JOLT

My Electric Journey Out of Darkness



TED SCHEINMAN

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Reminiscent of William Styron's *Darkness Visible* but with an appealing vein of humor, a magnificently written memoir of riding the depression roller coaster, choosing electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and finding the path to happiness—with fascinating side-journeys into the nature of identity and memory.

Growing up in a hyper-educated, artistic, eccentric family, Ted Scheinman, the son of a medical doctor and an English professor, spent much of his precocious childhood as a writer and performer—and his greatest performance was as someone who was happy. He recognized his depression early and recorded its effects in a series of tragicomic journals, always hoping that the ritual of doing so would palliate if not cure.

While the clouds occasionally parted, particularly during Ted's years of intellectual questing at Hotchkiss and Yale—and, fleetingly, through his emergence as a successful journalist—his gloom kept returning, seemingly more debilitating each time. Eventually, a series of emotional plunges deposited Ted, at age thirty-five, in a psych ward in Washington, D.C. There, he began an intensive course of electroconvulsive therapy—considered by most a treatment of last resort. The controversial procedure saved his life, but it also exacted a price: he was now missing important pieces of his memory.

By turns deeply gripping, startlingly perceptive, understatedly hilarious, and heartbreakingly poignant, particularly in Ted's depiction of his romantic relationships, *Jolt* asks: How do our families shape who we are, for good and ill? How much of our character is ingrained versus sculpted by circumstances? How can we adapt when our memory fails? Perhaps most critically: what are we willing to sacrifice to have a chance at life?

Ultimately, this exceptionally engrossing memoir brings hope to anyone who has ever tried desperately to regain their footing and rejoin the world.

"Like some cockeyed modern version of Dante's Virgil, Ted Scheinman takes the reader on a vivid journey through his descent into a depressive inferno and his ascent back out of it. Only Scheinman's a lot funnier—imagine Virgil with the self-lacerating wit of Carrie Fisher or Augusten Burroughs. A fascinating and hopeful consideration of a controversial treatment, as well as a brilliant meditation on memory and identity, *Jolt* belongs on the same shelf as classics by Donald Antrim and William Styron."

—Scott Stossel, National Editor of *The Atlantic* and bestselling author of *My Age of Anxiety: Fear, Hope, Dread, and the Search for Peace of Mind*

Ted Scheinman is a senior editor at *Smithsonian* magazine and contributing editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. His 2018 debut, *Camp Austen: My Life as an Accidental Jane Austen Superfan*, garnered enthusiastic praise on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. His essays and reporting have appeared in such publications as *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, and *Slate*. He and his wife make their home in Washington, DC.

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JOLT

My Electric Journey Out of Darkness

Ted Scheinman

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To my parents, and to my favorite person of all: Tara

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Electroshock can boast of having liberated humankind of millions of tons of suffering.

—undated letter from an American psychiatrist to Dr. Ugo Cerletti, innovator of electroconvulsive therapy

Without our memories, we would be lost to ourselves, amnesiacs flailing around in a constant, unrelenting present.

—Dr. Charles Fernyhough

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Prologue

No, I Will Never

May 2021

The therapists said to draw an emotional biography of your illness. The nurses gave us only four colors of crayon. Serena began scribbling immediately. The rest of us stared at our papers, then at each other. After some deliberation, I drew my girlfriend, Melanie, in blue, then used the red and orange to make the fires in California. I sketched my sister, Jane, first as the little chipmunk she'd been at two and then as the new mother she'd so recently become, rocking an approximation of baby Theo in her arms. All the faces were coming out wrong: angry and put upon, as if to say, *I cannot sanction what he's doing with my likeness*.

It was my third day in the psych ward, and I knew vaguely that my first ECT was scheduled for the next day, but on the ward, the concept of time tended to blur. All I knew was that sometime, perhaps unbearably far in the future, they'd affix the electrodes to my temples and begin inducing seizures. They'd keep zapping me until my agitated depression began to recede. And if those seizures didn't work . . . well, then I might have to get pretty comfy in art classes like this one.

As we mucked around with our crayons, Amara leaned over and asked: "You gonna write about this?"

I gave a theatrical shiver of displeasure. "I don't wanna do that."

"You're a writer, aren't you?"

"I *used* to be."

She drew a careful outward spiral in blue and red, then looked up. "If *I* were a writer, I'd make a movie about this place."

"Oh yeah, what would you call it?"

She smiled broadly. “Something about how *slow* it is.”

“‘Bored on the Ward,’” I offered.

“‘Bored Crazy,’” she countered.

“‘Chairman of the Bored,’” I whispered, and the art therapist, a nice lady with a gray braid, gave us a look of opprobrium. We went quiet.

Later, Amara said: “Living here is like living in a secret room at the center of everything.” We were turning in our crayons. “*Someone* oughtta write it.”

Mom shared Amara’s view. During the short windows when we were allowed our phones, she kept trying to buck my spirits.

“Are you writing?”

“In my journal, constantly.” I didn’t even try to fake enthusiasm. “Not always complete sentences.”

“Keep writing,” Mom advised. “Think about all the really great material you must be collecting.”

My notebook was a palimpsest of ink and crayon and marker, full of broken phrases like “fidgety and lazy all day” and “crawling up the walls a bit” and *“facilis descensus Averno.”*

“I don’t know about ‘great’ material. There isn’t much drama or revelation on the ward. We’re all just doing time.”

“You don’t think you’ll write about this one day?”

If I’d said *Yes, I’ll transmute all this into something less sordid and sad,* Mom would have flushed with pleasure. She always thought that if you could write about something, you could redeem it or reinvent it. On the ward, this notion was the most alien thing in the world to me. I didn’t see how I could ever write again.

I knew Mom wanted me to see the bright side. Trouble was, I’d been unable to focus on the bright side for longer than I could remember—literally, because my memory was already failing me. What was more, they said my imminent ECT might aggravate memory problems. What if I couldn’t remember these conversations? How could I write about them?

Yet Melanie, too, wanted me to write it all: the ECT, the ward, and before that the ketamine, those awful months careening between different cocktails of SSRIs and SNRIs and a whole alphabet of antidepressants and mood stabilizers and atypical antipsychotics and several extended families of anxiolytics—the full rainbow. When I thought of Mel, I almost had to ball up on the floor. She kept sending little presents every day, each with a

buck-up message: “The world and I are waiting for you, all set to wrap you in a hug once you’re ready.”

Along with the presents were photos of old friends. Each time I opened an envelope, I wondered whether I’d recognize the people in the photos.

“Keep taking notes,” Mom said.

“Write it as a story,” Mel said, “for me.”

And all I could think was: *Never. Because to write a story is to flatten something into sense, and here there* is *no sense . . . There are no clean angles in depression, and a story, in the end, makes everything square. So, no, I’m sorry, but I’ll never, ever write about any of this*.

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Chapter 1

The Batman Episode

(1988)

I've been afraid of madness for about as long as I can remember, possibly exactly as long.

I was by all accounts a happy baby, the kind who skips over that interval of looking like an alien or an elderly comedy writer. I projected instead the unquestioning bliss of the placid cherub on the Gerber label. I had blue eyes and a pirate's smile and an idiotic baritone chortle that—my mother told her friends with pride—gave me the affect of a 1930s gangster.

The trouble started in late summer 1988.

This is my first memory. It's a day in early fall and I'm feeling a frantic, joyous energy heightened by the sense that it's the last day of its kind this season, an inversion of the fever of spring. My parents and I have just returned from the New York State Fair, where, as photos can verify, the three of us had a good and wholesome time, posing before the butter cow and eating funnel cake. I also scuffed my hand during a fall outside one of the pavilions, possibly milked a goat, and chewed my first piece of gum (Bazooka, the kind that looks like an eraser). In my memory, my parents haven't argued once all day, and the image recurs of my mother standing with my father, her head tilted toward his shoulder, watching a pair of adolescent horses cavorting and burying their muzzles in thick piles of hay. One thing I absolutely remember is the animal smell clinging to me for hours afterward—a barnyard sourness that I'll eventually come to associate with ecstatic dread.

I'm all of three years old and about to learn some serious lessons in mortality.

We've just returned home to our little redbrick house in the village of Hamilton in upstate New York, and I'm in the downstairs bathroom in front of the mirror, hugging to my chest a stuffed Batman about ten inches tall, a consolation prize yielded by some booth at the fair. Now I'm whooshing him back and forth over the sink—perhaps the Riddler is lurking in the pipes below—and at some point I turn on the water for dramatic effect. Batman, reckless, flies too close to the tap, and a small splash darkens into a spot on his Batboots. Inside, I'm filled with an unfamiliar sense of alarm: somehow, the doll is no longer *new*. But it still *smells* new. This observation pains me, and the pain, in turn, confuses. What is so scary about newness? That it precedes oldness. Unbidden, the image of my Batman ten years hence presents itself to my toddler mind. He will be fraying, missing an ear, unaccountably soggy. And it is I who'll be responsible for degrading the hero of Gotham, through neglect, clumsiness, or some other evidence of unworthiness.

More troubling is my next thought: This delicate doll will certainly perish before I do. A twofold knowledge follows: that *I* am going to die, maybe even lose an ear like Batman, but regardless will definitely *cease to be*—and how will my parents deal with that?

In the mirror, I'm now frantically scrubbing a hand towel against the partly defiled superhero, but the water pock only settles in further.

Through the door, my mother reminds me that *no toys* are allowed in the bathroom—a sensible and hygienic policy. I turn off the tap and exit the bathroom and set the doll by a window in the living room, where direct sunlight will restore the moistened boot, the same way I've been taught to dry my towel whenever we splash around in the town swimming pool. I'm not sure how long I sit there watching Batman dry in the living room after this encounter with the infinite, but in my memory, I see myself seeking solace from a waxed bag brought home from the fair that contains pink and turquoise squares of taffy.

How silly, to receive a lesson in death from an off-brand superhero plushy—like finding the face of God in the kernels at the bottom of a bag of popcorn. Of course, to my young self, there was nothing silly about it. During those few minutes in front of the mirror, it seemed that everything had changed. However clumsily or inadvertently, I'd recognized where *I* ended and the rest of creation began. Between others and me rose a sharp divider, the hard, glistening edge of something impersonal. In the blink of

an eye, I'd lost contact with the helpful idea that we're all in this together. The sharp edge suggested otherwise: I was alone, and the world and its dolls were merely waiting to decay. Though I couldn't know it, later in life I'd dance right up to that edge and very nearly tumble over it into delirium. For the moment, the doll sat placidly in the sun, drying at its own pace.

Depressives, like superheroes, often have an origin story, and this is mine.

The Batman episode established my first gnawing distrust of life, and in trying to compensate for what I regarded as a deficiency even then, I tended to pendulum from a depressive indifference to the world to a frantic effort to embrace it. Caring too much, I now sensed, could hurt dreadfully . . . while caring too little was its own kind of death. In any case, the Batman moment haunted me, stuck to me like a piece of Bazooka gum on the sole of my shoe.

Psychologists who study the very young sometimes note that babies cry when separated from a beloved object—not merely because the object is beloved but because the baby hasn't been condemned yet to recognize the strict boundary between the me and the not-me. The object, for a baby, is mistaken for an extension of their being—so that, before memory, each new object can feel like an appendage that one has never been without.

I never told my mother about the Batman episode, but she was quick to remark on my subsequent tics, admonishing me, as each new obsession emerged, that I should not indulge it. In my early years, Mom was my closest friend, and we spoke with a shared humor and a brutal honesty that one associates with college roommates. Dad wasn't around much during the week, since each morning he had to commute to Syracuse—about an hour's drive from our house—to serve as a kidney doctor for the state of New York. Mom's job, meanwhile, was a five-minute jaunt down the road and up the hill to the campus of Colgate University, built in a flagrant if miniature imitation of an Ivy League school. Its planners had mingled the Gothic aesthetic with the Georgian to create a sober loveliness, and the institution is often named one of the country's prettiest campuses. Mom joined the

faculty at Colgate in 1977, the same year that *Star Wars* entered theaters and the U.S. sent the *Voyager* into space with a golden record holding the collective memory of humanity. The spacecraft's payload had been intended as both a gift to the aliens and a reminder, should our species ever extinguish itself, that we were once capable of great things.

Mom was just the second woman in the English department and one of only half a dozen on the faculty. A star at Smith and Yale and a beauty as well, she wore fashionably large glasses over blue eyes that it was my good fortune to inherit. Very Diane Keaton, based on photos and my father's account.

After only a few years on the faculty, Mom helped to establish the school's women's studies department. Tenure came in 1984, I arrived the following year, and my sister showed up four years after that, a beaming, enormous baby whom my parents named Jane. The appellation was a family name that doubled as a happy reference to the author Mom loved above all others: Jane Austen.

Certainly, the archness with which Mom needled my childhood neuroses was Austenian in its satiric bite and in its wisdom. When I entered a germaphobe phase in elementary school, she was nonplussed, but the concerns she showed were quite practical: "You'll have a very disappointing sex life if you go on like this," she told me one day upon noticing the chapped, flaky skin of my knuckles, the wages of too much washing. "How so?" I asked. Her response: "Good sex and squeamishness don't go together. You'll understand when it's time." I flinched a bit at this wisdom, but it did jolt me out of the phase, and within a week I was washing my hands a mere ten times daily.

Dad was the prude of the family, less hawk-eyed about my odd tics and easier to shock, if one was in the mood. Which was why, when I was six, I solicited from him, rather than Mom, an official introduction to the concept of sex. That afternoon, in my grandparents' guest room in eastern Long Island, Dad explained the whole shebang. But he didn't want to place too much emphasis on the genital mechanics; rather, he enriched his account with atmosphere and a degree of gentility. He explained, for example, that two people very much in love will express that love by setting aside an evening, going to a romantic restaurant, enjoying a fancy meal, and then, later, slowly taking off each other's clothes and joining bodies.

At the time I was a bit too literal-minded. Dad failed to specify that there was a change of venue between Dinner and Sex, so I contemplated his words for a while and finally asked my mother eagerly where one could find these restaurants-slash-bordellos. Once Mom grasped the root of my misunderstanding, she declared that henceforth, she'd take the lead in answering her children's questions about carnal matters—and soon about nearly anything to do with adult life. She preferred straight talk and thought the healthiest children were usually the least green or cosseted. In that spirit, she delighted in making my father uncomfortable—in leading him to laugh at his own prudishness. She used to say that if you don't talk to children honestly about sex, they'll end up *repressed*, a term she always seemed to pronounce between quotation marks, nodding to the Freudian cliché.

If there were a type-A-plus, that would be Mom. She kept a spotless house, drove Jane and me to all our various lessons and soccer games, cooked us fresh dinners each day—rich beef with noodles, or curried chicken, or, around Christmastime, Yorkshire pudding and big fat dripping roasts—all while managing a heavy teaching load and performing in not one but two choirs. As much as Mom demanded excellence from us, she was doubly exacting with herself, in the classroom and the kitchen and everywhere else, and from a young age, I saw how she drew fuel from her anxiety, propelling herself through insanely productive days on the strength of love but also intense worry. Some behaviors are inherited and some imitated; while clearly inherited, my anxiety in childhood also began, in some measure, as imitation, no less than my choice in books or manner of speech.

As a melancholic herself, Mom sort of got it, which is good, since Dad, a preternaturally optimistic, unnervingly placid guy, knew less how to identify and mollify neuroses. Mom started me on piano when I was four, largely to keep my mind from toxic idling. Scales and simplified Chopin came quickly, first on a sallow upright with tawny keys like nicotine-stained teeth, then on a secondhand but serviceable Wurlitzer baby grand, on which I gave Jane her first lessons. She would stand on the bench, and I'd guide her pink fingers, dainty even in their chubbiness, onto the desired keys, causing her to chortle whenever the hammer struck the string. Amusing my sister in these small ways became one of my chief consolations and distractions. Even before she could talk, I felt a tremulous

solidarity with this round, beaming little tyke—a deep and gangster-like loyalty.

Jane was only two when I got my father's strangely culinary sex talk, and I shielded her from the knowledge of the restaurant and of Dad's remarkable ineptness in describing it to me. This sense of protectiveness flowed both ways. A couple of years later, when Mom told Jane that the Easter Bunny wasn't real, Jane thought for a spell and then asked sadly, "Does Edward know?" (I did.) The two of us metabolized the revelations in a play we cowrote and performed in front of the living room fireplace. In the play, the Easter Bunny reveals to the children that he is real and cajoles them into keeping the secret from their well-meaning, dim-witted parents.

Of course, Jane was also a little devil, the sort of second child who'll take a permanent marker and draw all over the back of a ramshackle sofa, then grin at you, drop the marker, and waddle into the kitchen singing: *Look what Edward did to the couch!* Still, when she wasn't framing me for crimes against upholstery, we took good care of each other. Many nights when she was five or six, particularly when our parents were arguing, Jane would sneak into my room, and I'd read her *The Fantastic Flying Journey*. We'd huddle in a pillow fort and imagine ourselves floating up, up, up in a hot-air balloon that contained all we would need— picnic baskets full of food, and heavy tarps for shelter, and nothing to tether us to the sufferings of the earth.

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Chapter 2

The End of History

(1988–1997)

For the bulk of my childhood, we lived in the brick house on University Avenue in Hamilton, with bats in the attic and squirrels in the bird feeders and a backyard hemmed by lilac trees. There was also a fragrant little fringe of chives and other herbs from which deer would sometimes steal an illegal munch. By the driveway, Mom grew fat tomatoes on the vine. In the yard's northwest corner, Dad had assembled a swing set and a tree house, and in afternoons the shade cast by the tree house protected Mom's flower garden from the sun. When there were blizzards, we could jump right off the top of the monkey bars into the snow. Down the street was the creek where we took our dog for swims, and where my childhood best friend and I nearly capsized in a homemade raft we were inspired to build after reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One of our chief delights was to poke around rusted strips of track from the long-gone Ontario and Western Railway. Friends remarked that I had a particular urgency as I excavated. I think I was digging for a final answer to a question I hadn't posed aloud yet, something to do with avoiding terror. A search for nirvana along what used to be the Erie Canal. We'd return from these explorations carrying bits of ancient brick and huge nails the length of our forearms, which we used to mark foul lines when we played baseball on the huge flat fields surrounding our tiny K– 12 public school.

It was on these fields that I found the first of my surrogate brothers when I was three and four, Mike D. and above all Evan I. We'd play baseball for hours, Mike assuming the role of Randy Johnson while I channeled Ken Griffey Jr.—and when it rained, we watched old cowboy shows on the TV

and read Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*. There was an old swing set by the blackberry bushes, with two chain-link swings on which we'd kick ourselves higher and higher, toward that huge sky, our toes reaching ever closer toward God.

While Mom thought my salvation might reside in Art, Dad wondered whether the answer lay in Sport. Acting on his theory, he smoothed and painted a miniature baseball bat for my fourth birthday, taught me how to score Mets games, and, on the dwarfy slopes of tiny mountains called Labrador and Toggenburg, coached my skiing sister and me in the art of carving an elegant route through sheer ice.

When friends raised in more cosmopolitan settings hear about my rustic childhood, they sometimes scoff, as though I'm cribbing scenes from *Boys' Life* or *The Andy Griffith Show*. Among foreign acquaintances, these vignettes seem doubly incredible. A friend in college declared my family the "poster children for Boomer wholesomeness." Of course, by then my parents were divorced, but though my friend was speaking loosely, he wasn't wrong. Growing up in Hamilton in the 1990s was oddly heady. It was the perfect place to experience the end of history, as the phrase went at the time—and the beginning of whatever came next.

Despite all the elements of a bucolic idyll, our household was a weird one—weird in ways that soon expanded my vocabulary for describing mental disturbance. My parents, both academics, held a narrow if idiosyncratic view of which entertainments were appropriate for small children. Cartoons were immature and decadent—but watching Ray Milland lose his mind in *The Lost Weekend* or Anthony Andrews do the same in *Brideshead Revisited* was deemed good, honest fun for kids of any age. Ditto for raunchy English comedy, from *Monty Python* to *Blackadder* to *Absolutely Fabulous*. In my 1964 hardcover of *The Golden Treasury of Myths and Legends*, already more than twenty years old by the time I got to it, I read of Hercules, his flesh in agony from the poison of the Hydra, trying to tear off his skin, and finally burning himself alive to escape the torment. I mark that as my first encounter with the concept of suicide, or at least with the notion that under certain conditions it can be the most reasonable option. Accompanying my mother to various lectures and plays at Colgate and beyond, I met Medea and Oedipus long before I ever met Freud.

From the start I saw that one could go mad from drink or disease, or simply from getting lost in the act of creation. Half the poets whose lines my mother taught had died by their own hand, or by an illness that seemed inseparable from their genius. I was exposed early to pseudo-romantic ideas about how great art requires the experience of tragedy, and while I didn't quite understand the danger of that strange fetish, I was lucky to see it as something hollow, thus fundamentally unbeautiful. One afternoon when I was six, I buried my face between the cushions of a couch, the prickly fabric chafing against my cheeks as I wept, and I didn't hear my mother come into the room. She sat herself beside me and patted my back. "You know, a lot of sensitive and creative people have a period of depression." I turned to her, my face red from the cheap couch and the tears, and said, "Yeah, but that's such a cliché." Mom couldn't help laughing even as she cried a little herself.

On nights when Dad put me to bed, he'd often spin cowboy stories, ad-libbing the serialized escapades of a golden-hearted gunslinger named Pistol Pete, whom Dad thrillingly turned into a stand-in for me, giving Pete a dog just like ours, and a love for baseball, and even, once Jane was on the scene, a tiny baby sister whom Pete had to protect from highwaymen and corrupt sheriffs and other malefactors. "Do the one with the chandelier" was my frequent request, a cue for Dad to begin a new set of variations that ended with me, or rather Pete, in a saloon showdown, using matching silver revolvers to shoot the coarse ropes holding aloft a wagon-wheel chandelier, bringing the whole contraption down on the villains' heads. Dad delivered this cowboy commonplace with unfailing verve and indulged me when I'd ask him to "do the crash again." He'd roll his eyes up toward the ceiling, shoot with his finger-pistols—*pew! pew!*—and then reach over to shelter me from any bullets that might come from the surviving villains.

But my most frequent request was for Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, whose grimmer parts, Mom noted, seemed to be my favorites. I laughed immoderately when Peter's mom first reminded the kids to beware of the McGregor family: "your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor." I think I loved the story because it didn't have a happy ending; at the first book's close, there's the possibility that Peter has

actually caught his death from the cold and damp. And I was obsessed with the corners of the book's illustrations, with the question of what might be just outside the frame—where the shadows crept in, where the predator lay with his deadly hunger, where the world of childhood ended and that of adults began.

Sometimes if a day had been particularly long for Jane and me, Mom would simply sing us songs before sleep. She never quite had the ham gene that her sister, my aunt Nancy, had; to seem to be seeking attention would have struck her as unserious or buffoonish. But she'd trained as a singer at Smith College, when she wasn't memorizing Homer or finding new things to say about the poetry of Alexander Pope. She'd even toured Germany one year with the Smith College Chamber Singers. At night I'd often request "Moon River," even though it made me cry, usually at the start of the last verse:

Two drifters off to see the world
There's such a lot of world to see . . .

I never understood why it felt like the lyrics were the last words of some unfortunate person now vanished from this earth. But I recall powerfully how, in my mother's breath, the song became a love letter in spite of despair.

Some semesters, Mom would teach in England, and my childhood thus became divided between the agrarian idyll of Hamilton and the cosmopolis of London. The first time Colgate shipped us off was January 1992, when I was six and Jane barely two. Mom would be leading a six-month study group, mainly English majors, often from Long Island, almost all girls. The university housed our family in a flat in South Kensington, and Dad spent his days doing research on a grant at the Royal London Hospital.

I went to first grade at Bousfield Primary School. On the first day, the headmistress gave me a tour and informed me the school had been built on the site of Beatrix Potter's childhood home, which the Nazis had destroyed during the Blitz. "Actually, Beatrix was always miserable in that house," Mom said in a gossipy way when I brought it up. "Her family said she was glad to hear it was blown up." For the first several weeks at school, I kept

waiting to spot a family of rabbits, perhaps even descended from the colony that had inspired Peter.

Doing first grade on a different continent, I became dreadfully homesick, pining for Evan I. and Mike D. and my bed and my yard but also for Hamilton's air—Edenic, compared with the soot I'd find in the tissue whenever I blew my nose in London. I soon made friends, though: with the Lucys (there were two), with Mila (a quiet, playful girl distinguished by her smile and long braid), and above all with Rory, a curly-haired and opinionated waif who quickly replaced Evan as my adopted brother. Rory took me to a cricket pitch and, after having me knock a few balls around, determined that my baseball training had prepped me well. I joined the school team and welcomed cricket's entry to my list of Anglophilic obsessions.

Much later, therapists would ask me whether these occasional childhood displacements might have left me *decentered*. I don't think that's the case. But when I look at the photos from London in the early 1990s and observe my younger self wearing an oxford-cloth shirt and the world's tiniest tweed blazer, I do sometimes wonder what I might've become had I not spent much of my childhood writing self-serious plays and poetry, obsessing over my flaws on the piano, and generally pretending to be an adult. It's not that I was marooned between England and America so much as I felt, from an early age, caught in a sometimes frantic limbo between innocence and experience.

Whenever we were in London, Mom was so invested in treating my sister and me like little adults that she brought us to every play her students saw, usually twenty or more in a given semester. I would've been six when we saw Michael Maloney as Prince Hal in *Henry IV Part 1;* I wept for Falstaff and wrote Maloney a fan letter to which he responded with generous grace: "I'm touched you found me convincing as Hal, and I'm pleased to hear that you write plays yourself. One day I hope to appear in one of them." My sympathy for drunks and madmen quickly became absolute: Lear going crazy on the heath gave me sympathetic nightmares, as did Ophelia's frantic monologues about rosemary and pansies. (Both of these flora grew in our garden in the States, which I took as a portent.)

Seeing Nigel Hawthorne tearing off his clothes in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* called to mind the ravings one sometimes heard among London's indigent population, whom we navigated with no small

shame on our way to and from the plush red seats of London's National Theatre. In London, I found that madness and poverty were everywhere. We visited Bethlem Royal Hospital, the original Bedlam, with a historian friend of my mother's, who informed Mom's students that wealthy Londoners would tour asylums in the nineteenth century the way my sister and I might go to the zoo. The same historian led us through the Cleveland Street Workhouse in Marylebone, sometimes called the Strand Union Workhouse, where Charles Dickens was consigned with his family at age twelve, and which—this historian suggested—was likely the chief inspiration for important scenes in *Oliver Twist.*

These visits provided a visual aid to my ripening obsession with my own imagined sinfulness and general unworthiness. For reasons I can't explain, some self-reproving part of me determined that a hell-prison like Bedlam was exactly where I belonged, and even in adulthood, the specter of a nineteenth-century asylum or debtors' prison struck a special and personal terror.

When we returned to Hamilton in June 1992, just in time for my summer baseball season, I told Mom that I wanted to do what I could for all the modern-day Oliver Twists living in poverty. She looked at me in brief silence, laughed, and signed us up to work at our church's soup kitchen two nights a week. (Later, Mom would tell me: "I thought it was the best idea in the world—that if you were involved in the suffering of others, you might be less sad.") The folks we served at the kitchen were broadly divided into two groups: a contingent of elderly from a nearby managed-care facility, and an all-ages cohort bused in from a handful of shelters. We didn't exchange many words, but I would memorize their faces and grow upset if someone missed a week, fearing they'd disappeared permanently. When once or twice we got word that one of the old folks had died, my mom broke the news to me as though we'd all been family.

It wasn't fun, exactly, to go to the kitchen, but I looked forward to it every week. Even then, I thought often of Batman and the hard edge and came to believe a version of my mother's credo: that if I could hurl myself into the middle of life, if I could simply behave as though the edge held no power, then I'd be freed of a strange and unpredictable pain. Each time we tramped home after an evening at the kitchen, I felt fresh gratitude for our family, and for the bricks of our house (which, per the Big Bad Wolf, were the best stuff for making houses).

At the same time, the homesickness I'd known in London now took a new shape, and I began to wonder whether one could be homesick *anywhere*. What if "home" was also a fable or myth?

The following year, I saw a building move in a way that has unsettled me ever since.

As part of a series of disputes that I could never keep straight, Colgate and the alumni of one of its fraternity chapters had agreed to move the frat's ancestral house a quarter mile south, to a new address on Broad Street. Along with other townsfolk thronging the green, my mom and I snapped photos as enormous yellow machines lifted the building onto a pair of side-by-side eighteen-wheelers. Then the house made its stately way down the street.

The house weighed three hundred tons, the papers said. If you stood toward the middle or back of the onlooking crowd, you didn't even see the flatbeds, so the house became a floating thing, unmoored from its history, deracinated and curiously vulnerable-looking. The image, and the whole surreal exercise, began to nauseate me, and I asked to go home. "Why?" Mom kept asking gently. I didn't say anything. As I watched the house float away from me, I was brought back to that first semester in London, when homesickness had struck like a disease.

The autumn when I was eight, the regional cable station put out a casting call for Tiny Tim in a production of *A Christmas Carol* in Syracuse, directed by Tazewell Thompson, a bona fide Broadway director, with an original score by Dianne Adams McDowell, who happened to direct our church's modest choir (Mom was a prominent soprano therein). Dianne said that she and Taz still hadn't found the right actor to play the famous waif and suggested I come to Syracuse to sing a few songs and deliver a monologue or two. Tazewell told my mother after the audition: "He is uncannily good at tragedy." I took this as a compliment rather than a warning.

Two days later, we got the call that I would play Tiny Tim in twenty-three performances that winter. I'd receive an honorarium, largely to cover

gas, and would technically become one of the Young Performers who receive union protections through the Actors' Equity Association. Suddenly, I had carte blanche to skip school and piano lessons and was getting profiled in such beloved regional papers as the *Syracuse Post-Standard* and the *Mid-York Weekly;* in afternoons and evenings I'd run songs with the rest of the cast. The adult actors had tales of working with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Martha Graham but treated us kids like equals. From the prop coordinator, I learned how to use crutches without cutting off circulation to my tiny arms. I also developed a Major Thing for a girl two years my senior who had a nonspeaking role in one of the party scenes. I never expressed my love but did manage to endear myself to her with regular gifts of grape soda. While cleaning my room that November, my mother found my diary and, as I learned only recently, allowed herself to snoop.

"I found this entry that said, 'I'm finally with people who understand me,' and I knew it was true," Mom told me later. "And it made me sad, but it also made me feel that I hadn't been wrong—that it was good to give you lots of scripted time, because in unscripted time, you might simply fret."

She was absolutely right. The *Christmas Carol* performances of late 1993 and early 1994 were, for me, the joyous pinnacle of my eight years of life, the bright star atop a rather indifferent tree. Each time I exchanged backstage jokes on an equal footing with actors who'd been in Bond movies, each time we took a curtain call, each time Bob Cratchit raised me over his head and piggybacked me all over the theater to raise my spirits during a long rehearsal, I caught a high that seemed to bring my life thus far into focus. I was doing precisely what I was supposed to be doing.

And then, just as quickly, I wasn't. The Christmas season can be extended *almost* indefinitely, but sooner or later the decorations come down and you have to go back to school. If you've been floating a mile or three above reality, the reentry can be dreadful. The play had made me feel part of a select and joyous world. Leaving the stage and returning to the comparatively dismal routines of third grade proved anticlimactic, and I began to feel aimless, then apathetic, then stressed over my apparent inability to feel joy. At school I was still bent on getting A's, but now it was all rote. I'd spend afternoons that January at the piano, hating myself for each mistake and ending many days by weeping. Mom was a comfort and let me stay up late watching *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* on TV Land. How I envied the main character's hat-tossing optimism.

One night I asked Mom: “What if I can’t stop being unhappy?” She gave me the saddest smile I can remember and teared up when she finally answered: “Oh, you’ll learn how to stop.” I believed her. But one day in late January 1994, I simply couldn’t get out of bed. Mom huddled with Dad:

“He’s sadder than I realized,” she said.

“He’s sad?” my father responded.

But Dad got a referral for a child psychologist. A week later I was sitting on the ancient, comfortable couch of Dr. David Keith in Syracuse.

Even at that young age, I knew the clichés about guilt and first children, not to mention the supposed epigenetic baggage of my dual Catholic and Jewish heritage, and considered my sin fixation and neurotic jitters to be standard-issue. Dr. Keith, a warm and witty man with a Socratic beard and a deep gentleness in dealing with children’s pain, did me the kindness of taking my problems seriously and speaking to me like an adult. “Go ahead, lie down if you want, or pace,” he said on the second visit. “I want to get you out of your head and into your life.” He asked about sports, about music, about why *A Christmas Carol* had mattered so much. The good doctor kept meticulous notes, and years later, after depression reclaimed me in adulthood and I wrote to Keith to figure out what had gone so wrong, the good doctor recalled my elementary school self with precision and heartbreaking sympathy. One of his notes from 1994:

> Edward is highly intelligent and terrified he will misuse this potential. I believe he feels his time is wasted if he is not creating or performing in some way. It seems probable the intensity of home life is a spur to his sense of guilt. . . . His parents are often at odds or, as he puts it, “trying to prove something” to each other, and Edward absorbs that strife. It seems possible he blames himself for the arguments. I have no doubt he feels he could bring things to peace if he were better in some way. . . . We have discussed ways to distract from sadness and guilt. I would like to see if he could begin to experience his gifts not as a burden but as something to enjoy. . . .

My mother accompanied me to my second session with Dr. Keith. He had an admirable policy of not talking to parents when the child wasn’t there, so I was privy to most of the conversations about my progress. I remember Mom saying she’d hoped that theater would improve my mood,

not simply because acting made me happy but most of all because it could teach me how to *act* happy, and couldn't that lead to being happy? Dr. Keith asked if I agreed. I thought about it and said I did. I also said I didn't want to be one of those people who held on to sadness because it made them special in some way. For all the ambient bohemian elements of my childhood, I knew there was little to romanticize in my own bouts of melancholy, especially once I'd learned, as I did among the actors, that a better life was possible.

Keith responded with uncharacteristic glibness. "No, sadness doesn't make you special. And being special doesn't make you sad. Being *different* can make you sad, and that's something we can work on."

I was numb that day and had to force myself to cry as I nodded. I had to make myself cry a good deal with Dr. Keith, especially if our session fell on one of my rare non-sad days—because what good was a visit if the doctor couldn't see the pain I was usually in? On the ride home, I thought about what Mom had said, about how acting happy could be a way out, and I told her I'd try to playact being happy if it would make *her* happy. She pulled over the car and started to cry a little. No, she told me, I shouldn't pretend like that, and I shouldn't worry about her. But I didn't know whether to believe her, and once home, I took refuge in my room and let the real tears come.

My parents were always a little showy around Dr. Keith, taking clear pains to joke and compliment each other. They were like a couple trying to prove to an immigration authority that they were *truly in love*. Outside Keith's office, they never seemed to enjoy each other's company for very long. While Dad spoke of their courtship fondly, his romantic memory of Mom seemed a little light on detail, not to say passion, in the years I knew them as a couple. Dad delighted in telling me, whenever I expressed a child's absolute devotion for our dog, how Mom had discovered her as a pup in a litter at the town farmers' market, three years before my birth, and had wept when Dad said he was adamantly against taking the animal home. Dad would always linger over how he hadn't been able to bear Mom's tears and that they basically dissolved his capacity to say no. So he and Mom brought the dog home and named her Fanny, mainly as an arch reference to the English architect and collector Sir John Soane—he built the Bank of England, among other triumphs, and received his knighthood in 1831. When Soane's wife died, she left him her dog, Fanny. Fanny, in turn, died

on Christmas Day 1820, and Soane, now bereft of wife and dog, erected a large, ludicrous headstone in his backyard that read, in homage to Shakespeare: ALAS, POOR FANNY!

Morbid, in retrospect, that Mom named Fanny after a dog most famous for being dead. *Our* Fanny died when I was nine, and Grandpa, a chemical engineer by trade and a craftsman in his bones, carved a wooden grave marker for our own backyard with the same "Alas! . . . "—though we didn't bury her there, instead scattering her ashes down the road in the creek where an old blue heron lived. The grave marker served as first base whenever friends and I played stickball in the yard. It ended up fielding a lot of grounders.

Trouble was, in Dad's recountings, even this apparently tender memory of Mom crying about a dog seemed to be about something other than my parents' love. Perhaps Dad simply favored a specific brand of sentimentality, but the main theme of the tale—and I heard it all the time—was Dad's delight in his own exquisite sensitivity, his chivalry, even, in acceding to the higher claim of a woman's tears. As I'd discover later, it doesn't take heroism to stanch a lover's weeping; often the stanching is as selfish as it is kind.

More recently, and for as long as I could remember, Mom and Dad's love was a shared thorn in the side, with each blaming the other for that stabbing sensation they repeatedly felt.

Their fighting was always verbal, perhaps to a fault. There certainly wasn't any hitting—though once a frying pan did get dented against the stove after one of them brought it down to punctuate some point or other. The arguments were invariably petty and no less passionate for it. Was my dad late home from work? Almost always. That piqued my mom, who would then make a big, wordless show of how difficult everything was: having to get back up from the table to fetch a missing fork, swatting my dad's hands away when he tried to take the dishes to the sink because "No, no, you relax, *I'll* do it." The dialogue wasn't exciting enough to bear recounting. Once they'd begun their jockeying to see who'd get to do the dishes, I knew it was time for my sister and me to leave the kitchen. Soon they'd be bringing up ancient grievances that were no less silly than who would take command of the sink. Only occasionally did they turn from battling over proxy issues and get real: Mom said, *You'll never take my*

work as seriously as you take your own! And Dad retorted: *Maybe if we didn't live so far from Syracuse, I could get home earlier . . .*

The intensity varied, and in some seasons the pair achieved a peaceful sweetness, holding each other and making private jokes about the kids. Jane and I cherished any periods when Mom and Dad weren't trying to enlist us against the other. Summertime was often best: Neither parent had classes to teach—although Dad's research work continued—and my sister and I were swimming and playing sports and exhausting ourselves without our parents having to stage-manage things. But the tension would never be far from any room that the two occupied together. Dad resented Mom because we lived five minutes from her job and an hour from his; because in their early marriage, and even in front of the children on occasion, she mocked his taste, undercut him, treated him like a child. Once at a party when they were newlyweds, he ordered a rum and Coke, and she lambasted him ruthlessly and publicly for ordering "a kid's drink." Most of all, he resented her because his parents had never quite forgiven him for marrying a shiksa, and then they'd both died before I was born, elevating their distrust of my mother to a sort of judgment from beyond the grave.

Predictably, Christmas could entail an ordeal: Normally not much of a drinker, Dad once or twice made himself quietly and pointedly drunk in protest of the tree we decorated and the stockings Mom had knitted herself. Mom, in turn, could grow furious over Dad's workaholism and accompanying obliviousness to domestic matters, and I saw how she would sometimes enjoy this fury, deriving perverse pleasure from poking at it like a sore tooth. Dad has often recalled a moment from when I was around three, probably the summer of the Batman episode: me, standing between my warring parents, holding my arms out to keep them apart, pleading with them to stop fighting. Dr. Keith fixed on this vignette and brought it up in our sessions again and again, encouraging me to get specific about the panic or despair I felt over my parents. I told him my stomach always felt like it was doing violent things to itself, that my arms tingled, that my breathing could get shallow and melodramatic. Dr. Keith taught me breathing exercises that would help me feel less scared. I practiced them a lot in church.

As late winter became cold spring, and memories of *A Christmas Carol* receded, I would still get jolts of terror now and then. I'd be doing a little garden work for Mom—fifty cents an hour to keep me in baseball cards—

and abruptly would freeze and have to lean against the old maple, fixing my gaze on a blue jay and breathing as slowly and purposefully as Keith had taught me to, trying to slow the despair and fear that chased after each other with such hungry constancy. But then came the summer, and my world returned to color, and I went two months without shedding tears, real or fake, in Keith's office, so I told the doctor that I didn't feel I had to see him anymore. He agreed. "Keep writing" was his last bit of advice. "If you're honest when you write, it will help more than you can know."

I took that advice to heart; and I remember it because I followed it, dutifully recording the quote in my diary, a slimmish brown notebook with a silhouette of Sherlock Holmes on the cover. While I soon stopped doing my breathing exercises—it would take a number of scares over subsequent decades before I learned the basic truth that with neuroses like mine, you can't afford to skip maintenance—I rarely stopped writing, even as everything else fell away. I'd write between school and soccer practice, between soccer practice and orchestra rehearsal, sometimes even scrawling in a notebook on my way home, my cuffs dusted with rosin from the violin bow that, if it came near your nose, gave off a rich amber scent suggesting the old world. And of course, during parental squabbles, as a way to distract myself, I still wrote stories and plays that my sister could memorize or perform with me. For years, I thought this was all fine and normal.

Throughout my childhood, the religious question remained charged. Mom wanted to take me to church each week. The proposal offended my dad's sense of himself as a Jew, and he proposed every other weekend. When I was five and six, I'd looked forward to those lazy Sundays at home, with Mom gone off to Jesus and Dad in the living room telling me stories from the Pentateuch. After the first few months, the fables were set aside, and on my non-church Sundays we'd watch baseball instead. The point wasn't really to make me an observant Jew but, rather, to ensure I didn't become too Christian.

Yet I began to pray, in the hope that a god might release me from my perverse fear of the passage of time. The yawn of time ahead can drive a kid mad: All those things to be done. All those things you punish yourself in

advance for leaving undone. Time became my greatest source of doubt and fear. Between its finitude and plenitude, it hemmed me in.

In seventh grade, I processed this dread of time in the most literal way imaginable: I became obsessed with watches. Not Rolexes or Omegas or anything so exquisite, nothing a normal watch fancier might covet. No, I was interested in the watches I saw each week at the Ames store next to what was then a Grand Union grocery.

So parochial an obsession! Yet I thrilled to the Casio company's digital offerings, with their limpid electric-blue LCD displays, still a newish gimmick around 1998. So, too, those smart analog Timexes that hawked impressive ocean depths under which the glass would stoically maintain its integrity. Commanding my most earnest and rarefied devotion were the Timexes marketed to outdoorsmen, with a compass built into the face—thus encompassing both time and space, all for $17.99 or less.

During late spring of seventh grade, I prevailed on my dad to "surprise" me with a Timex Expedition watch, with Indiglo on the numbers and hands so you could see, for example, what time it was if you were fleeing the Stasi through an unlit tunnel. The Expedition was in part a congratulations present, commemorating my baseball team's first night-game win, which featured me driving in the tying run and then scoring the go-ahead.

The gift brought as much trouble as it did joy. I would despair for half an hour or more that I'd scratched the glass, and to verify the destruction I'd wreaked on it, I'd hold the watch every which way under a direct lightbulb. If, after such close analysis, I couldn't identify any new imperfections, my relief brought overwhelming contentment in which all dread was exhaled—for an hour, at least.

"Will I scratch the glass if I use a towel on it?" I asked my mother one night at home.

"I really don't know," she said with the exasperation you'd expect at being interrogated on this theme for the umpteenth time. "Normally, I'd say no, but that doesn't mean *you* wouldn't find a scratch. *Most people* don't put their watch under a microscope at the end of each day . . . "

My obsession continued into the summer, when one day I found myself in my grandparents' guest room, inspecting the glass on the watch for splotches of dried sugar; my sister had spilled some orange juice at the table, and I'd convinced myself that some of the insidious stickiness had befouled the watch. Yet as the sun came through the slanting blinds

revealing not a speck or scratch on my precious timepiece, I was struck with a thought as obvious as it was thunderous: I could always replace a given part. No matter how poor a steward I was of this remarkable device, I could always restore the watch to its prelapsarian state, to its virginal untouchedness.

"Dad, do you think it'd be hard to find specific parts from the company?"

"I'm no expert," sighed the patriarch, who was nearly as bored with my fretfulness as Mom. "But I don't think there's a huge market for parts, not for a twenty-dollar watch."

A day or two later I looked up the number for Timex HQ and wrote it in the back of a diary. But before I could work myself up to make the call, the paranoia fled. I might not be able to free myself from Time, but I'd freed myself from Timex, and the relief was like getting off a murder charge.

Certainly, my mom was pleased. "You haven't been banging on about that watch," she said over a newspaper one evening while I was distracted with *The Ministry of Fear* on Turner Classic Movies.

"Yeah, I figured it out. You just have to separate all the parts in your head, then it's easy . . . "

And it was—for a time.

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Chapter 3

A Class Act

(1999–2001)

“He’d be happier where his talents are appreciated” was my grandma’s line urging my mom to send me off to a fancy New England boarding school. “Don’t worry, we’ll pay.” I wasn’t sure I believed this last part—Grandpa was a congenital penny-pincher and had gone far himself in outer-borough public schools and at Brooklyn Polytechnic, where he earned his engineering degrees. It sounded like a nice idea that I shouldn’t bank on.

I also wasn’t sure how badly I wanted to go if it meant being far from my friends, especially Evan I. and a newish Hamilton arrival named Mallory, for whom I’d developed a big crush, which she returned in a small way. But Grandma lobbied me, delicately and persistently, to go, saying the money shouldn’t give me pause because Grandpa had a bunch of stock in his old company, and the stock had just split. She said they could even send Jane along with me once she was old enough. I tried to square my automatic belief in anything Grandma said with my knowledge of Grandpa’s famous thrift. Surely he wasn’t about to drop five figures a year to send me off to play the violin alongside the American aristocracy.

I was wrong.

We chose Hotchkiss, in Lakeville, Connecticut. In memory, it was I who chose, but the choice may have been coached, and the pages on this subject in my diary read more like rationalization than deep enthusiasm: “It’s small, it’s ranked higher than Choate, it has a great organ in the chapel, and it’s not all boys (THANK GOD).” Mallory, much more worldly than I, had heard of the school and said it was “cool.” She threw me a going-away party with

karaoke and made me a sweatshirt that said “Gimme a Hot Kiss—I go to Hotchkiss.”

I was thirteen and nervous as hell when my parents drove me off to school, our station wagon packed to its ceiling with clothes and books and sheet music, plus my violin and clarinet and baseball gear. Dad and I had lashed my little green bike to the roof, and its wheels hung over the side, creating gyrating shadows on the highway beside us.

After a little more than four hours, the wagon climbed a hill and rolled through Hotchkiss’s front gates toward the central quad. The main avenue was shaded by arching oaks that called to mind the stately yew alleys of a historic English estate. It felt like walking into a brochure.

I’d always thought the Subaru was rather badass. It boasted *all-wheel* drive, practically a muscle car compared to my mom’s ancient Mazda sedan. But I quickly saw that each dorm was encircled by Land Rovers and BMWs. Ruddy dudes with easy swaggers materialized to greet us, identifying themselves as proctors. “Why are their shirts like that?” Mom asked Dad. She meant the collars, each popped impudently upward. “I guess it’s the style,” Dad said, bemused. The sheer number of polos in various shades of blue—the dominant being “Bearcat blue,” in honor of the school’s mascot—felt farcical, especially given the proctors’ look-alike blond hair and chino shorts.

“Wow, I had no idea this was such a blue-collar school,” I joked to Mom. She grinned and, remembering her duties as guardian of my etiquette, told me to “stop it.”

My assigned roommate was a diminutive dude from Seattle, one of two kids in our class who was shorter than I was. He made up for his stature by being good at hockey, and by having one of the longest names I’ve ever encountered. I’ll fudge it out of respect for his privacy, but it was the precise number and rhythm of syllables as Odin Steffanson-Mittendorfer, complete with the hyphen. He should’ve been a Nordic explorer in the age of Amundsen. Instead, he was a fourteen-year-old hockey defender with a bowl cut. But he was a musician—a drummer—and that boded well, even if he preferred metal to Mozart.

The homesickness began before my parents even drove off. Independent in other ways, I’d never been to a sleepaway camp, never faced such an indefinite estrangement from family and hearth—and it was this indefiniteness that made the separation feel crueler. I wept into a pillow on

my lower bunk, while Odin issued soprano snores from the upper bunk. So many nights lying there in bed, I thought ahead to the day when my parents' fighting and loving would come to an end, and Jane and I would oversee the funerals and comfort our aunts, and all the while I'd be doing the math: how many dinners, how many days, how many memories had I willingly squandered simply because, when Grandma suggested boarding school, I'd lacked the self-possession to say, *No, this will end the family, I'm staying . . .*

At Hotchkiss, the promised future stretched before us, as serene and smooth as a putting green. The columns and inscriptions from Virgil—monuments to our future greatness. A finishing school for future commercial titans, for the aristocracy of NYC and Chicago. It was Hogwarts for kids shaken awake at age ten by a Cornish groundskeeper who informed them, "Yer a WASP, Harry!" We were here, circularly, to become *ourselves*.

I didn't know what that would mean, practically speaking. There were expectations, mainly mine; there were capacities and achievements, or at least a few faded ribbons indicating a successful childhood; there was my physical body (an inferior vessel: I rejected it, hoping that time would do for my diminutive stature and skinny ass what no degree of working out or overeating had seemed able to so far). Sure, there was the person I wanted to be: placid, virtuous, early to rise, unflappable, never at a loss for a quip, one who made time to build houses for the homeless and walk kindly grannies across the street. In between, there was only the dash, the drive, the mad hope. I looked around at my glamorous peers. So many seemed to define themselves by the destiny encoded in their names. Alongside the solidity of their prospects, I fretted that there was no single, stable *me*. In my imagination, that apparent absence seemed to spell doom.

The school sat on fifty or so acres in a little slice of the Southern Berkshires, perched on the soft-rolling hills between the big lake, Wononscopomuc, and its smaller cousin to the south, Wononpakook. Close to our east was the village of Lime Rock. The elevation in our little northwest corner of Connecticut was modest, but one felt close to the heavens, and quite exposed.

In the 1980s, some neo-hippie students had persuaded the school to let them build cabins at strategic points along the wooded trails, and the kids built them well and named them after Grateful Dead songs. By my day, you could use these venues to try your first joint or lose your virginity—or so it appeared from the outside to a tremulous virgin who'd never touched cannabis. Many classmates discovered the extent of the land for themselves while using the cover of the woods for illicit adventures. Me, I drew my mental map of the grounds early, during dawn cross-country practices. In my memory of our wholesome band of runners, everyone's face is dewy and innocent. My early cross-country coaches in Hamilton had taught me that to run a route intimately was to belong to it, and I clung to the mantra with clammy hands—*here's how I'll beat the homesickness*. That first season I ran hard and long, until my body rebelled and I began vomiting after each race.

