ACT! The new agent says Tarzan's Wild Man diet can't fail! Y2K is hippo shit! The new century will be a good one, maybe even a better one!*

Then he sees Boy looking at him with concern, the way he might watch a river for crocodiles. "Hey," Boy says. "What's up?"

Tarzan's smile is like a shrug. He is amazed that Boy can hear him through the noise of his music. Then, because the day has gone so well, he offers a confession he hasn't offered in a month or more: "I miss Cheeta, don't you?"

Boy pauses, one orange half in hand, then looks out the kitchen window, east to the Berkeley hills, where the sky is as deep a blue as his mother's eyes. He's nodding in agreement. He says, "Yeah, Dad, Cheeta."