Our coach was a New Zealander, an older Abe Lincoln–faced fellow, all graven wrinkles that made his face look hard. Among runners he was a legendary figure, though the legend changed depending on whom you were talking to. Some said he'd once completed an ultramarathon without touching water; others that he'd been an Olympian in three sports in the early 1980s. In the most lurid tale, our coach was a world-class kickboxer who'd inadvertently killed a teammate and close friend with a particularly devastating blow to the chest, and had been so shaken by the accident that he'd quit the sport altogether. This was the most compelling etiology for his gravitas as a running coach. I never confirmed where the last story originated or whether it held any truth. I suspect it was invented entirely as a way for adepts in an uncool sport to claim some of the martial valor; to elevate our sweat to that of the hockey and lacrosse teams, the two most favored sports.

When I wasn't disciplining myself through running, I was studying in my monkish and self-flagellating way, especially French and Latin, which I adored, and math, a language that came less naturally and therefore angered and interested me all the more.

It was during one of those first late nights, in some lull that followed my absorbing Catullus or Cicero (fun) before facing down math (stressful), that Odin laid out his totalizing theory of the sexual economy in a school such as ours. We were talking about a sophomore we knew, whom a very attractive senior had taken a shine to. Though he hadn't yet walked her back

to her dorm before lock-in—the established preliminary in any public courtship at school—it was reported that they'd be dating soon. She'd decided as much, or so They said, and no one questioned whether the guy might object (he didn't), so the girl's pronouncement was treated as a guarantee.

"How does a sophomore date a senior," I wondered earnestly, as though beginning my approach to an algebraic problem.

"He's tri-var," Odin said matter-of-factly while cracking his knuckles. "And he's tall. Playing three varsity sports means you can date three years above yourself, maybe even more . . . " Odin slowed the cracking of his knuckles to a more pensive rate, as though wondering just how high such a paragon might go.

"And two varsity sports?"

Odin considered. "Maybe two years above yourself. But it also depends on the sport. Hockey and lacrosse are always gonna count more than golf or swimming or diving or even soccer."

"Or cross-country?"

"Yeah, sorry. It's not a bad thing," he added diplomatically. "It's just that contact sports count more with girls. I'm short, but it's okay because I play hockey." He paused. "Football is the exception: lots of contact, but with girls, there's no guarantee."

"And musicians?"

"If it rocks, it's a plus. Otherwise . . . "

"Nerd shit?"

"Boom."

While I'd been banging my head against basic trig, Odin had established a whole econometrics for age-gap sex. And I was less distressed by the dismissive treatment of cross-country in Odin's cosmology than I was charmed by the total sincerity and confidence with which he'd ventriloquized an imagined consensus. Lest it be taken for a joke, he returned often to these philosophical touchstones when analyzing this or that bit of gossip—why an apparently undistinguished day student was suddenly getting invited to weekends in NYC, say, or why a spotty sophomore dude had recently been elevated at the whim of a field-hockey captain. It was a goofy cosmology, but I envied his faith in it.

My own faith was in something of a crisis. A sense of sin fell thickly about me; a single erotic dream could leave me ashamed for days. As there

were no proper Sunday services in the chapel, certainly not Anglican ones, I arranged to ride with one of the deans to Trinity Episcopal Church near Lime Rock each week, where I could apologize to God in person for my laziness and sadness (which spoke to a lack of character), for staying up too late, for being just okay at math, for my homesickness, for leaving Jane behind. If those Sunday mornings didn't bring me closer to God, it's probably because I didn't allow them to. My strange shame formed a tight seal that could shut out the Lord Himself. But church did allow me to feel closer to my family, whom I missed with a physical ache. I knew Mom would be in the choir stalls in Hamilton, in the same moment, hearing some of the same readings and singing from the same hymnal.

None of us quite knew who our classmates were when it came time, later that month, to choose a class president. I ran automatically, because it was the sort of thing one was supposed to do—and won. It was a backhanded victory: Yes, they trusted me not to fuck up the ice cream social, but mainly, they liked having the tiny guy as a mascot. *Look at that little dude up there!* Certainly, I was padding my résumé. I think I was also trying to plant a flag and declare a new home. The night of my victory, Odin stood at the door to our room, playing martial-sounding patterns on his snare drum and informing visitors that "the president will see you when he's good and ready."

I had biweekly meetings with Skip, the headmaster, little informal things where he'd try to take the temperature of the class. What I didn't tell him was that I often wanted to die that first semester, not in some grandiose way but as a practical escape from the longing for home: *Boy, would it be nice not to feel this*. In fact, I might have fallen somewhat apart without the attention of Madame Demaray.

Mme. Demaray was the grande dame of the languages wing, an elegant older woman with short hair, a bold, almost saucy smile, and a commanding presence. She was exacting and charming and very protective of me, and one of the few teachers I trusted with confessions of homesickness. Toward the end of freshman fall, she asked what I'd be doing for my winter sport. "The dark comes early in Connecticut," she said with ominous delicacy, as though I'd been raised in Barbados. "You'll want something to keep your spirits up." I said I'd be doing a special off-season training program for cross-country, with my exercise for each week approved by the team's assistant coach. Demaray frowned and said the plan didn't sound very fun,

what about joining her Voltaire discussion group? Knowing she was there, and cared, made some of the loneliness manageable.

Demaray was right: The dusk came when we'd hardly left classes for the day. At first, tiered sprints across the golf course felt ghostly and thrilling, a dash of New England Gothic; later, they became a crepuscular grind. When the prospect of woods and hills made me too sad or frantic, I'd lace up my running shoes in the dorm and spend an hour doing sprints up and down the stairwell. It was better than any treadmill for endurance, our Kiwi coach had said, and my classmates were sometimes bemused by these masochistic rituals, watching me in a pair of mesh shorts and a headband running in spirals up and down, going nowhere. The practice confirmed my eccentricity. "Scheinman the lineman, getting huge quads," someone once offered by way of color commentary.

A recurrent shock at Hotchkiss was how degenerate the conversation could be, how grim and straightforward the social codes. Children are better than adults at giving themselves over completely and perfectly to a mood, and their cruelty is thereby total and often undisguised. In my first week at the school, I saw two kids get punched full-on in the nuts while leaving the shower; a passel of athletes taunting a kid with a speech defect; and a small flock of girls decreeing loudly that [name redacted] had better learn to vomit if she wanted to have cheekbones. In the kids' eyes, I saw joyous hate and knew in that moment how many of us are capable of murder. Not helping matters, everyone was toxically horny, even the guys who were "getting play," as the phrase went, and most of us weren't getting any. A couple of gay friends later told me that the school had fucked them up deeply.

To my innocent eyes, most of my fellow students—the older ones, particularly—were as jaded as deadbeat dads or aging con men. It was an era of modish nihilism for young white men: Woodstock '99, Y2K, Korn and *South Park* and *Jackass* and *Opie and Anthony*. Hell, the Columbine shooters had kicked off the school-shooting trend less than six months before I'd arrived at Hotchkiss, and Hotchkiss itself was built with gun money, so in a way brutality was all around us. Love could be scarce. But I'd found it before in the theater, and that's where I looked again.

The big play that first year was John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves*. I'd hoped for something with a big cast (Shakespeare, maybe), or at least something conventionally witty (George Bernard Shaw?). Guare was gonzo in a way I didn't quite appreciate. At the time it felt like performing in a *Doonesbury* strip, something that'd strike your parents as edgy. In the tiny cast, I was given the part of Ronnie, the son of a jingle-composing father and a schizophrenic mother. Ronnie is shell-shocked from a deployment in Vietnam and has gone AWOL, returning to the States a shaken and fidgety figure. But he also has grand religious ambitions: As the play opens, Ronnie has built a bomb in a cigar box and plans to use it to detonate the pope.

Our director was Susan, the bob-haired, hyper-skinny, often brilliant co-chair of the drama department. With her scarves and turtlenecks and devotion to paisley and coffee, she could've been one of Mom's Smith classmates. Like Mme. Demaray, she became for me a kind of adopted aunt and guru. Susan took an interest in me from our first meeting, in her office in the basement of the school's main building. She asked me for a monologue, and I gave her Henry V at Agincourt, and at the end of my delivery, she got up and came around the desk and hugged me and said we'd have four years to do some fun things.

Privately, I was a bit down on the whole production and considered Ronnie a rotten role; even his laugh lines were middling. It was particularly galling that I was expected to get a buzz cut, to appear as though I'd just fled the army. To make oneself look like an idiot for such a secondary role! If you're skinny with protuberant ears, a buzz cut makes you look sickly and weird, a patient being readied for lobotomy.

"Well, guess I'm not getting a spring girlfriend now," I told Odin as he used his trimmer to buzz me.

In fact, the whole play seemed designed to activate something contrarian in me. Some of the problems may have been, ahem, thematic. Move Ronnie's family a rung or two up the economic ladder, tone down the mother's schizophrenia and replace it with mere anxiety and OCD, and the fictional family's life was uneasily analogous to my own: a pathologically, delusionally optimistic father; a moody, fixative mother; and a son who seemed at times on the brink of exploding. And then, predictably but devastatingly, a second woman, the father's lover, unknown to wife and son until now, with whom the father has been casually arranging to destroy the

household. The precision of the analogy would be revealed to me that summer.

In the meantime, Susan insisted that I was “fighting something”—that, in playing Ronnie, I was “showing the anger but not the sadness.” She kept sounding that note until one rehearsal when I got it right, almost summoning tears. Susan was thrilled; I left the theater afterward feeling no pride in the work and with the distinct impression that Ronnie’s depression had sunk its teeth into me. I returned to my room sharply aware of how far I was from any sense or possibility of home.

I’d hear later from kids in Susan’s classes that she’d taken to using me as a point of reference. One evening after rehearsal, not long before opening night, I asked Susan about it.

“Yes,” she said, “I tell students to study you, because you have the perfect actor’s mask.”

“Come again?”

“See, you don’t even know it. But your face—when you’re onstage, you’re ready at any moment for shocking transformation, ready to improvise, to do, to *be*, whatever is needed.”

Normally, I would’ve basked in any praise from above, but after I reflected on it, I felt ashamed by Susan’s observation. The quality she was describing was one I shared with every sycophant and spy who’d ever walked the earth. How pathetic: to be ever ready to please and mollify the larger, hungrier beasts; to laugh a half second too late or too early; to fashion one’s emotions around the expectations of an audience; never to be *oneself*.

That first year at prep school, I wondered why I often felt on the precipice of being sent home. Sometimes, in the hall or the dining room, you’d hear older kids talking about some former classmate who’d gotten the boot or simply dropped out. Maybe he’d collected too many C’s, or gotten caught drinking, or spent too much time at student health discussing his mood problems. And they’d say something like “Oh, he ended up at [another totally fine prep school], which might as well be public school.” I shivered to imagine what they’d say of me when I was gone. *Remember old*

broken Ted? Short dude with the skinny legs, kept speaking French to himself? The guy couldn't hack it—fell apart during the SAT II's.

Somewhat confoundingly, fear of the boot stoked in me a morbid and irrational fear of ending up on the street. Whenever I imagined being homeless, I always pictured it in London. I'd become one of those sooty figures from my childhood.

This paranoia transformed somewhat on the second night of sophomore fall, when Skip, the headmaster, put on his bluest bow tie and showered me with awards at the first all-school meeting: prizes for excellence in French, Latin, English, for GPA, for "citizenship" . . . It was gratifying if a bit uncomfortable. Yet by the next day I began resenting the prizes. They implied a debt: *So you've proved it—you can succeed here. What now? How do you avoid messing it up?* The answer was to work even harder, banish all laziness, remove all space between thought and action. Ascent invites the fear of falling.

I became even more puritanical about effort and commitment; if the thought occurred that I ought to stay up late devising a mnemonic system for a certain group of organic compounds, or redoing a Latin composition from scratch to improve my fluency, then I seized that thought, brooking no excuse until I'd made good on it. The school had told me I was smart enough. Now it was a question of will.

As if to counterbalance this headstrong, desperate new chapter in proving myself, the school brought in a crop of new sophomores that fall, furnishing me with new friends who made me feel much less like an outcast, including Noah, a chronically smiley, adorably corny little guy, and Bennet, aka Bear, proficient at football and baseball and a fellow French and Latin student with a pleasant gruffness. Bear lived down the road in Sharon, Connecticut, and was one of the school's contingent of commuting day students.

Then there was Chris, aka Engel, a sweet New York City kid with floppy black hair and a jolly flush to his Irish cheeks. His facility at Latin, nurtured at Catholic schools in Manhattan, meant a lot of our classes coincided. Engel was no less worldly than other kids from his class and city, but by virtue of being on the short side and unaffiliated with hockey or lacrosse, he brought his wise, well-adjusted, fully socialized talents to the less exalted stretch of the social register, where he found me. I admired immediately his approach to pleasure, which he took more seriously than anyone I'd known.

He was the first true Epicurean I'd met, the Ted Williams of high-achieving slackers. His prime directive seemed to be not to expend unnecessary effort.

Best of all, Engel was, like me, bad at sleeping, and at night in the dorm he'd teach me golf putting on the dorm carpets. Soon we were hosting baroque mini-golf tourneys, with holes that required you to surmount stairs and shelves and pyramids of books from our class on the Tudors. Our soundtrack was the J. Geils Band, OutKast, Wu-Tang, Ludacris, Guns N' Roses, Tom Petty. In the usual small ways, after practice and rehearsal and dinner and study hall, a modest crew came into being. As a group, we were overachieving but sociable, possessed of (or at least aspiring to) social graces, good enough at sports but not so good as to draw comment. We were mischievous without getting into real trouble—for now.

Mom was teaching again in London that spring, and Jane was again attending Bousfield, our old primary school in Chelsea, so Dad collected me at the start of my spring break, and together we flew to visit Mom and Jane. "Can we afford this?" I asked; spring vacation in Europe was something Manhattan aristocrats did, not us. Dad said the college was still flying family members to visit faculty abroad, so all we had to pay was lodging and some trains. On the plane, I was restless, unsure what to do with my legs; I'd finally hit a growth spurt, late and violent.

I don't remember much of our two nights in London—but I do remember that the fighting began quicker than usual, as though my parents, while separated by the Atlantic, had passionately missed being able to argue in person. By the third day in France, in a small rented car on the N2, I learned why the arguments felt so much more desperate: Dad had finally admitted to an affair, a long one, eighteen months or so, with a colleague. He'd ended it the previous summer, when Mom had confronted him and he'd admitted that yes, there was a reason he'd been cold for so long.

In Nice, they fought, and it rained. In Menton, they fought, and it was sunny, so Jane and I made friends with the crinkly-faced ancient gentlemen in the park and spent two afternoons with them playing a bocce-like game called boules while our parents fought and drank wine. Mom's French was okay, but Dad had none, so Jane and I would slip out of English if we wanted to discuss sensitive matters with our father in the room. Even at

eleven, Jane was already a sponge for languages. Escaping together into French was one of the few reprieves we had from the intensity of our parents' alternating squabbles and prickly silences. Neither of us quite believed what was happening. *"Un cauchemar,"* we said: a shared nightmare. I did my best to cheer Jane and thereby distract myself from yawning despair.

The four of us were sharing a room in each city to save money. Otherwise I would've done something to break the tension, like taking up smoking. Lots of my classmates in the States did it. One night in France I managed to peel away from my family and bum a cig from a reedy twentysomething outside a bar, but I hardly inhaled—as I recall, I mainly used it as a punctuating prop while explaining that my family was *"folle, absolument folle."*

In the car, the tension was thick, and my heart sometimes galloped in ways I hadn't known since the wordless manias of early childhood. I had a strong impulse to wait until the car was going 100 or 140 kilometers per hour, then lunge for the door and hurl myself out. Instead, I kept my seat belt on, and we hurtled toward our hiking destination in northwest Italy. The Cinque Terre, a series of villages built into the cliffs of Liguria on the Italian Riviera, appeared to be collapsing just as we were visiting. The first morning, in Monterosso, Jane and I awoke on our cots to see Mom and Dad whispering and giggling and making eyes at each other in their bed. Pathetically, my spirits soared . . . it was Christmas again, Paradise *could* be regained . . .

"We're staying together," Dad said in response to the hopeful inquiry he read on our faces. Even in the moment I could tell something was off; Dad flashed the same reckless smile as when he drank more than a glass. Mom looked thrilled, almost girlishly so, but there was something tentative in the way she smiled at her mate, as though she didn't quite believe, but oh, how she wanted to. On the children's side of the room, Jane was ecstatic, laughing and weeping at once. In the rashness of my hope, I reverted to the role of jester. "Sounds like maybe we should get you two a separate room tonight." The parents laughed, and Dad gave Mom a showy smooch.

Of course, the squabbling began again, over nothing or everything: who would go to the grocery store or how a person could lie to their wife for a year and a half. I never saw them argue over something intermediate, like politics; it was either all-out war over dishes or a clipped and bitter line of questioning about when, precisely, Dad stopped loving Mom.

Back in London, Dad and I said goodbye to Mom and Jane and drove to the airport. Mom went back to teaching and giving walking tours; Jane went back to sixth grade at Bousfield. On the plane to the U.S., Dad said not to worry, that he and Mom would be all right. I wondered whether he was remembering an entirely different vacation from the one I'd just endured.

At school, one of my English teachers had introduced us to the old definition of madness: doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result.

That's what Mom did the following spring. She planned a vacation that followed the same itinerary she and Dad had made a couple of years before. (It was on this earlier trip that Dad first admitted the affair to her, long before Jane and I were let in on the secret.) Using miles and vouchers from the university, she flew the four of us to Northumbria during school break. In Norwich, we saw the cathedral, paid our respects to the Venerable Bede, and read a pamphlet about the mighty unity of the British people, "which would have made the Bede proud." My sister and I wondered about this. We knew some very angry Irish families who felt brutally shafted by the whole arrangement. Supposed age-old bonds seemed to be coming apart, and we were struck forcibly with the idea that perhaps certain unions never should have been forged to begin with.

We proceeded north in a little rental car, visiting various historic sites. One day in rural northern Scotland, when Dad and Jane were in town getting provisions, Mom and I sat in the parlor of the place we'd rented, a no-nonsense cottage north of Inverness, and she told me why we were here. Dad had bought a couple of bottles at a nearby distillery, and Mom poured herself two fingers of something old and amber, preparing to confide in her fifteen-year-old son. "You know your father and I did this trip two years ago."

"Yeah, you said, that's how you knew the drive to the castle—"

"No, I mean this *exact* trip."

"Can I have a sip?"

“No.” (Laughing.) “I mean this is a do-over.” She explained that two years earlier, they’d seen Bede’s grave and the rest . . . and a month later, he’d admitted to her that, yes, he’d been in close touch with his mistress (Mom’s word). Dad had even been emailing with her while whisking Mom around the north of the British Isles. On that trip, Mom had also learned about a “love nest” apartment where Dad and this woman would shack up whenever Mom was out of town. Mom said that after Dad told her, she’d started getting persistent migraines. She needed the pain to go away. “I thought the memories of these places could be redeemed for me if we saw them together, as a family,” she said, becoming choked up. “Now I feel like a selfish idiot, inflicting this nonsense on Jane and you, just so I can try to claw back my marriage.”

“Stop it, no one thinks you’re a fool—” I was weeping, too, ashamed of my powerlessness. I heard the growl of the rental’s motor. Jane and Dad were back from the village. We could see them through the low window in the parlor. They were lingering outdoors, waving at the Shetland ponies grazing in the neighbors’ field.

Mom poured herself another two fingers. “You don’t think it’s hopeless?”

“No,” I said falsely. I would’ve said anything to stop her crying.

“Am I an idiot?”

“God, no. Why?”

“For trying to make it work after everything—for *wanting* to make it work.” She was lying on her side on the couch now, still crying.

I went over and hugged her. “Obviously not. *Duh*.” She gave a mock laugh and a real smile. I continued, “Jane and I are praying that . . . I just mean, I want that, too, and so does Jane. *If* that’s what *you* want.”

“It is. Maybe that’s pathetic, but . . . that’s all I want.”

Dad and Jane came sidling crookedly through the irregularly trapezoidal door, and I remember Dad had bought some kind of Scottish ale, the first time he’d touched beer that trip. Now he was pulling a six-pack from a paper bag with an upbeat and brittle energy; Mom rose from the couch and went over to kiss him on the cheek. Dad tore the cap off a bottle, laughed, and took a long swig, putting his hand around Mom’s waist and pulling her close. Something in the action stopped me. Dad’s many virtues had never included subtlety, and now he was playing a stock role that he simply couldn’t pull off. His performance was ersatz, like something learned from

a beer commercial: *Got a battle-ax for a wife? Drink MacDougalson's—you'll forget why you cheated on her in the first place!!* I went into the kids' bedroom and wept and read while Dad rode out his good mood and everyone pretended we'd never been anything but a fun, heedless bohemian family. Eventually, my mood and heart settled a bit as I envisioned my treat this evening: If I finished the Latin I was reading for school—some selections from *The Aeneid*—I'd allow myself a taste of some of the single malts in the cupboard. Two small glasses, maybe, and a bottle of the Scottish ale.

Outside the window, the neighbors' ponies and cows stood in nuclear clumps, each clan munching its own plot, the parents groggily nosing their gawky foals and calves to chastise them for some infraction. The steers' horns were as enormous as the ponies were tiny. Comically tiny. One ought to laugh. The steers—that is, the male castrati of the species—looked especially surreal, almost childish, like two men inside a bull costume. In each little family, the mother was at the centrifugal center of the adolescents who ringed her in a tight circle. Fuck it, why wait? I decided I'd take my first drink now—the bottle of blended in the cupboard . . . I cracked the door of the bedroom. Everyone was safely distracted and miserable in the kitchen. I grabbed the flat pint bottle and slipped it into the waist of my trousers and threw on a light jacket.

Jane moseyed into the room. "Where you going?"

"Wanted another look at the ponies."

"Don't trespass," Mom said from the kitchen, "and don't get shot."

"I promise."

Free of the house, behind a short, squat tree, I pulled a generous draft from the bottle then went to lean on the fence, where two of the ponies approached. The Houyhnhnms of *Gulliver's Travels* came to mind, those talking horses Gulliver meets in the fourth and final installment of his adventures. Mom had told me how, centuries ago, humans saw horses as the height of nonhuman organic intelligence—a rational animal, as the phrase went. With my back to our cottage and its windows, I took another belt from the flask and inspected the creatures' eyes, the mothers' faces. Yes, they were quite personable; there seemed to be unexpected depth to their character, or at least you could see where people had gotten that idea. Another slug. "You trust their dad?" The mama pony nearest to me looked up at this badinage. "Don't worry, it's not you, it's *him*—turning fifty is

hard, you see, it *does* things to a steed." The pony made no response. "I get it. Your dignity, wounded. But look at the young ones"—swig—"you've still got them, and they've still got you." I was petting her snout now with my non-whiskey hand. "You'll make it, your heart is pure."

Back in the kitchen, my sister gave me a funny look. "Were you talking to the horses?"

"Not much."

In the mornings in Scotland, the thick, huge mist rolled over the treeless mountains and slowly revealed the biggest sky I'd ever seen, a landscape that didn't teem with life but instead surprised you with it, in the smallest and oddest places. Except in the family, where no life emerged. We were all sick by the end of the trip, far away from one another.

Jane was inconsolable some days; other days she cultivated a wryness well beyond her tender eleven years. "Why," she asked me crisply in the backseat of the car one afternoon, "couldn't they have hashed it out *after* the vacation?"

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Chapter 4

Tuxedos in the Mud

(2001–2003)

Back at school, I discovered an unfamiliar bitterness in myself, a new despair that greeted me each morning. At the same time, there were plenty of distractions. For one, word of a scandal was afoot. A half-dozen kids on the sailing team had been caught drinking and summarily expelled. One patrician girl, a senior, sneered that such behavior was “cliché” on the part of competitive sailors: “So stupid in preseason, save it for Nantucket,” she said. The ruthless practicality in her voice was comic brilliance—you absolute *fool*, *everyone* knows not to behave like that in Fort Lauderdale. I was bummed because I’d been trying to date one of the sailor-drinkers, a lovely girl in my year named Olive, and now I wouldn’t see her again, possibly ever. Still, the girlfriend question somehow felt far less pressing after watching Mom and Dad in France, so I reapplied myself to studies, from honors chem (which I loved because it was a language) to the Voltaire I had to memorize for French, throwing myself back into frantic perfectionism with less joy and more fervor than ever.

I stopped sleeping normally, seeking distraction nightly in work breaks on the second floor of the dorm, listening to OutKast or Busta Rhymes with Engel and Bennet and company. Hotchkiss had a famous no-strikes policy for drugs and booze, so when one or two of my comrades slipped away to enjoy some bit of contraband, I tried to keep out of the room. Once or twice as a favor when one of the guys feared a room search from the faculty adviser, I held a Gatorade bottle filled with an eighty-proof guarantee of expulsion. Otherwise my nose was clean.

Although drinking could mean ruin at Hotchkiss, at home it had always been a straightforward marker of sophistication. And as I'd learned while sipping wine in France or whiskey in Scotland, booze had a remarkably punchy quality. It bestowed a liveliness, also a certain rose-tinged perspective—the capacity to think only on the beautiful or the hoped for, and to ignore or even laugh at anything that was incompatible with paradise.

Even before I dared to tipple in the dorms, there were moments of pure ecstasy that spring. Toward the end of the school year, a few of us made extra cash serving as waiters and busboys at reunion events. Servers were required to don cummerbunds, so Mom mailed me Dad's twenty-five-year-old tuxedo, and Noah and Engel and a kid named Devin and I tried to keep straight faces as we poured the cold white wine and circulated around the tables, answering all the alums' questions about School These Days. Most of the questions came from bespectacled sixtysomethings asking about coeds and then saying something like "Eh, you boys don't see how lucky you are, if you know what I mean." By the third of these, it was a struggle not to snidely respond: "Yes, it's so good to have some steady hands around to do the darning and the typing." But we didn't have the stones to play smart aleck, and anyway, who wanted to be snide?

One evening as we finished our serving duties, the fireflies were coming out, and the air became suddenly, almost tropically sticky. The rain didn't begin until we were halfway back to the dorm. Engs and I gathered with Noah and Devin under a copse of trees not far from the statues of those enormous bronze bulls off the main avenue of the campus. We giggled like toddlers, our coats over our heads, bow ties loose, cummerbunds taking on water. The rain had turned the nearest stretch of the golf course into a muddy and inviting slide.

"Dare me?" Engs asked.

Devin: "You serious?"

Engel turned to me. "Scheins?"

I was grinning—the streetlamps along the main drive turned the raindrops on my glasses into funny prisms of color. "I mean, yeah," I said, "let's see how fast we can go."

Engs hung his jacket on the tree and got a running start. The rain enveloped him, and he skidded down the hill feetfirst, like a runner sliding into home. Devin and Noah and I lost our jackets and took off after Engs,

and in a moment the three of us were sloshing into one another at the foot of the little hill.

Scrambling and slipping on our way back to the top, we reached the tree again right as the first thunder came.

“Anyone see lightning?”

“Not so far. I think we’re safe. Whoa!”

Whoosh. Slip. Slide. After a year of grinding, of enduring battles within myself and between my parents, well, to swap friction for *this* was bliss. Our friends Megan and Cat had joined us, laughing and egging us on but too sensible about their dresses to get down in the dirt with us. When I got back to the dorm, I took a long shower, then spent an hour using a ruler to scrape mud off my ancient tux and into a garbage bag. I was still vibrating with joy, as though something beautiful had been passed to me through the rain.

With our tuxes drying before a box fan, I asked Engel: “Is this how you feel when you’re high?”

He laughed. “I feel drunk, and I haven’t touched a drop.”

Imagine, feeling this way whenever you wanted.

That night, a couple of the dorm faculty offered half-hearted reprimands for our muddy escapades. They chuckled at our bedraggled appearance. But honest concern led them to ask, arms crossed: With all that lightning and all those trees, didn’t we know we could get electrocuted?

I held off on any real drinking until junior year, when Engel and I were living in Memorial Dormitory, aka Memo.

Mom and Dad were now living apart but still involved in a two-year, on-off debate over whether to stay married. Jane and I wavered between playing matchmakers and wishing they’d just get on with the divorce already. The phone calls were wearing us thin: Mom and Dad each took to calling Jane and me amid distressing bouts of self-doubt and would pose answerless questions to us (*Why doesn’t he love me? When will she believe that I love her?*). Mom was practically broken, including physically: Her knees were in bad shape from worsening arthritis, and she was diagnosed with a new nerve disorder that her doctor attributed to shock, stress, and uncertainty.

I stayed on the phone with Mom very late some nights. On the other end I could hear the glass clinking against the table and pictured her in her armchair in the living room in Hamilton, on her fifth or seventh Scotch. She wondered aloud how, after a lifetime of being careful, she could've "messed up so badly." I told her she hadn't messed up, she wasn't a fool, *Dad* was the fool, and anyway, Jane and I would always be there. Often it seemed she didn't wish to listen so much as talk and be confirmed in her martyrdom. So I confirmed it.

Somewhere between the anguished phone calls and the emails between sister and brother to keep each other's spirits up, it occurred to me that it might be time to join Mom, remotely, in a very strong drink.

Alcohol always held this aspirational pull. I'd thrilled to the rich caramel colors of the transfixing whiskey bottles in the lower kitchen cabinet on University Avenue; I'd watched *The Thin Man* and admired the complacent elegance of Nick and Nora Charles falling ever deeper in love as they got fractured on martinis. For me, even outright dissipation had a certain Byronic panache. If you thought about it in a cockeyed way, risking expulsion for something as trivial as an hour's pleasure—well, it could feel rather dashing, if you did it right.

Engel was obsessed with doing it right and maintained a smart set of operational security protocols to baffle our faculty overseers. Simple, consistent measures—they were the way to go, Engel said. You could get too fancy with these things. No use bothering with hollowed-out books or secret panels in the wood baseboard. "The more steps, the more likely you are to get caught," he told me. It checked out. For storing contraband, neutral zones were best: accessible and deniable. Like a ceiling panel in the bathroom, or the base of a bush, or a nook on the roof of the main building. Another rule: only clear liquor—either horrible Popov, half a step up from formaldehyde, or, much better, Stolichnaya. Beer was a high delicacy and indulgence. But so was anything mixed. The trick was to hide the most in the least. So: vodka, always taken as shots, both to clock one's consumption and to minimize any time in proximity to the contraband. None of us in Memo got caught while following these precepts; many who didn't follow them weren't so lucky.

Sometimes when drinking, we imitated the smart set and spent the occasional fast weekend in New York, gambling on which bars would serve us. If you didn't have money or a car, you could get free transportation on

one of the school's many enriching trips. I got a ride one weekend by singing with the a cappella group at a venue in Midtown; afterward we repaired to a basement store where an elderly Chinese man made fake ID's for a friend and me. On one of them, "Delaware" was misspelled. We'd always end the night at Muldoon's. It was a fetidly glorious place, the sort of bar where you exclusively down drinks with "bomb" in their title. Most important: Back then, they served anyone. A two-year-old could waddle in and, as long as he flashed something laminated at the bouncer, be permitted to party all night. One night there a socialite freshman left her card on an open tab, and dozens of kids put their drinks on it, leaving her with some unexpected zeros at the end of the bill. So many high schoolers were in attendance that night that the manager did something unheard of: He kicked us out. One kid objected loudly: "Come on, man, we got ID!" "Come with me," the manager said, and steered the kid (a junior on the sailing team) around the bar. The manager pointed. "Look at that girl." The junior did so. "You telling me she's twenty-one?" The junior considered for a moment. "Lotta people have adult braces, man." His was the first ass out the door.

It was early senior year, and we were in my room, Engel and I, chatting with Hammond, a dude in our fantasy baseball league. Hammond was telling me it was really in my best interest to unload Jason Giambi, and I was trying gently to get him to stop talking. Then my email dinged, and I toggled over from Yahoo Sports to read Mom's email, short and direct: "It's over. He's getting an apartment in Syracuse." My throat closed up. When it opened, I spoke haltingly.

"Fellas, it looks as though I have just become a child of divorce."

Hammond put a hand on my shoulder and stopped trying to separate me from my best hitter. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Scheins."

"Thanks," I managed. "I need a minute." Engs saw how my face had sunk and shooed Hammond out the door, then followed him and shut it behind them. Then I called Mom.

"He did it." Her voice was thick on the line, like she was forcing herself not to sob. "It's official, he did it, he finally left."

Did I feel relief? Sadness? Fury at Dad, or at Mom, for that matter? Not quite any of these. I felt merely hopeless and suddenly very tired. What was

there to say? I asked: “This is a good thing, right?” At the same time, I pinched the skin on the back of my hand, hard, as punishment for my next thought: that perhaps these spill-every-last-bean phone calls would begin to taper off as Mom stopped looking back and started looking forward. In my mind, a lonely house came into view, floating a few feet off the ground, down Broad Street in Hamilton. It sailed down the road away from the watching children, freed from the foundations of memory and sense.

She was still talking. “It would’ve been good if . . . ” *If, if, if,* I interjected silently. I let her talk: the indignity of all the neighbors knowing, the deeper indignity of having to offer oneself on dating websites, and wasn’t it rich that it had come to this!—she’d washed his underwear those eighteen months when he was fucking that other woman, never knowing how she was being misled. “And still he left.”

“You’re the one who asked him for a divorce, I thought?”

“It seemed like the smart move, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Ma, you’ve been miserable for years, even before any affair. He’s not gonna become any less oblivious . . . ” (*And you’re not gonna become any less impossible,* a wicked inner voice added like a poisonous footnote).

“I don’t know who I am without him. We’ve been married my entire adulthood . . . *he stole my fucking life*.”

“I don’t think that’s true. How can you talk like that?” I had no idea what to say. I was seventeen, trying and failing to ad-lib therapeutic wisdom, and it all made me so very, very tired . . . the protection of sleep beckoned, promising a temporary reprieve. If only I could drift off, detach myself from the corkboard of this particular reality . . .

After the first wash of pity for Mom came one for Jane, who’d been in Hamilton and London with Mom through the whole crack-up and who’d undoubtedly absorbed as much oversharing in person from both parents as I ever had on the phone. I wrote a short email to her and sat staring at the wall above my desk, where I’d taped sheets of handwritten Italian verb conjugations—my parents were officially going to be unconjugated—and focused my stare on the bumpy off-white plane of the wall, wanting to merge with it, to disappear utterly. Engs knocked and came in to offer his condolences. We put on a hip-hop mix, and he asked if I cared to hang with him while he got high.

I knew Engs could never enjoy these infractions unless he was satisfied he’d taken every precaution, and I trusted these precautions, so I said yes.

Despite using a largely scentless vaporizer, he brought an oversize towel from his room to effect a seal at the foot of the door and had me point my fan out the window. He also produced a sploof—you know the implement: Take an empty paper towel roll, stuff it to bursting with scent-absorbing dryer sheets, and voilà, there's your exhaust filter. It captures those illegal smells—scant, in this case—and locks 'em in. I admired the resourcefulness.

Some people say it's hard to get high the first time. Something about one's cannabinoid receptors needing to reconfigure themselves. Not so for me; that first night with Engel's vaporizer seemed to shift everything.

Engs hit the vaporizer, and I watched his eyes crinkle and narrow above his diagonal stoner's grin, and he grew chattier and more amused with each pull—an experienced Sherpa for my own inaugural ascent. The vaporizer was a small glass cylinder with a simple tube snaking out of it to serve as a mouthpiece. A modest divot, smaller than a thimble, held the crushed leaves. When you plugged it in and mashed the button, the glass began to look foggy; then came the quiet scent, at once warm and pleasantly sharp, like crushed pine needles, with something nuttier and more savory behind it to complete the bouquet.

Then Engs offered me my first puff.

"Pull pretty hard," he said. "It's your first time, so we gotta really fill your lungs." I emptied them, caught my heart starting to race at this imminent transgression, popped the end of the rubber tube into my mouth like a straw, and drew, and drew . . .

My lungs were burning. "Hold it," Engel instructed. "Every second you hold it, you're, like, doubling your high." Dutifully, I held until Engs offered me the sploof. The funny vegetal flavor, so strong in my throat, made little smell, even before it passed through the baffle of dryer sheets. After two hits, the sheets became a bit off-white, like the staining of a cigarette filter in reverse, I thought. Engel observed my pursed lips and reddening face: "You need to cough?" I did, so he tossed me a pillow for muffling, and I hacked into the pillow while Engs took a few more hits himself. I let the pillow drop into my lap, and Engel appraised me.

"My dude," he said with gravity, "you are already high as shit."

My words came slowly. "I . . . am." Pause, chuckle. "I am?"

"You're grinning."

A warmth was encircling my temples; the blood in my head pushing outward, as though my skull were somehow widening. I put my hands on either side of my head. Were my temples actually pulsing? “Not outwardly,” I answered aloud.

“What?”

“There’s, like, a soft heat—” I gestured to my head.

Engel nodded. “The pothead halo.”

“Ah.” The giggles began. “I don’t know what’s so funny. Why *everything’s* so funny.” The head rush was extraordinary. Not unnerving or bad, not when your chest felt so relaxed, so *big*. You could contain anything like this. We started singing along with the music: *Never meant to make your daughter cry . . . You can plan a pretty picnic / But you can’t predict the weather* . . . Later, when Engs went to refill our water bottles (he took drymouth as seriously as a vitamin C deficiency), I stared again at those Italian verbs pasted above my desk and thought of the call with Mom. I recalled my desire to weep earlier. Yet tears were now impossible. The divorce hadn’t become unimportant; it was terribly important; I just happened to be otherwise engaged. Life appeared far off, reaching me with the distant hilarity of an alien pageant. Existence had never felt so light, not even the few times I’d been drunk. *Yes, it’s very sad for all of us—but my sadness is unavailable right now. Leave a message.* Believe *me, he’ll be back. For now, can I interest you in euphoria?*

I asked Dad very gently if he’d thought about not coming to graduation. Just floated the idea. “In case there’s a scene or something,” I said.

“Who’d make a scene?”

I envied him for his willful blitheness. “You know, in case Mom gets emotional.” As though it were some hobby of hers. Damn them for making me triangulate, always.

Dad considered. “She wouldn’t do that—”

“Anyone can do anything when provoked.” (Engel, head bent over his softback copy of Lucretius, gave me an arch look, as if to say, “Look at Mr. Epigram.”)

Dad laughed. “I promise not to provoke anyone,” he said with mock gravity. His composure was infuriating—provoking, even. It did not bode

well. I wanted to say: “Don’t you see that simply *being you* will provoke Mom?” How had he been married to her for twenty-five years? He didn’t know the first thing about her. The nausea rose in me as I contemplated the Cluelessness of Man.

Was I destined for such obliviousness? Then again, our psychologies were diametrically different, as I tried to explain to Engs that evening.

“Dad can’t help but see the sunny side even when things are terrible. That’s pathological—honestly, a little insane—but I don’t have that. I can be dumb and pigheaded, but I rarely assume that things’ll turn out okay . . . ”

“That doesn’t seem fair. I’d say you’re an optimist, just high-strung, is all.”

“I don’t know,” I said, “maybe. But to live your whole adult life with someone else and to emerge without knowing fuck all about them . . . ” The hard, sharp edge glinted at the margins of my vision. “I mean, it could happen. Becoming Dad, becoming a statistic . . . ”

Engel removed a pack of Camels from his jacket pocket and displayed it to me by way of a question. Cheeky, to carry it right on him. I nodded, and we struck out for the roof off the French classrooms. The sun was lowering itself into a colorful evening bath, and we pulled on our cigs, and Engel told me not to freak out over my dad. “If he comes, he comes. But this stuff about becoming him is dumb. Sounds like you’re already more emotionally . . . with it, or whatever.”

“Maybe.”

“Also, you can read a fucking social cue, talk to a girl, crack a joke—” The list sounded so remedial, I had to laugh. He went on: “I’m not kidding. There are dudes who never put it together and spend their lives complaining they can’t understand women, and they absolutely don’t—and that’s not you.”

I thanked him. Engs nodded, thinking. “Just try not to let him provoke you.”

“You’re right, yes . . . ”

“Because”—Engs gestured grandly with his cig— “anyone can do anything when provoked.” He held my gaze deadpan for a moment, then we dissolved into the relief of giggles.

Not that I had much to complain about on paper. I was off to Yale in the fall, and before then Engs and I would spend three weeks in Rome, posing as language students. I'd found a program where, for three hundred dollars per week, you'd get three hours' classroom work each morning, then free time with nominal homework, with two meals a day included at a host family's house. Really, it was an opportunity to soak up sun and wine and flap our wings a bit in the new air of adulthood. I agreed with my parents I'd pay them back from my summer job, an under-the-table arrangement with a lawyer in Syracuse to do his filing for eight dollars an hour.

Ahead of the trip, on those long afternoons of senior spring, I intensified my self-schooling in Italian. It was a natural process, if one knew French and especially Latin, and it set you up to read Dante—which, I'd been promised, was a carnival of madness.

As were my parents at graduation.

Graduation dinner was held in the hockey stadium, where circular tables took over what was normally the field of play. Mom and Dad had hardly spoken since Dad moved out, and Mom seemed ready to turn dinner into a contact sport.

Engel's parents were quite rich and *extremely* Catholic. His mom cut a prim and commanding, almost Cleopatrine figure; his father was a short, ruddy-cheeked dude of few words. Together they managed a private hedge fund. It was hell, watching them stiffen the upper lip and pretend they weren't watching a woman have a breakdown—if a wholly understandable one—over the soup course. Dad was, if anything, more out of touch than Mom; he kept making small talk with his tablemates in the most ham-fisted ways, like someone new to the concept. He even tried his hand with Mom—"Oh, Debbie, look, it's Dr. Albus from Classics, remember we met him on move-in day?" He might as well have said, "Hey, remember back before I betrayed the family?" No Nobel Peace Prize for Dad, not this year. The Engels were mortified. Chris and I had gotten high before the dinner, but not high enough.

Mom kept talking too loudly to Mrs. Engel, sometimes launching into non sequiturs about how edifying Rome would be for us that summer. "And of course Chris is Catholic, so there's loads of places to do Sunday worship—they can pick a different church every Sunday!" Engs nodded dutifully at this ludicrous pronouncement (he *hated* church) and kicked me under the table as if to say, *How droll and innocent your mom can be!* But he saw I

was looking ashen, and he stifled his mirth. Our dinners arrived. I'd gambled on the fish and lost, which was fine. Normally, I got peckish after a pipe, but tonight the prospect of any food was impossible. Mom was still talking about Rome, offering unprompted annotations that tended to dislodge memories better left alone: she and Dad at the Spanish Steps or whatever. Realizing the path she'd wandered down, she'd stop herself theatrically and say something like "But I'm probably the only one who remembers that" with a mournful smile at me, and the table would return to silence until Dad concocted some gibe against the Yankees, beloved by Mr. Engel, who merely broadened his smile and summoned a polite laugh.

The Engels no doubt marveled later at how thoroughly academics become parodies—*I've never seen one of those couples in the wild*.

Back at the dorm, Engs and a few others and I drank vodka and blasted music until four a.m. It was a positively decadent evening. Someone upstairs even had beers. The next day, proud of our illegal hangovers, we donned our mortarboards and accepted our diplomas from Skip. Then photos with the parents, where I had the temerity to interrupt with: "You two need to take a deep breath and stop talking." They insisted on staying for the valedictory lunch, but I succeeded in packing them off promptly after that, well ahead of the other parents, furious at Mom and Dad and equally ashamed of my own ingratitude and so very, very tired of the whole business.

In Rome, Engs and I met the landlady who was renting us a room in her apartment, a dyspeptic chain-smoking woman who hated us on sight. Each morning we walked or bused from her apartment in Trastevere to our classes, in a busy little building a block from Stazione Termini, and ate three-euro pizzas for lunch. When we dined out at night, it was always at the same place, a trattoria by Termini where we could reliably save a few bucks, and where a carafe of the house red came with the meal. The proprietor, an old man named Bruno, had a free hand with the wine. We became regulars and were sometimes the only people there, no matter the time of day, and Engs and I sometimes joked it was a laundering front for organized crime—why else would they charge so little? Toward the end of our stay, Bruno told us he had wanted to open a place where you could eat great even if you were a student. "I thought it was fate when you two started to dine here . . . " *Pensavo fosse il destino.*

In the afternoons following Italian lessons, Engel gamely tramped after me as I led us on various expeditions in and around Rome and the Vatican. We saw every Caravaggio on display in the city and visited about every ancient site that would have us. We were two louche fellows on a miniature version of the Grand Tour, and we found excellent use for our boarding-school classics diplomas—our old-fashioned gentlemen's education—in deciphering Roman inscriptions. Latin served us in the strangest places and once even helped us defuse an altercation with a cop after we'd been caught taking an illegal taxi; to the policeman, I apologized and began extolling Agrippa and the early imperial armies, Engel adding sagely whenever I paused: *"È vero."* The man laughed and tore up our half-written ticket.

We took a sleeper train to Paris for two days and one night, to see the Louvre and Notre-Dame. As we left the Gare du Nord for the pension we'd rented close to the Latin Quarter, a young Tunisian man, maybe a year older than we were, brushed past, whispering: *"Vous avez une cigarette? Voulez-vous du hashish?"*

Even Engs picked up on this last word, his eyes brightening with an arch twinkle. *"Oui, et oui,"* I responded, and handed the guy one of our cigarettes. *"C'est combien pour twenty euros?"*

He held up his pinkie. *"Comme ça."*

"D'accord." It was a steal. I gave the Tunisian a bill, and he forked over the hash: a dark brown straight-cut bar about the size of a KitKat stick, inside the plasticine wrapper from a packet of cigarettes.

"Thank God," Engel said, sniffing the contraband as we continued on our way.

The next morning, Engel sparked up our little pipe, and I had my first wake-and-bake—so beautiful, a bite from a prohibited apple. The Paris summer sunlight kissed me, embraced me, as we entered the street; the city stretched before us, a garden of delights, a galaxy of art and loveliness. At the Louvre, I tried to keep a straight face while an American couple argued over why and whether the *Mona Lisa* was good. I wondered if the museum guards suspected me of being on acid.

Yet the idyllic lightness did not last. I recognized that I'd been staring at the same painting for five or ten minutes—more? Engel was bopping around the next room, trying to find plausible versions of our high school friends in the Renaissance portraits. The painting to which I was glued was Telemachus visiting the island of Calypso, where his dad spent seven years

far from his family, screwing a nymph; all while his wife, Penelope, suffered dutifully at home.

What would I have said to Odysseus, were I Telemachus? *How could you do this to Mom?* Of course, by "Mom" I also meant "me," but that would've been harder to say. As I stared at Telemachus, I now feared that it had all been purely selfish. I saw myself as a pathetic lost child pretending to be a marriage counselor—all out of simple greed to keep my own childhood alive. I didn't want Engel to see me. But as I felt a few tears drop, I was curious what there was to see.

I caught sight of myself in the reflection of a glass-fronted painting on the next wall. Standing very still, I watched myself in the glass: reflection of a coward. Engs ambled back from the next gallery to see what was taking me so long. He pulled on my sleeve, leaning in to confide: "I don't wanna alarm you, but there are some colors in the next room doing pirouettes, you'd better come take a look." We staggered along.

Over a sobering coffee in the Tuileries Garden, I told Engs a halting and simplified version of my silly visions from *The Odyssey*, how useless I had felt and yet how surprised I was that this purportedly soporific drug was allowing me to follow emotional connections. It was bracing to be outside, but I was still teary. Engs put a hand on my shoulder and said in a delicate voice, "I think you're taking the classics too far."

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Chapter 5

Gallows and Lollipops

(2003–2005)

A week later, Engs and I said farewell to our crotchety Roman landlady and headed home to the States. I spent the rest of the summer listening to Snoop Dogg and the Beatles while working under the table, filing and fetching docs for that lawyer's office and sometimes hiding in an empty office to write diary entries castigating myself for being mad at my father over all the messy family stuff: "I'm seventeen years old. My moods are now my responsibility, NOT theirs." In the fall, I traded the Georgian redbrick of Hotchkiss for the Gothic sandstone and limestone of Yale. It was meant to be a new leaf, and I wanted to write something beautiful on it.

Each student was assigned to one of the residential colleges, which numbered twelve in those days and offered undergrads a built-in community within the larger university. I landed in Berkeley, named after the Anglo-Irish bishop and philosopher, famous for arguing that our minds create the world—tough luck, depending on the mind you're dealt. Most freshmen stayed together on the Old Campus quad to foster cohesion among the newcomers. After that first year, we'd trade the freshman dorms for the residential colleges themselves, each of which took up a large block in the city. Berkeley first-years stayed in Vanderbilt Hall on the southernmost end of Old Campus, a red sandstone castle with an archway leading from the main quad to our small gated courtyard. A few of us began referring to our fortified haven as the "womb" and the archway as the "birth canal," the conceit being that every day when one set out for class or rehearsal, one was born anew.

The school felt familiar in some ways; the university's morose Gothicisms were reminiscent of the stately homes and abbeys that my sister and I had seen in England, and many of the families whose names graced Yale's buildings had passed through Hotchkiss as well. Along with a half-dozen or so high school classmates, I rode that privileged conveyor belt and was deposited at Yale for processing and refinement, expected to come out the other end as a leader, a fully formed meritocrat, a well-adjusted high earner who could perpetuate the class—above all, one who, later in life, would enjoin peers to donate to both schools.

As prepped as I was, there was still something of the bumpkin in me. I'd met some psychopaths in high school but no one who wore their naked, bottomless ambition as openly and proudly as Declan, another student in my dorm. The child of academics, much like me, Declan had spent the back half of high school modeling himself after the protagonist of *American Psycho*, sculpting his body like Christian Bale in the film adaptation and becoming valedictorian, fueled by sheer spite for his classmates. As he described them to me: "sheep who will never ask a real question about the world or themselves." I took it they'd wronged him in some way, presumably by withholding sex or respect, and that first semester, he would tell anyone who asked that he intended to become the chief justice of the Supreme Court. "When I was young and dumb, I wanted to be president," he'd say, "but as I got older, I saw where the real power lay."

Declan was given to strange enthusiasms. He argued humankind's greatest triumph was to have the atomic bomb and consciously not use it.

"But we did use it?"

Declan smiled widely. "I mean on *ourselves*." To have all those nukes, he said, and not to end the world with them—well, that was the highest philosophical achievement in history, a collective expression of: *Yes, on balance life is worth it*. This view seemed to me to misunderstand both politics and suicide.

Arriving at the university amid a divestment push in Darfur and major union strikes was its own crash course in understanding my classmates. I signed the divestment petitions out of earnest conviction, but, unmoved by these objections, the school refused to divest until years later. As for the graduate students' union, I really can't impress on you how unfashionable it was to support it. Undergrads would line up on balconies and holler abuse from windows: "Go back to grading!" The median Yalie was at least

skeptical of unions, certainly of any union that would coddle allegedly feckless grad students. Many, too—if pressed—would own that they had supported the Iraq war. I was sufficiently green to find it all rather shocking.

The arts scene offered a reprieve from the Declans of the campus. To satisfy my undying urge to perform, I had a mind to join one of the singing groups, where you got at least two concert tours a year, sometimes international. I also considered wading into the school's famous theater scene. Specifically, I wanted to compose a score or two, maybe write a script. One of the campus's aspiring actors, Max, was an imposing, square-shouldered football player from Texas, and when he heard I wrote music, he buttonholed me outside our freshman dorm and invited me to a party that he and his roommate, Evan, were holding that night. He was smoking Camel Turkish Royal, the height of sophistication, and I bummed one. With a game, wolfish grin, he asked me: "You smoke anything else?" I did. "Stick around after the party and we'll listen to LPs and I'll smoke you out." It was a deal.

It was interesting to see the processes of self-reinvention, -actualization, and -mythology in action. Max appeared eager to establish himself as a glamorous macho aesthete and wore a silk nightgown throughout the party, making friends with everyone and lending books to guests. To me he gave Bret Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* ("If you love Fitzgerald, then I think you'll dig this"). I was charmed, though a little confused as to why all the males on this campus were so bent on stuffing my bookshelves with Ellis.

Max introduced Brian. We'd brushed shoulders a couple of times, and I knew he was involved in music and theater. To see him next to Max was briefly unsettling: Yale in those days was not immune to the trend of chinstrap beards that had stormed white America around Y2K. Max and Brian each wore one, and the similarity between the two guys was striking. Black hair pressed straight up and held there by product; facial hair of a nineteen-year-old middle reliever. Max was merely taller and perhaps louder—but then I told some lame joke and Brian started guffawing. It was the rich, world-encompassing laugh you'd expect from the Buddha, and I observed him with new wonder. At the end of that night, Max mustered Brian and three other neighbors, Andy and Evan and Peter, out to the courtyard.

To discover one's tribe is a glorious thing, and I had the inbuilt loyalty—and a new distrust of institutions—that left me fully dedicated to the group I

chose. With Evan, a tall swimmer from Alaska who played jazz trumpet, I talked music and heard tales of sea fishing and frontier living. With Andy, a wiry red-haired environmentalist, I exchanged stories about the joys and terrors of boarding school. With Peter, a curly-haired polygenius, I bonded over having spent parts of our childhood in England. At night, we'd all convene around Max, the berobed pasha, on benches in the circular courtyard of the dorm. Each in his way was a beautiful and brilliant contrarian, keen in conversation and elegant in mischief. Evan and Brian and Andy were particularly fond of corralling friends to pose as CIA recruiters, and you wouldn't believe how many Yalies fell for their pitches —nor what our classmates were willing to do to impress them in their role as recruiters. My quickly formed friendships with Brian and the rest of the crew very soon felt ancient, rooted in uncompromising love.

Brian proved an especially game companion. When I proposed that a couple of us surprise my sister by showing up in the front row at her high school play, Brian sprang into action and secured a car. Half an hour later we were dressed in tuxedos and speeding off to watch Jane perform as Fabian in *Twelfth Night*. Jane preserved her composure when she spotted our grinning-idiot faces in the audience and afterward ran up to us and wrapped me in a joyous and tearful hug. I grinned as I introduced Brian, who honored Jane with a low bow. Jane told Brian she hoped I was taking care of myself. "He is," Brian said. "And he's got us."

("I like your friends," Jane told me on our next phone call, with some degree of relief.)

I have always found or engineered surrogate brothers. As college went on, my friendship with Brian rose above the rest, taking that proposition to a new extreme. Yes, he was my brother—is my brother, almost a fraternal twin—but also something more, an extension of myself, my complement in many ways. We share an obsession with story, whether writing a good one or living in such a way that merits one. A seeker and observer, Brian is one of the most alive people I've met—a man who wants to absorb the whole world. If he directed a play, I wrote the music; if I called for a road trip, he automatically became copilot. In college, his family basically adopted me, and his mother, Paula, still refers to me as her third son.

On one of those fall mornings, Brian and I had a late breakfast in the Berkeley dining hall and discussed the a cappella question, constructing our taxonomy of the men's singing groups as we chewed. We agreed that the Spizzwinks and Duke's Men were a bit uptight, and that the Alley Cats and SOBs had the jazziest arrangements and seemed to have the most fun, if one didn't count the Baker's Dozen, which struck both of us as a frat who happened to sing.

"Aren't the SOBs sort of fratty, too, though?" I asked.

"They drink a lot," Brian said. "But I think they're more like comedy nerds who party and do pranks." That tracked with the group's name, an acronym for the Society of Orpheus and Bacchus, devoted equally to song as to ecstatic experience. The group's upperclassmen were literally called "immortals." Tempting for aspirants such as we.

As it turned out, the SOBs depended on a kind of upbeat hazing. It was the only singing group who also had the vibe of a secret society, with lots of gnomic Latin sayings and obscure acronyms that the upperclassmen never, of course, explained to freshmen. (It was *good* Latin, too; they'd made sure of that.) I dug these old traditions; I loved the idea that one could take up the fragments of obsolete worship and turn them to practical account. It all enticed me deeply. Recuperation and Orphic rebirth—why, yes, I could use some of that.

So could Brian. We were glad when we passed through rush and received our bids.

Lord knows, I needed something to cling to. The failure of my parents' marriage had toppled the whole system of values on which I'd modeled my life with servile zeal. My sister and I had learned from Mom and Dad that hard work and overeducation and all the rest would make you happy. But the divorce suggested that wasn't the case. So, once at college, I abandoned many inherited ideals in the most predictable of ways, transforming from a sober, first-in-class people pleaser to an idler who delighted in music and drink, and who took whatever classes allowed him to read the most poetry.

I was fortunate in my teachers, particularly Claude Rawson, a short, stout bulldog of a Brit who'd studied under C. S. Lewis at Oxford. Rawson was a titan in the study of Western satire and as exacting as he was playful.

To understand poets better, Rawson encouraged us to imitate them and assigned me to translate passages from Horace and Juvenal into iambic couplets. At music rehearsals in the evenings, we were picking up a new jazz number every week. Things were going so well that for a month, I nearly forgot the quiet bitterness that had clung to me since my family's gnarliest chapter began. In fact, for six weeks or so, I was on a bit of a cloud. I introduced Evan to live music at a fetid and glorious venue called Toad's Place, where we saw Talib Kweli one night and Funkadelic another, raising our hands in the crowd and closing our eyes and breathing in whatever acerbic smell came from the floor and singing along blissfully to "One Nation Under a Groove." But around mid-October the honeymoon period ended, and that familiar frantic gloom once again began to greet me each morning. It returned inevitably each afternoon and evening, when my thoughts grew bleak and everywhere I cast my mind I found the same waste, as though everything had been scoured of sense or meaning. Internally, I referred to these daily dyspeptic interludes as my "forty minutes in the desert," but often they lasted for three to four hours. Without considering it deeply, I blamed myself for feeling like that, for not seizing the day like my psychopathic roommate, Declan, or any of the other normal, conventional fellow students going about their lives without wallowing.

In any case, to be caught between the pincers of self-hatred (*You ass, why can't you just be normal*) and self-delusion (*. . . like all these lovely and no doubt super-well-adjusted achievers!*) is a common plight, and when Mom and Dad arrived for Parents' Weekend, I tried not to make a big deal about something so childish. That resolve lasted about three hours, until Dad looked up from his tray in the dining hall and asked why I was crying. Mom saw, too, but didn't say anything, simply took my hand under the table.

"It's stupid," I said softly, not caring whether my classmates had noticed my tears. "I've looked every which way and can't find a reason that I'm here, or anywhere. All these"—indicating the placid, ruthless Yalies around us—"they're happy just bouncing around campus, gathering bits of themselves into a whole. *Everything's good, everything matters, but not too much, everything in its right place* . . . They're all crazy, I think. And what does that make me?"

I was babbling. Mom squeezed my hand. Dad looked flattened by the flood of words. He put down his fork. Mom said something about finding joy in Italian verbs and in Dr. Frame's brain-melting course about fractal geometry. "Aren't your classes *any* fun?"

"Yeah, the Mandelbrot sets look cool, I'm not denying that," I conceded. "I can't explain it. I just wake up so dead." Those mornings I rarely recalled the plots of my dreams beyond a general sense of having been chewed out by the universe. When I woke, I was back in a reality that those dreams conditioned me to hate. "It sounds crazy when you say it out loud."

Mom and Dad were being uncharacteristically sweet. Mom stopped making cutting remarks, and my now-patent depression silenced Dad's enthusiastic response to the newness of Yale. In a way, it was the first time in years they'd listened to me so closely together on a topic other than the logistics of divorce. My pathetic gratitude for that listening sharpened the sadness of the moment and was quickly succeeded by the mortifying knowledge that they did not understand me—and could not.

We bused our trays. I dropped my uneaten food into the compost bin, hating myself for my wastefulness. Outside, as we stood at the corner of High and Elm streets, waiting for the pedestrian light, my chest got tight with hope.

"Maybe I should talk to Dr. Keith again," I ventured in a shaky voice. I conjured his kindly face, bearded and friendly and wise, looking like the portrait of Socrates on the front of my philosophy textbook. Good old Dr. K, always so easy to talk to. Maybe he could help. Few people understood the family better than Keith, I thought. We crossed the street headed south, and Dad promised to give me Keith's number.

Upstate was already wintry when I arrived home. Mom was preparing to sell the old house on University Avenue, but it was ours until the next fall. Not much had changed inside, except Dad's desk and dresser were empty.

The night before I saw Dr. Keith for the first time in over a decade, I visited Dad's new pad. Exposed brick, big glassy windows, a fake fireplace, a granite kitchen that looked staged for a catalog. Dad's air was relief mingled with a quiet uncertainty about what he'd done to us and who he was without Mom's guidance and judgment. His major expressions of

divorced-guy freedom seemed largely stylistic: listening to jazz, say, when Mom would've preferred classical or folk. He hadn't become religious or grown a beard or taken up powerlifting, which was for the best, but my heart sank a bit at the thinness, the flimsiness, of Dad's new freedom. After dinner, he played a Jack Johnson CD, incongruous enough to suggest the influence of a different woman in his life—indeed, he eventually mentioned he was dating someone named Elizabeth. A single longish blond hair I discovered on the red leather couch gave this Elizabeth some embodiment in my imagination. At least it seemed he wasn't too lonely.

The next morning, Dr. Keith got right into it. "Why didn't you see a therapist at Yale?" He was still the kind, smiling, pug-nosed dude I'd known in my Tiny Tim days. But the question caught me off guard.

"Um . . . I guess I trusted you." There was also the problem of explaining myself to a new person, the perennial question: *Could I be trusted* to give an account of it all? Plus, it would take so long. "Like, you've met my parents, and you knew me when I was eight, or it felt like you did. That's not the sort of thing a college counselor would necessarily intuit . . . "

"You might be flattering me. You shouldn't hesitate to get help at school. Those places save lives—" He saw my startled look. "Let me put it this way: My SUNY colleagues are always working with SUNY students, none of whom we knew as children."

I told him how I envied the apparently well-adjusted, happily driven kids all around me at Yale, envied their assurance in shaping a life worthy of them. "It's probably as simple as a matter of morale, just convincing myself there's meaning to anything I do."

"And why is it difficult to convince yourself?"

"It's stupid," I said after a minute. "Like, I was writing in my journal about this and scrawled something like 'Sure, it makes sense, you jettisoned the whole idea of your family, definitely including your parents' ideas about success, and now you can't locate any drive of your own.' You know what I mean? Was it all . . . secondhand?"

"Tell me what you mean by that."

"That I can only jump through hoops if someone else is holding them?"

Keith finished writing something. "And what do you make of that insight?"

"That it seems sort of facile."

“What hoops would you jump through if *you* were the one holding them?”

I considered. “Learn guitar properly. Do more writing. Figure out how I’m gonna make any money. Probably drink less.”

“How much *are* you drinking?” Keith asked.

“Three or four nights a week. Tuesday things get pretty boozy while we’re performing, and on Thursday and Friday and Saturday almost everyone drinks. . . .”

“Tell me why you want to drink less.”

“I mean, it doesn’t seem the healthiest response—” I stopped. “It seems a good way to drive yourself crazy. But then I ask myself, *Why bother denying myself a pleasure?,* and I end up hating myself because I can’t do the moderation thing.” I told him Dad was dating and Mom seemed to be, too. I said how dismaying I’d found Dad’s divorced-guy condo, how I’d slept fitfully on an air mattress under one of the few wall hangings he’d salvaged from the house in Hamilton, a lithograph of Lincoln that once decorated our dining room. Lincoln was his favorite president; Dad loved a good bootstrap story, and the self-made, self-taught Illinois lawyer was Dad’s Main Guy. Most of all, Dad loved that portrait because he’d inherited it from his own father. For some reason, I told Keith, I couldn’t stand the thing.

Keith asked: “Why does the Lincoln portrait annoy you so much?”

A beat. “I think because it reminds me that Dad still idolizes *his* father, who never really liked Mom, and Dad always felt he’d been disloyal by marrying Mom. It’s part of what drove them apart.” Keith said nothing, so I continued. “Dad’s dad was a literal judge. So you can figure there’s a lot of . . . judgment there. And Dad always presents everything like it’s this fable. It makes him seem childish, and then I think, *Well, I’m probably gonna end up the same way.*”

“Which is?”

“A fraud, a source of sadness.”

Keith smiled at me. “You’re good at seeing things from your mother’s perspective. Whose perspective do you imagine when you say ‘fraud’?”

“A mix of my mom and an imaginary version of myself, free from doubt and weakness.”

“This version—he sounds impressive.” I shrugged. Keith went on: “He also sounds like he’s not helping you very much.”

“He keeps me honest.”

“I think he might keep you sad. Think about all the times you tried to get your parents to be gentler with each other. Then grant some of that gentleness to yourself.”

At a second appointment that week, Keith listened as I wept and told him I didn’t feel worthy of a big fancy college. “Everything’s wasted on me right now.”

Keith reminded me of my breathing exercises from when he’d treated me ten years before. I pledged to resume them. He also prescribed my first antidepressant. Keith said there were many varieties of depressive people, including those with unipolar major depression, and those with complementary anxiety—or, in some cases, mania. In my case, he said, I wasn’t sad about being sad; I was terrified of that sadness and of what might lie behind it. So Keith prescribed Paxil, a reasonably close cousin to Prozac, the OG of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. As its name suggested, Paxil flaunted its anti-anxiety properties—peace (*pax*) in a pill. One couldn’t help but feel curious.

“Your profile makes you a great candidate for these drugs,” Keith said. I didn’t feel like a great candidate for anything; if the pills could change that, I’d gladly gobble them. Keith sent me off with encouragement and a warning. “If you’re kind to yourself, if you trust yourself, you’ll do fine. Do the breath exercises, get sleep, and stop treating yourself as a guilty prisoner. And remember: careful with alcohol on these pills . . . ”

The Paxil was working its way into my veins when I returned to campus at the end of the week. Keith had told me it often took two weeks for the benefits to make themselves fully known. Perhaps because of a fast metabolism, and/or some susceptibility toward placebo, I’ve often felt a new SSRI within a day or two: a mix of lightness and tightness in the chest (the seat of melancholy, as Rawson reminded us in class), an invisible flush just beneath the skin of the shoulders and thighs, and an adrenal feeling behind the temples. Mornings became brighter and dreams more baroque. Often Jane and I were in some heroic medieval battle on which all depended. Though I still wasn’t sure how to make Yale work for me, I was

far less irritated by my classmates' good cheer and apparent sense of purpose.

I passed a few weeks of temperance, and the Paxil did seem to be calming my nerves, especially in the afternoons, when my anxiety would normally be hitting its apex. Before Paxil, I'd be at my dorm-room desk, staring out the south-facing window, past the courtyard gates onto Chapel Street, and would find myself despairing over something ominous in the drooping angle of a tree branch, or in the disquieting constancy of an early-autumn sun. For a period, Paxil seemed to shield me from the frown of a disapproving God.

Then one afternoon, the trees resumed their hostile appearance for a moment, and the breathing exercises became impossible. While I was recovering my composure, Brian stopped by to say some kids from his theater class were having beers in the quad—did I want to join?

It was energizing, drinking on Paxil. The drug seemed to double the carefree confidence imparted by alcohol and made me feel sharper than I was, delaying the point when I got sleepy or sloppy. Once I did reach that point, though . . . well, it could turn me into a caricature of a stumbling drunk in a movie. In my short drinking career, I'd normally retained my self-consciousness; not so with Paxil, which, when combined with liquor, made me bold and unapologetic. It felt marvelous, although the stories I heard about myself the next morning sometimes vexed me, and I made a resolution to be a better steward of my memory.

Spring tour with the SOBs took us to California, and Brian and I fell utterly in love with the stretch of coast between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz. Someone put the group up in a glassy cliffside house above Pescadero State Beach, and in the mornings we could see gray whales breaching and enjoying the end of their own migratory tour. Somewhere amid performances for San Francisco financiers and gigs at one of the posh private schools in the area, One of the seniors in the group, slipped me one of his Dexedrines, a speedy study drug. A few minutes after I gobbled the pill, things tilted *forward*, and each moment felt blessed. We spent our off-hours that tour sharing packs of cigarettes in Golden Gate Park and playing late-night games of pool and sleeping very little. After the first time I took

Dexedrine, I felt as though a switch had been flipped within me. I only took the pills once or twice—thank goodness—but that switch stayed flipped; I was now always *on*, practically flying. I wondered privately: *Have I broken through?* I'm not sure there's anything as dangerous as mistaking a mood for a God.

After two weeks, we returned to New Haven and piled out of the rental cars, setting aside our tuxedos and hangovers and reconstituting ourselves as students rather than traveling troubadours. I expected a lull, coming off a carefree tour and with the Connecticut sun so different from California's gold. Instead, I became aware of a strange alteration in my chest, as though the Paxil were redoubling its strength after California, flooding my veins anew. There was an added quickness in my heart and sharpness in my vision, or so I felt. The sensation of a permanent flush beneath my skin took on fresh strength. It was exhilarating, like being in a perpetual state of *almost* breaking into goose bumps.

My reading became, how shall I put this, ecstatic. Dad had given me the blue-covered Penguin collected stories of Jorge Luis Borges, and I fell on them greedily. One of the Borges tales I read endlessly was "Funes the Memorious," in which Ireneo Funes, a simple country boy, falls from a horse. After his injury, he discovers a remarkable capacity, or incapacity: He can no longer forget. Everything he has ever seen or experienced or thought is accessible to him always, in a uniform constancy. He remembers the shape and movement of every hair on the mane of the horse that threw him. His memory becomes a wonder and a handicap. Funes is so beset by the concrete details of moment-to-moment life, he loses the ability to conceive of the abstractions that make living possible. In particular, he is baffled by the idea of continuity, by the illusion of persistent identity. Funes becomes an insomniac, unable to dissolve memory in sleep. He lives out his days an invalid.

The Borges stories were a fabulous complement to the midcentury novels of ideas to which I'd become addicted, including Aldous Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*. I liked Huxley's funny ideas about subsuming the I in the not-I, and for a newly rootless kid, such theories held a promise of release, of meaning first defied then restored.

It was once said of the sports columnist Jimmy Cannon that he wrote "to end writing." I treated reading the same way that spring: as a maximalist endeavor, headed toward a glorious finality. That mania crossed into the

classroom. Grandiose papers about Neoplatonic mystics for my philosophy course should've gotten me sent to student health. Instead, they earned commendations. I don't think the word "manic" ever occurred to me, nor the possibility that I'd entered a hyper-responsive phase with Paxil. I simply assumed that the new state was happiness. There were mornings when I felt so good, so *on*, that I decided to smoke a small joint before Italian class so I could slow down and savor the thoughts that were coming on with such pure and delicious speed.

A sensible dude would've clocked these changes and made a beeline for student psychiatry, or at least phoned Keith in Syracuse, to be safe. It never occurred to me to do either, or if it did, I ignored any premonitions. Fact was, I felt fucking *great*, and as the days grew longer, the sense of amplitude and immortality grew more powerful. Nights were a beautiful suspension—they zipped by, yet I relished each moment, and when I'd spend a couple of nights in a row without much sleep, I rarely lamented or even noticed fatigue. There was too much writing to be done, music to be played or sung, secrets to be wrung from my books. I started staying up forever, a wakeful debauch, gorging on consciousness, writing papers that I allowed myself to imagine were synthesizing all the moral and historical wisdom of a given field. Sometimes I'd be up for three days, then pass out for eleven or twelve hours and do it all again. My friend Becca, a poet and musician from New York, became a simpatico and increasingly frequent companion during these late nights, patient and friendly as she instructed me in the ways of love.

My nocturnal routine became a holy joy: Milton, then Italian irregular verbs, then a black coffee and a puff of cannabis, see how the fractals homework was hitting; share a nightcap cigarette with Max out in the courtyard, workshop dumb sketches with Brian via AOL instant messenger, then take a brisk walk to shake something loose on that Milton paper or architecture thesis.

My rare emotional wobbles, that otherwise euphoric spring, came briefly and in the form of a paranoia about poverty. For it was during that nocturnal period in freshman spring when I first got to know the city's homeless, igniting memories of the indigents I'd encountered in London, some of whose faces I could still recall. In those days, many of New Haven's unhoused slept under an I-91 overpass or in a series of tent villages out on Whitney or Whalley Avenue. The most famous of the people on the street

was Margaret Holloway, aka the Shakespeare Lady, an alum of the Yale School of Drama, where she was said to have held her own with Christopher Walken and other future stars. She had hair-raising stories about growing up in the South under Jim Crow but was best known for practicing one of theater's oldest forms: walking through town on a semi-appointed itinerary each day, reciting poetry and drama for coins from anyone who offered them. Besides her namesake, she did Chaucer and Sophocles and Beckett and could usually count on accumulating the twenty-five dollars per day she needed to secure nightly lodging; plus, there were greasy spoons in town that gave her free breakfasts. Many students were kind to her. But sometimes you'd see kids challenging her to perform a speech before mocking and imitating her as she performed; then they'd turn unctuous and patronizing as they bestowed on her a dollar or two. I thought of one rich Hotchkiss guy who'd liked to brag about his policy toward beggars: "I'll give you money if you earn it, but do a dance or sing a fucking song; it's not like you're *entitled* to shit." That memory activated an old insecurity: What if I were to go mad and make my home on the streets? What gimmickry would I summon to earn my keep and justify my life?

You're either inside the castle or outside. Margaret showed me how mercilessly one could be cast out, leaving you to make your money from your audience's pitiless knowledge of exactly how far you've fallen.

I tried to explain the paranoia to Mom during one of our evening calls. How the unhoused of London came to me accusingly in dreams; how I sometimes couldn't stop myself from dwelling on my memory of that house floating down Broad Street in Hamilton; how my stomach kept telling me I was doomed to wander. She was baffled.

"That's not exactly the lesson I wanted you to take from living abroad."

"Sure, but . . . it *could* happen."

"Kiddo, you spend too much time *brooding*." Calling me "kiddo" was her way of signaling a shared and happy conspiracy. *She still knows how to cheer me up*. In my diary, I promised not to worry my mother any more with irrational panics.

Anyway, most of the time that spring, I felt invincible.

The beginning of a manic episode is a bit like the whistling sound you hear if you lean your head against the window of an airplane. The squeak reminds you how little separates you from the sucking vacuum. The thrill is perilous in how simple and natural it feels. Had I forgotten to call Mom? Had I done something insanely dumb while drinking, like, I don't know, spray-painting an Aristophanes quote on a wall in the basement of the residential college? Did I maybe not *entirely* remember the night I'd lost my virginity to Becca? No matter—the bullishness of my mood dissolved all other concerns.

In this jittery joy, I dove through the rest of the year, and despite a bit of laziness and a lot of partying, scraped through quite well. Vincent Scully wrote me a kind note to say he hoped to see me in another architecture class, while Rawson—whom I'd come to adore and revere—said I reminded him of himself at my age.

Sometimes that whooshing sound, the one only I could hear, would start to get me uptight, and I began anticipating a crash, as sure as gravity. Well, fuck the whooshing sound. Hadn't Dr. Keith told me to trust myself?

I have worked to remember that spring because I knew there'd been real happiness amid the mania, a happiness I'd sought desperately, and which I wouldn't rediscover until two years later. It was a fair bit of work to piece together the whole episode, through correspondence and interviews and diaries. There are many ways to mess with memory formation, consolidation, and retention; mania is one of them. And the alcohol mixing with the antidepressant didn't exactly help memory or anything else. The day after our last finals, Brian and I drove his mom's old car into Manhattan for a night of getting weird. After a long afternoon drinking from brown bags with two other friends, the four of us somehow ended up at an anti-Bush play staged by Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, but by then I was blacked out. I'm told I tried to get backstage to have Robbins sign a baseball with the name of his character from *Bull Durham*. Somehow no one ejected me. After the performance, Brian found me dozing against the wall in the bathroom by the sinks, where, evidently, I'd been chain-smoking.

Then we were back in New Haven, sitting on benches in the Womb, Brian telling Becca all about my behavior and Becca laughing with delight. “To a bar!” I cried at one point, optimistically.

“No bars,” Becca said patiently, and led me to the safety of her room.

The next day, Brian said that when I was sleeping in the bathroom at the play, one of our friends woke me up and asked me to recite some Latin. Apparently, I did so without opening my eyes. *Holy shit,* I said to myself, ashamed of the thought before it was expressed, *keep going like this and you’ll end up like the Shakespeare Lady*.

That morning I packed up my room in six furious, hungover hours, interrupted only by a farewell visit from Becca. We hardly spoke. For my part, I could hardly think.

When a mania releases you, the comedown is severe. For perhaps six weeks, I’d been hovering a few feet above reality; today, as I shoved boxes into Dad’s station wagon with a sunken look that even he noticed, my system had finally given up on levitation. It was a full-on crash. I was supremely shaken by reports of what I’d done the night before, and by the hangover that seemed to confirm the worst. I hadn’t unraveled entirely, I told myself . . . but I had certainly frayed, and if I kept pulling at threads, the circumstance might become irreparable. By the time we reached Cherry Valley in rural New York, the cows were seeking shade from the high afternoon heat, my dad was playing Billy Joel, and I’d made two decisions: to cool it on drinking and to end the Paxil experiment.

“Can I stay with you one night this week in Syracuse?”

“Of course,” Dad said, happy for the company.

“It’s to see Dr. Keith. I wanna taper off this stuff.”

Dad frowned. “I thought it was working.”

“Maybe too well. I want to sleep, and the sleep is tough . . . and it’s becoming hard to trust the good cheer. It feels”— I’d avoided the word so far, even in diaries—“manic.”

“Oh, Edward,” Dad said, and then nothing else for a bit. I could see him getting worked up. “When I think of how I hurt you and Jane and your mother, I can’t always forgive myself.”

Good, I thought, but said only, “Everyone’s parents are divorced.” That wasn’t true for any of my close friends, in fact, but it was common enough that I hadn’t considered myself worthy of pity.

Dad shook his head. “You’ve always been the advocate. We made you be a go-between.” He smiled wistfully. “One time you were so small, your head no higher than my waist, and you stood between us during an argument . . . ”

“Yep, arms outstretched, saying, ‘Stop fighting, stop fighting.’ You bring that up a lot.” So often that if I’d ever remembered the moment, memory had been replaced by now with the Official Account.

Dad pulled over on the shoulder of Route 20. “Every day I wish I could go back and remove that pain at its source—or that I could take all that pain on myself. It’s not yours to carry.”

The kindness of this last point tempered my impatience with his theatrical expressions of guilt. It wasn’t an apology, not in the conventional sense, more an invitation to marvel at Dad’s tender contrition. The invitation held little appeal for me.

“It’s fine, Dad, I don’t really wanna talk about it. Honestly, we’ve said everything by now. Let me call Keith—it’s okay, just keep driving.” Behind my words, an old fear was coming to me, a fear that if I didn’t face things squarely, whatever that meant, I’d end up just like him: a man who, through his lack of self-knowledge, had so devastated his family. Had so devastated me.

A swell of pity rose in me as I watched Dad steer the car back onto the highway. He was as much a boy as I in some respects, or so I told myself. To blame him for what he and Mom had made of our family was unfair.

Keith helped me develop a schedule for tapering off the Paxil. I spent the summer living at our house—or, I should say, Mom’s house—working as an assistant editor at a local weekly based in Clinton, New York. I’d been on a very low dose, just 20 milligrams, but tapering to 10 and then 5 was like watching *The Wizard of Oz* in reverse. Slowly, colors started to fade, and hope seemed further away than ever, and when I’d loll by the creek with a girl I was seeing or with Evan I., my partner in crime from preschool, I sometimes found it difficult to convince myself the world was animate. I sat

in the backyard and read Bertrand Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness* and thought, *If old Bertrand could cure himself with some math, why shouldn't I be able to do the same with words, with music?* I slogged onward.

Mom's new boyfriend was Tom, a wry, rather retiring dude she'd met online. Tom was the home-improvement editor at *Popular Mechanics*, a master designer and carpenter, and a sort of omni-musician who played nearly every instrument and could make violins and harpsichords from scratch. Mom was excited to introduce us, and Tom successfully curried favor by offering to lend me one of his electric guitars, plus an amp, so I could get more familiar with tone, drive, and phrasing. Smart guy. I couldn't put the guitar down, and since Mom often stayed over at Tom's, Evan and I would play as late and loud as we wanted. Evan manned Mom's old piano, and we'd cover songs by the Band and the Dead and the Beatles. Those late nights of electric music also exorcised something. Playing music with the kid who'd taught me about Ninja Turtles and video games and Radiohead was a lifeline. It made bearable the comedown from the antidepressant, and from freshman year.

I returned to campus in the fall a bit bashful, but my friends greeted me with the usual gusto and seemed not to notice the cooling of my brain's fever from the previous spring. Not long after our last goodbye, Becca had had a pregnancy scare and spent a week considering whether she should have the child and move to the country and/or "join a convent in Italy," she recalled airily. Later she learned she'd had mono. We were back to being just friends, mostly.

In class, I became greedier than ever about finding the roots of a word or a civilization or an art. It was a thrill to travel backward through history's tangled memory, whether studying ancient civilizations or the workings of Latin and the languages that followed it, or simply listening to old blues records to figure out where rock and roll came from. Moving backward against time, dwelling in history and memory, was like a drug that heightened everything about the present. To study the Greek or Tamazight alphabet was to marvel at the tantalizing memory of the Phoenicians. To hear the slide guitars of Elmore James and Duane Allman and Derek Trucks reminded you that Robert Johnson, the man mad enough to barter with the

Devil, had achieved immortality after all. On long afternoons as I recited Roman verses in dry, dusty seminar rooms, my pulse would slow, and the rest of the day would seem much more bearable. Translating dead languages offered me a bewitching sense of getting one over on death itself. Contact with the past became a wholesome addiction, and I added a second major, in Latin literature, to my English diploma.

Though I was devoted to study, I was developing an adversarial attitude toward deadlines. I treated due dates as an opportunity for daring, rarely beginning to compose a paper until the day before. Like a man eager to show off what he could do one-handed. *But what if you used both hands?* someone might ask. The answer is he's terrified to know how much he could achieve—or how little. Potential is a bitch that way: The idea of reaching it can be as scary as the idea of falling short.

In place of an antidepressant, I threw myself into activity: writing, studying philosophy, teaching myself new musical instruments, looking for the ecstatic experience or insight that might bring freedom. And, of course, there were foreign languages. French, Latin, Italian, Greek: Each I fell in love with, and each could have occupied me for a lifetime. Language professors are fond of a quote attributed to Charlemagne, that to possess another language is to possess another soul. It wasn't untrue: I thought differently in each language, and for all the sybaritic pleasures afforded me by foreign tongues, the greatest pleasure may have been that of escaping my own soul for the length of a book or an afternoon.

The other main balm was friendship. The weight nearly always lifted in company: With friends, I found, I often couldn't feel depressed, so on campus, I tried not to be alone, at least not in the daytime. On singing tour, I could get completely swept up and manage never to be alone at all.

One strange and misty night during our tour that spring, on the balcony of a hotel on the coast of South Carolina, I told a good friend, Josh, about the hard edge. It was the first time I'd confessed real depression to anyone besides my family or Brian; but I also told Josh how curiously holy the depression could feel. That old thing about how despair can be adjacent to ecstasy. Cries of joy from drunken beachcombers came to us from below.

"But I feel overmatched. There's just such an enormous . . . gap," I said fatuously.

Josh nodded. "Oh yes, *the gap*," he agreed, his solemnity only half mocking. He proceeded with a pep talk: "It's real. It's big. But there's so

much to fill it with." Josh said I should give myself credit for all the different ways I found to replenish that gap with meaning. He was right that I could be happy, quite fun, in fact, especially when we were zipping down the highway at 90 miles per hour or climbing a mountain or endearing ourselves to strangers or performing bawdy sketches. The problem was that after a given escapade or happy season, I'd return to myself, and the hard edge felt all the sharper after real happiness.

To my friends, Josh told me, I was the guy who could stare into the abyss and "laugh in its fucking face." He asked: "You can see that, right?" Yes and no, I said. The rain was so fine we didn't know it was falling until we walked inside the overlit hotel and found ourselves totally bedewed.

That sophomore year our crew got pretty claustrophobic in the Yale bubble, and Brian and I wanted to make a constructive escape, so we began talking about a big road trip around the country, ostensibly journalistic in nature, to interview all sorts of different Americans in a Studs Terkel vein, and come back with a set of whimsical oral histories about people's respective pursuits of happiness. Yale was awash in fellowships and funds that would subsidize extracurricular work, and we figured it'd be fitting to use Yale's money to get the hell away from the school. In between singing tours and research papers, we started applying for cash to fund our story-collection project, and the fellowships rolled in. Brian's best friend from childhood, Chris, then studying at the University of Southern California, got some money from his school, too, plus a handheld Sony video camera. We decided to call the project "American Backyard," and we determined to collect tales of how everyone was cultivating their respective gardens and pursuing their various blisses.

We used fifteen hundred dollars of the Yale money to buy a maroon fifteen-year-old GMC Vandura, a glorious beast of a van. It had swiveling chairs in the middle, and the rear seat folded down into a full bed. It was a home on wheels, like the house I'd seen floating down Broad Street as a child. Perhaps rootlessness wasn't scary as long as you were moving toward something rather than away from something. Chris and Brian and I set off on June 5, 2005. Around 13,000 miles and 33 states and 100-odd interviews later, I felt as though I had shed years of dead skin, letting go of my fusty

inwardness, turning out toward other lights. The night I remember best, we spent with a bunch of trainee firefighters in the White Sands Desert in New Mexico, under a full moon on the summer solstice. The firefighters taught us how to go dune-diving (it wasn't hard; you hurled yourself off the dune). The sand was so white it was almost blue under the sky's glow.

Everywhere we stopped, we made friends like that. As we drove, we shot fifty hours of video and published diaries, essays, and short, loosely produced videos on a website that Chris had made, to mollify our funders and edify our friends. We collected gurus throughout the country: Iovanthy, a Basque artist in New Orleans; Willy, a chili farmer in Hatch, New Mexico, who was celebrating the birth of his fifth grandchild; Reverend Orril Fluharty, a ninety-three-year-old lumberjack and Congregational minister in La Honda, California; a passel of boisterous Evangelicals protesting outside a porn store in the Dalles, Oregon. We camped and slummed it and slept on strangers' floors and spent precisely one night out of sixty-three in a motel, where we stayed up late to transcribe interviews and edit videos for the site.

The trip was an edifying crash course in journalism on the go and a better one in people. In the Midwest, I even got seduced by Jenna, a divorced hairdresser who, at the advanced age of twenty-four, struck me as Deeply Experienced. She picked us up at a gas station in Iowa and had us trail her sedan for over an hour to reach her apartment in Omaha. Turned out she wanted company because her roommate and best friend, a medic, had just left for training before deployment to Iraq. We spent two nights at her apartment, eating Iowa sweet corn and drinking Bud Light. Jenna liked making us blush with her saucy frankness and amused herself by taking us on walks down the Omaha River; the first morning she came upon a panama hat in my luggage, a cheap thing I'd bought in New Orleans, and she took a fancy to it, tilting it over one smoldering eye to look like Carmen Sandiego. In bed, Jenna cried when she talked about her fears for her best friend going off into such danger and how good it was to have such nice boys for companionship. During our halting exchange of whispered secrets and brief love, I felt oddly valuable, as though I'd supplied a modest but important service.

On the road, Chris, Bri, and I decided we had a benefactor whom we named Lady Serendipity, or Lady S., and when the gas gauge teetered into deepest red, or when a cop car cruising behind us turned on its flashers, we

invoked Lady S. and gripped the wheel. She didn't let us down once, and unconsciously, I began to have faith in providence once more.

When we were home, Brian and I got to work on a book about the people we'd met on the road. Often we'd write through the night, facing each other across a desk, wired on coffee and remembered freedom.

We arranged to move off campus for senior year, Evan and Brian and I, plus our buddy Aaron. The summer before, I found used couches and tables to furnish our place, a three-story brick house painted a rusty red. I spent days working as a low-level staffer on an antiwar U.S. senate campaign and evenings hosting Chris and other friends at the Red House. One of our most frequent visitors that summer was Joey, whom Chris and Brian knew from childhood. Joey was a sweet, quiet blond kid who went to Manhattanville University in Westchester County. He loved surfing and running as well as plugging in a guitar and picking apart the lyrics to old soul songs. Ever restless, he relished meeting people and was somewhat famous at Manhattanville for having spent several days living in Grand Central Terminal while trying to understand what it was like to be homeless.

Brian was in Italy for the summer teaching English, and Joey and Chris and I passed a lot of time together. We ended a lot of nights on the shore of a lake, or by the Housatonic River, slinging acoustic guitars and making harmonies. Joey taught me a few finger-picking techniques, including a way of holding a high note in suspension over an unexpected series of passing chords. A beautiful trick, like surfing on the guitar. He made it look as easy and natural as gravity.

Joey is always so calm, I thought. Even when we talked about politics and war. A philosopher. Often I envied his apparent equanimity. He sometimes regretted the way people talked about aging. "We talk about 'midlife' as though every life is divided in two. But it's really divided in four." We were twenty, which meant we were about to enter what Joey called "the second quarter of life," possibly the most exciting quarter. It was a nice alternative to the hackneyed idea, endorsed by so many alums, that everything got worse after college.

Then Joey went back to school, and Chris went off to use his Mandarin in Shanghai, where he had a funny-sounding job acting as a Sino-American

liaison for a grout-and-tile company.

I didn't see Joey much the first semester of senior year. He and I continued to talk on the phone and exchange album recommendations and occasional poetry via email, but he didn't visit, and I missed him, then was too distracted by campus life to get in touch.

Then, that winter, Joey went missing.

Police had noticed his car, an old white Jeep, bobbing in the water of Lake Lillinonah in Bridgewater, Connecticut. Closed-circuit footage later showed that he'd bought some food for apparent strangers at a gas station the night before. Joey himself was—well, we dared to hope.

After two days of searching, they found his body in the river. As soon as Chris heard, he filled a carry-on bag and flew straight home. In a taxi from the airport, he heard WCBS announcing that the coroner had pronounced Joey's death a "likely suicide."

People seemed to accept that verdict. At first I refused to. The night Chris got back and came over to the Red House, we got a little drunk, and I became furiously convinced that Joey had been murdered, possibly by the same people he was seen helping in the gas station video. Searching on Google, I compiled a list of private detectives to call in the morning. When I woke up, I felt ashamed. But at least I'd exited denial. Now came the true pain, and the usual unutterable question: *why?*

Joey's family was Catholic, so the funeral featured an open casket. I stared at Joey and didn't recognize him. The cheeks, so pink. God bless the morticians, I guess. They'd done remarkable work.

Brian's mother, Paula, hugged each of us close at the wake and extracted a promise that "you'll never, ever do this to us." We promised.

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Chapter 6

Elopement Risk

(2008–2010)

After graduation, Brian and I settled into a cheap and spacious house in Petworth, in northwest D.C., where our buddy Aaron soon joined us. At the time some folks referred to the "purple door" rule for determining the degree of gentrification in a majority-black neighborhood. There was only one purple door on our street, and it indeed belonged to a white couple. The closest we got to gentrified adornment was to swap a green bulb into the lamp on our front stoop. It was a prop for a speakeasy party we held that first summer—a gesture toward Jay Gatsby's dirty money and clean dreams.

Brian and I had both snagged jobs working on the digital side of D.C.'s alternative weekly, *Washington City Paper,* with its intimidatingly excellent staff. In our off-hours, we worked on a book based on the American Backyard interviews and immersed ourselves in the new city: going to every free show we could, hosting big barbecues and parties, striking up friendships with bartenders so they'd slip us free drinks and let me play the piano in their establishment. We also welcomed new additions to the crew. We'd known Daisy and Zoe and Alice in a distant way at college, but in D.C. we got close, bringing them along to concerts and listening to their dating complaints. At the paper, I met Mike Riggs, a powerlifter from central Florida with a chest full of tattoos and an obsession with the rich history and dubious future of American magazines.

Brian and I still had that American Backyard tendency, where we'd make a point of forging friendships with anyone who seemed promising, and soon our neighbor Larry Huff, an older Black dude who lived right across the

street with his sister and her husband and their kids, was stopping by a few nights a week to pick guitar with Aaron and me. Larry worked as a barber and was good on the guitar, but his real talent was as a singer, an aptitude he shared with many of his eighteen siblings, especially his older brothers Andrew and Terry. We became known in the neighborhood for our odd intergenerational parties, where you might find Alice or Zoe (an heiress) listening politely to one of Terry's harebrained schemes for getting rich *like that* (with a snap of the fingers). At one early soirée, the mayor of Bladensburg, Maryland, showed up drunk and in possession of a dead goose that we roasted the following night. "No one could ever be bored in this house," Riggs marveled more than once.

Terry, we learned from Larry, was a former cop—and supposedly he'd gotten the closest to real stardom of all the musical brothers. Larry often complained about Terry's capacity for stretching the truth and general craziness, but I couldn't help finding Terry fascinating. By all accounts, he was brilliant and, yes, crazy. The crazy had kept fucking with the brilliant until he'd alienated his band and lost his record contract. Apparently, as he passed from his fifties into his sixties, Terry found himself on speaking terms with fewer and fewer of his siblings. It made me wonder: How does a person sabotage and squander their talents, making enemies out of their whole family in the process? Why doesn't the brilliance simply win out?

By that first winter, we'd created an orbit of writers, musicians, and radio reporters who correctly considered our doors open at any time. I made happy resolutions before the New Year, promising to avoid tobacco, drink less, improve my slide guitar, get a better job, and above all be a better friend.

I wanted to be a good son, too, so I pointed my station wagon north to Hamilton to celebrate Christmas with my mom and sister. All three of us donned cassocks and sang in the choir for our rural midnight mass, and the next day Mom made her signature Yorkshire pudding. But I couldn't stay long enough to enjoy the leftovers because I was due back in D.C. to help *City Paper* prep its coverage of President Obama's first inauguration. Which meant that on December 28, there was no one else with me in the Petworth house when the call came about the hospital.

"Daisy's checked herself in," Alice said. "For psychiatric evaluation."

"Checked in? Where?"

Alice named a university hospital in the city.

“Shit. How bad is it?”

Alice didn’t know but said Daisy had sounded not herself on the phone. “She’s supposed to be seen by a psychiatrist, but she says it’s only been nurses so far. I don’t think any of her roommates are in the city.”

“What about her parents?” They lived just two miles away.

“Either they won’t come or she won’t see them, I’m not sure. Can you go check on her? I know it’s late, and I’m sorry to keep treating you like a public service . . . ”

“It’s no problem,” I said. It was ten-thirty p.m. “As long as they’re allowing visitors, I’ll send you an update once I’m there.”

When I arrived twenty minutes later, Daisy had been at the hospital for hours but was still in the ER. After a wait and a lot of hubbub in the halls—stretchers gliding past me, mothers wandering from station to station seeking news about their children—a nurse ushered me into Daisy’s dreary temporary room.

Daisy mentioned she’d stopped taking her bipolar meds recently, perhaps the day before. She couldn’t sit still, wearing shorts and socks and a billowing Windex-blue hospital gown, pacing furiously in a room so tiny that half the time she was sort of ambling in place. She said the doctors were ignoring her completely.

“My parents aren’t even offering to visit me.” She paused. “And I am *for sure* suing my psychiatrist.”

It was my first experience with a manic episode that wasn’t my own. I could tell Daisy needed nothing less than absolute sympathy, so I agreed: The psych did sound negligent and was probably in need of a good suing.

It was hard to grasp what she was saying beyond how distressed she was. I’d never heard her go off like this before. But the connections she was drawing seemed clear and sensible to her.

Then Daisy stopped pacing and returned to the litigation question. “Maybe I should sue my parents, too.” She uttered the line musingly. Her sudden calm was startling after the torrents of words.

“Maybe, maybe,” I said. “Lemme see if I can rustle up a doctor.” But would she be safe on her own, even with the door closed? The staff evidently thought so—after they’d taken her shoelaces and purse and belt and the rest. My anger at the doctors’ apparent unconcern surged. *Is this the best you can expect when you’re in a complete mental crisis? To stare at a green wall indefinitely while your mind unravels?*

I hurried from the nurses' station to the front desk and stalked the grim antiseptic corridors, buttonholing doctors all the way. "Not one doctor has seen her, and she's been here three hours . . . " Eventually, one of the doctors, heaving a sigh that made me hate him, informed me that Daisy had in fact been seen by two doctors, shortly after her admittance. When I returned to Daisy's room and gently raised this point, she simply shook her head. "They haven't sent one *real* doctor," she said. I understood then that her manic episode was fucking with her memory and perception. But I also saw that, in her way, she was speaking the plain truth: No one had *seen* her, not in the way she needed to be seen.

That the emergency unit was dealing with a gunshot victim chastened my anger at the hospital a little. Still, in a crisis, you don't tell your friend that she has to wait in line; you try to help her jump it. So I kept roaming the halls to persuade a doctor to free her from that horrible holding room. When the doctors started to look at me like *I* was crazy, I went outside and dialed Daisy's parents.

"I'm not sure if you remember me, but I'm one of Daisy's friends . . . and she's trying to figure out why you're not here."

I was evidently on speakerphone. The mom chimed in first. "I didn't think she wanted us there . . . "

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not exactly, we thought it might be better to wait—"

My heart cracked a little for the mom. Of course—it would be hell to see your kid in one of these places. Then the father spoke. "Hey, Ted, we're so happy Daisy has a friend with her." He paused. I didn't say a thing, so he pressed forward with all the subtlety of a PR representative. "You know, we love Daisy, we think she's a great girl . . . "

A great girl? Was he trying to get me to hire her as an executive assistant? And his tone, so casual and upbeat, so *clubby* . . .

"She *is* a great girl," I responded with dry lips. "And she deserves to know that her parents care about her, that they're *aware* of what's going on . . . " I managed to restrain myself. "Before things deteriorate further, we need you here."

It was past eleven-thirty, and I was standing outside by the roundabout where the ambulances came in. I paced in the cold, wetting my dry lips with my tongue and cradling the phone from each blast of wintry air. I would've committed treason for a cigarette; instead, I popped in a second piece of the

new, weirdly thick nicotine gum. *Cut them some slack,* I reminded myself, staring up with enmity at the grim tower of the hospital. *No parent knows how to meet a crisis until it's here. The dad's probably nowhere near as blithe as he sounds.*

Once they'd made the fifteen-minute drive, I met them out front—Daisy was still in the holding room—and her father shook my hand with an easy smile, as though we were meeting for a casual dinner. A series of wind blasts sent Daisy's mom's jacket into a swirl.

"Well, you're here now," I said. "Let's go in."

The meeting was not a happy one on Daisy's side, not at first, but then her mother clasped her in a hug, and Daisy returned it. It was time for me to go. I thanked the nurse at the reception station and tramped back through the snow to find my old station wagon in the visitors' lot, giving silent thanks on the drive home that I'd been merely a visitor.

The next day after work, I went straight to the hospital with a clutch of short, fun, accessible novels: *Siddhartha,* a Wodehouse novella, and *The Satyricon*, plus Bertrand Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness* and, on a lark, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Daisy was out of the ER at last and in the psych ward on the fifth floor. Outside the ward was a square placard in ominous capital letters: ELOPEMENT RISK. I thought I must have misread, but no—when I blinked and again gathered in the words, the euphemism was still there. I wondered how many people had made a run for it; I wondered who would choose a cure that looked a lot like prison.

I buzzed for admittance, and a sweet-looking, round-faced nurse opened the door and led me to a vestibule where patients could meet their loved ones under close supervision. Daisy came in a few minutes later, having traded her hospital gown for sweatpants with no drawstring—hospital-issued, I gathered—and a dark turtleneck sweater. Above the waist, she appeared dressed for Paris in October. Below, she was dressed for exactly where she was. She lit up at a few of the books and thanked me profusely, if slowly and from an apparent distance. Whatever sedative she was under, it seemed potent as hell. Exuding a contingent calm, she kept picking her nails and avoiding eye contact. In another corner of the room, two visiting children were hugging an older Black woman while the woman wept and moaned.

"My roommate's nuts," Daisy told me, and a playful smile briefly lightened her mournful affect.

“How so?”

“She scratches herself and keeps asking for my drugs. I’ll point her out later.”

I tried to amuse her by complaining about the story I was working on, a frivolous reported piece about how the D.C. government was bracing for the enormous inauguration crowds by renting an historic number of porta-potties to line the National Mall. I hammed up my characterization of the eccentric contractor responsible for the swift deployment and the even swifter (he assured me) drainage of those hundreds of johns. After twenty minutes or so, Daisy had an air of brightness, almost of comfort, and she embarrassed me with her gratitude.

Then I made the mistake of bringing up her therapist. “You still planning to sue her?”

An invisible but impenetrable wall now interposed itself between us. In a few words, I’d broken whatever good mood my visit had wrought and brought her right back to the previous night, to all that manic fury. The sudden turnabout made me want to weep.

“I think it’s time for you to go,” she said, rising and fidgeting as she hugged herself.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything—”

“The nurse will come back soon—they’ll be happier if you go now.”

The next day’s visit was more successful. Daisy proudly showed me her markings in the *Fear and Loathing* book I’d brought her. The pages were striated with big letters in various shades of Crayola (did they not allow felt-tip pens?). Daisy said these were her shorthand notes for an absurdist novel about the ward.

“I don’t want the nurses to read it because they’ll confiscate it.”

“They will?”

She nodded and smiled grimly. “It would expose this whole place.”

I said it sounded like the exact kind of covert journalism the world needed. Daisy would become the Upton Sinclair of psych wards.

I don’t know what else we said except that we laughed a fair bit, and I had the good sense not to mention her therapist or parents. This time we parted on good terms.

Two days later, she was out of the hospital and faring well, hewing to an adjusted medication regimen and going on long runs. She sent me a touching thank-you note for my visits: “You came when no one else could

or would.” I never told her why her recovery had mattered so much to me, or why I needed so much to see that a person could go into such a ward and come out again.

It would be over a decade until I found myself in a similar ward just across town. If you’d told me so at the time, a large part of me would have refused to believe it: *No, not I, not there, not ever*. But another, older part would have responded: *Really? It’s gonna take that long?*

Daisy recovered well, and she and Alice and Zoe soon became the most reliable fixtures at our Petworth parties. At some point, I noticed Zoe’s playful eyes had started to home in on me.

There’s a lovely thing that happens when you’re falling for someone new. It seems to rub off on every other element of your life, everything you’re doing and everything that came before. A free-floating endorsement of all things. The illusion of receiving a smile from God.

That’s what it was like to fall in love with Zoe.

Zoe was hot and bookish and game as all hell. Her day job was teaching special education at a small school in northeast D.C. The real flirtation started during the city’s Fringe Festival that summer, which we were each writing about. At bars, I kept catching her staring at me with an expression of fathomless seriousness, which softened when she felt my gaze. Still, I couldn’t tell what she wanted from me. Not until the night in her parents’ pool.

It was a Monday. Aaron and I were just back from an exhausting weekend of watching live music under too much sun, and Riggs, my powerlifting friend from the paper, knew I wanted to catch up on sleep but made me promise to come out for “just one drink.” That sounded fine. By the second drink, Brian had materialized; by the third, Zoe had, too, and before long we’d secured a six-pack and mounted the roof of the newspaper offices to drink al fresco under the moon. I suggested a swim in one of the city’s outdoor pools, most of which boasted beautifully scalable chain-link fences. Zoe countered that her parents were away, and their pool was enormous.

The four of us piled into my car and made our way to Spring Valley in far northwest D.C., singing along to JJ Grey & Mofro’s *Orange Blossoms*.

The house was a mansion, the pool heated, the white wine dry and chilled, the parents verifiably gone. All opted for skinny-dipping save Riggs, who swam demurely in his undershorts. Once Brian and Riggs retired to guest rooms to pass out, Zoe glided over to me and slipped a hand around my waist, and I turned and kissed her. I'll never forget her smile, which told me she'd been waiting for this. The owls in the orchard and the summer flowers whispering above us were ancient, immortal, the stuff of Eden before all that regrettable business with the fruit.

We spent much of the next three weeks together. After that first night, we interspersed the sex with some tremulous dates, exchanged books, went to concerts, sang together till dawn. But the whole thing had a sell-by date. Zoe was off for her master's studies in Ireland that fall, and I figured the affair was a delirious, passing thing. But Zoe wasn't eager to foreclose any romantic possibilities and made me promise to send her honest-to-goodness airmail letters. "I can fly you over. Whenever you want," she whispered.

"Christ, I'm going to miss you."

And I did. Missing Zoe—morbidly and completely—started to take over my life.

One of depression's many ironies is that the most beautiful things can set it off. So it was with Zoe. Once she left for Ireland, and despite the loving letters she sent in her smiley hand, that tightness in my chest—the seat of melancholy—returned, and everything felt like a brewing catastrophe. It didn't help that I was beginning to lose faith in the book project with Brian. It wasn't that the book was bad. But we were two drafts into a roughly 120,000-word manuscript, and I feared we were marooned between being simply charming and actually saying something memorable about the people we met on the trip. All those wondrous characters we met in New Orleans or Atlanta or the Wyoming hinterlands were becoming, on the page, merely a means to our own transcendent experience.

At the time I hadn't quite articulated this problem to myself. I felt a sense of doubt, then doom. I took three weeks off work, and Brian and I drove to a friend's house in New Hampshire for a writing retreat, hoping to emerge with a third draft. By the last week in New Hampshire, I was writing and editing at a good clip, but with dreadful pangs of guilt and fear

in the morning (*The book will never work—and it's my fault alone . . .*) and, come nightfall, a full-body feeling of despair (*. . . and Zoe, seduced by a soft brogue, will forget all about me!*).

We had Chris and another friend up for the last weekend to hear us read aloud. There was, I had to admit, some decent stuff in the manuscript, but even the good pages I'd written sounded, to my poisoned ears, like the work of someone else. Who wrote all that? Perhaps some past version of me, no longer findable. By the final morning, I was blind to any of the project's virtues and longed for my dumb, narcotizing work routine in D.C.

Once I returned, though, neither habit nor drugs seemed to work. Cannabis and liquor had lost their luster, and suddenly I'd gone from "night person" to "full-on insomniac." Zoe's letters brought my spirit arching high—and then a couple of days' silence from her sent me crashing. Brian came down to work out a few more things in the book, and I started breaking down, crying at random moments. Even in the most generous reading, the book was a pleasant and carefully written frolic, and I couldn't see a reason it deserved to be a book. I castigated myself for this lack of vision. If I doubted less, I'd be a better writing partner, I told myself doubtfully. I avoided Brian one day, not knowing how to talk to him because I was convinced I'd failed him, that I'd destroyed our partnership with my lack of faith, a betrayal of our friendship and shared past. When I finally told Brian and Aaron all this, they looked at me with a mix of surprise and pity. "That's insane," Brian said.

Yup.

From any perspective, it was untenable. My basic quest to Find Happiness, or at least to Feel Somewhat Okay, had run aground yet again. So I called my reliable go-to since childhood, Dr. Keith, who listened gently to my fears and said he knew just the colleague who could help me in D.C.

To me, a hearty recommendation from Dr. Keith was tantamount to a divine vouch. I began therapy with Dr. Wynne.

Dr. Wynne was a genteel Virginian with offices six blocks or so from the White House. He had the warm, irascible grin of a magnanimous satyr, sharp features leading down to a sharp chin covered by a trim, pleasantly goatish beard. A wrinkly-faced fellow whose every wrinkle was evidence of some hard-won smile—and whenever you induced a smile, all the creases on his face would come alive in harmonious jollity. (I've described him to friends as a hyperthyroidal Santa Claus.) Above all, he was one of the

precious few psychiatrists whose presence alone was calming. You could really talk to him.

Dr. Wynne asked lively questions, offered excellent book recommendations, quoted pre-Socratic philosophers and songs by Jason Isbell in turn, and generally treated you like a person rather than a set of eccentricities to be tamed. He was in all ways a humanist. And I adored the Virginia gravel in his stately voice.

I told him how the book project was going to hell, that it was my fault, even though I couldn't name the fault. I told him how much I worried about Zoe. The more she gave herself to me, I said, the more I trembled to think of losing her.

Wynne listened carefully to my anxieties about losing Zoe. He urged common sense: She said she cared for me, and I had every reason to believe her. She'd even floated our being exclusive despite the distance—shouldn't I be pleased? Wynne and I talked weekly, and he prescribed me sertraline (aka Zoloft, an SSRI) and an occasional Xanax for anxiety, plus Ambien as needed, to slow my brain enough to steal a few hours' sleep before rolling out of bed and dashing to my job at the newspaper. Keith had told Wynne the general drift of my childhood: conventional unhappiness that my nature had magnified far beyond convention. Wynne, like Keith, observed that I appeared to be carving a different path from my father's, privileging relationships over work. At the same time, my conviction that love was doomed smacked, to Keith at least, of my mother's (rightful) pessimism in the final years of her marriage. "It is also likely," Wynne wrote at an early session, "that his childhood attempts to shield his sister from pain have led him to a hyper-attunement toward disaster." I liked the sound of that. It made my self-centered depression sound almost noble.

Zoe came back to the States in November, and we had a sloppy reunion, each of us trying to time our "L bomb" properly. Afterward we clung together, alight with electricity. Two opposite charges, briefly balanced. Then she went back to Dublin, and I was left an unpaired ion, buzzing on its own.

With Zoe in Ireland once more, I began running again, often during my lunch break at work, less for cardiovascular health and more out of a raw need to exhaust myself, to give the Ambien some help and earn some of the sleep that my body had begun to reject. I spent my days and nights locked in memories of my courtship with Zoe, and in my imagination, those

memories came to represent an unrecoverable experience of paradise. I felt like a schoolboy. The dead certainty that Zoe would drop me made everything else irrelevant.

Aaron started tending to me, coming home with a pint of ice cream and a DVD on nights when he'd gotten the impression that I was having a hard one. What was I so scared to show Zoe? I didn't know, but I knew the fear had something to do with all that wealth. How could you count on the love of someone who had so many fucking options?

Zoe flew me to Ireland twice that semester. We drove a weeklong clockwise loop through southwest Ireland, hiking each day and reading poems to one another at Yeats's gravestone in County Sligo. At nights we'd close down the loudest bar in Dingle or Glendalough. In those days, there was nothing in the world as pleasurable and holy as getting joyously sloshed with Zoe. I loved her tipsy articulations of strong opinions about writers or movies, and I was addicted to that smile, the twinkle in her blue eyes in the dim lights of a bar. Most of all, I loved how, in every drinking session, explicitly or not, Zoe was celebrating *us*.

Zoe's time in grad school was a chance for me to eavesdrop on that world, and I grew increasingly envious of it. Getting paid to read and teach sounded pretty good, and I was growing ambivalent about D.C. journalism. Everything felt so perishable, dated so quickly; at a university, by contrast, you could focus on work that had lasted for centuries. That's how it looked to me back then. And I could keep freelancing. I began applying to PhD programs that offered good stipends. Most rejected me, but a letter of recommendation from Rawson, my ultra-distinguished undergraduate mentor, held some weight—God bless the old British bulldog—and my proficiency in languages ancient and modern, along with my writing samples and the durable appeal of a Yale undergraduate diploma, did the trick at a couple of places. The best-funded offer came from the University of North Carolina. Mom was thrilled. "I'm going into the family business," I told friends, usually with some aside about how it'd probably been inevitable. Dress a kid in tweed long enough and he'll grow into it; read him enough Swift and he'll start talking in footnotes. Yet for all the self-effacement, I was earnestly excited about the whole thing, and the former

actor in me was especially jazzed about the prospect of teaching. I didn't want to become my parents, but I would've been a fool not to admire *some* of their choices.

One of the last big stories I wrote for *City Paper* was a cover story profiling Terry Huff, Larry's brother, the hero cop turned soul star turned family pariah. I told readers about the making of *I Destroyed Your Love*, a really good soul LP that Terry released in 1976. The title track did well as a single and, in the words of Captain Fly, a D.C. DJ of the period, turned Terry into "a hometown hero with a national piece."

But Terry couldn't ever get along with anyone. After he got kicked out of a succession of siblings' houses, he sold insurance, then cemetery plots, then was a salesman with nothing to hawk but his own past. He spent a lot of time in shelters. He wouldn't accept a bed in our house. It was hard to know how to help him.

That fall, I was driving down to grad school in North Carolina when someone at the Police Benevolent Association called me on my cell. "Terry Huff is dead," they said. "We've been trying to reach his family, but none of them will talk to us."

"What do you need?"

"We can set aside ten thousand dollars to help with a funeral. The problem is we need someone in his family to pick up the phone."

I called Larry, Terry's younger brother who'd lived across the street from us. I told him about the PBA and the offer of funeral funds.

"Terry's no good," Larry said. "I love you, we can talk about anything other than Terry, but I'm done doing favors for that man."

I don't know whether Terry ever had a funeral, whether Larry ever forgave him for being Terry, whether Terry had been neurochemically fated to end up an outcast or whether he made a choice somewhere along the line, or both, or neither. Amid my ruminations, I thought of Terry's masterpiece. *I Destroyed Your Love*. It felt like a warning.

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Chapter 7

A Heavenly Chaos

(2010–2011)

Driving down to North Carolina in the Subaru, I took stock of things. The English department at UNC–Chapel Hill was investing in me, treating me—unjustly, I thought—as a catch; now came the proving time. I was bent on a life of devoted scholarship and wholesome living. I promised that I'd bike everywhere, decline cigarettes when offered, read constantly. I also vowed to return to the gym and put on more muscle so I wouldn't become one of those shuffling scholars who, by forty-five, had the downward-drooping neck of an aged stork. Lifting would also alleviate my anxiety, or so I told myself as I zipped down the seaboard at a smooth 78 mph, working the nicotine gum so hard it should've turned into a diamond. I would cook and eat clean and do all the other things that a healthy person did, and through dedicated mimicry, I'd become the real thing. I would do so much normie shit that one day I'd simply wake up normal. Above all, I'd study hard—and publish early.

North Carolina was ideal for a young scholar on a budget. I had arranged a two-bedroom apartment in one of the semi-detached redbrick bungalows of the rather sprawling Glen Lennox development, just a mile east of campus. It was one of the first modern planned communities of the postwar era, at least according to the owners, a corporation that went by the name Grubb Properties—a name Dickens would've rejected for a landlord as being too on the nose. The place struck me as new and disturbingly impersonal. At the time I was reading Ruth Richardson on the history of London workhouses: the places, back in Victorian times, where you'd end up if you couldn't pay your debts. My first impression of my Glen Lennox

bungalow was accordingly addled: *This is the sort of House you settle for when you give up hopes of a Home*. *Workhouse or madhouse, what difference can it make to me?*

These overreactions were neither rational nor healthy. But they were *my* overreactions, and they weren't going away. Midway through emptying the station wagon, I opened my laptop to look for therapists covered by university insurance—and remembered I had no Wi-Fi. *Tomorrow*.

For all my upright intentions, I was vibrating with anxiety, so after unpacking the car and filling the fridge, I drank beers until I felt loose and careless, then more until I was grave and lonely and feeling far from Zoe. As in childhood, I kept trying to take the watch apart, to look at things reasonably, but the gears were churning too fast. The night ended with my inflating an air mattress and then tossing on it, worrying every which way about the relationship. It was too good to last. Zoe must've made a clerical error and would realize it soon. I was playing, essentially, a version of "she loves me/she loves me not," yanking recklessly at the threads of my own peace.

The first month in NC was a lot of catch-up reading (hello, Democritus, my old friend) and therapy—my first period of truly devoting myself to therapy as an adult. Once the Wi-Fi kicked in, I researched local psychiatrist options carefully. Wynne wasn't necessarily a genius, but he was perceptive and honest and kind and truly cared. I suspected that was rare in the field, and I hoped I could find it in my new home. It struck me that having a woman therapist might be worth a shot. Maybe she could hold me to account more than the median male psychiatrist, especially as I was so given to relationship anxieties and really didn't want to fuck things up with Zoe. Thus, I found myself sinking each week into the floofy couch of Dr. Shirley.

Dr. Shirley was a young, freckly lady perhaps a couple of years my senior. I liked that she was a family therapist; the idea of being a young dad was attractive to me then, and Zoe was sufficiently rich that she could have kids, as many as she could count, whenever the whim struck her, and she talked about them constantly . . . Lord knew my own family history was

relevant to present anxieties, and who better to adjudicate those than a family therapist?

"I'm high-strung these days," I informed her during our first appointment—a superfluous explanation, given how fast I was talking. "Always, actually, but especially this past year. I'm probably a little too in love with my girlfriend. I also drink too much, not in a daily way but in binges, and Zoe *really* likes to party, so I'm trying to keep things . . . more balanced on that front. And relatedly, I've become an insomniac and probably use too much Ambien. So I'm a lot of fun!"

She gave me a perfunctory smile and didn't break my gaze—she was positively a demon for eye contact, which I respected. "The sleep stuff we can deal with easily. You use your bed for sleep and sex. No lolling about." The floor between her chair and the patients' couch was littered with stuffed toys and rubberized blocks for the younger generation. I remembered the little basketball hoop I'd played with in Dr. Keith's office. Were the kids whom Dr. Shirley counseled destined to keep returning to some version of this office all their lives, until they shambled into their graves?

"I really don't loll these days."

"Good. No napping and no invalidism."

I stirred defensively at "invalidism." "Do I seem like a hypochondriac?"

"No, but it sounds like your mother is. So given your profile, you should probably keep an eye out."

"Oh, Mom's ailments are very real," I assured her.

"Hmm," said Dr. Shirley. "You make it sound like she embraces them."

I paused. "I'm not sure that's fair." She smiled. Could she smell my guilt over years of having entertained the same question?

Zoe had finished her master's in Ireland and returned to the States that summer. Now she wanted to live close to me, so she interviewed at several schools in the eastern part of the state and took a job teaching seventh-graders at a private school in Winston-Salem, an hour-and-a-half drive from Chapel Hill. At first I despaired over the distance—she'd need her own apartment. But we'd still be building a life together, and hell, if she was willing to live a year in Winston-Salem just for the debatable privilege of seeing me every weekend, when she could've been in Ireland or at one of

the family houses in Vail . . . Even my neurotic ass had to admit there was every sign she was fully committed. Zoe was my first partner with whom the prospect of having kids was a forthright turn-on. I loved the way she'd sometimes gulp and say "I want one" whenever a particularly winsome baby hove into view. *Wow,* I thought, *I might actually want to make a family. At least with Zoe.*

During the week, we'd be apart and I'd send surprise deliveries to her apartment, especially oversize balloons and chocolates. I spent way too much time on the phone trying to find someone who could supply a singing telegram. No dice. But Zoe was touched by the effort.

Zoe and I were good partners, but we were *great* drinking buddies. In D.C., we'd tripped boozily between embassy parties and rock shows and various dives that we loved. We kept up the routine in North Carolina, perhaps more so as I sought to make the transition fun for her, to distract her from any second thoughts she might have about winding up in the sticks. With Zoe's life in Winston-Salem so new and—frankly—down-market, I was eager to make Chapel Hill doubly charming to her. I wondered sometimes what would become of us if one or both stopped drinking—whether the magic would dry up.

When Zoe was in town, we'd host dinners at my goofy bungalow with fresh fish and plenty of wine. We wanted to make a good impression on my colleagues—and on the faculty, from whom we might be begging for jobs in a few years. With a lot of excitement and a little trepidation, we accepted an invitation to dine with Jessica, a short spark plug of a professor who'd recruited me to the program, and her husband, Reid. Zoe and I dressed sharp and were received as equals. Our hosts were fond of wine, and before the hors d'oeuvres, Zoe and I were three glasses deep. Spareribs followed at the candlelit table, and the house came to feel of a type with my mom's, one more stop on the circuit of academic homes appointed not expensively but always wisely. And Reid and Jessica were true jet-setters, so the house was an apotheosis of its genre. Photos of them hiking after conferences in Japan or Switzerland or delivering talks at Oxford or the Sorbonne; photos of them with famous novelists or celeb academics whom Zoe and I knew from our Norton Critical Editions.

By the third bottle, Jessica was telling us how she'd met Reid. It was while she was interviewing for her job at the university, and they'd begun a romance via letters; they would be reading Milton on opposite sides of the

country, she at Stanford and he at UNC, and they'd embellish the margins of their love notes with quotations and newly discovered inside jokes. "Can you believe it, a Carolina redneck and a hotshot Jewish girl from Queens . . . " He sloshed out of his seat and around the table to give her a wet kiss on the cheek.

After some kind of flan—we were all quite drunk—we ended the evening listening to Sibelius, followed by a country-swing record. Our hosts had informed us several times that they'd never wanted children, so a series of dachshunds had served instead. During the second record, Reid repaired to a bench in the corner of the dining room and took their little wiener dog in his arms, rocking it like a baby and singing to it with his eyes closed. Faintly embarrassed, I used some third-base-coach signals to confirm that Zoe was ready to skedaddle; we offered flowery thanks and began the slow enterprise of peeling ourselves away.

In the car home, Zoe was cuddly, as she often became after any social excursion that seemed to consecrate our togetherness. Part of the beauty and mess of the whole thing was that we were still somehow in a honeymoon phase, though we'd been seeing each other for nearly a year, and the sheer *goodness* of it continued to scare me.

"Can that be us one day?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. I wondered whether I was holding her hand a bit too tightly. "But I draw the line at kissing dogs."

"Oh, Ted, they're so *adorable*," Zoe cried.

I didn't really sleep that night. I had too much wine in my belly to take the Ambien that had become a requirement if I hoped to doze at all, and was angry at myself for driving, even if I'd cut myself off a few glasses before Zoe. After she conked out on my chest, I dislodged myself—Zoe was a champion sleeper—and went to sit on the back stoop to smoke and do math in my head.

How could I secure the life that Reid and Jessica made look so glamorous? Publish, publish, sure. But I also had to make friends with the funding folks at various foundations and never let a travel fellowship swim into possibility without working fast to harpoon the thing. The other option was independent wealth, and I didn't have that. It would be impossible to

keep up with Zoe, or with my highest dreams of working abroad and leading study groups, without making constant use of other people's money. There were so few properly funded programs to begin with, and tenured positions were disappearing. It was clear that you couldn't simply be *quite good;* you had to professionalize early, as everyone knew. But what did that mean for me? I lit another cig.

First, it meant polishing my Latin fluency until I had the juice to apply for jobs in multiple departments. (How old-fashioned these concerns now seem. At the time, if you can believe it, recent humanities doctorates looked forward innocently to a tenure-track position.) Second, it meant adjusting my concentration to cover a wider historical period, strategically including some of the sixteenth-century authors, so that I could apply to jobs in the English eighteenth century *and* the Classical Period, but also to those in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe. I stubbed out the cigarette and added the butt to a row on the stoop, where the mottled orange of the filters took on a psychedelic texture and shimmered under the porchlight. I blinked. The Zoloft was like that sometimes, when you were drinking and especially when you were underslept: at first a sensation along your skin, as though your nerve endings had become newly self-aware; and before long the prickliness reached your vision, which alternately swam and crystallized. I took the extinguished butts inside and flushed them in the toilet and, before putting myself to bed, wrote in large letters on a yellow sticky note: SUMMER—ROME AND/OR LONDON; SPEAK LATIN; FUCKING PUBLISH.

As usual, I awoke before Zoe and had the sense to snatch the note off my desk so she wouldn't laugh at my tipsy exhortations, the scholarly equivalent of a Nike poster: JUST PUBLISH. How remarkably insightful!

Yet I didn't throw the note away. In fact, I did exactly what it said.

Zoe and I really were adorable for a while there, in our haste toward a kind of scholarly wholesomeness and a sweet, almost puppy-love devotion. The passion and impracticality of it all nearly broke my heart when we were apart. It was painful to consider what she was sacrificing, how pluckily she was making the best of her weekday life in Winston-Salem. Given her means, she could've settled anywhere.

When I told Dr. Shirley about Reid and Jessica and the tiny, agèd weiner dog, she gave a rare smile.

“You’re becoming very domestic. It sounds like Zoe is happy because she can imagine having such a life with you?”

“I don’t think we’d quite be like them, but—yes.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“Relieved, and a little distrustful of the relief . . . ”

“Why distrustful?”

“Because I don’t want my happiness to depend so entirely on someone else. It makes you helpless.”

I told her of my old paranoia about having a breakdown and being expelled from society. If I cracked up, having money couldn’t save me entirely . . . but Christ, it would help. Dr. Shirley saw that I was uptight about money and tried to bring me to reason. In our sessions, I’d referred to myself as a cupbearer enough times that the doc stopped me and asked about it.

“You seem very conscious of the disparity in wealth. But you also describe your budgeting and finances with a clear eye, you’re not carrying debt, you went to the same college. Why do you think you dwell so much on her parents’ money?”

I paused. “I mean, she’s worth eight figures already, with more to come. That’s a distracting amount of money for anyone.” It was embarrassing, this role of the middle-class striver who apologized for his wealth and his poverty in the same breath. The old Hotchkiss anxieties all over again. Perhaps defensively, I said, “You don’t have to be obsessed with class—”

“I’m not sure it’s about class; it sounds more to me like you’re looking for complications.”

I nodded and thought. She wasn’t wrong. She was also oversimplifying. To my obsessive mind, the money was a clear third member in our relationship. Not that Zoe ever threw it in my face. No, she was quite generous with me, flying me to Vail or to Nantucket and otherwise happily slumming it with me in my apartment, where I cooked her fillets of discounted sole. “But there’s a coldness whenever she mistakes some glance or silence from me as dismissal, a sort of unspoken readiness to say *Well, fuck you,* too, *then.* And I know some of that swagger comes from her knowing how smart she is, but a lot of it also comes from money.”

“You’re intimidated by her money?”

“I mean, it’s an objectively terrifying amount of money.” I paused. “And her family is, let’s say, *sensitive* to the possibility that someone might have mercenary reasons for marrying into it.”

“Do you feel scrutinized around them?”

“A bit, maybe for being too Jewish or too liberal, not for greed. But I don’t know. When I find myself thinking about the money, it worries me.”

“Would it feel less painful to be rejected by a class than by a person?”

It would. It did.

Jess soon engaged me as the Latin proofreader and occasional translator for her forthcoming book for Oxford about Homer and war in the Renaissance. I also promptly applied for two important things: a fellowship in Early Modern studies from the Mellon Foundation and a funded spot at the University of Virginia’s Rare Book School. If I got them, I could spend May and June in Rome reading manuscripts at the Vatican Library, then late July and early August in Charlottesville studying paleography—essentially, learning how to go all Sherlock Holmes on a given piece of handwriting from the Tudor period on. While greedy for more abstract knowledge, I also wanted to pick up as many practical, concrete skills as I could. A properly trained paleographer could go work for Sotheby’s or Christie’s or wherever, enjoying job options even if tenure and professorships disappeared.

“I love you,” Zoe said one day, “because you consider paleography to be a *practical* skill.” Remarkably, the fellowships came in, guaranteeing I could study in Rome. Zoe arranged to spend at least a month there with me, which sounded as close to heaven as one could expect in this life.

The next month, she was accepted at an excellent university to do her own doctorate. It was a farther trek than Winston-Salem, and I worried about our growing apart. But for now, we had the summer to look forward to, in Rome.

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Chapter 8

Declensions

(2011–2013)

In June, I moved into an apartment on Via del Pellegrino, on the northwestern edge of the Campo de' Fiori, with a little kitchen and study on the second floor and a large bed on the third under steeply angled ceilings. It was a ludicrous address at which to take up residence, in some ways the best in the city: close to everything, with a fresh market in the square most days and two justly famous pizza shops, as well as more fashionable restaurants. The sixteenth-century philosopher Giordano Bruno had been burned at the stake for heresy a stone's throw from our bedroom window.

In the mornings I would walk a mile and a half north, across the Sant'Angelo Bridge, to the modest schoolroom in Prati where I read Latin with my fellow students, mainly American but with one Italian in the mix. As we read and composed in this supposedly dead language, we also began to speak it, haltingly at first, then with increasing fluency, under the tutelage of Jason and Eric. The two had been protégés of Reginaldus, aka Father Reginald Foster, a remarkable Carmelite monk from Wisconsin who served as the Vatican's chief Latinist for many decades.

In the weeks before Zoe joined me, I developed a happy routine: I read Tacitus and Polybius and, in the early mornings, translated aloud; spoke Latin in conversation by the Castello St. Angelo until lunch; and, in the afternoons, either enjoyed tours in Latin of catacombs and baths and ancient graffiti, or visited the spot at Largo di Torre Argentina in Rome where Julius Caesar was assassinated, or the castle in Latium where Thomas Aquinas was born. On the weekends, our class would make day or overnight trips out of the city, aiming for a mix of historic sites, *latine loqui*, and leisure.

This is one of Rome's greatest thrills: finding an abundant continuity between past and present—and wasn't that the kind of sanity I'd been after for so long?

Most evenings I'd set aside an hour with a half glass of white wine and write some stand-alone piece of fiction. It became a discipline, a reliable source of calm. I flattered myself that things were going very well, even wrote to Dr. Shirley to brag about it all, how active I'd been, how I exercised in the mornings and walked over ten miles a day to burn off my nervous energy. "Can you believe the Mellon Foundation is paying for me to do this?" I asked the doc. "I feel luckier than Augustus."

Like most normal people, Zoe didn't read Latin, much less speak it. But she was, in her words, ride or die for Ted—plus, the scenery wasn't bad. When she joined me in the Eternal City, Zoe got on quickly with my Rome friends, and she was remarkably forgiving of all the Latin. She gamely joined us as we hiked the Alban Hills around Genzano to reach Nemi, the volcanic lake where Caligula had relaxed on enormous barges that served as floating palaces. We traveled to Naples by train to stay in a funny little château and visit the cave of the Sibyl and hike Mount Vesuvius, at the summit of which the Latin students took turns reading aloud from the letter that Pliny Jr. wrote as he watched the earth-shifting eruption in 79 CE.

Everything was so *right*. I loved cooking for Zoe with vegetables from the Campo and meat and fish from a butcher downstairs, and we both enjoyed the curious privileges of being among Rome's inner circle—having an edge on other tourists by virtue of our scholarly privileges (special library and museum access) and our friendships with various upscale tour guides (few others were then permitted to visit the Domus Aurea at night). Indeed, it was all going so well that I convinced myself my brain and heart were recovered somehow, rather than merely being exhausted from happy use.

But toil could absorb only so much nervous energy. And I began to find myself drinking with Zoe in a way I hadn't before: hard, long, and with a brittle joy that was quietly conjoined with desperation.

Before, I'd binged but could also enjoy a single glass and then be done. Now I found myself speeding toward being a one-means-twenty drinker. Something had changed in me that first year in Carolina, a recklessness that grew with my efforts to succeed as a scholar, and with trying to succeed as Zoe's boyfriend.

I was caught in a perverse trade-off. Zoe and I were living a semi-glamorous life full of gorgeous vistas and enlivening work, paid for by grants and fellowships that affirmed and quantified our value. But now that I'd obtained such a life, I was more fearful than ever. Strangely, during that last month in Rome, a single glass of wine never helped: My heart would start to race, and I'd feel desperate to slow it down. The solution, for a couple of weeks, was either to abstain entirely, or else to drink the rest of the bottle. Zoe didn't pay much heed at first. Firmly raised in a work-hard-play-hard family, she delighted in popping a bottle and having a grand, epic night. The first night of July, the two of us went for a cheap dinner off the Piazza Navona, and Zoe blanched when I ordered just sparkling water, as though I'd used a slur in public. She informed me airily that Italian law proscribed restaurant patrons from having dinner without wine. I smiled and nodded but couldn't make myself say what I was thinking: *Hey, we haven't talked about this much, but sometimes I feel a certain franticness while drinking, and I'd like to watch out for it*.

"Let's at least share a bottle," she said, "you shouldn't feel guilty about *that*."

I smiled, said of course, and after the second glass, we both felt well again. She was in Italy for me, after all. I didn't want to be a poor sport.

It was the Fourth of July, a few days later, when things came undone.

"I need a quiet night," I told Zoe.

"Just one drink," she responded. "Where's your patriotism?" *Just one drink*—as early as our first date, "just one drink" had become a famous trio of last words, usually presaging a night of carnality. There was no way it'd be just one. (Poor Zoe—she couldn't have seen how hard it was to say no to her.)

As I foolishly saw it, I was stuck between two unhappy choices: drink or disappoint Zoe. I thought Zoe loved me for my wit and do-anything spirit; what a shame it would be if I were to complicate that picture. So we went to one of the bars in the Campo and settled ourselves among the other Americans. Zoe ordered shots and beers, "just like in D.C.," and my memory after the fourth drink is deader than Latin.

In the morning, we had a train to catch for another edifying outing with the Latinists. Zoe awoke around eight and came downstairs to find me on the couch, medicating the worst hangover of my life with sips from a bottle of Scotch. I hadn't ever drunk like this before, and the grim necessity of it,

the natural way I awoke and thought, *Hard liquor for breakfast,* terrified me. Zoe was patient at first as I apologized for myself. She was almost as scared as I was; maybe more so, since she didn't have the benefit of being tipsy. Checking the time, she tried to salvage the day.

"We can still make the train," she said, holding me on the couch.

"You go, I'll stay," I said. "I don't want anyone to see . . . this."

Zoe shook her head slowly, firmly. "We're both going. I'm making coffee."

I put aside the Scotch and began guzzling espresso, and by the time we reached Stazione Termini, the alcohol and caffeine had me in a fine mood, feeling zero pain and buttonholing hopelessly confused strangers to ask them for cigarettes in Latin (*fistulae nicotianae*). On the train, I bantered with my fellow Latinists and laughed too loudly, reeking of whiskey. I stopped chattering when Zoe muttered something under her breath about how I was acting like a "hyper, drunken fool."

At the beach, we swam and read Tacitus. I bought a pair of beers from a man with a cooler and drained them slowly to smooth my descent, and I borrowed a guitar to play a few maundering country songs. Zoe came over and kissed my neck and said she was sorry for snapping at me. I told her not to apologize, that I deserved it. I wanted to say, *I've been scared of something like this since we started together, scared that you'd see the monster, the loser, the fool*. I was so recklessly besotted that I would've dropped nearly anything for Zoe—but if I admitted as much to her, it would spell the end of the relationship. My need was far too much responsibility for one person. So instead of telling her my concrete fear of losing her, I mysticized the whole thing. It was a chemical imbalance, I said. I probably wasn't on the right antidepressant. Zoe said my particular flavors of depression and anxiety were a sign of my intelligence, and I pretended to agree. We can lie infinitely when we're in love.

As a practical matter, I insisted on *tapering* over the next day, sipping wine against the brutal hangover; as always, I was taking the coward's way out, and a shortsighted one. On that last night of Roman drinking, I (mostly) remember having a nice dinner at the house of an Italian colleague, Alessandro, a protégé of a Princeton historian whom I idolized. Alessandro cooked us a rustic pasta dish that he finished in a hot pan, and we talked a bit about Petrarch and a lot about Silvio Berlusconi, the country's Caligulan prime minister, who'd recently lost his majority in the Italian parliament

and was on his way to resigning that November. Alessandro, mild-mannered in all other things, exhibited eloquent fury on the topic of Berlusconi. Zoe vehemently agreed, and I enjoyed the harmony of their wits, especially since I had none of my own to lend.

When we left, I thought I'd acquitted myself well. But Zoe gently observed that I'd put my feet up on an ottoman that was probably only for display, and I crumpled inwardly. A breakdown in manners, and I hadn't even been in a blackout? Could I not be trusted to obey the most basic social codes? And in the wine-dark recesses of my mind, I now saw one thing with horrifying clarity: I'd been depending on manners for a long time to prove to others I was sane. Unconsciously, I'd believed that if I could convince others of my sanity, then I could convince myself. Now no one was fooled.

After our dinner with Alessandro, I stayed in bed for two days straight. I guzzled water and took vitamins because I wasn't eating. I could've forced myself to eat if I'd had the gumption, but I was fresh out. Thoroughgoing self-hatred had beggared my appetite, and I simply had to outlast the hate.

I dozed in and out, batting away memories of the last two days. Zoe's look of mingled boredom and mortification when I was babbling in Latin on the train. How the undergrads across from us had taken me as merely overcaffeinated, at least at first. The night of the Fourth, when Zoe was expressing her frustration with me but the only response I could muster was *mi dispiace, mi dispiace* in a thick and mournful voice. Zoe eventually cut me off: "STOP FUCKING TALKING ITALIAN."

Retrospectively, I shared in her fury; exceeded it. As I lay in half slumber, my imagination began to return. I pictured myself in court, with a judge berating me for my behavior on Friday. The little lawyer making arguments on my behalf began objecting sweatily that it was Zoe who'd maneuvered us out of the apartment, over my protestations, for just the one drink, Your Honor. Nonsense, returned the judge; the defendant was responsible for his own foolishness, and anyway, Zoe couldn't be expected to know what the defendant wouldn't tell her. The little lawyer cut in, why yes, he never told *anyone* just how mad he feared he might get—which

proved madness, and wasn't madness a defense in itself? Not (thundered the judge) if the young defendant *had sought out* that madness.

These jousting arguments in my enervated brain harried me into the late morning. Finally, I managed to dip into cool, dissolving sleep for forty-five minutes, the sweetest and most silent sleep I'd known, and when it relinquished me, I could've sobbed to find myself still in Rome, in the attic polluted with the history of the past three days. Around me, the tiny, lovely apartment gathered itself into a recrimination: *Why do you always muck up paradise?* It had all been going so well. But I was too parched to sob.

I returned shakily to North Carolina from Rome and embarked on a committed life of non-drinking. That binge in the Eternal City represented a bright line: Alcohol was now out of the question.

I began seeing a peculiar psychiatrist, Dr. Stubb, a compact man who practiced intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy. A colleague of Dad's recommended Stubb. I can't imagine why.

Stubb warned me at the outset: "You may find yourself overwhelmed by the intensity of feeling unlocked, and the more overwhelmed you feel, the more you'll resist. This is natural." *Wow, okay,* I thought. *We're really gonna break down some doors.*

This aggressive treatment, known in shorthand as ISTDP, was then on the rise in a big way, along with a mini-generation of other psychodynamic approaches. Initially developed in the U.K. in the 1960s and '70s, ISTDP wasn't used widely in Britain until the late 2000s and was even newer on our shores. For me, there were red flags from the start. Stubb touted the use of ISTDP in patients repressing a traumatic wound. That didn't match Dr. Keith's profile of me, nor the assessments of Dr. Shirley or Dr. Wynne or really anyone who'd treated me, ever. And there were no major trials at the time attesting to the efficacy of ISTDP.

On the first day, we sat in facing chairs, and Stubb explained how our sessions would work: We'd sit like this, and I'd stare into his fervid, protuberant eyes, and Stubb would ask how various things, people, ideas, situations *made me feel*.

"It's that simple?"

"You'll be amazed."

It all seemed a little off base and a little impractical. I was wrong: It turned out to be remarkably off base and utterly impractical. He enjoyed abstract questions, like “What is the shape of your anxiety?” But his favorite thing was to find a single theme and then play it until it was dead. Once he’d chosen a question that pleased him—for example, “How do you feel toward your dead grandparents?”—he’d spend our full ninety minutes repeating the question at me, with increasing vehemence, like a dog mauling a bone. At one point he said that I had “achieved transference,” which meant (allegedly) that I now saw Stubb as the emissary of whatever I truly feared or hated but could not name. Stubb was like a magician who stared at you, surly and impatient, insisting that you pretend to see the rabbit in his hat.

At home after a session, I would sometimes read testimonials online from those who’d found ISTDP of use. In each case, the patient made note of the psychiatrist’s penetrating insights; of how the doc had carefully adjusted lines of questioning; above all, how the therapist had successfully engendered a confidence in the patient, who stuck with this intense, strange therapy because it really seemed like the practitioner knew what he was doing. I envied the authors of these testimonials. The doctors sounded so different from Stubb.

He became a project of mine. I wanted to collect every detail about him, understand why his face was always so pinched, whether he had friends, what the hell his internal monologue sounded like. I had so many questions about Stubb. Sometimes when sleepless, I’d lie in bed and imagine him managing various impossible social situations, like a first date (*These are arancini—how do you feel toward them?*).

By the eleventh or twelfth session, Stubb was still resolutely convinced that the key to my happiness was to discover a single event that explained all the others. I came to think of him as a mad explorer so bent on finding El Dorado just across the next ridge that he never bothered to pan for smaller but immensely valuable strikes in creeks and furrows along the way.

In our remaining sessions, though, the main topic of discussion wasn’t my health or happiness but Stubb himself.

“How do you feel toward me?” he asked me for the frillionth time.

“Honestly, increasingly annoyed.”

“‘Annoyed’ isn’t an emotion.”

“It’s becoming one. I’m just trying to answer the question honestly.”

“What *else* do you feel toward me, then?”

“Despair.”

“That’s not an emotion, either.”

“Isn’t it? Then I don’t know what else to say.”

“Okay, then, why despair?” He seemed, as usual, rather put out.

“I guess because I allowed myself to believe you could help me.”

He lit up a bit. “Okay, that’s interesting.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, you say you’re annoyed at me, but really it sounds like you’re annoyed at *yourself: You* allowed yourself to believe.” Good Lord, he was serving thin gruel. But he looked at me with an almost lip-smacking complacency, as if to say, *Not bad, right?*

It was a snot-nosed logic, at once smarmy and superior, like a middle-school debater being patronizing to an elderly relative. So assured and so vacuous . . .

“You say you *allowed* yourself to believe,” he went on. “Tell me: How does belief make you feel?”

“Um . . . aspirational? Covetous?”

He could’ve gone on like this for days, or years, if I’d allowed him.

Stubb registered disappointment when I suggested in an email we bring our sessions to an end. “But I suppose I can understand,” he wrote back (the “suppose” sounded peevish to me). “You wanted concrete progress.”

“I’d love to hear your professional opinion on why we didn’t make that progress,” I responded. It was an earnest question: I’d so wanted this to work.

“I would agree we didn’t achieve much,” he wrote back, “and would say it was mainly because of technical errors on my part. Perhaps also some resistance on yours. I’m very sorry.” I asked Stubb whether he thought I might be able to achieve a relevant transference with a different analyst. Maybe it was an indelicate question. He never wrote back.

It was a dispiriting but memorable lesson for me—about psychiatrists, and what a rotten feeling it is to be a pincushion or practice doll for pet theories. It was eye-opening to see how abysmally unprepared some “caregivers” can be. Wouldn’t you be a bit shaken if you went to your cardiologist and he’d forgotten where your heart was?

I figured I’d have to get better all by myself.

After Rome, I yoked myself to a maxim from Gore Vidal: “The more a mind is used and fed, the less apt it is to devour itself.” I filled every moment with some bit of reading or writing and became positively obsessive about freelance journalism, writing mainly about books, music, and movies for monosyllabic magazines like *Paste* and *Slate*, as well as polysyllabic outlets like *The Paris Review* or the *Oxford American*. At the same time, I was teaching two undergraduate writing courses and preparing my thesis for the MA portion of the program, plus driving a couple of hours every other weekend to see Zoe. “I don’t want you to wear yourself out,” Zoe said. She also encouraged me not to give up on psychiatry: “Don’t let Stubb sour you on the whole field!”

So I consulted someone I trusted: the cheery Dr. Keith, then still practicing in Syracuse, New York. On the phone, Keith furnished promising recommendations for psychiatrists in my part of North Carolina. When one of his recommendations requested a rundown of my psychological profile, Keith emailed it to me:

> My recollection is that you were an intelligent and thoughtful little kid. Your mind was too big for your small body. I think you felt yourself an outsider amongst peers. I couldn’t tell if you were in fact excluded or you felt you didn’t belong/didn’t know how to fit in. I suspect many/most/other child psychiatrists would have started you on Prozac at the first visit. I rarely medicate children. I didn’t medicate you and I am glad I didn’t. I enjoyed working with you, had a fondness for you, and my impression was that at some level you appreciated your relationship to me. I can imagine you were uncertain what it was all about.
>
> I saw you with your family much of the time. As far as background, this part may be more important than what you were like. I had good relationships with each parent. As many times as I saw you all, I knew very little about the marriage. It felt like a great deal of unhappiness was concealed in the marriage. I have no explicit evidence for that, only intuition. It

> seemed also that as a family all members carried an obligation for high achievement, but achievement was not always accompanied by satisfaction.
>
> One of my beliefs about the Nature of Children, is that all children worry about their parents. They do not have language for the worry, the worrying is done with their whole being. But children instinctively conceal their worry because the child knows that if the parents find out the child is worrying, the parents' distress will increase, which will further increase the emotional burdens of the child. I think you carried a much greater burden of concern than your little sister did. The character of the kid that carries responsibility for parental well-being is shaped by that concern . . .

As I read these lines in my office on campus, the simplicity of Keith's words drew from me a barking laugh. Mortification vied with gratitude: I shuddered at how little progress I'd made on the road to happiness—but I also felt oddly encouraged by the lucid reason of Keith's analysis. He was so much more literal and straightforward than Stubb. He didn't mystify anything or posit an unintegrated major trauma as the key to my anxiety and depression. He understood that, for certain depressives, nothing fancy is required as a catalyst; that dealing with what was in front of you was sometimes the unglamorous best one could do. He sent me to Dr. Whitby, a well-fed, kindly guy who looked like a retired college basketball coach. Whitby preferred steady maintenance and improvement over the single heroic spasm. When I told him of my struggles with Stubb, he said: "We're hitting to get on base, not swinging for a home run every time." That sounded good and honest and steady. We talked every week, with no staring contest. He cheered victories here and there—snagging a fellowship, acquitting myself well with Zoe's family over holidays, exhausting every muscle during my increasingly intense gym sessions—and urged me to cheer them, too. I came to look forward to our sessions. Whitby inspired trust. I didn't think much of it when he slowly began to raise my daily dosage of Valium.

Zoe caught the freelance bug that year and began writing about music more often, for some of the same places I did. That whole year we both wrote so regularly that it wasn't hard to wangle critics' credentials to cover South by Southwest that March. At night, attending concerts gave me something to do while Zoe drank, but she didn't love drinking alone; meanwhile, I had become rather distant. Between writing and teaching, I was making decent money, and it made me feel much more secure. (Looking back, I'm amused by how little money it took to make me feel secure.) My secret sense of dependence on Zoe wasn't gone, but it was well on the wane, and I was surprised to discover in myself an optimistic curiosity about a Zoe-less life.

For her part, Zoe's love for me had entered a new phase. She'd always behaved in a head-over-heels way with me, despite the part of her that I wasn't permitted to see full-on. Now her head and heels were more or less where they belonged, and whatever had interposed itself between us wasn't going anywhere. The last night of the festival, we left Austin at seven p.m. for the drive to Chapel Hill, where two days later I had to teach.

"It just feels like you want someone different—someone less annoying, less moody," she said from the passenger seat.

"I've never called you either of those things," I said. Zoe was assuming an unflattering posture: *Aren't I just the worst?* "Are you trying to get me to break up with you?"

"No!"

"Yeah? It sure feels like you are."

"I want you to be happy, with whoever you want."

"What if I want you?"

She laughed. "Then we're fine, I guess." But we weren't, and neither of us felt like pretending.

So we got into it. Zoe said our respective lives were intensifying, and she was scared of us taking each other for granted. I suggested we were probably already taking each other for granted. She brought up couples therapy but became disgusted with the idea as soon as I expressed possible interest. We were kind and petty at once. Two things became quite clear: She wanted to break up and really didn't want to be the one doing it. I was so high on the exotic idea of my own independence that I actually started grinning. Dr. Keith would say: *You're no longer trying to keep your parents' marriage together, and that's real progress*. Or something.

“So stop me if I’m mistaken,” I said, “but it seems we’re each okay with, at minimum, a break, and you’re being too delicate to say we should break up. Is that right?”

“ . . . Maybe?”

“Then let’s break up.”

We were silent for several minutes. Then Zoe saw a weird billboard for the goofiest-looking personal injury lawyer you can imagine, and we both fucking lost it.

“We have to meet him.”

“I want someone to T-bone me just so I have an excuse to call the guy.”

Locked inside a car for the better part of twenty-four hours is an amazing way to break up with someone. You end up going through the stages quickly. A speedrun through the classics. Zoe got tearful thinking about previous road trips, all those cliffs and beaches in Ireland, our temporary apartment in Rome. . . . We were silent for twenty minutes, until I said with a mischievous smile: “I’m gonna win you back.”

“And how are you gonna do that? Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

We pulled over and fooled around, and Zoe asked, “Do you think we could end up together?”

I said, “At this rate, no.”

We spoke of the children we wouldn’t have, of how our moms would do some weeping when they heard the news; we joked about how to divide our friends most equitably. It was all punctuated with banal roadside moments. A pickup in Texas with truck nuts hanging off its trailer hitch. Each of us dropping a quarter in a slot machine at a rest stop where nobody won but the state of Louisiana. Snagging novelty gifts for each other at the gas stations of Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia. I think we both felt a perverse pride in covering so much emotional ground while locked in a tube together. It was a bittersweet pleasure to reflect on how good we could be to each other. With the exception of a few touchy moments, unavoidable, we tended to each other well, and with a new kind of pain, I considered how fun it would’ve been, to have gotten to do some parenting with Zoe.

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Chapter 9

Regency Romance

It’s terrifying to learn how happy you can be without the one thing you thought you needed. What else have you been so wrong about?

For the last years of grad school, I rented a house on Roberts Street in Carrboro with a colleague, Jerrod, a Spenserian from Ohio with a brooding face and a mordant sense of humor. He was a good woodworker and made all the bookshelves in our house from sturdy birch, with an elegant poplar trim. In the summers, he’d return to the commercial fishing boats of Lake Erie to awake at four a.m. every day and bank at least ten thousand dollars a season. So in June and July, I usually had the house to myself and led a monkish life: lifting, writing, smoking the occasional cannabis pipe with a friendly neighbor, Tariq, with whom I passed many happy late nights around the firepit in the backyard.

The previous year, I’d earned some extra cash helping one of my advisers organize the first-ever Jane Austen Summer Program at UNC, which soon became known as Jane Austen Camp. Though my mom was the real Austen expert, I knew the novels pretty well, and I knew it’d give Mom a kick to see photos of me dressed in Regency finery. Over the course of the conference, I grew so fascinated by the Austen obsessives, known as Janeites, that I wrote a short diary about the camp and published it in *The Paris Review*. Then a publisher got in touch to ask whether I wanted to “make it longer”—i.e., write a book version. I was finalizing the terms of the book deal and beginning to draft the thing. As much as I enjoyed my research and teaching at the university, I was beginning to get jazzed about writing for a general audience again. Maybe I’d go back to journalism after all. Options felt nice, especially when academic job prospects seemed to be thinning faster than nearly anyone had predicted.

One earlyish morning at the coffee shop, my phone tinkled, and Mila's face popped onto the screen. I remembered her as that serious, prim, quiet-but-arch girl who'd sat across from Rory and me in fourth grade in London, and who'd always been appreciative of whatever foolery he and I got up to. Thanks to Facebook, I'd noticed that the serious little girl had become a pretty cool adult: a Latin scholar and a travel obsessive whose smile in her photos suggested the indulgent wisdom of Ginger Rogers.

Her message said she was leaving her finance job in London and would be visiting the States the following month, with stops in New York and Los Angeles. On the way, she wondered if she could visit me and "see what North Carolina is all about." Innocent as a dandelion, I typed back that she'd be more than welcome, but wasn't Carolina a bit out of the way? No, she responded immediately, not out of the way. "And I've always wanted to see NC." *How strange,* I thought, but everyone was permitted a fad or hobbyhorse. Perhaps North Carolina was Mila's.

Anyway, with the nonfiction book about Jane Austen, which I was meant to be revising, I was in a nostalgic and Anglophilic mood. Maybe Mila's visit would jump-start the revision by reminding me of that Arcadian time before the family had begun to crumble; after all, I wanted the book to read as though a happy person had written it. Mila and I kept messaging, then phoned, and soon it was all set: four whole nights in Carrboro, so that she could enjoy what she blithely called "the full experience."

I couldn't deny that my heart started shimmying the more I saw her name pop up on my screen. *That's fine. Admire from a distance,* I thought. *There's no way she's traveling thousands of miles for anything more. Be gallant and friendly and marvel at her loveliness, and that'll be the end of it.*

An observation of Dr. Wynne's came back to me. He once said I had this weird chivalric *thing:* a tendency to conceive of love as a grand, heroic, beautifully tragic effort. "You idolize another," he'd told me, "and expect yourself to suffer, and then you *make* yourself suffer, because that's the script." Meanwhile, the woman's pedestal would grow vertiginously, so that the more I romanticized, the more hopeless love seemed. It was basic Pygmalion, Knights of the Round Table stuff. The same stuff that, in its way, drove Quixote mad. *Just be a NORMAL romantic,* I urged myself in a diary entry. *Steel yourself! It must be possible.*

The Thursday and Friday before Mila arrived, I reprised my role in breeches and top hat at the opening of the second annual Jane Austen Summer Program; Tariq, deadpan, even helped me straighten my cravat. Around dinnertime on Saturday, I slipped away from the conference and met Mila at the train station. She was somehow taller than I'd expected and seemed happy, even frolicsome. Her delightful apple cheeks rose when she smiled. I kissed her on one of them and chauffeured us back to the house in my old Subaru while *Rubber Soul* played on the speakers.

"Door-to-door, such a gentleman," she murmured. Something like pillow talk in the way she said it made me blush. I parked the car, and Mila surveyed our down-market dead-end country street with evident pleasure. The cars on blocks, the one house without a roof, the vibe of a rustic trailer park—she seemed to find it all a marvelous adventure.

Inside, I boiled water for tea and caught my reflection in the window over the sink—a calm smile, the look of someone happy.

On one of the couches, we sipped our tea. I put Van Morrison's *Wavelength* on the record player, and after a few songs, Mila yawned in a happy way. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I wanted to take her face in my hands. Instead, I said quietly, "You must be tired. Still on London time?"

"Yes and no," she said, not removing her head.

"Let me show you to your room."

Mila followed me into Jerrod's bedroom, where I proposed she sleep. "Such a gentleman," she repeated, her cheeks rising to eye level as she smiled. "And you'll be just across the hall?"

"That's me. Get some good sleep. Tomorrow, if you like, we'll go swimming."

"Oh, I like."

"Excellent," I said, trying to compose my face into a guileless smile. "Sleep tight." The stakes felt high, yet that strange calm persisted. Mila leaned against the door with her indulgent smile. Feeling red-faced, I turned back and added: "I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too."

In the morning it was hot, and we puttered about the kitchen drinking tea and flirting like fifteen-year-olds. Mila wore a light blue bikini under a white peignoir, looking like an heiress on vacation in Greece. I changed out

of sweatpants into my trunks and a short-sleeve button-down and pointed the car toward Jordan Lake.

I'd long been fond of swimming dates. They were sexy in a laid-back way: You'd get a little stupid off the sun, grow lazy and contentedly tired in pace with one another. We helped each other with sunscreen and splashed around, and as we let the sun dry us, I read aloud from Wodehouse while Mila chuckled. She drew my attention to the waterline, where a small child in a floppy hat toddled past us holding a shell in his hand and studying it with the look of intense concentration Adam must've worn when deciding how to name the first flower.

I'd almost dozed off when I felt Mila's hand on my chest. "Sorry, I thought you had a mosquito—just a shadow."

The gesture yanked me out of my lassitude. Something told me there hadn't been any mosquito. "You didn't have any breakfast. Let's go find you some lunch," I said.

She was floating above me in her sky blue bikini, such that she seemed to partake in the sky's essence and the sky in hers. Her long hair was hanging over me, giving off the tiniest whiff of bergamot.

"I really couldn't eat anything now. Could we go home and take a nap first?"

On the drive home, we laughed more than we talked. At the house, we showered separately. I told her I'd probably do a bit of work on my laptop while she napped. "Give a shout if you need anything."

About three minutes later, she tapped on my half-open door and came in.

"You good?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, softly and accurately, and lay down on my bed. She bestowed one of her beatific smiles on the ceiling, then trained a frank, smirking stare on me. My heart was doing jumping jacks, but for once the exhilaration was untouched by anxiety. I left my chair, lay down beside her, and with one hand on her cheek, I kissed her. A moment later she pulled back, smiling wide (like a sunrise, that smile, every time), and looked at me with an ecstatic intensity, and the universe reconfigured itself around the single transcendent fact of our bodies together.

Other love affairs I'd approached with a preemptive sense of tragedy, the certainty that I would taint or pollute or fuck it all up. Those fears never touched me when Mila and I were falling in love. She seemed the great exception to darkness. It was a thrill to find something at once so new and so ancient in this person from the past. The earth had tripped twenty-two times around the sun since the two of us first met in South London and took our lessons over the rubble of Beatrix Potter's despised childhood home. Now, a reciprocal admiration on social media had brought this brilliant woman back into my life, and I loved how earnestly charmed she was by North Carolina and its lakes. Maybe this exquisite happiness was real, could last, could be mine.

One night in a Motel 6, Mila lay with her head on my chest. I was biting my tongue off and finally allowed the rash words out. "I'm not gonna—Fuck it, I'm falling in love with you."

She blushed, smiled like a kid on Christmas morning, and composed herself. "I *think* I am, too," she said. You could see she was trying to talk herself out of it, but she didn't want to try very hard. Suddenly, she beamed and kissed me with her eyes open, and out poured honeyed words about how she hadn't counted on it all feeling so predestined, "like we were made for each other." Dangerous words. I fell on them greedily. I thought, *So this is what people mean by "deliriously happy."*

Soon enough she'd have to leave for Australia, where she would save money at a finance job and then consider her next options. The night before our goodbye, she wept, and I said some silly things, the usual things, but Lord, I meant them. She agreed, in principle. But already we were too in love with each other—and with the memory of each other—to let go.

It was meant to be a triumphant day. I had worked and taught and pined throughout the fall, and my big arrival in Australia would be the first time I'd seen Mila in months. She had planned a week's road trip, down the coast from her apartment in Sydney to Mallacoota, then west to Melbourne. The night before I began the series of flights that would land me in the antipodes, Mila texted me a series of fantasies that left me feeling pleasantly like a mail-order bride.

Between North Carolina and Australia, I had a longish layover in San Francisco. Eating a hamburger between gates, I reviewed the past year: completing a rough draft of the Austen book, meeting Mila, publishing my first peer-reviewed paper, finally making more from writing than from teaching. My brain was still at a high RPM from the end of the semester, the mad rush of grading and thesis-writing and freelancing. My hypomania felt earned.

If I'd been in the house with Jerrod, we would have honored the mood by burning something in the firepit, howling at the moon, and maybe smoking a cheeky pipe.

But there was no firepit and no Jerrod and certainly no cannabis. Sitting at the glassy table over the remnants of my burger, I remembered that I was severely underslept and had been for a while. I talked on the phone to Brian, who said he was going to propose to his girlfriend, Solange. We toasted our good fortune in having found two such remarkable women. But it was late on the East Coast, and Brian had to go, and still there were two hours before my flight to Sydney—and in my fatigued, smiley, hypomanic state, I determined that the best way to pass the remaining time would be to have a couple of Scotches.

Just two, I thought. It was an inspiration, really. Now was the perfect time, come to think of it, for a drink. I was in *control*, a conqueror. These vast logistical systems, these distances between continents, existed just for Mila and me; the rest of my life unfurled before me, a series of beautiful, conspiratorial trips with Mila, whose love would keep me hovering a couple of feet above the ground at all times. *You've made it. There's nothing more to fear. For God's sake, man, let's tie one on!*

By the time I boarded the fifteen-hour flight to Sydney, I was four drinks deep. On the plane, growing bored, I thought it wise to knock myself out and kill a few hours by popping an Ambien. Sleep didn't come, though. Instead, I got a full-body feeling of antsiness and determined to tame it with the novel strategy of having *just a few more drinks*. (How simple. Why hadn't I thought of it before?)

In a gentle way, a flight attendant eventually said the drinks weren't unlimited, and I got oddly sanctimonious.

"You know how much these tickets cost?" It came out louder than I meant, and another attendant joined him. Taller than the first guy, with an expression that said, *Not one of these guys again*.

“You’ll have to be quiet, sir.”

Christ, they’re treating us like children, I thought. It wasn’t a bad point. “You’re treating us like children,” I informed him.

“Sir, I can have the police meet the aircraft when we land. Is that what you want?”

I said it wasn’t against the law to ask for a drink.

A guy across the aisle from me took an interest. “Actually, you *are* breaking the law, making a fuss like this,” the guy said authoritatively. He was fifty-five or so, pudgy and sun-reddened, wearing what I recall as a Titleist cap. He looked exactly like a cop on vacation. Which was why I couldn’t stop laughing once he identified himself to the flight attendants as a retired detective with the NYPD. The detective leaned closer across the aisle and said I should mind my manners.

“Fuck that,” I said to Mr. NYPD. Nodding toward him, I told the attendants he’d been “farting for the last three time zones.” The detective looked ready to sock me. The shorter attendant put his hand on the guy’s shoulder and leaned down, and the two held a whispered exchange. I heard the detective say something like “That would make me more comfortable, yes.” I figured they were bringing him a pillow.

A new attendant showed up with a ginger ale. I thanked her with exaggerated gentility, to show her two colleagues and my fellow passengers that I was the sane one here. She poured it with a shakiness that I attributed to wind turbulence. She didn’t look me in the face.

I must have slept. Next thing I knew, we were landing in Sydney, and I was holding my head in both hands, already hungover. Chewing gum to bat away the taste of whiskey and drymouth, I came reeling off the plane, stinking of guilt. The detective emeritus followed me down the sky bridge muttering nasty things in my ear—until he saw the two airport policemen awaiting me at the gate and told me, “Have fun with them.”

“Are you still talking? I thought you fucking retired,” I said to him in a hoarse whisper. He laughed and tipped his cap at the airport cops. A cheeky bastard. I found myself unable to hate him.

The Australian cops evidently had been told to walk with me as far as baggage claim and remind me to obey fasten-seat-belt signs in the future and not mouth off to flight attendants. I couldn’t have agreed with them more. The shame was unbearable. I kept telling them I was sorrier than they could know.

My head felt fried and dried, simply awful. I didn't want Mila to see me like this. But there she was, in a casual-chic beige dress, looking prim and solicitous and as beautiful as ever. Eyeing the cops on either side of me, she gave me a distressed look and a tight hug, and I told her I was very tired and maybe a little drunk. In case I might be tempted to sugarcoat my inexcusable behavior on the plane, the officers told Mila that I'd received a warning. She kept her lips tight, said, *"Oh,"* and looked up at me with a frightened wonder. The police left us, and Mila didn't say anything but kept squeezing my arm and studying my face. I leaned on her a bit as we navigated toward baggage claim and then to the taxi that brought us to her apartment.

Mila had to work that afternoon but made time for a sweaty reunion in her flat. Then she slipped back into her dress and instructed me to get some sleep and straighten up. She looked confused as she left me tangled in the sheets. *Who is this strange man in my bed?*

From our start, I had told her I didn't drink. What I'd left out was that I *couldn't* drink or else. A mask had come off.

At the apartment, I slept for a half hour, woke up feeling worse, and, with a strange, impersonal sense of inevitability, I slouched into the kitchen and opened a bottle of tequila on the counter, taking a quick shot to steady myself before returning to bed and tumbling through a deeper sleep.

When I woke again, Mila was sitting on the floor next to the bed, sipping a cup of tea very slowly and staring at a point on the wall. "What *happened*?" she asked finally.

"I was nervous, I guess, it's been so long, I didn't know if you still . . . "

"That's nonsense," she said quietly. "You've been my world, for months."

I told her she was everything to me. We were silent for a long time. Mila came to bed again, and I gratefully subsumed myself in her. It felt like a death throe.

Afterward Mila said there was nothing we couldn't get past. Still, she was pointed in saying she needed to adapt herself to her new knowledge of me.

"I love you," she said, adding the chilling proviso: "I just want to make sure I know you."

We argued once that trip, when Mila said I was “too sensible to be depressed” with a kind of pat finality, as though that should settle it. I bristled at the airiness of the suggestion. She had the mechanism flatly backwards. I wanted to respond that depression and anxiety cripple good sense much more easily than sense has ever crippled sickness. Instead, irritated, I said only, “I’m not sure that’s how it works.” We argued for maybe twenty minutes, the closest thing to a fight we ever had—in retrospect, a glaring sign that our relationship was grounded a bit too firmly in mutual idealization. *She expects too much of me*, I remember thinking, *and only because I encouraged her to*.

Otherwise, for the rest of the trip, even the pitiless sun, blasting at the height of Australian summer, barely distracted us from bliss. In Sydney we defied that sun, basking on the beaches at Double Bay and Bondi, and on New Year’s Eve watched the famous conflagration of fireworks over Sydney Harbor. We rented a car and drove down to Melbourne and Phillip Island, where we stayed in a cottage and cooked springy vegetarian dishes; then back to Sydney with a tender stop at Mallacoota, where we convened with a kindly wombat by the river and hopped between rocks and waded into the shallows to observe the fish during a slow sunset.

Mila was holding up her skirt to keep it out of the water and looking into each eddy with deep seriousness. “I’m trying to figure out whether this changes anything.” By “this,” of course, she meant my alcoholic humiliation and the way it had shaken her highly idealized notion of me, a fantasy I was ashamed to have encouraged. “Should I just move to America and carry on as we’d planned? Should we . . . wait?”

With the wind picking up, she was cold. I gave her my blazer, and she leaned on me.

“I can’t decide that,” I said. “I’m gonna have to accept whatever you decide. To wait, not to wait . . . It’s absolutely fine if you prefer to wade rather than dive.”

She nuzzled her head against my shoulder. Her answer came much more quickly than I’d dared to hope.

“I think I want to dive.”

A monkish series of months ensued in the States: writing, teaching, preparing for my written and oral exams while trying to finish the prospectus for my dissertation, all by April. I was planning to get a full-time journalism job or else try freelancing. Part of that was a cockeyed practicality: Journalism and the collegiate humanities might both be endangered industries, but journalism was starting to look like the smarter of the two options, especially as I saw people with freshly conferred PhD's, many much cleverer than I, struggling to land more than a visiting assistant professorship. Anyway, I reasoned, if I could finish the prospectus now, then I'd be in good standing to return someday and deliver a dissertation, if the academic job market somehow turned around completely. I managed to cram around sixteen months' work of reading and writing into four, and delivered the prospectus early, all while lifting again and keeping up with Mila and taking time to visit Brian and Evan and hosting Noah and Aaron and Riggs. On many evenings, Tariq would knock on the door, tell me I was working too hard, and suggest a midnight hamburger run followed by darts. But I wasn't very good company, and my game was going to hell. "Relax, bro" was Tariq's refrain to me as he arced his darts with maddening neatness into inner triples on the board.

In March, I got a call from Nick, an editor at *Pacific Standard* magazine in California, where I'd been contributing regularly. He said they wanted to hire me for an open editing position, beginning in Santa Barbara, ASAP. I told him I could start in June. Mila was thrilled and said she'd join me in California at the end of the summer. She visited me in North Carolina for a week at the beginning of May, when the air was sticky and sweet. We returned to Jordan Lake and got sappy talking about the last time we'd swum here, and Mila told me, "There's no way you could ever stop being my favorite." A part of me knew that was nonsense, but I clung to it. Then Mila left for London, where she was taking another contract job that would last until August, after which she'd join me in California to begin our golden new life together.

I'd also come to a recognition, as belated as it was obvious. I was taking a *lot* of Valium, and a dependence on any sedative will fuck with your nerves. Reflecting on it, I became convinced that my disgraceful display on the airplane had been encouraged partly by my persisting in an irresponsibly escapist drug cocktail.

Benzodiazepines are a funny class of drugs. There are lots of them, from Valium (aka diazepam—the "little yellow pill" that Mick Jagger sang about in 1966) to alprazolam (Xanax), lorazepam (Ativan), and a host of others that you now mainly find in operating rooms. Benzos are tranquilizers. They make you sleepy, or at least groggy, but never exactly *tranquil*—not me, anyway. But they do lower the volume on the channel that's screaming CATASTROPHE, and for that, patients are willing to put up with the side effects: mainly intermittent feelings of vacancy, almost like jet lag.

Valium can be a sleepy drug, so a lot of patients take it in the afternoon or before bed. At the time, though, Dr. Whitby had me taking a large dose of this powerful benzo *as soon as I woke up*. Now, especially after the Australia fiasco, I was more disgusted than ever at this prescription; when I'd mentioned it to Mila, her eyes had gotten big and she'd said, "Oh, that's a lot . . . " Anyway, I didn't like that, under Whitby's care, I'd been using Valium almost as a vitamin, and decided I could recoup some self-possession if I diminished my dependence. Under Whitby's supervision, I titrated rather quickly, over the course of two months, from 10 milligrams a day to 2. Sleep came harder than ever, but my nerves held up pretty well through the gauntlet of exams and writing deadlines and job applications. From London, Mila kept up my spirits with reckless optimism, reminding me how much fun we'd have in California. And wasn't I looking forward to another cross-country road trip? "I thought you were *Mister* Road Trip," she reminded me one night on WhatsApp. *Yes*, I wanted to respond, *but I've never done the whole continent alone, or while going through withdrawal . . .*

I set out for California alone on June 5, coincidentally ten years to the day after the American Backyard trip began. I did okay the first few days—my nerves didn't *really* start vibrating urgently until partway through the cross-country drive, specifically in Kansas. We'd skipped Kansas somehow on the American Backyard trip, and it was one of seven remaining states I hadn't set foot in. Yet when I crossed the border from Missouri, headed toward the bright lights of Topeka, I felt an abrupt and hideous aversion to getting out of the car. I didn't even want to roll down the windows, and it pained me physically when I had to stop for fuel or food, or to mumble my name to the proprietor of the Super 8 motel where I spent that night. I couldn't tell you why it happened there and not in Tennessee or New Mexico. I think I was finally starting to sense the danger of moving so

damn fast with Mila. And it felt like the Valium withdrawal had been saving its biggest blow until now. I began to hold an inarticulable grudge against the sun. The newly sharpened anxiety didn't let up, and as the Great Plains gave way to mountain and desert and all those broad American vistas, my vision began to cramp and narrow. Some nights I would stay up till three a.m. at a motel desk, writing in my journal. *There must be another way,* I wrote in Utah. *Something beyond the pills, beyond the talk talk talk, beyond all these temporary reprieves*. By morning, the only reprieve available was in defeating the miles that lay before me. The car—it was safe in the car. Only by moving forward as fast as possible could I quiet myself.

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Chapter 10

Forgetting to Live

My first home in Santa Barbara was a friendly place but hardly conducive to joy. Mila and I wanted to choose an apartment together, but she wouldn't arrive until late August, so when I moved in early June, I took a cheap room in a small three-bedroom apartment on Bath Street. The master bedroom was occupied by the owners, a married couple: Linda, an American, and Ingvar, her Icelander husband. They were strange and deeply kind as hosts, and a funny pair. Ingvar rarely spoke, and Linda rarely didn't. Ingvar worked all day at a standing desk in the living room putting out IT fires for a Scandinavian company, and Linda was driving a cab most days, though she also tutored and studied computer tech at the city college.

Pacific Standard kept me busy for the two and a half months preceding Mila's arrival. I was nominally editing special projects, but it was such a small shop that pretty soon I was editing book reviews and culture, too, and then climate. Some nights I would go out for drinks with the staff at Dargan's or some other dive and stick resolutely to club soda, but mostly, I roamed the beaches and started smoking weed again. It helped the anxiety, though only to a point.

People talk about experiencing a "social death" when you uproot your life by moving a great distance or changing jobs. Until my dash across the country, I didn't know how much teaching had meant to me. It was such a gas and had conferred daily rewards. Now I was student-less, not to mention Jerrod-less and Tariq-less and farther than ever from Brian and friends. And I started being someone else.

First I dodged calls with friends back east; then I dodged video calls with Mila. *I'm not myself,* I rationalized, and I didn't want her to see my hollowness. When we did talk, I tried to be sweet—and keep the calls short.

It was work, I said. Small staff, weird hours—I was just tired and distracted. That was the official story.

"I'm worried I don't interest you anymore," she wrote via WhatsApp after a call that I'd hurried even more gracelessly than usual. "You're not dating someone else?" With a pained shock at the very suggestion, I called her immediately and said I wasn't, and she believed me. But she wasn't entirely wrong: I was betraying her in a different way, by becoming a stranger to both of us.

When Mila arrived, I scooped her from the airport in Los Angeles. Her kisses felt distant, her smiles tight and provisional. Entering Linda and Ingvar's place, this micro-boardinghouse with walls like parchment, she looked taken aback. Her eyes seemed to say: *You've been living like this?*

Neither of us knew where to begin talking. I didn't know how to apologize for defrauding her by hiding the true depth of my depression and anxiety. It was clear that Mila immediately regretted diving rather than wading. Within a week, we decided that some days apart might do us well, so she went off to visit family friends in San Francisco, and I drove to a cabin for Brian's bachelor weekend, where I glued a fake smile to my face, got a little high, and felt sure I was bringing down the mood.

By the time Mila and I returned from our respective trips, she told me haltingly that she thought she should go back to London. The little fantasy was over, and a new nightmare began.

Mila's departure and my failure to live up to her ideal affected me in an embarrassingly extravagant way. Life without her felt wrong, unholy; I rejected this life, and outside of work, I largely stopped living it. I tried to sleep as much as possible. I watched streaming services and ate bad pizza and, for a brief period, put on some fat for the first time in my life. I awoke for a few things—to attend Brian's wedding or to fly home and see how Mom and Tom (now her husband) were doing—but otherwise, I was an inert husk.

The longest I perked up was when my boss, Nick, put me in charge of covering the United Nations climate summit in Paris and gave me a budget to hire help. I began brushing up on my French—a good, wholesome exercise that brought me back in time. I was also grateful to find an

excellent co-conspirator for the reporting trip. After auditioning a few long-form freelance reporters, I hired Lucia to cover the personalities and the marquee events at the summit. Lucia was based in D.C., so we didn't meet in person until we arrived in the country. French police were detaining climate activists all over Paris, and it made me irrationally nervy, but Lucia was a strong, stabilizing presence, funny and sharp as hell. We were nicely complementary as reporters: Lucia wrote consistently compelling stuff about the big players—diplomats like Laurent Fabius of France, American interlopers like Mike Bloomberg—as well as smart, probing policy pieces about the drafts of what would become the Paris Agreement. I was a bit more comfortable hanging with the grinders and firebrands: the more outspoken of the Oxfam folks, delegates from the Global South and island nations, sleepless staffers at the UN High Commission on Refugees. Each day, Lucia and I worked sixteen hours and filed two stories each, and on some of those days, I almost forgot about Mila and how badly I'd messed everything up.

By the end of the trip, 194 countries had signed the Paris Agreement, and Lucia and I allowed ourselves a day of optimism. Some activists marked the adoption of the agreement with a march down the Champs-Élysées, and Lucia and I went into the city to watch. Young people were taking to the streets, waving banners, chanting joyfully. Paris being Paris, there were also lots of picturesque couples making out in the middle of the street. Lucia asked me: "Do you think this is what world peace will feel like?" I knew what she meant. The photo essay we published from that day, including several iconic kisses, suggested a reenactment of VE Day.

Lucia and I had acquitted ourselves well, and Nick said the reporting was good enough that he wanted us to do it again the following year. I had a fabulous new friend in Lucia. But she was off to D.C., and I was off to Santa Barbara, where habit proved stronger than wisdom. For a while I didn't even look for a therapist; happiness no longer seemed a possibility, so why persist in the quest? Before long, I once more became a walking ghost.

Depression and anxiety, I flattered myself, were lowercase ailments that troubled me without being truly scary, in part because so many of my

friends and peers supposedly suffered from them. Sure, I was depressed. But I wasn't *depressed* depressed. I clung to that denial even or especially during my deepest bouts—periods when I had the affect of a high-functioning catatonic, punctuated with moments of dread and panic. Riggs would call to check in and come away troubled, describing me to Aaron as "isolated in California—probably capable of feeling isolated anywhere."

The sadness was generally unutterable and unattributable. When I could articulate it, I told myself I was sad about all the things I'd wasted and anxious about all the things that, given the chance, I'd waste in the future. Mom's extreme and admirable thrift stood for me as an unattainable goal, and I punished myself for losing Mila, for failing so miserably at being happy. *You need to go back to therapy,* I told myself, but I received the thought with bitter pessimism. How remedial, to go back and explain everything all over again. How would talking be different this time? Still, hewing to the same principle whereby Pascal found it reasonable to pray (as a gamble, just in case there was a God to listen and respond), I figured I might as well give the talking cure another go. After all, talking with Keith had helped me once.

There was one therapist in town whom my insurance would cover. I hoped he could bring me back to some enthusiasm for living. But it became clear this doctor had checked out years ago and was now paid mainly to wear Hawaiian shirts and to issue simpering smiles. Privately, I began to call him Dr. Aloha. His main medical advice was to get a hobby; he enthusiastically repeated this advice at most sessions, even after I reminded him that he was talking to a devoted hobbyist. "There's a lot out there in the world to get excited about," he said on one particularly generic day. "There's travel, there's books and arts, there's sports—" I interrupted him quietly to point out that he was listing sections of a newspaper.

Aloha claimed to offer a loose mix of cognitive behavioral therapy and logotherapy. The latter is an approach founded by the Austrian psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl and holds that rediscovering meaning—Frankl referred to it with the Greek word *logos*—can wrench people out of depression. Frankl, a Jew, had developed this existentialist program before World War II but refined the theory while detained by the Nazis in concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau, forming the basis of his book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

I read my Frankl and made dutiful visits to Dr. Aloha. But (I shudder to admit it) I began to resent Frankl. Nowhere in this earth-bestriding bestseller did Frankl offer a jot of advice for someone whose depression didn't respond to meaning—whose very symptoms prevented one from discerning or making meaning! In fact, Frankl left strong hints that he considered such cases more or less hopeless.

"You're overthinking it," Aloha said when I raised these objections.

"Okay, but what do we do if logotherapy doesn't work?"

"If you stop overthinking it," Aloha said, "then it *will* work."

Aloha's whole logotherapeutic shtick started to sound like rank mysticism, delivered with the vacuously upbeat air of a youth pastor. And I didn't love the idea of waiting around for a religious revelation that came dressed as a philosophical breakthrough—and in Tommy Bahama. Still, I kept making my pilgrimages to Dr. Aloha, determined to find my *logos*.

Well-balanced, reasonably content people don't get hung up on meaning; it's something that makes you stroke your chin, not tear your hair out. But if you dwell on a lack of meaning, go looking for it, and can neither find it nor make it, then the question will dominate your vision. Add in other effects of depression—aggressive fatigue, disrupted sleep, clouded memory—and that meaning deficit becomes even more unbearable.

Indeed, as I looked around for meaning, like a child seeking a lost toy, I noticed I was becoming more forgetful, losing little threads of memory. When old students wrote to me, it suddenly took much longer to recall their faces. When reading, I could sometimes forget a whole chapter on which I'd just spent an hour taking notes. Depression, it turns out, is one of the most common causes of loss of memory, and it was finally coming for mine. Anatomically, depression and stress can result in delayed synaptic transmission in the hippocampus; at their worst, these dysregulations can shrink the hippocampus and, with it, the capacity for memory formation. But depression can inhibit memory in other ways. The monochrome dread that marks each day also blurs them together; the depressive has often withdrawn from social life, from a traditional clock, from a sense of time and—there's that word again—*meaning*.

Memory and meaning, in fact, are deeply intertwined. To put it crudely, a person needs meaning, some sort of story, to make and encode strong, binding memories. Yet the right story, or *logos*, kept eluding me.

In memory loss of any kind, the lack of coherence—of a story; of the idea that you even *deserve* a story—helps form the basis of forgetting. Isolation only makes matters worse: Memory is an associative and sociable process, and memories strengthen and take on meaning in company, as people make sense of an event together. When you're depressed and begin rejecting or fleeing company, you don't have anyone around to verify what's happening, still less to help you make sense of it. Probably you have nothing much you want to say, anyway. Depression cuts you off from the people with whom you could form any new meaning. This is a devious way in which depression protects itself: through its atomizing, antisocial rejection of memory.

It's hard to overstate how bad anxiety and depression are—not just for your memory but for your entire brain. People with these maladies release excessive amounts of cortisol, the fight-or-flight hormone we secrete under stress. This cortisol flood overwhelms the brain's glucocorticoid receptors, punishing us with constant sirens. The catastrophic panic that fuels and is fueled by this hormonal dysfunction in turn puts pressure on the body's stress-response system, redoubling the impulse to fight or flee from pretty much everything. So, as my life contracted to an ever smaller circle around the central dense fact of my illness, so did the very matter of my brain. It felt doubly cruel to be hit with these new memory problems just when I needed memory most.

As best as I can remember—which isn't very well until I glance into sparse diaries of the period—I didn't know just how sick I was in Santa Barbara. It was a dangerous denial, made possible only because my illness didn't *quite* paralyze me. Like a virus delicately concerned with keeping its host alive, depression had determined the exact limit of my psychic tolerance and was overjoyed to be dancing right on that line—with forgetfulness as a crucial helpmate. The weather also conspired against me. In Santa Barbara, the seasons changed so little and the hothouse atmosphere was so eerily steady that the passage of time no longer felt convincing.

Milestones came: I turned thirty, Brian got married, then Aaron, and a week after both weddings, I had no more than hazy memories of either. On the phone with Jerrod, I'd stumble over the names of old colleagues at

UNC. A couple of times, when this or that woman came home with me, I'd forgotten her name by the next morning. When I mentioned these memory deficits to Dr. Aloha, he made a note and urged me not to fixate on them. I responded that "my only worthwhile skills are memory and imitation," and now the first was deserting me.

Like a call-center employee working from a script, Dr. Aloha mentally scanned his list of hobbies and recommended I join an improv group. The suggestion was so unpleasant, he might as well have prescribed a lobotomy.

Santa Barbara, meanwhile, mocked me with its insistent, infernally sunny positivity—a hollow bonniness expressly designed to harry any depressive.

In early 2016 I moved out of Linda and Ingvar's place and took a bungalow-style apartment in downtown Santa Barbara. I adopted a rescue cat from the county, a long-haired but tiny girl named Sophie, black on the back and white on the belly with rust-colored accents. I liked her floofy face and mane, but there was a practical concern as well: I knew plenty of folks who'd adopted a pet to keep thoughts of suicide at bay. It helped, I'd been told, to have some creature other than yourself whom you *must* survive to feed. When Sophie spoke, she did so in a scratchy, desiccated squawk, often sounding like a broken kazoo. She spent the first two days terrified, living under my bed frame, where she was visible principally as a set of enormous eyes, frozen, horrified. "I know, me, too," I said.

Alone in my new apartment one night, still on my back foot from Mila, I made a truly reckless decision: I bought a six-pack, a Pilsner of some kind, which I chose for its relatively low alcohol content. It was the first alcohol I'd touched since the Australia debacle, more than a year before. I turned off my phone and listened to a Mozart piano concerto, then some Little Richard and then Wu-Tang. Around "Protect Ya Neck," I found myself writing a to-do list, punctuated with diaristic observations, on the back of an old envelope. Once the six-pack was dry, the envelope accompanied me to a bar six blocks south. There I thought it'd be wise to allow myself no more than two drinks, specifically shots of mid-tier vodka, on the debatable premise that clear liquor would minimize a hangover. I embellished the list until the second vodka was in me. A revoltingly bad band was on the tiny

wooden stage playing the worst Clash covers you can imagine. A woman a decade or two older than I was, her face red from drink and sun, tried to befriend me in a slurring, overfriendly way.

"Let me buy you a real drink!"

"That's kind, but I'm on a strict diet . . . "

The band was abominable. I scribbled again on the envelope.

"What are you writing?" She bobbed a bit, like a boxer.

"My New Year's resolutions."

She was about to ask what they were, but then her brow crinkled as she did some math and asked instead, "Isn't it March?"

"Yes, I'm either very ahead or very behind."

"You're weird. Do you live in SB or Isla Vista or—"

"No, I'm not living here," I lied, and started laughing. After all, who could call this *living*? "No, I'm not living here. Just working. God, they're *destroying* this song, it's criminal . . . " The band was lurching through "Should I Stay or Should I Go," every musician playing a separate tempo.

"Got a request? I know the band pretty well."

I absorbed this dark admission and surveyed our reflections in the mirror behind the bartender, relieved to find my face betraying no look of horror. "Sorry, I've got to go." I thanked her for her company and added, "Give the band my compliments." I took out my wallet and slapped down some cash with a good tip for the bartender, who'd had to listen to the slop all night. I strolled home, the envelope in my back pocket, and when I reached the bungalow complex of Park East, I dropped into my desk chair, unfolded the envelope, and opened my laptop.

I awoke with no headache, only bad breath, and let the cat outside. I was sure I'd done something stupid beyond drinking in the first place, but at first all I could remember was the red-faced lady and how I'd fled the bar, the music, the drink, before anything could get too weird. I surveyed the room. The guitar was out of its case, sitting at a dignified angle in my office chair. Sophie was gently vocalizing outside the door, keen to be let back in from her morning explorations. On my desk sat my laptop—open. *Oh, Christ.* Had I emailed Mila? Posted nudes on Facebook Marketplace? No such memories presented themselves, but I crossed my fingers nonetheless

before clicking open my browser history . . . then started laughing and couldn't stop. I'd posted an ad on Craigslist—a very wholesome and earnest one, touting my musical experience and offering my services to bar bands in the area. It was honest: "No frills or pyrotechnics, just honest guitar work that makes a piece dance, short trenchant fills as needed . . . " It was touching. Hell, *I* wanted to hire this guy. Toward the end of the ad, I'd written: "I'm very tired of not being in a band." Evidently the Clash covers at the bar had broken something in me. I owed those bastards a debt of gratitude.

It gave me perverse pleasure to see the linear logic: I'd gone out, heard a terrible band, and decided to be part of the solution. At the same time, not being in a band had clearly become a quality-of-life issue for me, and until now I hadn't had the gumption, or sufficient interest in the future, to do anything about it. A band would mean rehearsals, and I'd become addicted to isolation; to be in company without Mila was to acknowledge that life was proceeding in a much worse way without her than it had ever with her. If I stayed in my solitary bubble, I could pretend, almost, that time had stopped. Now, though, something had changed.

I'd gone months without touching my revisions on the Austen book. Finally, a semiconscious rebellion had taken place in me, not in the decision to drink but in what I'd done afterward: making use of the superego's lowered defenses to stage a kind of jailbreak. That's how I explained it to Dr. Aloha.

"A jailbreak, wow!" Dr. Aloha was given to bursts of enthusiasm, like a younger brother eager to please. He punctuated his sentences almost exclusively with exclamation points. "So you must be feeling, like, super free!"

I looked back at him with pity and envy. "Naw, I'm saying my unconscious mind is what did the jailbreak. Against *me*. It feels like a good thing. But the point isn't about freedom, it's about building a way forward . . . "

"Gosh, that's an interesting distinction!" (It wasn't.)

"I'm saying I got super lucky, or else it was the providence of a very forgiving God: I got drunk, but no drunker than planned, and then proceeded to make a more honest appraisal of my own happiness and day-to-day life than at any point in the previous six months. Isn't that sad?" He

seemed surprised by the question, so I continued. “The other night was like plunging my face into a bucket of ice water, painful but bracing.”

“Can I just say that’s so promising?!”

“It could be. I’m a little shaken by the whole thing.”

“Why?!”

“Because I spent the past six months telling myself I was bored and a little lost, and that was all self-appeasing bullshit. I’ve been miserable, is the truth. And it’s scary as hell to see *just how low* my standards can get for what I’ll accept in my life. Makes you realize you could sleepwalk for years without properly knowing it. And that’s . . . fucking terrifying. Sorry,” I added to excuse the profanity, “but it feels like clarity united with terror . . . sort of a mixed bag, even if I feel lucky to be the guy holding it.”

I wished he weren’t always wearing shorts. I always half expected him to launch into a sales pitch for a time-share in North Miami. I stopped seeing him the following month and felt like a rube for sticking around after he’d suggested improv.

At least I was making music again. A rock-and-soul band called the Volts had responded to my Craigslist ad and engaged me to play keyboards and rhythm guitar. Dragging myself to shows was almost always a drag, but once onstage I felt drawn backward in time and became, briefly, the guy who’d sung his way across France and whom Riggs and Mila and others had thought indomitable. I never skipped a band rehearsal, and we kept booking more gigs and making decent money. The magazine staff became enthusiastic regulars at our shows. Our creative director even designed a T-shirt with my face on the front, bedecked in a Rod Stewart–style mullet. They were all so damn sweet.

I even began writing again—pretty efficiently, in fact. At long last, I’d mustered the will to say, “I will not wait for a better version of me to write this book; I will simply write it.” Within a couple of months, I delivered a second draft to the publisher. Oddly, after that night with the Pilsner and the envelope, the temptation to drink never returned. (To this day, it’s the last time I swallowed a drop of alcohol.) Everything seemed promising.

Then the fires came.

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Chapter 11

Season of Ash

(2017–2019)

My nerves have never been entirely steady, but they achieved new heights of jumpiness in December 2017, when the Thomas Fire consumed more than a quarter of a million acres all around my bungalow in Santa Barbara. My place was in the area of town subject to a mandatory evacuation order; neighbors two blocks to my west were permitted to stay in their homes, but most didn't. The fires destroyed more than a thousand homes and displaced more than a hundred thousand people.

As any firefighter will tell you, the smoke is as insidious as the fire. And this smoke was *apocalyptic*. So dense it was almost reflective. The day before I evacuated, I saw nothing but a pulsating blanket of white outside my window, not gray like woodsmoke but an uncanny white, almost metallic, the residue of vaporized houses and insulation. Second- and third-generation locals attested to its being the heaviest smoke they'd seen in thirty years. Poor Sophie escaped one morning and returned so covered that she looked like an albino. She allowed me to towel her in the bathtub until we'd more or less restored her dignity.

The population of unhoused throughout Ventura County, whose ranks had been swelling since before the Great Recession, were all sleeping outside in the stuff. Outlets reported that many of the unhoused were still sick from exposure during the previous fall's fires; now their lungs burned again as the whole central coast was once more blanketed in soot. I met one family sharing a single respirator mask among the four of them. (The children each got it for eight hours, each parent for four.) The wealthy, on the other hand, got to evacuate to fancy ranches in Palm Springs or installed

themselves in luxury hotels in San Francisco, referring to themselves as “fire refugees” without a trace of irony. At the time, it was the biggest fire in California’s history.

I decamped, with the cat, to a motel in Santa Maria for a couple of nights. By day I teleworked, editing coverage of the fires from a safe distance, then spent the nights reading and watching bad horror movies. It was a cushy way to experience disaster. Even when a winter storm followed the fire, bringing mudslides and displacing me again for a couple of nights, I never realistically feared for my life.

Yet the fires stirred in me a new and frenetic agitation. For weeks afterward, I was horribly jumpy, oddly sensitive to heat. The sun felt wrong on my skin. If I touched a laptop that was unexpectedly hot, a mini panic set in before I knew what was happening. It probably didn’t help that my day job had me elbow-deep in climate coverage. Each day we read new worst-case scenarios; some were projections, others had already come to pass. There were also more prosaic nightmares: Layoffs across journalism began to affect friends and former colleagues and prompted in me a gnawing guilt over having a job when so many excellent journalists were losing theirs each day.

I also began, for the first time consciously, to long for the East Coast.

My anxiety and anger at the fires, at this glimpse of how violently the earth was changing and who was most likely to pay for it, were alarms that had become impossible to turn off. I knew it wasn’t a conventional response to what little I’d experienced of disaster. Anxiety, as its subjects know, is parasitic, and will use any premise to propagate itself. And there had been a lot of good premises making the rounds.

I tried an old trick: taking the watch apart.

What are you afraid of?

I’m afraid of the smoke.

What else?

I’m afraid for the future.

What else?

I’m afraid that I want to walk into the fire.

That’s easy: Don’t walk.

But, of course, it wasn’t easy.

When I moved back to D.C. in early 2019 to expand *Pacific Standard*'s second bureau, I thought those jangling nerves would stay behind me in the west, where they belonged. Instead, they were with me and tiny Sophie in the car as we crossed the continent, returning east because it was the closest thing to going back in time. I wanted to be near my friends again, to diminish my sense of constant doom about where the world was headed.

Once installed in the *Pacific Standard* offices at the Watergate, I took a half step back from overseeing my magazine's climate reporting, farming out some of our daily coverage to the news editor. I considered it an embarrassing expression of cowardice. I wasn't a climate refugee, after all. But certain kinds of anxiety don't respond to rational argument any more than climate change does. In any case, I was launching the new Ideas section and still running the magazine's culture pages, so my boss treated the request as being about bandwidth.

For musical reasons as much for economic ones, I'd moved in with my buddy Noah in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, a few blocks north of Malcolm X Park and the weird Masonic temple looming over Sixteenth Street, with the White House visible to the south. Noah and I had met through musician friends and played in basement bands when I'd lived in D.C. seven years prior, and we established an efficient homestead together. Aaron and Lucia visited often. I also resumed sessions with Dr. Wynne.

"I thought moving back east would help me leave the sickness behind," I told him during our first reunion in his office. It was a brisk March afternoon, and I'd been too nervous to eat all day.

"The climate hasn't stopped changing since your road trip. Your industry hasn't stabilized. You're allowed to feel nervous."

"Sure, but I'm getting pretty tired of it."

Wynne switched me from Zoloft to Lexapro and added a tricyclic antidepressant, Pamelor, but warned the adjustment period could be tough. Those first two drugs are pretty similar, both SSRIs, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. When SSRIs work, it's because they help keep the neurotransmitter serotonin in circulation, preventing its reabsorption into neurons. Increased circulation of serotonin is associated with improved mood—and can lessen anxiety in some patients. SSRIs don't work for everyone, but they'd worked for me in the past. Sometimes even switching

between cousin drugs, like Zoloft and Lexapro, can help flip a switch, jolt you out of ingrained neurohormonal patterns.

First, though, you spend at least a couple of weeks adapting to the new drug. And that first month back in D.C., before I got my bearings, was torture. I added a second Wynne visit each week; on days when we had an appointment, I'd spend the morning watching the clock, doing math in different ways to make the wait seem shorter than it was: *Three hours and forty-five minutes, or two hundred and twenty-five minutes total. But that's actually just two hundred minutes when you factor in the commute. Plus, thirty of the* remaining *minutes will be lunch, anyway, so* . . . It was a miserable routine of bargaining and almost certainly slowed down the time.

I found a partial reprieve once I began a daily practice of writing fiction, compiling a short, farcical, and violent novella based on the wealthy eccentrics I'd met in my California years. It was a wholesome and happy practice, a much belated resumption of the fiction writing in Rome, which I'd always credited with having at least delayed that summer's meltdown. Mornings offered a placid scene at the round table by the living room window. I'd write for forty-five minutes or an hour as Sophie the cat stretched and displayed herself in various poses on the other side of the table. Embracing this morning regimen seemed to serve as an effective prophylactic against anxiety later in the day. But then the Lexapro began to work, and I even permitted Wynne to start me on a very low daily dose of Klonopin—like Valium, a benzodiazepine. Now I could finally ponder the fires and the state of the journalism industry without my pulse going fully haywire.

With friendship, decent meds, and a productive routine, what couldn't I achieve? Words were appearing on the page, my memory seemed to be stabilizing, and reasons for optimism piled on top of one another just as quickly. A month later, I told Wynne things had improved dramatically. "The scribbling gives me some purpose. When I finish a scene in the early morning, I know the rest of the day will feel like it's all gravy from there."

"You're doing what you know you should be doing."

"Something like that. And ignoring the work was just making me sicker."

I knew Wynne was primed to enjoy this news. He looked optimistic, even if he was being delicate about it. "And music?"

I told him how I'd been supplying backup guitar for a friend's band, and that Aaron and Noah and Lucia and I were traveling to a cabin soon with an excellent gang. That weekend was heaven. Lucia and I drove together and reminisced about France. At the house, Noah and Aaron and the rest of us spent two days playing syncopated soul songs and making big meals, and I thought how fortunate we all were in one another; how fortunate I was especially, to be making new memories that for the first time in forever actually meant something.

Slowly, over the course of that spring and early summer, I started to get better. Being in D.C. meant I could drive to upstate New York to see my sister at our father's house outside Skaneateles, and then to Hamilton to catch up with Mom. "You look great," Mom said when I arrived. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much." Wynne's notes from our most recent session described me as "in remission," with "good control over anxiety symptoms."

In June, Mom and I flew to California to deliver a joint talk to the Jane Austen Society at the Huntington Library. By now, the two of us had spent plenty of time surrounded by genial Austen fanatics dressed in Regency gowns and waistcoats, but the effect was still pleasantly exotic. I like to think that Mom was pretty jazzed by our onstage collaboration, that it felt to her like the culmination of something that began when she decided to name me Edward.

All the time my jangling nerves, the uncomfortable apprehension of the hard edge, were feeling progressively calmer and more manageable, and I thought that perhaps moving back was curing me after all.

Then came Black Wednesday, or what I like to think was the second most disgraceful moment in the history of the Watergate, just in time to shatter my new and fragile peace.

Two D.C.-based colleagues, Francie and Joe, were huddling with me around a phone on the sixth floor. Our boss, Nick, was on the line from California, delivering the news that our small, idealistic magazine was

about to be declared dead. We were now—suddenly, summarily—unemployed.

"The good news is there'll be severances," said Nick. Joe, a hard-nosed investigative journalist, was pacing. He was a recent hire and had moved his family down from Baltimore to join the D.C. nano-bureau that the three of us comprised.

Francie, a hotshot science and education journalist, leaned forward over the speakerphone. "What *degree* of severance?" she asked.

"It's pegged to how long each staffer has been with the magazine . . . "

Joe stopped pacing and looked skyward. "Well okay, then, fuck me." He looked ready to punch the wall. I wouldn't have blamed him.

"But they just okayed our ten-year plan," Francie said, "didn't they?"

"Yup," Nick said. "And now that's turned into a three-week plan."

The New York Times, in fact, already had the story of our demise, Nick told us, which was why he sounded so rushed. He wanted to go public before the *Times* did—and was about to, right after calling us. I couldn't help stealing a glance at Joe's look of despair. I'd been at the magazine for four years, so my severance would be decent despite the modesty of my salary. Joe, by contrast, would get maybe twenty-five hundred dollars. He had kids; I had a cat. None of this was remotely fair.

We shared some mournful pleasantries, and Nick rang off.

There followed a brittle, reactive silence, as though it carried an electrical charge suddenly unable to complete its circuit. Joe left the room to go call his wife. Francie said only "I still have three stories to finish." A pro, she went back to her cubicle and kept working.

Alone in the conference room that was as antiseptic as an insurance office, I was vibrating. The righteousness, I knew, would settle itself more insidiously, would become a simple and deadly anxiety, but not yet. For the moment, we had the privilege of fancying ourselves martyrs. Nick's impromptu Twitter eulogy for the mag made me choke up. "This team has changed policy and changed minds, influenced educators and saved lives—literally," Nick wrote. "That's not an overstatement or bloated mission speak; it's the power of storytelling and reporting done in the public interest. We sent reporters to Afghanistan and the Maldives, to the Gulf of California and an abandoned zoo in Buenos Aires. We've reported from all 50 states, the U.S. territories, and opened a second office in Washington, D.C., to report on the biggest stories of our time."

The first call I got after Nick's came from Lucia. "I know you don't drink, but let's go to Little Coco's and I'll buy you their strongest pineapple juice." I said that sounded perfect.

For a journalist's ego, the two greatest days are when you get a job and when you lose it. Journalism Twitter quickly mythologized a past that had ended precisely three quarters of an hour before. It was a bit like eavesdropping on your own funeral, in the proud tradition of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

I spent the next three hours calling my writers, fielding a handful of emails from recruiters at other publications eager to collect various cuts from the carcass of the magazine, and reassuring my contract editors that they'd get *some* kind of severance, even if it had to come out of mine. I pitched a few stories to the BBC and *The New Republic*. I educated myself about drawing unemployment insurance in D.C. Then I finished editing the fall books preview, a collection of early endorsements from the staff of books that wouldn't hit stores until after the magazine had closed.

After that, I stole into the bathroom and called Wynne to arrange a visit ASAP, and felt my breath come easier once he said he could squeeze me in tomorrow. The plastic insurance card in my wallet had never felt so flimsy. In a few more weeks, my coverage would be gone, and while I knew I could buy a new plan, the whole business unsettled me. I texted Lucia: "It sounds insane, but for more than a year I've kept getting this paranoia I'll end up on the street . . . " Of course, it had been closer to thirty years. Lucia responded, simply, "Shush."

Walking northeast an hour later, I remembered how powerless I'd felt in all that smoke back when I was in California, and my throat tightened. The sun was high and bright on Upshur Street; a mocking sun, I thought ungratefully. A chapped, scruffy-looking guy came up and asked for a dollar, and I bought him a tallboy in the corner liquor store. I got to the restaurant, and Lucia wrapped me in a hug.

Lucia is a dream of a friend, kind and exacting, with the sort of shrewd but gracious smile most often associated with the *Mona Lisa.* Her husband, Alex, then a political reporter for NBC, is no less sweet. If anyone could make me feel better on this topsy-turvy day, it would be them.

"Alex is sad he can't join us, but he sends his love and says he knows you'll land somewhere great." I laughed. It felt in poor taste to rebut this optimism.

We ambled up to Little Coco's, an Italian spot on Fourteenth Street. Lucia ordered our drinks and cradled a hand under her jaw. We talked about how publishers' promises should never be trusted. Two and a half blocks north, in Rock Creek Cemetery, lay Upton Sinclair, or what was left of him, and I thought he would've agreed with this last point. Old George McGovern, also buried there, had learned well what devilry can happen in the Watergate.

Lucia was very breezy about my chances on the job market, and she joked and performed until I loosened up a bit. Then, in the middle of some pleasant exchange, I exclaimed, "Fuck, the archives!" A waitress shot me a look of alarm from the bar.

Lucia tented her eyebrows theatrically. "What *about* the archives?"

"As of this moment, the board hasn't answered any questions about preserving them." I could feel myself growing red. "Lucia, when you get home, you'd really better save PDFs of all your stories for us, in case the site just . . . disappears . . . " I was shaking my head, trying to imagine the entire memory of the magazine, ten years of stories that had often lit up the Internet, won awards, or changed policy—all of it suddenly hanging by a thread. "It'll be like a *damnatio memoriae*."

In ancient Rome, if you insulted or scandalized the emperor sufficiently, the praetorian guard (after, say, cutting off your hands) would go about striking every trace of your life and words from public memory: sanding off statuary inscriptions, erasing your name and deeds from the history books—a gruesome punishment. The extermination of memory, I said with some melodrama, was more than murder.

"That's stupid," Lucia said finally. "The magazine *did* exist—does exist. The work mattered. Don't be morbid."

I drank my pineapple juice and stopped talking about Rome.

"You're allowed to feel sorry for yourself," Lucia continued. "But only for a day or two. Then your license is revoked."

"I don't even feel sorry for myself, just angry. Which is funny, because for years, I've been feeling guilty about having a job in this business at all."

"Well," Lucia said flatly, "you don't need to feel guilty about *that* anymore."

When we parted ways, I hastened off and emailed around a hundred past contributors encouraging them to save PDFs of all the stories they'd written

for me. Even if only for their personal records. Simply to prove any of it had ever happened.

The next two nights, I didn’t sleep, even after indulging in a couple of pipes of cannabis. I sat at my desk applying for jobs, writing shakily in my journal, hating myself for being so goddamn terrified. Of course, the terror wasn’t rational. But that only made it worse.

The next week, I admitted something funny to Wynne: I’d been thinking a lot more about psych wards lately. My old terror of ending up on the street or in the asylum was back with a fresh and biting energy. For the first time, Wynne didn’t encourage me to loosen my grasp on the fear. Instead, he said very quietly: “You know, psych wards are much more humane these days.”

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Chapter 12

Babies in a Burning World

Lucia was right: Things were moving too fast for me to feel sorry for myself. Journalism tends to favor people who've been recently employed in a distinguished job, even if the distinction is having been a big fish at a small magazine. I'd awake in the mornings to find my ganglions dancing with terrified anxiety—but then I'd open my inbox and see emails from headhunters or commissioning editors and recognize that, by the standards of the industry, I was lucky as hell. I worked for a spell editing at CNN's online opinion vertical, sometimes from the New York office but mainly from D.C. I figured as long as I never stopped working, I could bank my *Pacific Standard* severance against whatever longer and more hard-bitten professional wilderness surely awaited.

In my off-hours, I was reporting a story for BBC World about couples forgoing children because of climate change. Chase and Brandalyn were one such pair. Brandalyn, raised Catholic, spent her early life planning to have thirteen kids. Then she spent four years doing aid work in Malawi, where she met and fell in love with Chase. Soon she revised her extravagant reproduction plans. She and Chase were seeing how subsistence farmers struggled amid awful dry spells followed by deadly cyclones of increasing frequency. Brandalyn pointed out that the annual carbon footprint of a typical American child was around 59 metric tons, compared to between 0.07 and 0.1 for a Malawian child. The couple simply couldn't justify the emissions. Nor did they wish to consign an innocent baby to the extreme weather and intensified battle for resources that they saw coming to America in just a few years; that battle had already begun elsewhere.

The piece had been an assignment rather than something I'd pitched, but it struck at a susceptible, nervous split within me, one I'd been trying to

mend for the better part of the previous decade. I adored children and wished to have one or two myself, but I didn't want to subject them to a world on fire—leaving aside the fear that any progeny would share my bent toward melancholy and fear.

It was then, in a state of heightened anxiety and only partial employment, that I met Melanie.

Melanie was lovely, a taller version of the actress Alison Brie, but what struck me with equal force was the serene and solid kindness she radiated, along with a quiet wisdom that had the appealing quality of mystery. She was smiley and knowing, with lovely dark wavy hair, eyes of limpid blue, and an important job as an environmental lawyer. After chatting on Hinge, we met on Fourteenth Street at a funny little speakeasy above a neighborhood laundromat. Melanie didn't balk when I ordered a club soda and told her I no longer drank "for mental hygiene." I immediately regretted the glib phrase; Melanie merely smiled and said that sounded healthy. I adored the passion she had for the concrete successes of her organization. So many nonprofits in D.C. were dedicated to talking about talking, as though a symposium were an end in itself. Melanie's group, by contrast, decisively shaped often successful legislation to regulate PFAS chemicals, or the compounds known as "forever chemicals." Whatever chemicals washed through my brain that first night were powerful, and entirely unregulated, as she shot me conspiratorial smiles.

Melanie referred to her recent divorce in a calm and straightforward way, drawing a gentle, implicit, yet clear line beyond which the subject didn't belong to me. She positively lit up when talking about her stepdaughters back in Wisconsin, and I got the sense that she was more involved in their lives than their father was. But she was more cautious in appraising me. The divorce wasn't exactly ancient; plus, privately, she was getting ever more serious about plans to become a mom on her own, so she wasn't sure what to make of this well-dressed but slightly eccentric bohemian dude. *Charming, possibly an oddball.* But she kept an open mind. Holding her at the end of the night felt giddily novel and unsettlingly familiar.

When I returned home to the apartment on Sixteenth Street, I found Sophie darting around the carpet with crazed eyes, pursuing a tiny white moth. She skidded to a stop and fixed her dinnerplate stare on me. I went over and rubbed her belly as she pretended to bite me, and I said, "I met

someone quite special, and I'm excited to introduce you two." Sophie licked one of my knuckles and returned to the trail of the moth.

As I interviewed for full-time jobs at various mags and newspapers, I felt more grateful than ever that I'd moved back to D.C. before *Pacific Standard* had disappeared. Washington was one of the few cities that always had a media job of *some* kind open in those days—and a couple of good magazines seemed to be working toward an offer for me. The job I most coveted, however, was an opening for a senior editor at *Smithsonian* magazine. I was particularly eager to impress the executive editor, Terry.

"Editing the history section is like juggling chainsaws," he told me over Korean food at my final interview. That didn't trouble me. You give me the work, and it gets done; I'd become a finisher, if only out of self-preservation.

"It's about the best journalism job I can imagine," Terry continued. I pinched a strip of stewed eggplant between my chopsticks while he described *Smithsonian* as "the most charming magazine in the country" and touted its base of 1.6 million subscribers—at the time (he emphasized) nearly twice the circulation of *The New Yorker*. "For breadth of audience, the only real places that have us beat are *National Geographic* and *AARP: The Magazine*, to get technical about it." I really felt like he was selling me on the mag, and my nerves relaxed. Terry went on to say that "sharpening historical memory" was central to the job description.

I laughed. "Sounds like a lot of responsibility."

"It is, as I've said, super difficult," Terry said, smiling. "The readers expect playfulness, wit, all that."

The position seemed about the safest in journalism, safe in an old-fashioned way, almost like a magazine job in the '90s. Terry and I wiped our mouths, parted company, and did some simple haggling over email. After a background check, I joined this small team dedicated to finding the new in the old, to sharpening, improving, enriching our collective memory. Well, memory generally had been a strong point of mine—with some exceptions that I didn't care to think about just then. What could go wrong?

It was a bit before Christmas when Melanie and I had our second date, this time to visit the National Zoo at night, a Yuletide tradition in D.C. beloved alike by young children and by adults who are courting. We laughed and fumbled while kissing and clasping in various unobserved quarters. One memorable embrace came outside the orangutan habitat, where I pulled back from her face to admire how fine it was.

"Those are the earrings from your Hinge profile."

"Yes, and they have ensnared many men," she shot back, deadpan.

Over the next two weeks, I got a glimpse of what life with Mel would be like. She ran marathons, and I loved to see her proud smile after a long training session. She fielded calls from her stepdaughters and coached them through college applications or disputes with their father. She was unparalleled in the kitchen: Tarts and pies and cakes and bagels issued from the oven of her Capitol Hill apartment. On evenings when she wasn't teaching a course about environmental advocacy at Georgetown Law School, she took me to concerts, mainly electro-pop bands that she fancied. We danced, and my skin jumped whenever she shimmied those delicate shoulders at me. She'd said something about concert dates being good at revealing compatibility. Apparently, I passed the test. We started spending weekend afternoons at a coffee shop near her apartment. She wrote in her journal with her marathoner's focus, and I returned to writing fiction in my own halting way.

With other girlfriends, I'd felt a need to use wit as a sort of stabilizing glue. With Mel, charm came more naturally, even as it had never felt less important. To me, our basis felt built of surer stuff than wit or lust alone.

By the time I met Mel, I could admit to myself that I had capital-D Depression. But I couldn't admit it to Mel. Instead, like a career criminal strategically confessing a misdemeanor, I told her my depression was conventional, manageable. She believed me.

Depression is often called a disease of silence. It's shameful to talk about; anyway, the experience is often unutterable. In childhood, especially when my parents were at odds, I'd pursued emotional silence as an unconscious discipline: *Never let them know it affects you*. If I admitted

anything was wrong, my own feelings might throw the people around me into further turmoil.

Yet even as I planned and strategized around ever gnarlier panic attacks, I tried to categorize them as temporary exceptions. It's part of the disease to use compartments in this way. And though I had no idea how bad it was about to get, even now I can't stop wishing that I'd been more honest with myself, and with Mel, from the start.

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Chapter 13

Season of Pestilence

> *In seasons of pestilence, some of us will have a secret attraction to the disease—a terrible passing inclination to die of it. And all of us have like wonders hidden in our breasts, only needing circumstances to evoke them.*
>
> *—Charles Dickens*

At an appointment in the new year, Dr. Wynne asked whether news of the novel coronavirus was getting me uptight. I looked down at the ribbon of Pennsylvania Avenue, all white and gray after the city's second snow.

"Not really. Honestly, I've been too lovestruck."

"So you're in love?"

"I'm beginning to be in love, yes," I said.

Wynne smiled at this cautious response. "That's fine, there's no rush. Tell me about her."

I described our first dates and told Wynne how I adored the slight shock in her blue eyes when we were clasped together, how she smiled with her whole lovely face. "Even her ears smile," I said fatuously. But I also said she was the most serious person I'd ever dated, and told Wynne how she discussed the dissolution of her marriage with a gentle pain, softened by a wisdom that for some reason startled me.

"So what's the problem?"

I waved my hand. "The usual. Or, rather, the latest. Why always the fight-or-flight response even when things are good?"

Wynne spoke slowly. "It's important to remember how you got yourself to this point." I nodded. "You spent a couple of years in California living with a persistent depression. You arrived back in D.C. in a state of high

anxiety. I don’t know if that was a premonition about the magazine or the stress of moving across the continent or your anger with yourself for not writing the novel faster—although it does seem you’re very close to finishing it.”

“Close to finishing an *extremely* mediocre first draft—but yes.”

Wynne smiled a wincing smile. He was always careful not to be too jolly when he knew I couldn’t match his good humor. “Almost done, then, that’s fine. But think about the stressors that are acting on you. You worry a good deal about climate catastrophes and fixate on the people who will suffer; I don’t think that’s productive, and I’m trying to help you shake that.”

“How is that unhealthy? That’s one of my few virtuous qualities.”

“Compassion is virtuous, yes. Self-laceration over Haiti is not. And besides that, you’re still terrified about not having a job, about ending up on the street.” (He was right. However much I enjoyed the *Smithsonian* work, I expected the job to go up in smoke at any moment.) “But there’s a long way between where you are and where you fear you’ll be. What I’m saying, I guess, is—don’t get too anxious about your anxiety, certainly not in a way that places Mel as a source of that anxiety. Allow yourself to enjoy her company. And try not to blame yourself for feeling anxious.”

“I’m not sure I’m blaming myself for being fearful and stressed,” I said, and thought for a moment. “I might be blaming myself for being unhappy, especially amid these blessings—a new job, an exciting beginning with Melanie . . . ”

“I’m not trying to split hairs—don’t blame yourself for that, either. It strikes me that you’ve lived your entire conscious life bearing guilt for a lot of things beyond your control. That doesn’t mean you can’t break the cycle. Don’t give up on yourself. I know that sounds like life coaching, but, very simply, you’re not so sick that you should abandon your hopes for happiness. Those hopes are not false, and we can try to help give them new life.”

I agreed but also demurred when he suggested increasing my anxiety medication; Klonopin is famously difficult to kick. I also knew what Wynne had left unsaid: that even now, at thirty-four, I’d managed to neither integrate nor escape the memory of my childhood failure to stage-manage my parents. That early failure had reappeared in the conviction that my unhappiness was contagious, that I was fated to create misery. Yet knowing all this didn’t seem to help a whole lot. Wynne could rewire me briefly,

through compassion and occasional tough honesty, but I knew my ruminative patterns would return once I got outside.

"You're keeping up the breathing exercises?" he asked. I was. He shook my hand. It was our last session before he left for a two-week vacation. Giving a slightly concerned look to my ragged peacoat, he patted me on the back for the only time I can remember. His general demeanor struck me as nicely in keeping with the midwinter snows outside. I felt almost steady as the cold hit my cheeks on Pennsylvania Avenue. But the recent up and down had me in confusion, and I couldn't help fearing the next dip.

Mel and I got serious at the start of March, when we left D.C. for a weekend in the brisk air of Rileyville, Virginia, just along the Shenandoah River. We settled for three nights in an Airbnb, cooking fish and exploring the wooded hiking trails and especially lying in bed, loving by turns idly and fiercely. Saturday evening found us in the house's enormous bathtub, surrounded by scented candles the host had provided, and Melanie told me for the first time that she'd begun working to become a single parent: planning egg-freezing appointments and considering how to source sperm. We talked it over earnestly, and I said that I didn't want to interfere with the process but I did want to keep seeing her.

Then her head was suddenly wreathed in flame.

She'd leaned backward while laughing at some quip of mine, and one of the candles caught her hair. We both yelped, and she quickly submerged herself, and the water hissed as it killed the flame.

The next morning, we decided to date *officially*. I was nervous about potentially delaying Mel's plans for kids; she told me not to be. The last day, as we hiked, I watched her flash ruddy smiles back toward me on the trails and caught a vision of a future with Melanie, a glimpse of happiness that left me giddy—and very frightened.

On our way back to D.C. in my little red hatchback, we stopped at a gas station where newspapers declared the new flu had finally made its way to D.C. and appeared more efficient than ever at killing people. For the rest of the drive, I felt an uneasy but familiar presence that made my whole body wince, and only after I'd deposited Melanie at her apartment on Capitol Hill did I recognize it as my internal fire alarm, now blaring again.

I'd spoken too loosely to Melanie about babies in the early days. When she joked about my saving her a trip to the sperm bank, I said, "Why not?" She knew I'd always adored kids, that in principle I wanted some. So as she froze some eggs and kept a list of male friends who could serve as donors, she wondered whether she might get a two-for-one deal with me.

I liked the idea, then doubted it, then became consumed with that doubt. As early as the summer, Lucia later said, she'd noticed a "disjunction" between what I said about having kids with Mel ("She's perfect, why wouldn't I?") and the way I said it (slowly, with pronounced caution and a background hum of agitation). I worried I'd caught Mel at the wrong time, although I didn't say as much to Noah or Lucia until later.

Wynne pointed out that I had a tendency, historically speaking, to blow things up when it seemed as though marriage or children were in the offing. "You worry a great deal," Wynne said, "about the shortcomings of your father."

"Granted," I said. I thought: *That doesn't mean I won't become him*.

"Are you eager to spare children pain?"

"Well, yes, but it's more complicated." I told him there was the genes thing (will they be doomed to my neuroses?) as well as the contagion thing (will my style of parenting somehow infect them behaviorally?) and the environmental thing (why consign children to a burning world?) and then, sure, the other thing, wherein I didn't want to re-create my dad's betrayal of my mother.

I loved Melanie, and I loved the idea of creating little versions of her, had always loved children, in fact; but as we talked about it, I started to notice a bodily rebellion, as though my nervous system were marshaling itself against what was, on paper, a beautiful possible future. Not that Melanie was pressuring me to do anything so soon. But the clock was ticking, wasn't it?

Wynne was saying something I hadn't caught. Now he paused, and I dropped a few tears. "It isn't sustainable. Half my waking hours I spend wishing I could bolt so fast from my own body that I'd leave even my bones in the rearview. Why am I so fucking over having a body?"

"You're not wanting to hurt yourself, though?"

“No, and never. You know my policy.” I reminded him of the promise Brian and I had made to his mother at Joey’s funeral. Long before I truly considered myself a suicide risk, I maintained a paradoxical clarity: Suicide can make all the sense in the world—and it is your duty to do everything under the sun to preserve yourself.

Wynne said, “You’ve told me you’d never do it, yes. But because of your loved ones. You don’t want your last act to be—”

“Not only because of that—”

“Mainly, then.”

“Sure. But I’m not talking about that.”

“Guilt alone cannot be a reason for staying alive any more than it is for dying.”

“But right now I don’t care about the guilt.”

“I think it might be a big part of why you’re feeling this way.”

“What I mean is that I don’t want salvation, I just want relief.”

Wynne frowned, and I hated to make him frown. “I can understand not wanting to have a body,” he said. “In your state, your nervous system thinks it’s at war, and we’ll find ways to help it recognize peace.” I worried he was going to suggest raising my dosage of Klonopin. That wasn’t the kind of solution I was looking for. But Wynne said nothing about the anxiety drug.

I wept for another minute. Then said: “I guess it hurts because I used to think that love lightens it all, or dissolves it, or gives me perspective, at least . . . it allows me to take the watch apart.”

“And this time?”

“This time it’s all backward. Melanie’s face should be enough to bring me peace. She’s so goddamn sweet. When we’re together, I mostly don’t feel like this. But then she goes home . . . ” I rolled my eyes and forced a joyless laugh. “It’s the Batman doll all over again, and I can never shake the feeling that the whole thing is doomed.”

“And what do you do when you get that feeling, when you need to subdue the fight-or-flight response?”

I told him about the exercise. “I don’t know if you’d even call it an exercise. It’s childishly simple.”

“Simple can be very good. Tell me.”

“I close my eyes for a bit, then open them and say aloud, ‘My name is Ted Scheinman, it’s whatever o’clock on whatever date . . . ’ Take now, for example, I’d say, ‘It’s three-forty-eight p.m. on December 17, 2020, and

I'm in the office of Dr. Wynne in northwest Washington, D.C. I am here and I am safe.' That's basically it." I felt sheepish. "A friend recommended it. I guess it is supposed to center you. And it works, to a point . . . sometimes, oddly, it's the only thing that works. What?" Wynne was looking at me funny.

"Did your friend mention that's an exercise we recommend to people experiencing intense PTSD?"

I waved this off. Didn't everyone say they had PTSD these days? I was a garden-variety anxious depressive. I said as much to Wynne.

"I'm not trying to give you a new diagnosis, you understand. But I do think we should possibly reassess the gravity of what you're experiencing."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"I believe that if you're resorting to the exercise you describe, and if you've come to feel you need it, then for me that's a sign you're suffering more than I realized, possibly more than *you* realize, even now . . . "

I missed the next sentence or two. Hearing a new note of concern in Wynne's voice as he made these pronouncements left me suspended between relief and despair: *Wow, I am more fucked than I knew*.

Mel and I escaped the city again, to our friend Jack's cabin in West Virginia along with Noah and his girlfriend. The plan was to forget the mass death by making music and smoking various cuts of pork—while also doing a little target practice with Jack's rifles.

"Keep the butt pressed just below your shoulder, like this," Jack said, adjusting Mel's grip. "Otherwise, you'll get a mule kick to the top of your shoulder, and the nearest hospital is fifty miles away." Mel turned to look over the barrel and give me a look of mock alarm. She was grinning.

Jack lowered the big cushiony ear protectors onto Mel's head. "Okay, fire in the hole, y'all, the range is hot." Mel gave the trigger a slow squeeze. The target was around thirty yards away, and her first shot perforated the target, not a bull's-eye but straight and respectable.

"That was a *great* fucking shot," Jack's wife, Charlotte, said, loud enough that Mel could hear the compliment through the ear protectors, and she flashed Charlotte a pleased, confident smile. My heart jumped. It was gratifying to see Mel shoot so well. I imagined her at the ramparts of some

stronghold or keep, idly picking off my demons: Pop, there goes a phalanx of melancholies; pop, a panic monster falls to the dry earth, spitting blood. She'd been strong enough for both of us for two months now. In that moment, as she lowered her rifle, Mel's strength shone as something bright and beautiful. I wished I could be worthy of it.

Mel removed the earmuffs. "How did I do?" she asked me with a smile that said she didn't need to be told.

"You were perfect. Trade marathons for cross-country skiing and you'll sweep the biathlon."

Behind us, the smoker was pungent from yesterday's fourteen hours of work on the brisket and the pork belly. Earth and grass and smoke and the crisp residue of gunpowder mingled in the air like a consecrating incense. From the other end of the deck, Noah and his girlfriend, a Catalonian astrophysicist named Roser, raised their arms in approval.

At dusk, the fireflies came out, the first time Roser had ever seen them, and we stood still and let them surround us in an aura of twinkling life.

Later, once the campfire was no more than embers, I warmed myself on memories of the day, and the weight of Mel's head half dozing on my shoulder felt like a kiss from God. I could hear the low growl of depression, but muted, as though I'd forgotten to take off my earmuffs after the shooting.

The weekend's vividness in memory is a beautiful pang, because it also marked an inflection point. Afterward, my ability to make and hold new memories began to desert me more profoundly than ever before.

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Chapter 14

Unbearable

In modern neuroscience, researchers often divide long-term human memory into three categories. There's episodic memory, which is your recollection of personal events (that home run you hit in third grade; your first kiss; what you had for lunch yesterday); there's semantic memory, which is general information about the world (what language they speak in Brazil; the year of the Battle of Hastings); and there's procedural memory, which comprises ingrained skills and motor memory (how to play the piano, tie your shoelaces, ride a bike). We unconsciously sort memories into each of these three realms and then incorporate them into our working memory, an active mode of short-term memory that relates new information to old and allows us to apply both together. If we're sufficiently moved or impressed by a given bit of knowledge, we encode it as a synaptic pattern in our long-term memory.

In depression, the first memory to go is often episodic—factual autobiography. That's because your episodic memory depends on a well-functioning hippocampus. The memory inhibition strikes in two ways: You form new memories less easily (in a pattern called anterograde amnesia), and you also lose some access to older memories (a pattern called retrograde amnesia). Neurologically, that makes sense: If your hippocampus is shrunken and lethargic, your ability to consolidate short-term memory into long-term memory diminishes precipitously. Psychologically and philosophically, it also makes sense. When you feel like the life you're living is not your own, you also feel like it doesn't matter what you're doing, and you don't necessarily pay all that much attention. Small wonder that it's hard to remember.

By mid-2020, I was already noting a disarray in my memory, an inability to retain moments. These lapses began in small ways. Some days I would start composing an email to a colleague, then look in my sent messages and find I'd already conveyed the pertinent info earlier that morning. Slowly, other things became harder to remember: when I'd played a concert at such and such a bar, and with which band, or when I'd last seen my mother, or where Melanie and I had last traveled. I also found that procedural memories formed during my illness had far less staying power than before: Playing music with Jack and Noah, I often needed a lead sheet, or a shorthand of the chords for a given number, even for songs I'd known and loved for years.

Forgetfulness of this kind isn't merely inconvenient. Quickly, it becomes existential. Even in the earliest stages, my loss of memory meddled with my illusion of a stable self. For one thing, selfhood is largely a function of memory—a serialized story about who you are, based on who you've been and what you've done.

What I do remember is that Mel and I struggled and loved each other through that fall and winter. We talked a bit about babies, but after a month, the subject was giving me terrors, and I told her I was scared to create a creature who was bound to suffer.

"Do you want to try being with someone else? Someone less impossible?" I asked. God, how I wanted a life with her, the chance to give her everything she wanted. All I wanted was the ability to give.

She shook her head and made a sad little smile. "No, I love *you*," she said, and told me not to fret.

Mel kept her deepest doubts private. On Thanksgiving, her diary records a fear that we each experienced in our own way: "I'm not sure what it would be like to spend every morning with Sad Ted."

It was January, not long after a sizable throng had breached the U.S. Capitol, when we discovered just how bad things were. I confessed to Melanie that, after nearly a year of isolating, I'd never in my life felt so low, so useless, so frightened. The smallest tasks at work mocked and bedeviled me, and I was convinced Terry wouldn't wait much longer to declare me a fraud and fire me.

Melanie’s diary, January 2021:

Ted came over for dinner and told me he was thinking about talking to his doctor or experimenting with different doses because he says, “I’m so medicated I shouldn’t be able to feel anything.” But he’s in pain. We decided after two weeks we would reassess and see if it warranted a change in meds or other medical intervention. But by Saturday things were worse. I tried to be optimistic, but Ted seemed dark. And then he stayed sad in a way I don’t quite remember seeing before. And he’s all worried about bringing me down. I felt fairly peppy and tried to reassure him.

On the Sixteenth Street side of my apartment building were a horseshoe driveway for deliveries and a fenced-in garden with few flowers but plentiful shade under two great oaks. It was there Lucia suggested meeting one day in March. I didn’t really want to go outside. For some depressives, the sun can assume the quality of a burning accusation, and you have to steel yourself for it.

In the garden with Lucia awaited her daughter, Phoebe, ten months old and a delightfully enormous child, her head both round and boxy. Whenever she made a serious face, she looked very German. Mel and I reached the garden, and Phoebe greeted me by gripping my index finger with her already considerable tensile strength. She roared into laughter the second I began to tickle her, releasing my finger only so she could cover her eyes. She was laughing in aspirated K’s: “Khee! Khee!”

“She’s a human finger trap,” I told Lucia, who fixed me with a faux-traumatized stare.

“You have no idea. My fingers are no longer my own. Three are on the cusp of atrophy.”

Lucia, with her big heart, took my antics with Phoebe as an opportunity to ask Mel not about me or my therapists—a very boring subject; things were getting worse, and we all knew it—but about how *she* was doing.

It felt perverse that Melanie had to spend so much time talking about sad old Ted—with my friends, with my parents, with her own parents. Lucia

saw as much and pressed Mel for more details about her stepkids, her nieces and nephews, her policy victories.

“Ted says you’ve been killing it at work.”

Mel smiled and said yes, they’d had some success recently. She fetched her phone to show Lucia photos of the nieces and nephews. They talked a little about gardening, a little about composting, although how much is there to say about composting, really?

Above Phoebe and me, lodged in some invisible cranny of the big tree, a songbird made insistent sounds, a running complaint, just like mine. Even the perfect cherub on my lap couldn’t distract me from the deadness within me. Her serious eyes and musical chirps and deep-chested giggles seemed to come from a better world—and that world didn’t need me in it. A couple of minutes later, I handed Phoebe back to Lucia so I could sneak away to cry. It was perverse that Mel and I weren’t working on our own Phoebe, and it was all my fault.

Later that night, for the first time, I told Melanie I was curious about electroconvulsive therapy. Mom had friends who’d gotten it back in the 1980s, I told Mel, and Mom said the treatment had helped. Even so, I pictured helpless patients convulsing on a table, their back arching violently off the table. Just thinking about it made the muscles around my spine go tense.

“It sounds extreme,” Mel said. She was right—but that was what drew me to it. Anything so powerful had to have *some* effect, right? To lie down on a table and undergo the unthinkable, then to rise again a new man! It appealed to my sense of drama, and it certainly appealed to my slackening faith in pharmacology. Maybe it was sort of like going bankrupt, I told Melanie: a big sacrifice in exchange for a clean-ish slate.

Mel’s diary, February 2021*:*

I was up a little early the next morning and did some work on the brief before Ted called me back into bed. We had sex and it was . . . actually great. I thought we were turning a corner. But then he checked his work email and the anguish set in again. He sat on my computer chair and told me that he’d increasingly been feeling like he

“wanted to get off the ride,” at work and in life. But he also wanted me to know that his desire to live was stronger than his desire to die. In reality, I was a bit too stressed about the brief to fully absorb what Ted was saying to me.

As for me: I’m feeling a late-onset sadness that my boyfriend has been feeling precursors to suicidal ideations. It’s hard when Ted’s libido is depressed and I don’t feel desired. It’s hard not to feel like I’m not bringing enough joy to the table to make him feel better, even though I know that’s not how this works. It’s hard to have a problem I can’t fix. And there’s an insecure part of me that wonders if his depression has dampened his feelings toward me or made me somehow boring.

(You were never boring—you were the only source of light that didn’t make me flinch.)

There’s also a part of me that thrives on mothering and wonders if I delight too much in taking care of him. For now, I’m mostly putting the most pressing concern aside. Which, of course, is when I am going to have this damn baby. I’m learning to have a little grace with myself, because the situation is hard, and the situation is this: Ted may never be ready to be a parent. I desperately want to be a parent right now.

My sister, Jane, had her first child early in the year, a beautiful tiny potato named Theo. Because Covid vaccinations weren’t yet available to all, she and her husband, Jim, weren’t hosting visitors, and during postpartum isolation, Jane developed a depression—the first real one, she said, of her life. She was bashful about bringing it up with me. “It’s so mild,” she said, “nothing like what you’re grappling with.” When she admitted with some guilt that she was worried she wouldn’t love her baby enough, I stated the obvious: “You will. You do.” But she couldn’t take the watch apart, and I worried my encouragement rang hollow, given the wretchedness of my own state.

Jane went on Zoloft, and since I was going through my own medication switch at the time, we compared notes sometimes via email. “Zoloft is less

speedy than Wellbutrin," I wrote to her, "so it shouldn't exacerbate anxiety, but let me know how it goes. If they want to try adding a tricyclic, ask for mirtazapine. It's much smoother than nortriptyline, sort of cushion-y."

Hearing Jane so sad brought on a pang of guilt—a residue from childhood. I felt guilty of having abandoned her and, before that, of having hogged our mother's love. It seemed to me that Mom and I had formed our own little society, a cramped little circle of letters and mutual understanding, within which Jane had never felt entirely welcome. Then as now, my brain had caused misery to others. When I told Wynne of these regrets, he urged me to "ration my guilt." But it wasn't an allotment I could control.

For my antidepressant, Wynne was tapering me from Lexapro to Effexor, another SSRI sometimes considered the biggest gun in that family. We started at 37.5 milligrams each morning, titrating quickly up to 150 milligrams. In diaries and psychiatrist visits, I reported that my main response to the med change was a worsening in mood and extreme sleep disturbances, including night sweats. I kept waking up at four-thirty, my sheets soaked and my brain on fire. I started smoking a small pipe of cannabis in the mornings to quiet myself, though I knew this regimen wasn't sustainable. Sleep had been my one refuge when I could reach it. Indeed, during Covid, sleep became the high point of my daily life, the gorgeous end to which all the suffering of the day was heading; a reflection of the final peace I longed for and grimly denied myself.

The morning terrors marked a new chapter of the illness. This mix of doom-struck anxiety and near-paralytic depression is called agitated depression, and it differs from unipolar (or unmixed) depression in the intensity of the terror and restlessness that accompany an episode. It's also associated with a heightened risk of suicide. I was still doing a good job of foreclosing any thoughts about the how of a suicide, but the desire not to *be* was increasingly constant. To say I hated myself was such an understatement as to be meaningless. My full self, to the extent that I could identify one, was defined and consumed with the full-time job of self-loathing.

It was an unkempt time. I let my hair and sometimes my beard grow far too long and started wearing headbands to keep the hair out of my eyes. Maybe I could've pulled off the long hair if I hadn't started to let so much else go. Before, my signature style had been overdressed yet shabby; I wore

blazers often (mainly for the pockets), usually frayed or crumpled. Now I lost the overdressed part and redoubled the shabbiness. By that winter, I wasn't changing my sheets very often, and on days when I wasn't seeing Mel, I often got by without a shower. My mane grew greasier and greasier. I looked less and less like anyone I'd been before, which made me sad and also relieved, because what right had I to look like myself? The litter box at the foot of the bed bedeviled me constantly. I'd clean it meticulously for a few days, then let it go to hell for a week and feel such guilt about Sophie that I'd cry and scrub the shitty plastic and refill the whole thing with fresh litter, then get too lazy to scoop, and repeat the whole pendulum act again. My bed became a warren. At first I could smell the stale sweat, and I minded the accompanying white lines in the shape of giant amoebas on the bedsheets. Then, after a spell, I didn't mind.

The morning terrors brought a further insult. Somatically, the expression of this terror was a drop in my bowels. Each morning was a race to the bathroom. I somehow never lost control—at least I can't remember having done so—but that was little consolation. To be so mortifyingly enslaved to your bowels, every day and as your first waking experience, added a final indignity to the whole period, like getting punched in the nuts every morning while awaiting execution. It was a reminder that my body, like the rest of my life, was no longer my own.

It can be difficult to communicate, in public, one's depressive symptoms, even on the rare occasions when you want to. Knowing as much, Mel developed a couple of simple bits of shorthand for when she wanted to check on me delicately in company. She had learned that in the hours of daylight, the sadness and fear would wash over me, now high tide and now low but always, always the undertow exerting its slow and inevitable pull to draw me away from land, light, love. We'd come to call them "the waves." Observing me in such moments—whether I was bouncing Phoebe on a knee, or scowling at a bush that had taken on some grim aspect of foreboding or accusation—Mel would mouth the word "waves," then later would ask the question wordlessly, turning her hand into a mermaid: up and down, up and down. It was our own version of ASL: anguished sign language. Mel found it helped her not to worry or, rather, to worry only as

much as circumstance required; more important, from her perspective, our private hand signals allowed her to wrap me in an invisible embrace that reminded me I wasn't alone, that someone who loved me more than words was watching me, thinking about me, gently reminding me that even as I suffered silently, I didn't suffer alone. The knowledge was a comfort and a curse.

Ted's diary, March 2021:

> *Today's inner monologue: "They're all dying and I'm just here. They're all unemployed and I'm just here. If I were useful, I'd have children by now and a second and third book but instead I'm this strange eccentric, this emotional cripple . . . Christ, I should've protected Jane more—was I a negligent brother?"*
>
> *Do I want to die? Why do I want to die? You can't have babies or write books if you're dead.*

Later in the same entry:

> *I want to die. And I'm terrified of getting sick.*

Around this time, I stopped writing in the mornings. The characters in my novel had all become joyless or else insane, and the tone was escaping me. I transcribed the most recent novel draft from notebooks into a Google doc, then sent it to Lucia and Riggs. "You're my literary executors if I end up a Covid casualty," I told Lucia. "You're not going anywhere," Lucia said prescriptively. I wanted to explain, to say I knew it was paranoia, but at the same time, I couldn't deny feeling certain I was marked for death.

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Chapter 15

Time Must Have a Stop

Puzzling over the causes of depression can feel like trying to analyze the weather without instruments. In some cases, the causes seem clear: A low-pressure system of an unfulfilling professional life, for example, brings cool air that meets the upward gusts of unsettling heat—a divorce, say. Boom, you've got a storm.

What to do when the storm comes without warning or impetus, when this system of nerves and hormones and memory goes haywire out of all proportion with circumstance? And what pushes a person to that lonely heath where even good news provokes despair and paralytic fear? This time, more than ever before, the precarity of it all made me shudder—the prospect of not securing satisfying employment; a looming sense of catastrophe about the climate; and a nagging voice that told me my work was doomed and probably didn't matter anyway. Of course, the final worry was the idea of losing Melanie, of not being enough for her. And I hated whatever inside me was rebelling against that love.

I'd thought that previous depressions could steel me, exempt me. That was idiocy. Wood singed once makes for better kindling, goes up faster the next time it catches the edge of the flame.

You risk burning other people, too. Mental illness rarely claims one victim at a time, and Melanie responded to my waves of anguish by doubting herself: "I took it as confirmation that I wasn't cut out for a real relationship or that I wasn't smart or funny enough for you," she told me, to my shame, much later. "I think I tried to reverse-engineer whatever version of me you'd fallen in love with, which, of course, made me less myself. It strikes me that we spent a lot of time loving each other without fully seeing each other."

It was the second spring of Covid when I finally started to come apart. The world's nervous system seemed to be buckling. Why not mine?

Mel told friends that my condition was worsening dramatically. She said I was barely walking and constantly hunched under an invisible and excruciating weight. In one message, she said that I looked "whole-body sad."

My solution was to be less seen, to hide under covers or under a baseball cap pulled low to hide my face. I felt a double relief on days when Melanie went running: I could tell myself she was sufficiently untouched by my contagion, and I had two hours with the apartment to myself, carte blanche, to cry alone. So I did. I engaged in binges and orgies of crying, as though by getting the tears out *now,* I'd leave none available for the evening. Sometimes, at least when Mel took her runs in the late afternoon, I wouldn't cry again until the next morning. I could nearly convince myself that the secret crying was working. Until one time when Mel returned and noticed my pillow darkened and sodden, not unlike the Batman doll—a damp bellwether for my madness. "Did you spill your water?" So considerate, that question! But she knew. I managed a half-truth: "It was sort of cathartic." Mel nodded but didn't look at my face. The next morning, she wrapped me in her arms and whispered with breath hot on my cheek: "I will love you no matter how sad you are . . . you never have to keep it secret."

On nights when I wasn't with Mel, my housemate, Noah, grew similarly freaked out by my slow speech and increasing curvature of the spine. Noah was somewhat brooding and had his own tendency toward depression, and there were days when he and I constituted hardly more than two ghosts stalking the apartment. I knew Mel and Roser were talking about us with the gentleness one extends to the very young and the very old, and indeed, Mel recalls my answering well-being questions with the mantra: "I feel ancient." Yet I was painfully aware of being a lost child, and of the strange, dispiritingly old-fashioned division of labor by gender that framed the circumstances to unflattering effect. Noah and I made our pronouncements while our girlfriends did the daily, unglamorous, and unremunerative work of taking care of us. ("Mel doesn't have time to care for *two* children," I wrote in a diary.)

If Noah's depression was a steady buzzing, mine was a frantic squawking and flapping of wings. In this increasingly dark period, Aaron and Lucia would call or visit Noah to ask about his state and collect intel about mine.

One day that March, I was privy to one side of these conversations. Noah thought I was at Mel's when, in fact, I was where I usually was: recumbent in my bed, in a full-body wince. So much of my recent life had made me feel that I was eavesdropping on the world, squatting in a life that wasn't my own, viewer rather than participant. Understandably if not forgivably, I listened through the door.

Noah was talking with Lucia on the phone, as I established once I heard Phoebe's name mentioned. Then the talk turned to me.

"I'm not gonna lie, it's difficult," Noah said. He was wearing a heavy-ish pair of hiking boots, and I could hear him pacing fretfully. "It's something I saw every day of my childhood. Each morning, I'd wake up and come downstairs for breakfast and see my mom's tortured face. Now it's all déjà vu. I come out of bed and go to the living room, and there's Ted with his notebook and laptop and his elbows propped on the table, holding the sides of his head like he's trying to keep it from bursting." Pause. "Sometimes he's scribbling with the pencil or pulling on his nicotine vape, but usually he's just . . . there, looking devastated." Another pause. "Is there a diaper emergency? 'Cause that takes precedence. . . ."

Lucia apparently reassured Noah that Phoebe's diaper, though admirably full, was Alex's problem in this instance. I don't remember what they talked about next, but a minute later, my ears perked up in distress as Noah said; "No, I don't think he has a plan, but I know he wishes he could do it without hurting anyone besides himself."

I had to will myself to breathe. I didn't hear the rest of the call, nor did I notice when Noah hung up. The old guilt came upon me, enveloped me. I wept for the agony I was causing these friends—even if I was sparing them the greater agony my demise would cause. Though I was crying into my pillow, I could stay unnoticed only so long, and when I blew my nose, I heard Noah start back to his feet in the living room. A moment later, there came a tentative rap on my bedroom door.

"You okay in there? I didn't know you were home . . . "

"Fine, just sinuses," I said. Then: "Sorry, I'll come out in a bit, I'm sort of half asleep."

“Was I talking too loud?”

“Were you talking? Sorry, I’ve had my earbuds in . . . ” I was trying to save us mutual embarrassment, but I also wanted time to gather myself in the wake of what I’d heard. I’d tried to spare my friends, and still they were being undone by the perverse amplitude of my sickness. I lay there with an old BBC adaptation of *Sherlock Holmes* playing on my lone earbud, but my mind was somewhere else, and whatever sanity I still possessed resolved itself into a single commandment: *You’ll never get well if you’re doing it for their benefit. You must do it for yourself.*

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Chapter 16

Delaying the Electrocution

“It’s funny that this whole thing started with a disgraceful moment at the Watergate.”

I was on a Zoom with Wynne, in one of those moments between bouts of tears when I was curiously still, calm, almost objective.

“You’re talking about when they shut down your magazine?”

“Yeah, exactly. But it’s more than that.”

“Connect the dots for me.”

“It goes back to Eagleton,” I said, and told Wynne how my mom had always blamed the Nixon campaign for amplifying and exploiting Eagleton’s psychiatric history. It was the lowest point, she’d said, of the scandalous 1972 campaign. “When I was tiny, we watched *All the President’s Men,* and Mom said the one truly unforgivable crime of Nixon’s campaign was to make Eagleton look crazy.” Thomas Eagleton, George McGovern’s running mate, had received electroconvulsive therapy back in the ’60s. Once reporters broke the story, Nixon apparatchiks seized on it to portray the candidate as damaged—a kook or a wimp or both. The major dailies published editorials urging McGovern to drop Eagleton from the ticket. McGovern said he’d stick by his VP nominee, that ECT wasn’t disqualifying. McGovern remained generous and broad-minded for about a week before he reversed course, the public having come to consider Eagleton suspect and hopelessly tainted by his association with such an apparently desperate treatment.

“Mom always described the reaction as something superstitious . . . Mom thought of ECT as much softer than a root canal, for example.”

“So she resented the public reaction?”

“Yes, very much, in her way. There was a sense of snobbery. She thought it was a parochial response. And she hated Nixon for—well, everything. Take your pick. The way he secretly helped torpedo the Paris peace talks ahead of the ’68 election, the bombing of Cambodia, the Kent State student killings—basically anything Neil Young wrote a song about. But she always said that outing Eagleton had been the work of a craven villain.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Is it?”

“Most mothers are . . . more leery of ECT.”

I brushed that off. “You know Mom. She always treated us like little adults. I think she delighted in coaxing us toward an early attainment of sophistication.” I laughed. “Like showing us Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*. It was cosmopolitan or at least artsy to understand dissolution. But also, I think Mom was quite serious about showing us portraits of human frailty, so we’d have compassion for the sick and the broken.”

“And do you have that same compassion for your current self?”

I could feel the muscles in my face warp into a grimace. “Not particularly.” My voice sounded icy. “I know, you want me to focus on the good things I’ve done, am doing, am capable of . . . ”

Wynne let me trail off, then spoke with a sigh. “You have a sense of bitter irony toward yourself. Now, irony can be good, or at least not bad. It enables two perspectives at once.”

I nodded, quoting him: “‘The situation is serious but not hopeless.’”

“Yes, that’s one example. Or, more to the point: ‘I recognize that I blame myself for everything, *and* I recognize this blame is rooted in nothing; it’s false, and is causing pain that I don’t deserve.’”

“But I don’t blame myself for *everything* . . . ”

“For your sadness, then. You feel terrible about feeling terrible. And guilty for having a job.” He paused. “You must see that your guilt would be just as strong if you *didn’t* have a job—you would find equal material in unemployment and employment because you’d blame yourself for either.”

He had me there, and I admitted it. But I added a caveat: “I can recognize what you say as true. But the blame and anger, as you’ve said repeatedly, aren’t rational and no longer respond to rational argument. They’re parasites, after all, aren’t they? You can’t debate a parasite.”

“You can try. You can starve it—especially since the parasite is metaphorical. I’m not arguing with a tapeworm here. I’m arguing with the

lies your brain tells and then accepts because guilt comes more naturally to you than self-forgiveness."

Wynne described the rest of the session in his notes:

> *Patient "undone" by anxiety and depression, including semiregular panic attacks. Inner dialogue brutal: patient says he debases any ideal he touches. It is clear he finds deep pain in being alienated from perfection. Suspects self of mediocrity and cowardice. Feels constantly under threat until "the moment before I fall asleep." Troubled with guilt over fact he has a job when so many journalists are unemployed. The love of his friends redoubles his guilt rather than comforts him. Mindfulness assignments include noticing the good he does, the reasons so many love him. We discussed adding Abilify and increasing mirtazapine . . .*

Lucia was getting the check at Maketto, a chic spot on H Street NE. She was mad at me, or else masking her sadness with impatience. It was supposed to be a nice little one-on-one lunch . . . and then I'd ruined it by being unable to eat or talk or feign the basic trappings of being a person. Now Lucia had all this uneaten food and a sizeable bill and what seemed to be the makings of a grudge.

Beneath the cloud of Covid, e*veryone* was some mix of angry and impatient and scared and sad, but Lucia's unhappiness was perhaps the hardest to bear among my friends. We shared an innocent but deep intimacy, a tenderness, a curiosity about each other, and the effect could be like hanging out with a particularly friendly ex. That intimacy meant she knew me well, and at this moment it seemed to confer a debt far beyond my price range. I kept wanting to say, *It would be so much simpler if people didn't care so much. Why did you all have to get* invested*?* These are the irrational things that come to you when you're so stupid from the disease—your brain matter has literally shrunk!—that even a kind glance feels like an accusation.

As Lucia tells it, she was indeed angry. She'd ordered a whole spread off the menu, all these small Cambodian and Taiwanese dishes chosen to stimulate a suppressed appetite, and once the food arrived, I pronounced

myself unable to eat. Lucia ended up back in her car, surrounded by take-out boxes, eating the lunch on her lonesome, fuming.

"I was hoping we'd have a nice lunch, but that wasn't on the table," Lucia said to Mel afterward. "In retrospect, it was not the right plan for us that day. But it was small portions! He wouldn't have had to eat that much. He just would've had to take a bite . . . "

She'd simply wanted me to try.

With Melanie but also Lucia, I kept asking myself: Why were these women wasting their time, their very selves, on me? Didn't they know that, functionally speaking, I was gone? Allegedly, I'd once had some kind of charm, a sociable intelligence; I could please, surprise, tease, comfort; I could prompt and enable adventure. Now I had to be babied. Worse, I was moving fast beyond the reach of babying.

Mom called me a lot, and it was always nice to hear her say "kiddo" on the phone. She sent me books that I lacked the focus to read and new shirts that I lacked the gumption to wear. She often said how much she wanted to come down and see me. Her mobility wasn't great, and Tom, her husband, hated traveling, but she'd get on a train if I needed.

I pictured her hobbling onto an Amtrak in Utica or Albany and having to make the annoying Penn Station transfer. I thought of the books she'd bring to read and underline, the pain she'd be in the whole ride. And at the end of it . . . she'd see me. The whole thing sounded like hell. "Please don't," I said. "I'm not very good company." She made me promise to tell her if I changed my mind. ("I can't let her come," I told Mel. "I couldn't stand the look on her face when she saw me.")

I told Dad the same: "Don't come, there's nothing for you to do." My calls with him were more frequent than those with Mom. He was, after all, the doctor of the family, though not a psychiatrist, and I was earnestly curious to hear what he made of Wynne's treatment, of my various medication changes, of my voice on the phone. He was quite attentive from a distance, and I often looked forward to our calls. But there was another reason I spoke more freely with Dad than with Mom—something I didn't recognize until much later. A small, sour part of me wanted to rub his nose

in my illness. It was a subconscious and cowardly bit of retribution for his sins, ones I told myself I'd forgiven long before.

Wynne's notes from this period chart a serrated line on a graph, up and down, but mainly down. In January, he recorded that the "patient presents with dramatic worsening of anxiety and depression; nausea, poor appetite, frequent panic attacks." Wynne cycled me through a series of new pharmaceutical combinations: switching SSRIs, trying an SNRI (which increases the availability of both serotonin and norepinephrine), pairing the latter with a tetracyclic antidepressant, raising my dosage of Klonopin, and adding the aforementioned Abilify, a mortifying booster drug—a rebranded antipsychotic that you take if your antidepressant needs its own antidepressant. Eventually, Wynne tossed lithium into the mix.

With each switch in my regimen, I cycled through placebo optimism into plain despair once the new drug failed to offer relief longer than a few days. My diary entries from these months form a mosaic of abject fear: One afternoon: "a day of pure terror." The next evening: "I can't let Noah be the one to find the body." The morning after the latter entry, I emailed my bosses at the magazine to say that I might need to take a medical leave of absence. Looking back at my journal, I can see myself growing convinced that ECT was not so much a last resort as my only hope. It increasingly seemed a preordained thing, a definite terminus toward which I was hurtling. But the treatment was fearful to contemplate, and I was still eager to avoid it. I knew the myths: ECT would cause brain damage, or at least sap the intellect; it was as much a punishment as a cure; it was the first step to a permanent tenure in the madhouse. All this I knew to be nonsense. Yet I also knew there were ECT patients who'd experienced memory loss—a side effect of depression I'd already suffered and didn't wish to exacerbate. Some patients said the came out of ECT feeling unhappily like someone else. I'd resolved to keep the electricity at bay, as long as I could.

But the drugs weren't working. Love wasn't working. I couldn't live longer like this. When you're that low, any course of action is imaginable.

People love to ask me when I first thought about getting ECT. Was it reading Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* or watching the lurid scenes of shock therapy in Miloš Forman's movie adaptation? Perhaps

I'd encountered the writing of Sylvia Plath when I was too young—or maybe I had a great-uncle who was treated in an asylum?

It wasn't any of those things. The truth is that if you spend enough time seriously depressed, you're fundamentally *aware* of ECT buzzing in the distance. "Well, at least it's not ECT," you say about this ineffectual drug or that ineffectual therapist. Or: "Well, there's always ECT" when that drug or therapy doesn't take. The possibility is always there. You probably don't talk about it much, because it freaks people out. But privately, you know.

In early March 2021, Wynne recorded "improved but partial remission for depression and panic disorder." Sounded promising! Then we tried *removing* Abilify, and my remission proved to have been greatly exaggerated: "patient reports being in agony."

Then Wynne asked if I'd ever tried ketamine.

"I haven't, and I'll try anything."Psychologists hit a wall with certain patients, and a hyperverbal depressive who shows insight but no improvement can suggest two related possibilities: that the patient's disease is a matter of biology, a physical problem as well as a mental one; or that the patient's dysregulated patterns of thought are so ingrained, so wired in, that they've *become* biological.

Any connection or pathway in your brain will become stronger through repetition, less flexible and responsive to nudging or coaching. In chronic depression and anxiety, researchers observe physical responses that essentially escape the realm of talk and begin a series of biological feedback loops. Your neuroreceptors can become hyperreactive, or depressed, and the repetition and sheer numbing weight of all that accrued anxiety and suffering can begin to show in your very genes. After a while, your brain literally shrinks and warps itself around a single gnarl of doom: *I deserve less than nothing*.

I ask my friends about it now, and Riggs recalls being scared by the apparent fruitlessness of my talk therapy. "For most people on the outside, it seemed like once *you* attained insight or awareness that the car was out of control, you'd be able to do what it took to fix it. A lot of the world looks at people with mood disorders and just says, 'Man, if they just knew how this looked to everyone else, there'd be an epiphany.' But you were having

epiphanies all the time and couldn't seem to course-correct. It was very scary from a distance. In 2019, you were vibrating. By 2021, you were rattling. When you came back to D.C., that shit followed you, that's what I remember, the vibration shifting into this sort of panicked energy that you carried all the time."

"You always had this lacerating intelligence," Evan recalls, "and at some point, it began lacerating itself." Now, Wynne suggested, those lacerations had become real wounds.

Wynne wasn't usually bullish on psychoanalysis, but in our last meeting pre-ketamine, he said that my superego had developed a caustic, tyrannical, slashing style; my ego cowered and groveled in response; and only my id was sufficiently vital to prevent a complete capitulation: that is to say, suicide. I happen to think he was correct about the superego. But no matter the framework, the plain fact was that no degree of insight offered reprieve, and with pain, I swallowed the evident truth: Talk wouldn't work until my body could believe that hope wasn't a lie. Until I was pulled out of this perpetual-motion mechanism that produced only misery, my nervous system would greet any impulse as cause for high alarm.

If ketamine could help me find my way back to the light without ECT, then perhaps I could avoid some unnecessary distress. I was scared enough that I dared to hope.

Ketamine is an odd drug. It descends from phencyclidine, a dissociative anesthetic first synthesized in 1926 and developed for a mass market by the pharmaceutical company Parke-Davis three decades later. When tested on various mammals, phencyclidine produced remarkable and sometimes baffling results. As Linda Li and Phillip E. Vlisides wrote in a 2016 article, "Phencyclidine was capable of causing the appearance of drunkenness in rodents, delirium in dogs, cataleptoid states in pigeons and anesthesia in monkeys." Unfortunately, in humans, this otherwise promising anesthetic also caused "emergence delirium," a state of distressed confusion for the patient awakening from anesthesia; some patients also became violent under its influence, and human use was discontinued in the mid-1960s. (Phencyclidine was used as a veterinary anesthetic until the federal government declared it illegal in 1978. But the drug didn't entirely

disappear. You probably know it better as PCP.) Parke-Davis wondered whether the drug might have a shorter-acting cousin. They found it in 1962 when they synthesized ketamine. The FDA approved its use as a general anesthetic for human patients in 1970. Like a lot of anesthetics—cocaine, chloroform, nitrous oxide, and, of course, phencyclidine—ketamine quickly earned recreational admirers, and by the 1980s, Special K had folks dissociating (entering "K-holes") at discos across the U.S. and Europe.

In April, Melanie drove me to a local ketamine therapist, Dr. Stephen Lucas in northern Virginia, who sat me down and gave me the pitch. "The ketamine experiences themselves are therapeutic," Lucas told me, "but the main benefits come after." When administered intravenously at proper intervals, he explained, the drug would increase the release and transmission of glutamate, the neurotransmitting amino acid that delivers messages between neurons and thus plays a central role in both memory and mood. What's more, enhanced glutamate (Lucas assured me) would nudge my brain to produce an abundance of another important neurotransmitter, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which can increase relaxation and decrease anxiety. Together, these processes are supposed to make the brain more flexible, more competent at creating new neural pathways and connections—including between neural regions and networks that normally have nothing to do with one another. "Ketamine has its own language," he said, rather pleased with the phrase.

At high doses, ketamine is even said to deliver the experience of ego death, wherein the bounds between you and not-you become irrelevant. Phenomenologically, you lose the ability to think of an "I"; scientifically, certain drugs, including psychedelics and ketamine, induce an experience of ego death by driving down activity in what's called the default mode network. The default mode network is a consortium of activities across several brain regions that allows you to daydream, edit and access memories, and engage in self-referential thinking. When the network is dialed down (as it were), your mind makes startling connections, then seems to have a mind outside of yours, and then, if all goes well, the very ability to discern a "you" goes out the window. When the philosopher walks into the hamburger joint and says, "Make me one with everything," what he's really requesting is ego death.

I perked up at the explanation of ego death. Lucas was telling me that enough ketamine could remove the hard, sharp edge I'd first felt with the

Batman doll. As a cure, it made a certain cockeyed sense to me: It would shake me out of well-worn, habituated grooves of negative thinking by encouraging my brain to create new grooves. It sounded good, possibly too good. But I was willing to believe. Especially if it could spare me from the electricity.

“The more you surrender yourself to the experience, the more powerful and therapeutic that experience will be,” Lucas told me. He made a lot of eye contact, which I respected; an astonishing number of mental health providers don’t know how to look you in the face. I nodded and continued taking my notes. He explained they’d start me on a forty-five-minute IV drip: 50 milligrams per milliliter of esketamine with a sidecar of magnesium, which in recent years has been found to increase the potency of therapeutic ketamine. Magnesium is a miraculous helpmate at all scales of life. Its alloys, for example, strengthen aluminum, keeping cars and airplanes sturdy. I had the ludicrous thought that if it could help a Boeing 747 take flight, maybe it could help lift me, too.

Lucas and a silent nurse led me into a dimly lit room with a fake-leather recliner. On a side table sat a plaster skull representing the brain areas as charted, dubiously, by Lorenzo Niles Fowler, the nineteenth-century phrenologist and pseudoscientist. The nurse slipped the IV needle into my arm. I’d forgotten headphones, so Lucas supplied a pair. I put on a Ralph Vaughan Williams fantasia. “Close your eyes if it gets too intense,” he said, and they left me to it.

The feeling of a flush, of blood awakening in my veins; a swell in my heart of the kind that often precedes euphoria. Then the sense of a light being turned on, the room suddenly, marvelously full of people and animals whom I did not see so much as intuit, as my eyes were closed. I opened them and began to scribble in my notebook. Today the handwriting looks palsied, frantic: “My lips are dry, motor function slightly compromised . . . TELL KATHLEEN [a colleague and confidante] . . . Am able to feel and note anxiety symptoms from without. Funny sensation whenever I move my head . . . Now I am somehow in my childhood bedroom.”

And I was. For the second half of that first trip, I lay on my childhood bed, transfixed. The strings swelled in my borrowed earphones. I kept writing. “There is a life in which I am a hopeless case, hanging on a psychiatrist’s next pronouncement, a wreck. I know this is my life. It also feels very distant, just now. Who is that sad boy, so sick of life? I know him

well. But is he me?. . . . OK tripping pretty hard to Ralph Vaughan Williams. It's like mushrooms combined with jet lag." The violas and cellos were now vying with the violins, now advancing, now retreating. As these sensations peaked, I heard myself utter a gasp. For a fraction of a second, I'd glimpsed life a year from now, two years from now, then more, myself as a husband, a father, finally a gray-haired retiree, at all stages a healthy and wholesome constituent of the physical world. I didn't know the last time I'd enjoyed such a glimpse, however fleeting; nor the sense, however contingent, that I might recover.

The machine gave a final series of beeps, and the drip turned off. The nurse arrived to unhook me, and shortly afterward Lucas came in. I was told not to stand for a couple of minutes. Fine by me. I was not yet un-dissociated.

"Tell me how it was." Lucas spoke gently, as during the exchange of peace in a Christian liturgy. I told him I was impressed. He asked whether I'd experienced ego death.

If we follow Freud's notion of the ego—it perceives the outer world and our place in that world—then the answer was no; I'd been aware, for example, of the room, the phrenology bust, the fact that Melanie was waiting outside to ferry me safely home, the much more painful fact that she was hurting because of me. I shook my head. "My ego stayed . . . intact. But I was able to observe it from, like, a partial remove."

Lucas nodded vigorously and smiled. "That's a start."

I agreed to come back in two days. Melanie squeezed my hand on the way out the door. For the moment, to ketamine's credit, I was able to conceive of those two days not as an eternity to be suffered but as a pause to be borne. I was still a wreck, but as I left Lucas's office, time was returned to its proper proportion—it wasn't an automatic cause for dread, for the remainder of that day, at least. As a further boost, Lucas sent me home with a prescription for esketamine, a potent nasal spray that had recently been approved by the Food and Drug Administration as a treatment for major depression.

Taking a hit at home offered a thirty-minute release from the capacity to fret. It also zonked me; Mel joked that after an infusion or even a nasal spray, I tended to walk "with all the grace of a baby giraffe."

For my next ketamine trip, Lucas put his foot on the gas. We went up to 60 milligrams of esketamine per milliliter, with a corresponding rise in

magnesium. Lucia drove me this time, and the nurse hooked me up to the machine for another session of what I was privately calling “dialysis for the broken spirit.”

The flush began again. “Let’s try drawing,” I wrote in my trip journal. I sketched two silhouettes fixing each other with intense stares over the word LIFE in bubble letters. The left-hand figure emitted a speech bubble, asking simply, “Why not?” Below these two figures, I drew a coarse version of a Mandelbrot fractal, though my attempts at re-creating the paisley eyes along the border of each spheroid ended in gnarly scribbles. Five minutes later: “I feel like a robot.” Then: “Why the fuck does my doctor have a phrenology bust in this room?” Then: “My ego has yet to dissolve; I just tried to push my anxiety and pain away with my hands, like a pile of poker chips.” Finally, a partial dissolution of ego; at least that was what it felt like. The thing with ego death is that, well, you aren’t exactly around to verify that it happened. What I can say is that I devolved into an ape. “I am following a monkey in a forest—a bonobo? Now I’m on the cover of *Nat Geo*, a scowling gorilla.” And a few minutes later: “So many hugs, all my fellow primates are embracing me, and I them . . . ”

At some point, I was returned to my human form. I can’t say how long I was a primate. Still, my time in this psychedelic jungle had landed me in a moment of ludicrous optimism, and I made my final note for the trip: “Most things in life are unimaginable until they happen. I might still need ECT—AND THAT’S OK!”

At the end of this second ketamine session, the nurse unhooked me from the drip and gave me a few minutes to come down from the drug. Then Lucas led me from the dimly lit room into his office and sat me down and asked for a trip report. I told him, my voice at its most halting, that for the first time I was thinking about ECT without fear.

“Give the ketamine some time,” Lucas said. “I’ve seen what these treatments can do for major depressives. Ketamine is far less invasive, less destructive, than ECT.”

I agreed to continue with ketamine over the next two weeks. Lucas continued raising the doses: up to 100 milligrams of esketamine per milliliter, with 600 milligrams of magnesium. Then 230. Up, up, and away.

Lucia awaited me in the car after the fourth ketamine treatment. She preferred the car to the waiting room, which had freaked her out with its mantra posters and bad music.

"How was it?"

"Well," I said with an air of having ticked off a required box, "I'm definitely not gay."

Lucia let out a monosyllabic laugh and looked at me sidewise. "And is this supposed to be some sort of surprise?"

"No, it's a cliché I had to interrogate . . . Doctors sometimes say that major depression represents an internal struggle, and being closeted is like the OG inner struggle . . . Seemed worth checking out."

"And how exactly does one go about checking that out?"

"You just . . . imagine you're married to a dude, and you see how that feels."

"And?"

"Nice guy, American, David or something like that. He liked my cooking. Accused me of not really being gay."

"Were you—*intimate*?"

"We didn't have sex. I wanted to see what the other stuff was like, you know, if I liked sitting on a couch and being held by him."

"By David."

"Or whatever his name was."

"No dice?"

I shook my head. "Alas." Lucia giggled. I could see that our ludicrous exchange wasn't exactly deepening Lucia's faith in the ketamine. For my part, I was a little less moved by the apparent comedy of my imaginative exercise.

"I guess it's funny," I said after a minute, "that I wish it were as simple as that."

Lucas had told me that using the ketamine nasal spray at home would help "to unplug and restart things." With three sprays, I dissolved a bit, and my heart slowed in a pleasant way.

During the home ketamine treatments, I often rolled words around my mouth at random ("finches . . . fluorescence") based on pure sound, or a

particular sensation of tongue on teeth—how odd that the two could touch, that they happened to inhabit the same geometry—and this morning the word was “ecstasy.” The opening cluster of consonants, so sharp, so crisp, so snapping. *Everything* was a consonant, all matter, anyway, and vowels were the shape we gave to the vacuum. What had I asked myself during that first ketamine infusion? *How do two people become one?* The answer came back: *The same way a V becomes a W*. Words, words, words. It was all awfully cheap, I reflected, staring slack-jawed at the bedroom ceiling and unanxious for the first moment that day; I was so trivial as a consciousness, nothing real, just words and letters and gnomic graspings. My inner prosecutor chimed in: *Mel is on the other side of the door thinking, constantly, of you and your health and survival . . . and all you can do is play word games.* In response, I whispered that one word, “ecstasy” and I hated myself for thinking it because all this focus on *words* was the enemy of ecstasy, of the ability to stand outside oneself.

For several mornings following a ketamine treatment, I would log a reprieve from the more paralytic elements of my depression. But these improvements were always fleeting. The morning after my first treatment: “Eating breakfast, resentfully. Watching the cat amuse herself on the carpet with string feels like a rebuke to the anhedonia that seems to mark even my better days.” The morning after my highest dose: “Make sure to ask Lucas: why am I not getting lasting insights from these trips? How many more infusions until I feel meaningfully better? The friends have started a group chat to share news, divide helping duties, etc. These poor bastards, even more helpless against this thing than I am.”

Of the ketamine period, Riggs recalls: “Things seemed to be going okay. And then you called me when I was in Philly. You could not stop crying. You were still talking, and I could understand everything you were saying, but you were crying the entire conversation. And I was like, *What the fuck is going on?* You were really scared, and thought maybe you needed to go to inpatient psychiatric care. I’d never heard you talk that way before. You were a few weeks into ketamine therapy. And I remember I’d had so much hope for that . . . ”

Ketamine allowed me, for little pockets of time, to unfurl possible futures before myself in a period when thinking about the next hour brought restive terror and a deadening gloom. But then I kept seeing those futures fade, and I knew that tripping my ass off on ketamine wasn't a sustainable routine for the remaining decades (more a word than a concept to me then) of my life. There was only the broken present, terrible and irrevocable. Each failed treatment seemed only to confirm my sentence.

Ted's diary, April 2021:

> *Weeping in my parked car outside the Tregaron Conservancy, listening to "Rikki Don't Lose That Number." Do I need to take time off work like now? Aaron and Lucia and Noah and Roser and the babies are all outside playing in the gardens. My cold heart is not touched even by babies and dogs. I'm surrounded by loving friends and feel very distanced from them all. Broke into tears when Aaron asked me if the benefits of the K treatments had lasted until today. Poor, sweet man.*
>
> *Now it's evening and I'm back at Mel's and my chest is splitting in half as I think about what I'm putting her through. Even the movies and shows we watch, christ just the last week:* In a Lonely Place, Ava, 8½, The Prisoner, Escape from Alcatraz, Shutter Island, Delirium . . . *All with a protagonist having a breakdown, being imprisoned, and/or having a breakdown while in prison. My madness is bleeding into everything. She doesn't need this.*

There were moments when it felt supremely urgent to kill something within myself so I could be the person required by a full relationship with Mel: babies, easy smiles, the whole deal. That urgency tipped over, around late April, into a quiet desire to annihilate all of me.

Aaron saw how bad it was when he came to visit me at Melanie's after my last ketamine infusion. Aaron looked straight-up horrified when he saw me. My face, he said, looked gaunt, discordant with the uncharacteristic flab when I lifted my shirt to wipe my nose on it; and I wore an expression

of great pain or worry, as though observing a massacre from afar—too far to do anything about it.

My heart cracked for Aaron. We'd looked after each other since we were eighteen, loved and fought as brothers, faltered into adulthood while sharing houses and apartments. When he experienced his first and only panic attack, I was his call. Never had I seen him as helpless as he looked in Melanie's doorway, eyes on the ground because to look at me was to see a man he didn't recognize, a dead man in the final stage before absolute catatonia, reduced to the hollowest of creatures, all gaping and tongueless need.

It shouldn't have surprised me when Aaron told me our good friends Jamey and Mariana had just gotten engaged, and I wondered whether this was news or whether I'd already been told and forgotten. In the haze of my depression, I could feel my memory slipping away again. Just a few weeks earlier, Dad had come to town on business for a day and convinced me to meet him at a restaurant. But I'd forgotten that now. By the end of April 2021, my memory had all the structural integrity of a wet tissue. And my ability to deceive my friends that I might be all right vanished completely.

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Chapter 17

Observation

The week before I went to the psych ward, I spent a lot of time apologizing to Sophie the cat, sometimes silently, sometimes in a quiet, thick mumble. She's always been protective of me. One time in California, back during the 2017 fires and evacuations, we were staying out of town with a girlfriend when I stubbed my toe in the bathroom and started cursing. As the girlfriend tells it, Sophie began yowling and hurling herself against the door, presumably to protect me—to defend my honor.

Now, I convinced myself, Soph was fretting about me to the point of becoming sick herself, on the bad-vibes principle of infection. Even though I hardly brushed her anymore, she still came to my lap, no matter how sick I was. She was touchingly unconcerned with contagion. I reflected on my selfishness in adopting her, how I'd yoked her to me first as a measure against suicide. *You deserve better than that, better than me*. As I stroked her inquisitive face with its grand muttonchops, I shrank before those searching eyes, and it was easy to weep and natural to apologize. *You deserve someone more fun,* I admitted to Soph. And she did. We all did. It was stuff I couldn't say to Melanie or Riggs or Jane or Lucia. I wasn't ready to kill myself and felt perverse embarrassment about that, as well as an obligation to apologize more and more for my continued existence.

I wondered whether it would've been better to hear voices, to accept or embrace unreality. The pain of observing your own madness is acute: If you squint, you can see through the lie of the disease, but you can't stop it. My paranoias coexisted with the fruitless knowledge that they *were* paranoias. Mel tried everything she could to ease my burden, and I tried to believe there were happier times to come. But I'd fallen so low that any notion of a

future seemed an optimistic fiction. In a Zoom session, I told Wynne, “We might as well start getting on with ECT.”

“Is that what you want?”

I dodged the question. “What else is there?”

And so the die was cast.

Even before my final, obscenely high dose of ketamine, ECT had gone from being the obvious last resort to the obvious next resort. No longer was I terrified of shock therapy. Now I shuddered at something else: the possibility that this last resort would prove fruitless. Meanwhile, I’d be more of a burden than ever. My friends would have to do a lot of driving, and at deeply uncivilized hours. The first round of ECT would require at least two weeks of Monday-Wednesday-Friday treatments, all beginning before six-thirty in the morning.

That was the plan. But a few days before I made my first acquaintance with those fateful electrodes, I found myself unable to eat, walk, or even move from my bed for more than minutes at a time. My sickness, whatever else it might be, was now thoroughly physical. So Mel and I found a psychiatric ward at a hospital that accepted my insurance, and I applied for admittance. My friends were off driving duty for now; as long as I stayed in the ward, I could receive my shocks as an inpatient.

I’d abased myself in every conceivable way, seeking relief. I was willing to give up a lot. My libido, thanks to the castratingly high doses of antidepressants and anxiolytics, was more a relic than a going concern; my emotional debts to friends were unpayable; I’d even, during the ketamine trips, offered up my sexuality: *Change my identity however you will, if only it stops hurting*. Now we’d reached The Treatment, the big one, the one you see in movies and, crucially, the one after which lies only a question mark. After you’ve deployed ECT, there isn’t a bigger gun.

The first fear with ECT was that it wouldn’t work. The second was how excruciating I imagined the treatment to be. But perhaps the most destabilizing fear was the potential for losing more memory. Sustained treatment, especially of the most aggressive electroshock, can often prevent the consolidation of short-term memory into long-term and, in some cases, can complicate memory going back months or more. (In the Bad Old Days, those who received unmodified ECT—i.e., without anesthesia and paralytics—found their memories hit even harder.)

I knew that, accepted it—at least in principle. I would try to barter my way toward some kind of future by trading my memories. It seemed a reasonable exchange at the time.

> *Assessment: Patient is alert and oriented to person, place, and time. No motor weakness, gait normal. Patient reports that for the past four months his depression and anxiety has [*sic*] been getting worse. He had started wishing he did not exist. Patient reports that he has had several medication trials including ketamine infusions but all has [*sic*] failed. His psychiatrist recommended an inpatient hospitalization for ECT evaluation. Patient denies SI [suicidal ideation] but continues to endorse PDW [passive death wish].*
>
> —patient intake evaluation, 5/9/21

The social worker who did my intake at a hospital in an upscale neighborhood of Washington, D.C., was cautiously upbeat. She knew that too much pep could cause a depressive to shut down; that some of us had been in the dark so long, the light hurt our eyes.

I was checking myself into the hospital for two reasons, neither having to do with suicide. For one, I hoped the medical supervision might prove helpful to my recovery (it wouldn't); and, more important, the psych ward was right across the hall from the room where, three times a week, they'd start zapping me to prompt seizures meant to bring me back from hell.

There was a well of tears just behind my eyes. I didn't cry, though; my body, perhaps, had decided to hold its weeping in reserve for whatever the night might bring.

"Would this be your first stay in a therapeutic ward?" the social worker asked.

I nodded. There'd been some confusion over my prescriptions, they said, and I would need to explain my circumstances to a few more nurses, caseworkers, and other functionaries before being admitted to the ward. I managed to croak out that I would very much like some of my ketamine. "Or esketamine. It's a nasal spray, some people call it Spravato—it helps to have it at intervals . . . " The social worker made no promises, but in less than ninety minutes, a nurse entered bearing that beautiful brown glass

bottle. I wouldn’t know until the next day how extraordinary this was: to request something in the psych ward and receive it. For the remainder of my stay, even obtaining the occasional square of nicotine gum would prove a daily struggle.

The nurse was exceptionally tall, perhaps six feet three. She asked my usual esketamine dosage, and to be on the safe side, I doubled it: up to sixteen sprays as needed. She handed me the bottle, and I got to it. The spray danced in my sinuses; a warm halo settled around my temples; suddenly, the nurse was the Statue of Liberty, and her green scrubs made the effect remarkably complete. For around fifteen minutes, I dwelled in this reprieve, this hypo-dissociative holiday.

Finally, a bit after five p.m., they said I could enter the ward. Protocol dictated that I do so in a wheelchair, so a tiny Trinidadian nurse ended up pushing me down the hall and into the elevator and, finally, through the double-locked and reinforced door into a place I learned to call The Unit.

Melanie and I had packed my go-bag last night. Since I didn’t know how long I’d be here and smartphone access was tightly controlled, I’d brought my journal, into which I’d jotted the phone numbers of fourteen good friends, plus contact details for various psychiatrists. I also had with me a couple of novels, though I’d end up getting through only half of an Inspector Morse mystery during my stay. I’d packed a pair of sweatpants from which I’d removed the drawstring—a suicide prevention measure—and was currently shuffling about in shoes from which I’d removed the laces for the same reason.

Packing for this medical sojourn sparked memories of the visits I’d paid my friend Daisy in a different psych ward, back when she’d sought inpatient help. I remembered the copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* I’d loaned her, and the notes she’d scrawled in crayon across its pages. The hospital staff hadn’t trusted her with a pencil. So I’d packed a handful of soft-tipped pens.

They’d given me my own room with a little window, a remarkable stroke of luck. The tiny Trinidadian nurse referred to a clipboard and told me I’d have to undergo some testing before they could begin giving me ECT: an electrocardiogram, plus a couple of intake interviews with doctors. So it might be a couple of days, she said, before I’d get my first electro-session. “God bless,” she whispered as she departed, wheeling before her the empty chair.

A few hours later in the common area, an open room with a dining space on one side and a TV lounge-slash-library on the other, I began to meet the rest of the clientele at an impromptu gathering, joining a circle of misfits on the floor in front of the TV. Serena, the biggest personality, was twitchily shuffling a deck of cards while directing the conversation like a no-nonsense traffic cop. She was the sort of soul who gets called either very old or very young, and as the in-house extrovert, she roped me into the group's conversation:

"So did you also try and fail to kill yourself, like us?" She motioned to an eighteen-year-old girl sitting to her left, who smiled bashfully.

The question was so direct I laughed, a rarity for me these days, and gave a slow shake of my head. "It sounds like I'm the coward of the group. I've never made the attempt."

"Good," Serena said with some finality. I was already warming to her.

Serena was an early-thirties doper who'd checked herself into the ward the day before. Two nights before, her stepdad had stolen her supply of fentanyl and promptly killed himself with an overdose. "Most people don't know how to do fent," she told me evenly. "I warned him the stuff in my bag was pure. And then I went to bed." When she discovered the body, she decided to join him—but her mother intervened and managed to get the needle away from her.

When she first arrived at the hospital, Serena said, she shot up in a bathroom before they took away her kit. Ever since, she'd been begging the orderlies for benzodiazepines—"the only way I can stay off heroin"—but the doctors didn't trust her with benzos, so instead she was on massive doses of gabapentin, which was as close as they'd let her to either Valium or methadone. A couple of her friends on the outside were looking into rehabs for Serena. In the meantime, she acted as a sort of master of ceremonies among this circle of sufferers, spinning stories of old road trips and spells in jail and weird exes to keep everyone distracted, herself very much included. She gave everyone nicknames; mine was "the Professor." She proposed we play a variation on slapjack that she and a boyfriend learned the last time they were in jail, and before everyone assented, she was already doling out the cards.

To my left was Jon, in his mid-thirties like me, committed by his family after his second suicide attempt; next to him was Molly, in her mid-twenties, who lost her daughter to Covid right before the vaccines appeared

and eventually opened her wrists with a razor blade. Next to Molly was Serena, then Amara, a young woman serving in the military who was five weeks pregnant; her friend had brought her in the day before after she found Amara trying to induce an abortion on her kitchen floor with a knife. There was Janet, around sixty, with a signature gait like I've never seen: in slow motion but with the exaggerated gestures of a power walker. (Janet asked why I was getting an echocardiogram the next day. I told her it was for ECT, and she said, "Good for you.") There was Catherine, recently graduated from an Ivy League college and experiencing catatonia and suicidal ideation; she'd come here because she'd stopped eating in what she called a passive suicide attempt. Then there were Rosalie, a young trans woman who emigrated from Colombia at age twelve, and a waifish twenty-two-year-old who was blind in her right eye whose name I did not record. A few of the older patients talked soupily. I couldn't tell how much of that was a side effect of medications or whether it was simply illness.

In my journal, I wrote rather dramatically of my fellow patients and myself: "Who will remind us that we're still human?"

Mel and Lucia and the rest of the gang tried to remind me, but they were rarely allowed to visit, so mainly, they delivered photos in little envelopes. The photos, Melanie said, would help me remember me who I was, that I'd known joy, that I had innumerable reasons to live again. My room in the hospital steadily came alive with friendly faces. Photos of my sister and me as kids, photos of her four-month-old, Theo, looking happily drunk, photos of Brian and me in California and South Dakota from the American Backyard trip and also in France from a college singing tour, smiling wide. There was a print of the caricatures that *The Yale Herald* had done of Brian and me, depicted on the road in South Dakota. A couple of glamorous shots of Mel and some candids of us together. Two photos of Sophie the cat, sunbathing. Sophie herself was with Mel. I hoped they would both enjoy this break from me.

We got phone privileges twice a day, and when Mom called on the second day, she was determinedly chipper. "Dare I ask about the food?"

"You know, the usual slop. Sometimes we get a decent brownie."

"And for mains?"

"Last night was Salisbury steak."

"Salisbury *steak*?" Mom responded with mock horror, pronouncing the phrase like Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell. I laughed. She asked about my

fellow patients, and I gave her some quick character sketches, though I wasn't able to muster much wit. Mom said that St. Thomas', our church in Hamilton, was including me in its prayers for the month. I imagined Mom's friends the Bracketts, both over ninety by now, eyes closed, shaking their heads a bit at how sorry I'd become. I saw Nancy Heck, who used to make us applesauce every autumn, and Dianne, who'd written the music for *A Christmas Carol* and coached me through the role of Tiny Tim, and my various other mentors and babysitters from the parish, all beseeching God to spare me and my poor family further misery. On the phone, I asked Mom: "Do you think I was always gonna end up here?"

"Well, *no*, obviously," Mom said, adding a harrumph. "Why, did *you*?"

"Yes and no," I almost whispered. The old terror of poverty, homelessness, permanent exile. "I thought age would mellow all this stuff."

Mom laughed. "Sweetheart, that's not exactly how age works. Are you writing?"

"In my journal, constantly. Not always complete sentences."

"Think about all the great material you must be collecting," Mom said airily. "You don't think you'll write about this one day?" The poor woman—she was trying to be optimistic the only way she knew how.

It's a common superstition, that we can redeem or reinvent our suffering in the telling. In the ward, this idea seemed the most alien thing in the world. How could I explain it to Mom? There was no *one day* when I'd be well, no abatement expected or even hoped for; the future held no life in my imagination; there was only the eternally compromised now, this shuffling, frantic, antiseptic life—or death. The future belonged to other people, and I saw no reason why I should distress them with the knowledge of my story. Hell, I no longer *had* a story, just a case history.

But I didn't say that to Mom. I just promised her that I'd keep taking notes. I asked about her hip and knee, which had been acting up. I cracked a joke or two but was finding it increasingly hard to hold back tears. It was Mom's voice that was doing it. The same voice that had sung me "Moon River," had read me *The Wind in the Willows*, and earlier—long before memory and loneliness—had whispered peace to me when I was colicky. My heart broke for her. I loathed myself from a new angle.

Dad called later that day, and I bothered less to reassure him because he needed it less. He made a half-hearted offer to come down and stay for a

few days. He was remarkably quick to accept my waving away of the idea. “I’m well taken care of, Pops, there’d be nothing for you to do.”

“Well, okay, let me know if you change your mind. You sound good.” (There was no way that I sounded good.)

I told each of my parents I didn’t want them to visit. After a day in the psych ward, I saw with horror that I was lying. I wanted to see them desperately. Otherwise—and I fought against the thought, but there it was—if the worst were to happen, perhaps I’d never see either again.

Ted’s diary 5/11/2021:

> *I didn’t know what to say on the phone when Wynne called, so I asked him, again, if I might be bipolar. He said not really. He calls it “anxious depression with certain bipolar characteristics.” Doesn’t that sound so genteel? Like a sommelier annotating a menu of mental disorders. He’s probably right. But also at the moment I’m not quite sure what a diagnosis is worth anymore. It’s hard to have faith in words just now.*

Later that day:

> *The food here is dreadful, my doctors can’t seem to agree on anything, and the only Austen on the shelf is* Mansfield Park.

The dreams I had in the psych ward were the most vivid I’ve known. Some of my fellow residents said the same; others said they’d stopped dreaming altogether. It was the same way with food: Half of us couldn’t eat, and the other half couldn’t stop. “One pill makes you larger / And one pill makes you small.” Truly. So much depended on what kind of drugs they gave you or took from you. As my SSRI adapted to its newest helpmate, lithium, for my belated diagnosis of “agitated depression with bipolar characteristics,” my dream life became far realer than the gray days on the ward. Some nights were in four dimensions. All nights were in Technicolor,

as though dreams had absorbed all the color that the sickness had leached from waking life.

The chronic theme of these dreams was that there was always a catch. Melanie had married again, but the man turned out to be in the Mafia. A friend with cancer was in remission, but his ears had fallen off. Lucia was driving me home from the ketamine office, except the doctors had given up on ketamine and were infusing me with heroin. (“They say it’s the natural next step,” Lucia said on the phone to someone.) Jane materialized holding Theo and reassured me that the little guy would “never end up like you” as long as I didn’t infect him. I promised not to.

One night I dreamed I was Funes the Memorious, the character in Borges who was doomed to remember everything, and I just kept saying, “I’m not myself, I’m not myself.”

If you hadn’t slept well the night before, you could fall asleep on one of the couches by the bookshelves; as long as you didn’t snore or talk in your sleep, the staff wouldn’t bother you. On the third afternoon, I started to doze there, closing my eyes against the afternoon sunlight, and spent the next twenty minutes in a waking dream; some trick of the nice-but-sleepy new tricyclic antidepressant the doctors had added to my cocktail. I thought of Dr. Keith . . . once I closed my eyelids, there he was, smiling and informing me patiently that I was seeking to repair my parents’ marriage by forcing things with Mel. (Duh.) Imaginary judges, like the one I’d dreamed of in Rome, began castigating me. I don’t think I knew until that afternoon how deeply I’d come to hate myself. Perhaps I was merely reliving a moment from one of the ketamine treatments. I slipped into deeper sleep, and my surrogates went silent.

A nurse shook me, and I stirred from the corner of the couch where I’d been slumped. My glasses were crooked, my cheeks drying under the tears, and I had the strange conviction that my face was very thirsty.

“Was I talking in my sleep?”

The nurse shook her head and offered me a Kleenex. When I took it, my hand was red. From the other couch, Catherine looked at me uneasily. I realized the bright color was from a crayon I’d broken in the pocket of my sweatshirt. What on earth was I saving that for? A letter for Melanie explaining everything, telling her to let me go. The nurse tapped her watch and said, “Dinner,” and we shambled over to the tables with false wood grain.

Jon sat across from me, pulling at his T-shirt in a nervous way, sizing me up, preparing to ask a question. “You gonna eat that?”

My strip of fried fish looked as tough as leather. The square bread bun next to it was a miniature pillow, mocking me.

“All yours,” I said, and Jon forked the cartilaginous mass and took it down in one mouthful. One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small.

A fun thing about psych wards is that they write report cards every day, and if you survive and ask for those reports, the hospital is obligated to send them to you. On my intake day, I got some high marks:

> *Patient report 5/9/2021—date of admission:*
> *Per Nurses Notes: Patient has been visible in milieu. Attended groups and socialized with peers. Accepted scheduled medications. Patient Strengths: Ability to pay continuous attention, Ability to initiate speech, Ability to ambulate, Ability to remember and recall information and Ability to successfully interact with others.*

I was, you will grant, a hell of a specimen. Initiating speech *and* ambulating? Look at Mr. Overachiever. Though I wasn’t entirely without blemish:

> *. . . mildly anxious in mood, with a constricted affect . . .*

Nonetheless, I was deemed unthreatening:

> *. . . denied any SI/HI/AVH; no signs of distress noted; ambulated safely in the milieu and was noted interacting with his peers*.

Tucked into this reassuring report are three acronyms. “SI” stands for suicidal ideation; “HI” for homicidal ideation; “AVH” for auditory or visual hallucinations.

The other fun thing about these report cards is they include a lot of detail about your sleep, because orderlies checked on each patient every fifteen minutes to make sure they weren’t hurting themselves.

5/11/2021

Edward still expressed concerns about the need for more sleep medication and was encouraged to try taking his Klonopin .5 mg PO PRN [medical jargon meaning "as needed"] a while after he had taken his scheduled medication [i.e., right before bedtime]. He verbalized understanding and he was cooperative with the plan, with good affect.

He is calm and sleeping at this time. Q 15 mins safety checks in progress.

On some days after breakfast, residents of the ward were obliged to attend a community meeting where we were invited to offer ideas for improving the ward. The whole thing felt as innocent and impotent as a student council.

One day a social worker asked us, "What can we do to help you? What do you need?"

Fraught silence. Then: "Cigarettes," Jon said to laughs from the other patients. "Real food," said Amara, and the rest of us murmured in agreement. "Real therapy," I offered drily. Amara whispered a theatrical "yes," and Janet, the ward's most senior citizen, fixed me with a look that said, *Don't hold your breath.* Catherine agreed, adding almost apologetically: "I was in here twelve hours before I even saw a doctor." The nurses made notes as the patients slowly heaved out these requests. But it was all theater. Jon never got his cigarettes, and I never got my therapy.

The group sessions at eleven-thirty were a little tougher. Many folks, including Amara and Molly and Rosalie, didn't like to talk in front of people. When one of the social workers asked Amara about her pregnancy, Amara started crying and didn't speak for the rest of the day. Serena was happy to fill the space left by her shier comrades and would offer wordplay commentary on her own stories—"Shooting yourself with a needle, shooting yourself with a gun, same outcome."

Janet smiled when a social worker asked her to share. She clutched her hands together tightly but shakily and responded in Parkinsonian slow

motion. “I . . . don’t . . . mind . . . talking,” she said with that tremulous smile. “But I can’t always remember my next thought.”

“That’s okay, we’ll focus on one thought at a time.”

“Thank you,” Janet said, and went silent. She had nothing more to say. She unclutched her hands and looked around the circle with bashfulness at her performance. This was a habit of Janet’s: She’d start a thought and then deem the thought complete long before anyone else did. It seemed to be a peculiarity of her condition and medications.

But the social worker didn’t know any of that and found Janet baffling. I couldn’t restrain a helpless laugh. Janet’s contribution had been excellent, I thought. She deserved a medal simply for opening her mouth.

Amara was still crying, wiping her nose on her sweatshirt. The half-blind youngster was staring at the ceiling, directing a quiet whistle upward. Catherine piped up to ask whether “individualized therapy” might be available. The social worker thanked her for the question and said she’d look into it.

“The art classes can get pretty boring,” Amara said, sniffling a bit. “It makes you feel like a kid.”

“And what’s wrong with feeling like a kid?” the social worker asked brightly.

“It’s fucking insulting,” Serena said in a stage whisper, which the social worker pretended not to notice.

I remember keeping my eyes down most of the time. When I raised them to peer at the others, I hated myself for how lucky I was. Most of them didn’t have a life bristling with friends or cushioned by overeducation. I’d squandered all that privilege by making myself sick. “Ingratitude will kill you,” I wrote in my diary, but the knowledge felt cold.

That afternoon, Serena started giving Amara advice. Serena was getting visions, she said: “You should keep the baby.” In one of the visions, Serena had seen Amara’s future child and said she foresaw the child would be strong and happy. Amara listened, very still, saying almost nothing.

“I wish she wouldn’t talk like that,” Catherine said of Serena in a whisper.

5/12/2021:

Remains anxious at times but manageable without PRN medication. Anticipates starting course of ECT tomorrow morning pending final evaluation (cleared by cardiology today). Compliant with scheduled medications and cooperative with care. Edward was visible in the milieu and very interactive with his peers; pleasant upon approach . . .

This was all basically true. With everyone, I was polite to the point of ludicrous gentility. “The Professor,” as Serena called me, was always on his best behavior, even when he wanted to die. Maintaining appearances in a psych ward might sound itself like the height of madness. But we all wanted some measure of dignity, and none of us was keen to appear any more insane than we had to. Depending on the time of day, and how much mirtazapine they’d given me, I could even achieve chattiness. That’s how Amara and I became friends.

The idea of the banality of evil has passed through truth to become a cliché. A cousin to this notion, I think, is the triviality of madness—how dramatic cases can arise from apparently inconsequential events, and the very triviality of a given trigger can feel like an extra insult. Take the grocery-store thing.

Amara told me she understood the grocery-store thing. When you walk into a Safeway, for example, the impossibility of everything slaps you across the face. Buying a whole box of cereal? It’s as aspirational as summiting Mount Everest in a bathrobe. How could you be expected to get through it all? How could you know you’d be around long enough to put a dent in it? Even purchasing a clutch of bananas was the height of optimism.

“It’s the bulk aisle that sends me,” Amara said. “You see those huge, huge pallets of Froot Loops?”

“So many. Enough to fill a swimming pool.”

We spent the next few minutes in this way.

“Enough to feed an army.”

“Enough to blot out the sun.”

Enough, enough, enough.

I put on an old prospector's voice: "Why, there's an ocean of Froot Loops just a-settin' under our feet!"

Serena, it seemed to me, was shooting us impatient glares; then I saw she was staring daggers at everyone and everything. She was in a muttering spell. Later, Catherine told me Serena had been cursing: "Fuck this place."

Going inpatient will be easier on my friends, I'd thought. Clearly not.

Lucia kept coming to the hospital, even though visitors weren't allowed to see patients in person—a Covid precaution. Lucia brought flowers from the garden that she and Alex kept in Petworth, plus a tiny stuffed cat and a homemade card on pink and purple construction paper.

> *I hope the nurses will forgive my second visit, to deliver these poppies and dahlia from the garden . . . There is no one like you, and I consider it one of the great blessings of my life to know you on this earth . . . Please never tell Soph I sent you another cat to cuddle while you're at the hospital. I won't pretend to know the place you're in right now, but I am absolutely confident we will find a treatment that works for you. If not this, something else. I say this based on my deep knowledge of you, myself, the universe and what human beings are capable of. You are loved by so many people including me . . .*

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Chapter 18

Live Wire

When the Romanian-born psychiatrist Constance Pascal began using the term “shock” (*choc*) in her psychiatric clinic in France, around 1926, she was referring to physical treatments meant to surprise or disturb the body and brain, restoring the mind to equilibrium. Pascal considered mental illnesses to be a kind of allergic reaction, and she argued that resetting the brain and nervous system would be necessary for recovery. Pascal’s first shock therapies, in the late 1920s, used various means to shock a patient, including induced fevers. Around the same time, in 1927 Berlin, the neurophysiologist Manfred Sakel was developing a new form of shock treatment in which a patient received potent injections of insulin. At proper doses, Sakel found he could induce a grand mal seizure as the patient came out of a hypoglycemic coma. Insulin coma therapy produced astonishingly positive results for mood disorders—sometimes. Generally, results were markedly uneven.

Ladislas Meduna, the Hungarian neuropathologist, shared Pascal’s interest in the possibilities of shock therapies and came to focus on seizures. In autopsies of epileptics, Meduna observed that the brains showed “tremendous changes” that were “just the opposite of those found in schizophrenia” (then a broad term that could encompass depression, schizoaffective disorders, and much more). In particular, Meduna noted that the glia—supportive cells sometimes called the janitors of the brain, whose duties include tending to the well-being of our neurons—were overproduced in the brain tissue of epileptics and vastly underrepresented in the cranial autopsies of patients with advanced mood disorders. Pursuing this apparent antagonism between seizures and psychosis, Meduna introduced a new shock therapy in late 1934, injecting a catatonic patient

with camphor, the same compound then used in mothballs. Three weeks and five camphor-assisted seizures later, the patient was moving and talking—two things he hadn't done in four years. Meduna repeated this apparent success with four subsequent patients, sometimes replacing camphor with the synthetic compound pentylenetetrazol, branded as Metrazol or Cardiazol, which achieved a similar convulsion but faster. It was also safer than insulin comas, which carried a real risk of death.

Still, Metrazol had severe drawbacks. One of the biggest was that the chemical seemed to induce feelings of absolute terror in patients before they finally fell into the coma. Meanwhile, over in Italy, they were beginning to practice a new form of shocking the system, one that worked faster and more effectively than insulin or Metrazol—even if no one quite knew *how* it worked in the first place.

At the Clinic for Nervous and Mental Disorders in Rome, a little after eleven a.m. on April 11, 1938, Italian neurologist Ugo Cerletti placed a pair of electrodes on the temples of a man identified as "Enrico X." Cerletti and his colleague, Lucio Bini, used a rubber band to hold the electrodes in place and electrocuted Enrico over a period of months, around eleven times. By the end of his electro-treatments, Signore X, the first ECT patient in history, was apparently recovered. The next month, in a presentation at the Royal Academy of Medicine in Rome, Cerletti and Bini administered an electro-treatment to a patient before an audience. In 1939, Cerletti and Bini coined a verb for what they'd invented: *zapare*, literally meaning "to zap."

Even from the start, Cerletti was uneasy about the awesome power he commanded with those two electrodes. "When subjecting unconscious patients to such an extremely violent reaction as these convulsions, I had a sense of illicitness and felt as though I had somehow betrayed these patients," he recalled later. Though Cerletti didn't dwell on it, there was also the small matter of Enrico X's relapse. He ended up readmitted to a psychiatric institution two years later.

In a few of the books Wynne had recommended, I read how insulin, Metrazol, and ECT jockeyed for primacy during a period of remarkable change in neuropsychiatry, when physical treatments challenged and then overtook the formerly dominant psychoanalytic model. Then the beginning of World War II cut supply lines, making insulin prohibitively expensive or unavailable in some areas of the globe; ECT was cheaper, safer, and clinically far more attractive than either insulin or Metrazol. The war also

emptied parts of Europe, notably Vienna, of many of its psychiatric eminences: Freud moved to England, Meduna went to Chicago, and Berlin-born psychiatrist Lothar Kalinowsky, who worked on ECT in Rome under Cerletti, decamped to spread the electric gospel in London and then New York.

ECT, then, much like the novel, was born in mainland Europe, refined in England, and naturalized in the U.S. American scientists welcomed the practice. “Coming at a time when war is subjecting the population of the whole world to those intolerable mental strains that precipitate mental disease,” the *Science News Letter* wrote with excitement in 1940, “this new use of electricity for mental health instead of for death is being enthusiastically welcomed by the medical profession.”

That was the year ECT took America by storm. “In the summer of 1940, the East Coast must have literally buzzed with electricity,” write Edward Shorter and David Healey in *Shock Therapy*, their comprehensive history of ECT. And those who recovered often evangelized. The procedure involved some discombobulation, many patients said, perhaps some memory loss. But it had been undeniably *worth it*.

At least that was the case for the success stories. There were many others. The asylum era was still chugging along in the 1940s, and asylums were justly feared and hated. For the inmates, ECT became one more blunt tool for asylum keepers to overuse, at a time when patients had precious few rights.

As with fever therapy and hydrotherapy (repeated, prolonged, and often nonconsensual dousing), some asylum doctors in the 1940s and ’50s seem to have taken on ECT as a challenge: *How much of this can my patients stand?* Bini himself advanced an argument for the *metodo dell’annichilimento*, or “annihilation therapy,” which required zapping a patient multiple times a day. Other doctors picked up this method with the express purpose of rebuilding the patient’s personality from scratch. The idea, essentially, was to use the memory-hampering qualities of ECT not as a side effect but as a central goal. In England and America, the practice became known as intensive ECT. In 1942, Hans Löwenbach of Germany wrote from his post at Duke University in support of it: “If the patient becomes almost immediately his pre-shock self, then the therapeutic procedure has been in vain.”

Wynne told me that today's ECT was quite different. No one was doing annihilation therapy in the U.S. anymore, he said. Plus, modern or "modified" ECT was much more civilized because the electrical pulses were briefer and more targeted, and the doctors gave you anesthesia and muscle relaxers and even an oxygen tube to prevent asphyxia. All the horror stories, Wynne said, dated from the era of "unmodified" ECT. "We're past the grisly stuff now," he told me.

But that didn't make the history any easier to read.

Yes, anesthesia and tranquilizers entered the picture—particularly in 1951, with the introduction of the muscle relaxant succinylcholine, still used in ECT today. But many asylums and hospitals were slow to adopt these new, gentler practices. According to the science journalist (and ECT skeptic) Robert Whitaker, more than one million patients got forced ECT in the 1940s and '50s. Even kids didn't escape the electrodes. From 1942 to 1947, Bellevue Hospital in New York treated ninety-eight children, some as young as four, with a long sequence of ECT treatments.

My heart rate slowed a bit when I read about the softer side of ECT. It's considered sufficiently gentle to be offered as a first resort for elderly patients who can't tolerate SSRIs or other pharmacological interventions. I was even more surprised to learn that ECT didn't attain its stigma—its association with persecution and alleged brain damage—until the mid-1960s, thanks in part to emerging psychopharmaceuticals but mainly amid a frantic new campaign to abolish ECT.

The anti-psychiatry movement was a coalition between heterodox psychiatrists and members of the New Left, as the antiauthoritarian ethos of young baby boomers came into conflict with a procedure that recalled the tyranny of asylum medicine. "Shock resonated because, like nuclear energy, [ECT] had the aura of an out-of-control technology imposed by an authoritarian society," wrote journalist Larry Tye, who, with Kitty Dukakis, authored an illuminating book about electroshock. By the 1970s, Tye reported, detractors had begun "picket[ing] outside electroshock clinics with signs linking the practitioners to Spanish inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada and Nazi executioner Adolf Eichmann." The anti-ECT campaign has been vigorous and well funded, thanks not least to munificent contributions from the Church of Scientology, which also played a central role in organizing.

Accordingly, ECT therapy was severely curtailed in most parts of the country. Numbers are tricky, as there's no central trove of data, but the most plausible estimate is that the yearly number of ECT patients in the U.S. fell from around 300,000 in the 1950s and '60s to around 59,000 by 1975; by 1980, that number had dropped further, to around 32,000. "It is as though penicillin had suddenly gone into a decline in the absence of any objective circumstance that might discourage physicians from prescribing it or patients from accepting it," Shorter and Healey wrote.

One can understand the skepticism. I know I did. But as I read about the campaign to expunge ECT, I wondered whether the problem was a failure to distinguish the baby from the bathwater. It seems statistically undeniable that, during ECT's period in the wilderness, millions of depressed or bipolar or schizophrenic Americans were functionally denied recourse to ECT. Wynne said we'd never know how many died because ECT was drummed out of so many American hospitals. ECT's frequently lurid portrayals in popular culture only bolstered the eye-popping claims of the anti-psychiatry camp: ECT turns you into a zombie; it erases your entire memory; it will literally break your back.

I found a few books that mounted a defense of ECT. Sometimes half apologetic, other times closer to triumphant. I read the Shorter and Healey history, Carrie Fisher's memoir about electroshock, and Tye's book with Kitty Dukakis in which the two authors alternated chapters: Tye covered the history and science, and the former first lady of Massachusetts recounted her own, positive experiences with ECT. ("In some ways ECT is less traumatic for me than going to the dentist, and certainly less frightening than the root canal," Dukakis wrote.)

But when I tried to find some authoritative consensus about memory loss, I kept meeting a chorus of contradiction from the medical literature. Some doctors said memory loss would be mild; others said it could be "more pronounced" (than what?); but the third and loudest group said that memory loss was a canard, a talking point for anti-psychiatrists, adding that most patients reported few to no cognitive problems. When I went online to eavesdrop on patient forums, the consensus was clearer: *Memory loss is very, very real*.

I'm only speculating here, but I do wonder whether, in their zeal to defend a lifesaving treatment from demagogic skeptics, some ECT advocates may have pushed back with their own immoderate claims.

Whatever the cause, it's a strange experience to have different doctors tell you different things about what's about to happen to your memory. It's even stranger when, after a few treatments, you can't quite remember which doctor told you what.

On my fourth day in the psych ward, they came at dawn to rouse me. I was awake already and sobbing quietly into my pillow. A male orderly who looked nearly asleep helped me dress and muttered words of encouragement, phrases he'd used on how many lunatics too dazed or drugged or depressed to put their pants on. He was an overworked stable hand whispering kind, perfunctory words to comfort a mad horse. The drugs had me groggy, and it took a minute to pull on my hospital-issue sweatpants, which sagged anyway without the drawstrings. Then a nurse led me past the door with its heavy reinforced lock and out of the ward. All I could think was: *This is what it has all been leading to. A year of unlivable despair and how many other episodes before that, and now I pray.*

We crossed the seventh-floor hallway and entered what was hospitably called the ECT Suite. The staff explained to me that here, three times a week, they'd attach gentle electrodes to my right temple and induce a series of seizures. I'd never been zapped before. At the time, in my sorry state, I couldn't even muster any real terror over the procedure.

In compliance with protocol, I hadn't eaten since yesterday's early dinner—soggy chicken nuggets, perhaps the saddest among the cafeteria dinners—and hadn't sipped any water since sunrise. Nonetheless, a nurse warned me that some patients experience incontinence after a seizure. I was briefly astonished at how little this bothered me. The unbidden thought flew down that I might never leave this hospital.

Whatever happened to Ted?

You mean that goofy journalist who went crazy?

Yeah, the Jane Austen guy.

Tucked away in an institution somewhere. Hasn't tweeted in years.

Across the hall, the ECT nurse punctured a vein in my left arm and taped an IV port to the skin above my elbow, close to where I got my first Covid vaccine some weeks before. When she wheeled me into the ECT sanctum, I was met by a chorus of hums and beeps—from the electroencephalography

machine, monitoring the extent of the induced seizure in my gray matter; from the hostile fluorescent lights in the ceiling; and from the ECT machine itself, which looked a bit like an old CB radio and seemed to buzz with potential energy. Dr. Kemper, a lovely woman with a serenity for which I was grateful, instructed me to lie down on the gurney and asked me to rate my mood on a one-to-ten scale. I thought and responded, “One,” and Dr. Kemper said not to worry—they’d soon have me back to my zippy self. A nurse was busy taping electrodes to my chest, one under each clavicle and a third just below my heart. These were to monitor my cardiac activity, while a different set of electrodes—one behind each ear and one on either side of my forehead—would monitor my brain activity and measure the duration of the induced seizure. The nurse cuffed a blood pressure monitor over my right ankle, tight enough to prevent the muscle relaxant from reaching my foot, thus allowing the doctors to observe the only outward sign of the seizure: a brief twitch in the big toe. Someone on the medical team started rubbing a strange substance on my right temple, the spot where they were preparing to zap me—a conductive goo that felt like warm honey. Kemper told me this stuff would help the ECT penetrate my skull. Then she affixed the crucial electrode, the one that would cause my brain to seize for anywhere between fifteen seconds and a minute.

Finally, as she did with every treatment, Dr. Kemper asked me three simple questions: my name, what day it was, and what procedure I was about to undergo. I answered truthfully. Dr. Kemper and the anesthesiologist nodded at each other, and the doctor said in a pleasant, neutral voice: “Okay, so we are all agreed: We are doing right unilateral ECT.” This catechistic little exercise is about establishing consent in the clearest way possible.

I could hear my heart rate generating faster and faster beeps from the EKG machine. So could Dr. Kemper. “You’re excited,” she said euphemistically. “There’s no need to be.”

Dr. Kemper removed my Covid mask and replaced it with an oxygen mask, which would do my breathing for me while the anesthetics had me functionally paralyzed; an oximeter on one of my fingers would ensure that the mask was doing its work. The nurse slid a bite block between my teeth. The anesthesiologist said something about “sleepy time” as he plunged a syringe into my IV and told me to count down from a hundred out loud. My lips went funny on ninety-five, and the last thing I felt was the sudden

warmth and truly rhapsodic euphoria of propofol, the general anesthetic that, along with a muscle relaxant, would ensure my body's only response to the shock was that twitch in my foot. When I later read about periodic reports of doctors abusing propofol, it made complete sense. I'd never felt so embraced by a drug. The world narrowed and receded cartoonishly and then went dark.

But I got only about ten seconds of propo-euphoria. Next thing I knew, I was lying on a gurney in the recovery room, weeping without quite knowing why and reeling as my central nervous system lurched out of the darkness.

Back in the ward after my first ECT, I cried, napped, cried again. About an hour after I awoke, I finally received a Tylenol for my extravagant headache and managed to eat a whole apple (green; only slightly mushy) for breakfast. I reentered social life a bit before dinner, depositing myself on a couch next to Amara, who asked whether the bed checks every fifteen minutes had awoken me the previous night.

I shook my head. But I couldn't remember. Amnesia had begun with a bang.

Having been warned about this side effect, I was not entirely surprised by the sudden blankness of memory. But it was a novel kind of disorientation, beyond the general sense of confusion that is common after a zap. Before the session, Dr. Kemper had flooded my veins with flumazenil, a benzo antagonist, which neutralized the therapeutic dose of Klonopin in my system, which might otherwise inhibit a seizure. If you're taking a benzo like Klonopin regularly, waking up after flumazenil can feel like its own micro-electrocution. For at least half an hour after that first treatment, I was raw, trembling like someone with an advanced nerve disorder, buzzing with a full-body anxiety so pronounced it inhibited the rudiments of thought.

Once the trembling stopped, I could remember the hour immediately preceding the treatment, but I couldn't recall waking up that morning, nor which movie we'd watched on Turner Classic Movies yesterday in the common room. I knew I'd talked to Melanie briefly the night before, during the ninety-minute period when we got to use our phones—but I couldn't remember a word of our conversation, only the tenor: extreme tenderness on her side and, on mine, an effort not to sound like a sad sack or a coward. I remembered I'd also spoken with my mom and began to worry that I

hadn’t put on a sufficiently cheery persona for her, either. I wondered whether I ought to start recording all my calls. Nope, bad idea; that’s how they got Nixon.

At dinner that evening, I was mortified to find that I’d forgotten the names of everyone in the ward save Serena, Amara, and Catherine. One guy smiled and put his brownie on my plate. “That’s me paying you back for the pudding yesterday.” I smiled back, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. *Of course I remember giving you my pudding.*

Once I found my diary, I wrote: “Has someone else been living in my body?”

Patient report 5/13/2021 after first ECT: *Pt was visible in the milieu with blunted affect, a/ox 4 [alert and oriented in four ways: to person, place, time, and event], and cooperative . . .*

The ward was quiet that night, punctuated occasionally with a stream of expletives from one of the schizophrenics’ rooms. Once in a while, you could hear all the orderlies scramble in the hall, pricked into action by some soft, unseen alarm. Sometimes I feared they were running to my room, to toss my bed and look for weapons that weren’t there. Sometimes a face was missing the next morning. We were not kept up on what happened in these contretemps. I do believe no one died while I was there.

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Chapter 19

Outpatient

By the fifth day in the psych ward, I'd had one ECT treatment, and I was crawling up the walls. I was desperate to finish the rest of ECT as an outpatient, even if it meant more driving for my friends. But getting discharged was hard, even though I wasn't deemed a high risk for self-harm. Eventually, a false positive on a rapid Covid test achieved what Mel and my friends and my doctors and I could not: I was deemed contagious and expelled from the ward. Lucia collected me in front of the hospital, and I had to hold up my sweatpants with one hand to avoid flashing the nice, heavily masked nurses who helped me into the car. Lucia had brought pineapple-flavored candies and stories about the latest escapades of her daughter, Phoebe, or "the Bleeb," as she and Alex had taken to calling her.

When Lucia deposited me home on Sixteenth Street, the apartment was strangely quiet. Melanie was at her fertility doc, Sophie was at Mel's, and Noah was out, leaving me alone with my shaky memories of the past week. I started reading my journal from the psych ward and was astonished at how little I could picture or recall. I had folded some of my crayon creations from art therapy folded between the pages, and I recognized the scribbles as mine but couldn't remember making them all. How had I covered that much construction paper? A postcard dislodged itself from the binding and fell to the floor. It showed Bernini's *David* at the Galleria Borghese in Rome—the sculpture of David winding up his sling, poised and coiled and ready to take on Goliath. On the postcard's reverse, a message from Mom said:

> *How to use this card:*
> *Picture anything that's making your life difficult—and you be David w/ the slingshot.*

See if you can enjoy the cherry blossoms.

Love,

Mom

The cherry blossoms were now out of bloom, and the postcard was new to me. Except that it wasn't. I'd written "aww" in the margin, in pencil, which meant I'd gotten the postcard *before* the psych ward. Faint, but there it was: evidence that I'd been here, had made a memory, and then had lost it.

Among the crumpled construction papers, my drawings were all determinedly morbid, each face a rictus. On one diary page from the day before I left the ward, I'd written: "Serena was screaming for drugs earlier, threatening. At first I figured they should just give her the benzos but now I'm not sure. Amara is now straight-up avoiding her. Thank God, since Serena can't seem to shut up. Maybe manipulating Amara is Serena's alternative to heroin?"

What the fuck, I wondered now, had Serena been saying to Amara? Were there further visions? I tried to poke around, suss out whether these memories were lost forever or merely misplaced—misfiled. I was coming up dry. I couldn't remember when Janet had left the hospital or any of the specifics of Catherine's care plan once she'd left the ward, even though I knew we'd talked about it. It's a profound violation to learn you can never have access to knowledge that you once unquestionably possessed. How can you maintain relations with anyone under such conditions? How can you trust yourself?

Furious and slow, I picked up a nice, sharp pencil, exactly the kind of implement they'd denied me for the past week, and started scratching against the paper: "I'm fucked. Memory yokes us to time. Without memory I am out of time, and suffering becomes infinite." Having bruised my memory—unforgivably, I thought—I could now see no possible end to the suffering; either I'd stay sick or I'd recover but never quite know it, because a fucked-up memory would make the comparison impossible.

I did some of Wynne's breathing exercises, then picked up my pencil again: "I guess in the end it's quite simple. I can't stay sick."

Over the next two weeks, we pushed through six rounds of right-unilateral ECT, with electrodes focused around my right temple. Mel drove me thrice weekly for the early-morning shocks. After a brief intake with a friendly nurse, we'd wait outside the ECT Suite, where Mel would work on her laptop. I always had an IV port poking out of my arm and couldn't stop staring across the hall, at the reinforced lock on the door to the psych unit below the sign warning of "elopement risk." I wondered whether Catherine or Serena was there, whether the ECT might fail and doom me to return to the strange world behind that door. The ward and the ECT Suite shared nurses; one time I awoke convinced I was still in the ward and told the nurse, who'd cared for me the week prior, "We've *got* to do something about the library in here."

In those first weeks of unilateral ECT, Kemper seemed merely to be singeing my memory, not torching it. Nonetheless, the nature of ECT is that your mood problems often seem to get worse before they get better. That is, you remain depressed and anxious, but now you're also dealing with early mornings and a headache after each procedure, plus a general sense of being completely drained. (Like, would you rather be depressed and otherwise healthy, or depressed with a wicked hangover? Some days after ECT, I grappled with the latter.) Meanwhile, for all the headaches, the results seemed stubbornly prosaic, sometimes just plain weird. Friends said I moved clumsily and sounded soupy, that my voice became thick and hardly inflected, similar to my pre-ECT affect but with an added degree of lostness.

Sophie and I moved into Mel's apartment full-time. This arrangement relieved my friends, who knew how stabilizing Mel was for me. Every day, it seemed, she found ways to drag me out of the soup, urging me to pick at a guitar or baking me homemade bagels, all while managing the text chain and answering the occasional gently troubled question from my mom or dad.

At dinner sometimes, she'd recall the getaways we took early in our relationship. I'd smile and hide behind the permitted silence of the invalid. Mel picked out details, trying to help me reconjure our history: the bizarre needlepointed mantras on the wall in that one Airbnb; a blue jay we'd spotted on a hike; how I'd taught her chords on guitar and learned how she liked to be touched. I confessed finally that while I could recall the weekend when her hair caught on fire and the target practice with Jack in

West Virginia, I remembered frighteningly little else of our adventures together. My heart broke for Mel. Whatever my memory failures, I've never forgotten the look on her face in that moment. As though she were the lone survivor of the relationship, widowed by unmemory. If you really want to drive someone crazy, remove your side of shared reality and see what happens.

It's a terrible feeling, to know you and your brain have caused such pain and distress to someone you love. And it's terrifying to find yourself so utterly dependent on a person you fear you can never repay and can only disappoint—by moping, by weeping, by basically giving up on the question of children. Melanie's occasional tears felt like resounding confirmation that I was contagious, unfit for company, a debilitating influence. Meanwhile, our Covid-safe outdoor hangouts with friends became ever more hideous ordeals in which I tried not to pollute the lives of my friends with the foul air of my sickness.

I later learned how scared my friends were for me, during and immediately after these most intensive weeks of electrotherapy. In an email chain from around this time, they discussed how I was telling jokes but without laughing. A link circulated, explaining how the risk of suicide attempts could rise during the first phases of ECT, when confusion and distress were still high but the patient had more energy—and suicide requires a certain amount of energy. Aaron was unnerved by "a new kind of hollowness" he observed in my eyes. Without ever crowding me, they all watched me closely.

I often think that with one's friends, disease is like heat applied to an invisible-ink letter, revealing who is truly ride or die and who is more fair-weather. In my case, everyone showed up. Brian was even in close touch with my father, discussing the finer points of my treatment. To read the emails now is to be overawed with gratitude at their thoughtfulness about even the smallest things: "I haven't told Ted that I was planning to write you," Brian confided to my father in an email that May. "I know he worries about being a burden on us—though of course he's not a burden at all. Ted is as loyal a friend as they come, and we would do anything for him."

Unilateral treatment works for a lot of patients. When it doesn't, you've got a heavier-gauge option: bilateral ECT, where they attach electrodes to both of your temples, zapping both sides of the skull. Bilateral is famously effective at improving mood—and inhibiting memory.

By the sixth unilateral treatment, I asked Dr. Kemper, as politely as I could: "When will it start working?" She told me that it probably already was working, that my loved ones would notice the difference before I did. "Will I need to switch to bilateral ECT and start the whole circus again?" Quite possibly, Dr. Kemper said, adding that having the more potent bilateral treatment as an option should be cause for hope. But the prospect of beginning a whole new series of treatments pushed my projected remission even further into the future. "Let ECT do its work," the doctors kept telling me. Through the headaches and incipient memory haze, I clung to this sentence as a mantra.

Yet after five more treatments, Kemper recorded, "Patient had very difficult week: hopelessness, anxiety, negative rumination, SI [suicidal ideation]." Eleven sessions of unilateral ECT had failed to do the trick. So, Dr. Kemper started me on a long course of bilateral treatments. She told me I'd undergo a new sequence, another fourteen sessions, which would deliver a more powerful therapeutic effect. But Kemper warned me again that bilateral treatment was also more dangerous for memory.

I was grateful for her honesty. Of course, fourteen more sessions sounded about as appealing as three years' hard labor. But what was the alternative? To accept a tattered life, to rebuild a ruined self without stone or mortar?

Melanie and I huddled on the red couch in her apartment.

"I'm morbidly curious to see what the new zaps are like," I said to her. "But fourteen more sessions—that's *so* much more driving for you . . . "

Mel said she'd happily facilitate my electrocution as many times as I wanted or needed. "Plus, Noah and Aaron and Lucia have been pitching in plenty." She was right. (In fact, I'd forgotten that Aaron had not only driven me to ECT the previous week but also spent the day with me, goofing around and eating Thai food, while Mel was visiting her stepdaughters in Wisconsin.) The orchestra was thrumming along. Mel talked about how

Brian kept reminding her that my friends would do anything for me. What were a few more drives up Massachusetts Avenue?

I started informing more people that I was receiving ECT. Two friends asked me whether it was voluntary and expressed shock when I said yes. *Who decides to get electrocuted these days?* I'd shrug, because the unspoken answer was: *People like me. People who don't know what else to do*.

Medical records indicate that during bilateral treatments, my seizures usually lasted between twenty-five and forty seconds. When I awoke from my first bilateral treatment, the headache felt different, more painful but with notably muted anxiety. Kemper's warnings about memory had been accurate. Sometimes I awoke with no recollection of which friend was giving me a ride. The nurse, a smiley lady named Ivy, would deposit me in a wheelchair and roll me down to the drop-off zone, and during the journey, I'd try to guess who was awaiting me there. According to a diary, I played this private game a couple of times, until it got too depressing.

Mel grew particularly concerned about my memory loss on mornings when I had to ask her how many times I'd been zapped. My inability to summon that essential fact was a low point. When you're desperately praying for ECT to work, the one thing you should remember is how many sessions you've done.

In those early days of bilateral treatment, I felt like a wreck. Besides the headaches, the treatments left me with a strange sensation in the hollows behind the nose and sometimes difficulty swallowing. I'd awake with my throat feeling like dried glue, and my epiglottis often seemed ready to rattle. I slept a lot; Lucia and Aaron visited so that I could vary weeping alone with weeping in company—but I began to notice that I was making progress, at least on paper. I quit cannabis, which I'd begun using near daily as a sleep aid and a means of slowing anxious thoughts. With Mel's encouragement, I worked up the gumption to join her on a couple of runs. Glorified jogs, really, never more than two miles and always at a ponderous pace, as though I were plodding through soup.

I broke up with Dr. Wynne. He sounded busy, which I forgave, but he also sounded tired of me, which didn't give me much to work with. Since

before I'd entered the hospital, Wynne had been slow and incomplete in coordinating the three main elements of my care: drugs, talk, and electricity. More recently, he'd switched me from Effexor to Zoloft, but he was dodging my emails about how to manage the switch and gave the impression he wanted to be free of me. So I sent him a huffy note asking why he was so half-hearted about coordinating my care. Wynne responded with a coldness that he'd never shown before, listed the ways he'd tried to help, and then said I apparently didn't to want his help. It was in every way a standard, liability-minded, ass-covering email: He had to square things in case I hurt myself. To be fair, it was an expression of his own despair; it must've been hell to watch me grow steeply sicker under his watch, and the poor guy was arguably heroic for sticking with me as long as he did. But back then I couldn't help feeling betrayed.

Nor could Mel. She said she was inclined to smack Wynne, perhaps the only time I ever heard her even joke about violence. "Writing that email, to you, right now, is like a deliberate twist of the knife." For her part, Lucia bristled and said Wynne had been "inexcusably inattentive." I was thankful for such firebrands on my side.

The good news was that I'd been referred to a psychiatrist who promised he'd be much more hands-on. The bad news was that the psychiatrist was Dr. Pearl, whose strange bedside manner I can't quite evoke. He had a deadness in his eyes that I associate with week-old fish, and he wasn't much for conversation. Figurative language confused and vexed him, and jokes were verboten. Pearl was a psychodynamic therapist, which meant that he wanted to uncover the drives and internal conflicts underpinning the various moods of my disorder, making his approach a lot like that of North Carolina's Dr. Stubb.

But you take what you can get. All the other psychiatrists in my insurer's network were closed to new patients. I was voluntarily getting electrocuted three times a week. What I needed was a psychiatrist who would coordinate my care at the executive level and communicate between my other providers, because I no longer had the memory to serve as point person. If Pearl was impossible to talk with, that mattered far less than that he was *involved,* bureaucratically. And when I accidentally swallowed my evening pills in the morning one day, Pearl picked up on the first ring. "You'll be fine," he said. "Take a nice long nap."

As bilateral treatments continued, Aaron and Noah and Lucia began to share the driving burden with Mel—and grew distressed as they started to see the depth of memory loss in real time. When Aaron or Noah drove, they'd use my car. Melanie had given them precise directions for every stage of the commute and hospital process, including which McDonald's they should hit to snag a sandwich after the procedure. Following a zap, we'd drive back past the embassies on Massachusetts Avenue, and sometimes Aaron and I would have whole conversations, even lighthearted ones—especially if I was punch-drunk from midazolam, the benzo Kemper began administering after the seizure to ease my return to consciousness. Then Aaron would park my car near my apartment and hug me and go on his way while I repaired to my bed, clutching a McGriddle in its twisted brown bag.

Two or four hours later, I'd text him: "Hey man, thanks for driving me today (I think?) . . . this is embarrassing but if you know where the car is then LMK."

"Lol damn dude you really don't remember?" Aaron would respond. "You were so lively and with it, I figured you knew what was going on."

For a while, I assumed these blackouts were a result of the thirty-second convulsion itself. Then I read about the side effects of midazolam, and anterograde amnesia was right at the top of the list. Receiving the benzo after each convulsion, it turned out, was adding to the difficulty of memory-formation. And it left Aaron and Noah a bit confused as to whom they'd been talking to.

The most baffling, endlessly intriguing questions about ECT are how and why it works. Physicians since ancient times have recorded the sometimes salutary effects of seizures on certain forms of mental illness, yet even today we don't know precisely why a given brain is happier, or clearer, or calmer, following a few seizures. There's an old saw comparing ECT to aspirin: *We don't know how it works, but it works magnificently.* Still, a few general ideas about the mechanism of ECT are widely accepted. During the seizure, affected neurons all fire at the same time, several times per second.

(Some doctors refer to this effect as the brain “resetting” itself.) As a result of this firing, the brain releases a welcome surplus of neurohormones such as norepinephrine and neurotransmitters such as dopamine. The most intriguing recent account for ECT’s high rate of success—around seventy-five to eighty percent for major depressives who’ve failed to find relief with pharmacology—is that the release of these brain chemicals can stimulate neural growth across various regions of the brain. Per brain imaging, just a few ECT treatments are often enough to spur visible volume increases in multiple cortical regions, not least in the hippocampus, the area of the brain that is prey to atrophy during major depression and other maladies, including addiction, certain schizoaffective disorders, dementia, and Alzheimer’s.

ECT’s demonstrated neurogenetic properties offer a compelling explanation for why the treatment remains a most effective antidepressant. That the brain grows and shows markedly more (and more regular) activity following ECT treatment is potentially confusing to laypeople, many of whom take the treatment to be inherently damaging—“scarring” is the preferred participle among the skeptics, as though doctors have applied a knife or a white-hot poker to your brain. Of course, surprisingly little electricity goes through you: not enough to singe or scar. Comparisons are tricky, because the human machine and the refrigerator (say) require different currents, but the amount of energy that zaps you during a single ECT session is mercifully modest—perhaps the equivalent of charging your phone by one percent or powering a lightbulb for a few seconds.

Discoveries about hippocampal growth following ECT are straightforwardly exciting. For those of us who grew up in the 1980s and ’90s, the essential unrecuperability of brain cells and memories was treated as a basic fact in “just say no”–style antidrug campaigns and even biology class. That was all wrong, even then. Neurogenesis had been established in small mammals and birds by the 1980s, while in the 1990s, we discovered that the human brain has its own stem cells—pluripotent little guys that can become new neurons, sometimes creating new connections that support neuroplasticity, as well as fresh glial cells to clean and maintain the brain’s circuits.

Still, certain disagreements persist. Some of the keenest students and proponents of ECT believe the seizure is the crucial mechanism, while other, equally illustrious ECT experts argue it’s the body’s post-seizure

response that hits the reset button rather than the seizure itself. If the latter group is right, that opens the intriguing possibility that future advances in brain imaging and brain stimulation might reveal a gentler shortcut toward triggering an anticonvulsive response, hyper-generating these chemicals, and reinvigorating the hippocampus and its neighbors, all without the dreaded seizure.

Regardless, ECT remains the nuclear power of psychiatric treatment: much maligned, often misused, yet sturdy and powerful, the gold standard that we've somehow disowned. Among latter-day electrical treatments, which include transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) and vagus nerve stimulation (VNS), none thus far has shown the efficacy of modern ECT. Particularly for acute cases—people who might not have the time to wait for another drug to work or not to work—ECT is unmatched.

By the second week of bilateral treatment, my friends were typing to each other with furtive hope. You can almost hear the tremulousness in their texts, like they were scared to jinx a good thing:

"He sounds better this week, so different. Don't you think?"

> "He did seem loads better than on Memorial Day. No crying (not that crying is bad!), and there were lots of little blocks of time when he was able to engage with the world beyond treatment."

> "That's how it seems to me. I think he's wrong that it's not working fast enough—but he's also not good at (or maybe even capable of?) remembering the existential panic he felt just a month ago."

I didn't go out that much. Sometimes to the park, to hang out with Aaron and his wife, Carina, and little baby, Cole, or to a jam session that folks had assembled for me with a few instruments, not enough people to make me anxious. Mostly, I stayed at Mel's, received visitors, and tried not to weep on them.

Pretty soon, however, I noticed the tears came less often. I also started to become impatient with ECT: Instead of counting with obsessive pride how many treatments I'd logged, I was counting down how many I had left. Though I was pretty damn far from being a fun companion, everyone except for me saw a quiet miracle unfolding. Melanie texted Riggs: "The fact that he is ready for ECT to be over feels like an improvement over his acute fear that he would lose his mind if he didn't get ECT."

As June heated up, Riggs came down from Philly for two nights. We ambled about the Kenilworth Gardens, admiring the water lotuses, and Riggs was patient with the limitations of my conversation: politics, *Columbo*, and ECT. Though we'd been smoking buddies in the past, we were now avoiding weed, and Riggs was conscientious about not trying to tempt me. More than anything else, I think he knew how important it was to my pride that I abstain. Riding the train back to Philly, Riggs wrote to the group text: "I am hopeful for Ted in a way I haven't been for a good long while, even though he is not yet hopeful himself."

In another week, allegedly, I would begin to taper ECT from thrice a week to twice a week to once a week, then monthly. I asked Dr. Pearl if it was rash to slow down the treatment when I still felt so rotten. He told me not to worry. "At this stage," he responded, "slowing the treatment will allow you to see how much progress you've made."

Psychiatrists will often warn you, when you're coming out of a major depressive episode, to watch out. As your capacities return, they say, you're sometimes at higher risk for suicide. Perhaps you simply have more energy than before—enough, say, to climb the stairs to the top of your building and try to fly. Or perhaps your depression was characterized by patches of numbness, and the return of feeling can mean a return of the capacity to feel anguish, *all* of it.

If your mental illness has also involved a breach in memory, as most acute ones do, then there's a further risk: You won't recognize that you're better because you can't remember how bad things were. But your friends remember. And that makes all the difference.

ECT patients, for whom memory tends to be especially compromised, can be even slower to recognize the signs of recovery. Your head throbs

post-anesthesia, your nerves are shot, you can't remember whether yesterday was a zero or a one on the mood scale. Your friends, whom you've briefed on the risks of heightened suicidal ideation during this stage of recovery, whisper among themselves about whether a given downtick in mood is merely a blip or a more serious warning sign. Your girlfriend buys you a pill organizer so you don't need to count them out every morning—but perhaps, also, so you don't accidentally take too many. Your charmless psychiatrist will say, "You just need to get through the acute stage," and you will begin to believe him.

Then finally, one morning, long after your friends have started to notice your improvements, you wake up and find yourself saying, "Shit, I think it's *really* working."

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Chapter 20

The Stranger in the Mirror

By the third week of June, I was back at work two days a week, telecommuting from Mel's apartment. My pay stub informed me that I had 130 hours of sick leave stored up. In a perverse expression of improvement, I started to strategize how to save those hours in case another breakdown loomed. You can't imagine the optimism, the sheer hope, it takes for a recovering depressive to contemplate a future bout.

Work was good. I'd spent so much time convinced that my bosses hated me and couldn't wait to fire me that I hadn't truly enjoyed the work since long before I began medical leave. Now the paranoia was lifting, and I could look at my work objectively, more or less. When my boss's number showed up on my phone, I thought, *Oh, he wants to talk about a story* rather than *Oh, he's finally gonna downsize me.* I was no longer preemptively wincing at life. I threw myself into editing for the three fall issues, and when a freelancer fell through, I began picking up stories myself just to get them done. Writing one page about the forgotten poets of Sparta brought me particular joy. I recognized the voice on the page. It didn't sound like it came from a broken man.

After another week or so, I was able to start visiting the friends who'd driven me to ketamine or ECT or cooked me a meal or visited me when I was too low to request a visit. "You look good," Aaron said. "I couldn't always tell when you were sick, but there were times when the light went out of your eyes, and it was fucking chilling."

Lucia put it more simply: "I'm glad to have Ted back."

I had no doubt they were right. But I was also a bit unsure who Ted was and had been.

In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, his 2008 memoir about the approach of death, Julian Barnes wrote: “Memory is identity. I have believed this since . . . oh, since I can remember. You are what you have done; what you have done is in your memory; what you remember defines who you are; when you forget your life, you cease to be, even before death.”

In his glib way, Barnes captured a sentiment that most people broadly share: We’re walking résumés and skill sets, sentient histories, who constitute our sense of ourselves based on versions of what we’ve been. When you’re cognitively compromised from disease or age or drugs or something else, people start to talk about you as though your very being has vanished. *He’s not himself. That’s just the disease talking.* We pronounce these words with the implication that a loved one’s true being is one that’s unblemished by any bits of embarrassing neurodegeneration.

This is also how the hypochondriac or depressive or amnesiac sees things.

Amnesiacs use a lot of verbs to describe what has happened to their memory, and one of the most common, I’ve found, is “obliterated.” It’s a telling choice. To be obliterated is, literally, to be erased, removed from any experience describable in letters. How, then, do we rewrite ourselves?

It’s particularly strange to encounter the absence of memory *while you’re recovering your wits*. “Holy shit the memory loss,” I wrote in a fragmented journal entry in early July. “Looking at old pieces I wrote, photos of Mel and me, I feel like an alien. I don’t know the guy who did any of this.” Dr. Pearl said I should fill these weeks of recovery with all the things that I loved. “But I don’t love any of the old things, and I can’t make myself,” I wrote. “I mean I can sometimes get off reading some poetry and playing some music, but then I keep having to stop work to do breathing exercises because I’m *furious* with myself for losing memories, for letting myself get sick in the first place.” I dwelled on Ernest Hemingway’s pained description of his own electroshock: “a brilliant cure, but we lost the patient.” Not long after his last treatment, he made that description prescient—with a shotgun. Delivered from catatonia, some patients finally have the gumption to do terrifying things.

There were no guns in Mel’s apartment, and my passive death wish was not nearly as strong as it had been a month before. Nonetheless, I pledged

in my journal to “keep my head on a swivel” for the return of suicidal thoughts.

But death was no longer the focus or hope or fear. The real difficulty now was finding a way back to life. My loss of memory began to feel like a loss of identity. It was very different from the passive ego death that Lucas had sought to induce with ketamine. And these memory difficulties persisted long after the acute phase of bilateral ECT. With each passing day, I recognized expansive realms of lost memory, from the profound (when I’d seen my sister last, when Melanie and I first exchanged “I love you”) to the frivolous (where I’d been the previous New Year’s Eve, whether I had read Balzac) to the logistical (which of my mother’s knees had most recently undergone surgery). I’d read *War and Peace* for the first time as recently as May. Now all I could tell you about the book was that Pierre was a gentle soul, and that moneyed Russians during the Napoleonic era ate lots of tasty French food. Even older memories seemed to be affected, some going as far back as eighteen months. Of course, I knew basic facts about myself. But that’s very different from having direct access to your memory; different, too, from identifying with your past from the intuitive sense of proprietorship you normally enjoy. To put it crudely, I didn’t *relate* to my own past in any meaningful way, or if I did, I saw it dimly, as a flat prologue to a banal tragedy.

Under these absurd circumstances, when you’ve forgotten so many things—so many moments of love and adventure, of rivers and trees and books and albums, of the joys and desires and commitments that make you who you are or were—you’re left to reconstruct yourself based on nothing but the irreparably damaged present. (My friend Malcolm had a sunnier reaction when I mentioned the *War and Peace* thing: “I’m so excited you get to read it again for the first time. In fact, I’m thinking of specific pages right now that will be a treat for you to rediscover . . . ” I tried to adopt this happy way of thinking.)

With most friends, I tried not to fuss over these questions. With Mel, I was also guarded: I’d forgotten so much of our relationship. As my agitated depression began to abate, a strange, new, and incommunicable pain took the place of the old one. The pain of not knowing and not being. The lure of the void, because only in the void can you see your own emptiness mirrored.

In mid-July, Mel wrote to the group chat: “Nurses also told him that the memory loss should start to get better as treatments decrease in frequency. I really hope that’s true because it’s been so much more severe than I anticipated. He’s forgotten most of the last three months and big chunks of the last year or so.” She added, “Seems worth the tradeoff, but . . . what an awful side effect . . . ”

“What I didn’t say,” Mel informed me more recently, “is: ‘Ted has lost most of the time where I exist.’”

Depression is often marked by the certainty that it will continue, that you will always feel like this. If you’re also robbed of faith in your memory, despair will recur, and imagining any kind of a future will become doubly difficult.

When memory and depression are at war, depression creates its own feedback loop that works to shut out memory, along with sense and wisdom. It can be a fiercely self-protective disorder, and for many patients, recovery depends on a capacity for memory that the disease itself has warped and shrunken. If, for example, you could fully remember and inhabit the memory of when you were well, when you brought joy to someone you loved, or hiked to the top of a mountain, or found salvation in the yellowed pages of an ancient book, then you’d know in your bones that depression is, among other things, a lie. You’d know that you are not the lowest of creatures but, rather, a creature brought temporarily low; that some retrievable version of you is capable of meeting the comedy and tragedy of life in measure; that your participation in life has not made the world, objectively, any more fallen than it was already.

Yet there are a few minutes each day when your vision will narrow to the present, when all you are is a strain, a thorn, a disappointment to your friends, a failed father without a child, a man who can’t say yes but also can’t say no, who once a day (don’t tell Mel) allows himself to tally the pills he has in his meds bag, estimating how many he could swallow without retching, and imagining whether that number would bring his central nervous system to a restful stop, dissolving present and past and all his unremembered selves.

It was petty and prideful: I'd always been pleased with my memory and considered it one of my main virtues. In the past, I'd been known as a steel trap or, as Zoe liked to put it, an "archivist," often the first to remember a line of conversation or what stage the moon had been in during a night on the beach four summers ago. Now I had trouble remembering which beach I had gone to under said full moon, or even whether I was thinking of the wrong girlfriend. To put it finely, my remembered self had been very good at memory. So when the latter started to go, I became doubly uncertain about my current self. Who was I really, without my memory parlor tricks? Aaron commiserated with me. He was also troubled by my memory loss, so incongruous with the Ted he'd known for nearly eighteen years. "It's like seeing an athlete you admire all of a sudden who can't walk," he told me.

In company, I would blank on names and use the familiar workarounds —foremost among them saying in a bullish and businesslike fashion, "It's *very* good to see you." On paper, I understood what my brain was doing, or failing to do. "The pills mess with memory. ECT *definitely* messes with memory. Kemper says some of the memory will come back, that you'll make new memories . . . " But that knowledge didn't offer much solace at the time.

By the end of June, I was back at work full-time. Remote, but so was everyone else at the magazine. Aaron texted the group with a touching sense of triumph: "He no longer fears imminent firing!!" Noah also reported that my "famous work ethic" had returned, and I was writing and reading in the early mornings, even scraping the rust off my Latin. On July 4, according to diaries and texts and good old human intelligence, I went to a party, where Steve and Noah and I made goofy jokes about the memory loss.

"We told Ted that it could be a source of fun," Noah informed the group chat. "We promised to rewrite history and convince him our old band was, like, world-famous in its time. *Hey Ted, remember that three-night stand in Philly when we opened for ZZ Top?*"

"Managed to laugh and mean it today," I wrote in the diary. That weekend Aaron had lured me to a pool party in Maryland where I was spotted by multiple surveilling friends "in great spirits."

Three days later, Aaron drove me to a maintenance electro-treatment. "Man, what a world of difference from the treatment I took him to a few

weeks ago," he wrote to the group chat. "He's just so much more . . . himself. So much better than I dared to hope."

Mel and I decided I was sufficiently with it to travel. The next weekend I braved the train for a solo trip to Manhattan to see friends. I don't remember much of the weekend. Brian and Evan and I strolled through the sculpture garden at the Noguchi Museum in Queens. Andy from college visited for part of the weekend and assessed me with cautious approval. We watched Zuri, Brian's hilariously deadpan daughter, climb on some of the sculptures and grin down at us. At Brian and Solange's house in Brooklyn, we stayed up late, and Chris Alesevich reminded me of two years before, when he and Solange and I had sat on this same rug, and Sol and I made him laugh so hard he'd had to seek medical attention for a strained abdominal muscle. There were no injuries tonight.

A couple of weeks later, Melanie reported to the group chat: "There has been a slight improvement in Ted's ability to form and retain new memories. He mostly remembers going to NYC. We're not repeating yesterday's conversations nearly as often."

Memory is slower to return than most of the other functions you associate with your self. My libido, for example. Once that was back, it was *really* back. There was a lot about my relationship with Mel that eluded my conscious mind, but my body hadn't forgotten our bond. And allowing the body to lead us back to love seemed wholesome in its way. At times during recovery, we found it easier and more meaningful to make love than to talk.

Yet with Mel, I kept bumping up against something. A new element, which it took me some time to identify as grief mingled with guilt. Pearl asked me, "Grief for what?" Eventually, I said I reckoned I was mourning any hope for a future with Mel. My illness, it was plain to anyone, had reoriented our whole relationship. As I came out of that illness, I was almost physically overwhelmed with a sense of debt toward everyone but especially Mel. That I couldn't remember how much I owed her made this debt even more acute. And forgetting came to feel like its own kind of sin.

We were on the maroon couch in her apartment when I found out I'd already met her parents. Mel had spoken with her mom on the phone, she told me, and her mom wanted me to know they were rooting for me.

“That’s sweet,” I said guiltily. “I hope I get to meet them someday and thank them in person.”

Mel informed me they’d been in town a few months earlier, and we’d all had lunch. Mel got teary. “It was such a big effort for you just to get yourself to the restaurant,” she said finally. “And it pained you *so much*, but you pushed through . . . ” I felt as though I’d done some violence to us both by forgetting, after all that effort. She looked horribly betrayed by my innocence of the whole episode.

The next day, Mel asked whether I could remember the first time we had sex, and I admitted that I couldn’t. She showed me photos of a kayaking trip, of the two of us at a pool in Virginia. A few things came back. The light in her eyes when she’d first told me about her stepchildren. Those earrings from her Hinge profile, which she wore later as a wink to our courtship. How she danced to my guitar as she assembled a picnic or how she used to wake me up in the sauciest way imaginable. The sweetness of these early memories turned acrid when I dwelled on what had followed.

Finally, Mel gave voice to what she knew: “We’ve spent a year and a half together, and suddenly, those memories are just mine. And I know that hurts you,” she said. “But it really, really hurts me.”

Sophie and I moved out of Mel’s apartment. An experiment. Dr. Pearl thought it was the right thing, might make me feel less like an invalid. But the move only accelerated my identity crisis. The walls of my little bedroom felt like a fierce enclosure. I began to view my forgetfulness as evidence that I wasn’t just insufficient but also, at some deep level, toxic. I was torn from an illusion of a stable, persistent self and left wondering whether there’d ever been one to begin with.

Passing workdays at my desk, I took inventory of my memory and compared it with outside evidence, and the discrepancies piled up. *Who ghostwrote this piece? I guess it was me.* A fine job. But how scary. It struck me, irrationally and forcefully, that this would now be my life: going through, getting through, finishing the story—and promptly forgetting, obliterating consciousness of my actions. It may sound dramatic, but in this period, I grew convinced that to be robbed of major memory is a direct wound to the third thing that mediates between intelligence and memory: Call it a soul.

For many days after returning to my apartment, I became struck with a strange and frantic new guilt. The simplest way I can put it is that I felt

distinctly as though I'd tried to commit a heinous crime. In dreams, I bared my soul to priests and judges and even once to a man who looked like Dickens. My night sweats, which began as a reaction to my medication, became flood-type events. Pearl didn't know what to make of it. "Perhaps you're mourning the child you haven't had?"

My cognition had improved enough that I could read, so I poked my nose into the old volumes of my library—and some of those books suggested a different possibility. I returned to the idiosyncratic critic Al Alvarez, who in 1971 published *The Savage God*, a sensitive and ruthlessly beautiful cultural history of suicide. In the late summer, I embraced Alvarez's companionship as constantly as Lucia's or Noah's. Alvarez had attempted suicide himself and was friends with one of the most famous suicides in twentieth-century American literature, Sylvia Plath. So he knew whereof he wrote. And he seemed to know where my consciousness of crime was coming from.

"A man may wish to kill only some aspect of himself under the illusion that its death will free some other part to live," Alvarez wrote, extrapolating the view of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. "What is at issue," he continued, "is not self-murder but an extreme act of placation which will restore some injured part of himself to health and enable it to flourish . . . He casts away his life in order properly to live."

On Zoom the next week, I read these passages and others to Dr. Pearl, who didn't seem to like them much. "He's one of these writers who thinks suicide is romantic?"

No, not at all, I tried to explain; he's starting from a place of compassion, which is the only way to understand suicide. "He's talking about failed suicide," I told Pearl. "He's saying that sometimes a person isn't trying to obliterate their whole self but instead, like, cut off one of the gangrenous parts."

"There are better ways," Pearl said drily.

Well, of course there are, I wanted to say. *Better not to be mad in the first place, if you want to go there.*

Pearl seemed to think that this kind of reading was dangerous, and I couldn't bring him around to the opposite possibility: that, through identification with failed suicides, I could make peace with the undeserved accident of my own survival. I hadn't ever tried to kill myself, not really. But on that shock table on the seventh floor of the hospital, I'd sacrificed

some bit of myself on the altar of the future. Now, as everything from my synapses to my nerve endings began to reacquaint themselves with the living world, I was ever more conscious of having gotten away with murder.

I wrote in my diary that the rest of that session with Pearl was pretty useless. My next phase of recovery, as I put it, would be "to repair and recover some sort of identity beyond *dude who is very, very sick*."

Maybe this all sounds abstract. But memory is the structure of the universe. Life begins with simple ions, then a duplicable set of ever more complicated genes, encoding the language of life. Even a black hole, in its tendrils of quantum hair, theoretically contains a record of everything that has passed through it. Life is information, conveyed. So memory is not merely the episodic experience of being a human but a fundamental organizing principle of all things.

Perhaps, if I could get some memories back, my feet would feel more firmly planted in the world.

I decided to track down some of my fellow patients from the psych ward. I got in touch with Catherine, the nice, quiet young Ivy Leaguer with whom I'd overlapped at the ward. It had been half a year or more since we'd met, but she responded promptly to my Facebook message and informed me that she was now a therapeutic counselor and case manager working with impoverished grade-schoolers in Massachusetts. I was nervous ahead of our call. Worried I'd pry, or ask the wrong questions, or trigger unpleasant memories. Who wants to dredge all that up?

But when I reached Catherine on the phone, she was happy, almost eager, to talk about the ward. I remembered little about what Catherine and I had said to each other back then, and we hadn't spoken since, so it was eerie to find how easy it was to talk with her. I suppose life on the ward felt like a shared secret, and while I'd forgotten a lot of that time, I still carried the experience.

We discussed the board games, the art therapy with crayons and charcoal (because who can commit suicide with a piece of charcoal?), the infrequent visits with social workers, the even less frequent visits with nurses and doctors. Catherine told me she'd written a formal complaint about the ward after her discharge, and she emailed it to me. It was a compelling and persuasive document, and I told her so.

“I definitely feel some level of pride in myself for having written to them at a time when my mental health was much more fragile than it is now,” she said. “I credit that experience as kind of giving me back some of my mojo. It was so clear to me how this ward was not doing right by the patients that it broke me out of some of the self-absorption that can come with depression.”

We kept coming back to Serena, the young woman who’d spoken so forthrightly about her addictions. “Serena was fascinating to me,” Catherine said. “We talked for a while each day. She’d spend time describing all these ways that heroin dependency opens up a different person inside of you who could control your actions.” *Shooting yourself with a needle, shooting yourself with a gun, same outcome*, Serena had said.

“How are *you*?” Catherine asked.

I told her I was fine, said the usual things about how recovery isn’t a straight line, how getting better brings its own challenges, but that I was clearly *better*. Miserable but not exactly depressed. “I do feel an overwhelming guilt,” I admitted. “Like I killed someone—even though I never even attempted suicide.” Except for Pearl, I hadn’t made this confession to anyone else.

Catherine exhaled heavily. “I get that, too,” she said. “I didn’t make a try, but I did stop eating, and I keep wanting to punish myself for it—for wasting food, wasting time, wasting everybody’s worry.” We’d both been so fearful of squandering something precious and had fretted about disappointing the people who only wanted us to get better.

Then Catherine told me more about her kindergarteners, of whom she sounded like a miraculously wise steward. She’d been considering a therapeutic career while in the ward. It sounded like her experiences at the hospital were informing her work in a deep and humane way.

We continued to keep up with each other as we returned to our respective selves. Catherine really did get it: the horrible self-absorption of the disease, the debts to others and to yourself, the therapeutic and moral necessity of getting outside yourself—even if that means letting go of the knowledge of what you’ve killed.

Through Internet sleuthing, Catherine and I both tried to determine what had happened to the others, especially Serena and Amara. But there’s no alumni network for graduates of the psych ward, and to date, the best we’ve managed has been to pray for each one.

One morning, I was regretting wasted time and memory more than usual. I looked for comfort in reading and was confronted with a sentence from Austrian poet Robert Hamerling: *"Was Du erlebst, kann keine Macht der Welt Dir rauben":* "What you have experienced, no power on Earth can take from you."

A pompous phrase, right? The sort of truism a megalomaniac might sew onto a throw pillow. No matter. It felt like a needed slap on the face. A call to action. I wanted to get that shit tattooed on my forehead, perhaps backward, so I could see it in the mirror every day. Of course, plenty of forces—electricity, for one—*can* steal our memories. But they can't steal our past. In a diary, I wrote: "Integration!!! It isn't just accommodating your present to your past and vice versa; it's also about accepting the lost you's that successively gave way to get you to this moment."

That day proceeded like any other: me at my particleboard desk, editing features, reading, sneaking in ten-minute sessions on the piano, spending a happy hour on the phone with Jane. But the Hamerling line stuck with me. I now think that I could have taken the needed impetus from practically anything: a word from Lucia, a quotation from one of the apostles, even the swaggering melody of a trumpet in a jazz song. What mattered was that my heart needed something and found it. The sinking feeling when I thought of the wasted time and wasted memories was only that—a feeling. What mattered wasn't recovering anything but merely living. The simplicity of the revelation left me without breath and, at least for a moment, without fear.

I became addictively active. I began lifting weights again, challenging myself with new chords and scales on the piano, bicycling, trying to show Mel some happy times.

ECT had granted me a second chance. When I started to think of that second chance as one more thing I was bound to ruin, I laughed and shook the thought out of my head. *All I can do is take good care.* Likewise, whenever all the family feelings came back from childhood—the guilt, the

shame, the dumb and persistent fervor to save the day—I tried to accept them as part of the furniture and often succeeded.

I knew that I was fortunate in many ways, beginning with my friends. And because I wasn't manic, or drunk, or experiencing psychosis, I didn't have a million people to whom I owed apologies for crashing their car, or starting a vicious argument, or hitting on their sister. I'd been a quiet, contrite depressive.

Just because I didn't have to apologize, though, didn't stop me from doing it. It feels awful to put your friends and family through such hell. So I went around apologizing to pretty much everyone, and after the apologies had sufficiently embarrassed everyone, I gently gathered intelligence on what, exactly, I'd been like while sick.

The answer wasn't fun. It was astonishing to fully take in how boring and myopic and small I'd become. Treatment and failure had been all I could think about. Consigned to a pendular alteration between terror and catatonia, I'd subjected my friends to the same extremes of fear and boredom. I'd become a professional invalid. "Very self-focused, almost with a bitter aspect," as Evan described me, looking back. "You weren't your best self," Lucia said with gracious understatement. "Tough hang" was Riggs's verdict. Knowing you've scared friends is bad; discovering how deeply you've bored them is mortifying.

Even worse was being sundered from Mel. She'd become the lone witness to our relationship. I knew how much it hurt her that I'd forgotten so much of life together before the ward. But there were some things that were harder to get back than memory. I'd spent so long in the dark that all of Mel's and my hoped-for futures now seemed to belong to someone else. With pain, I remembered falling in love with her, but it also seemed as though that memory belonged to someone who wasn't me. I can't say when I stopped loving her properly. I knew only that while my mind was busy losing itself, my heart had released its yearning for her. "I want to fall in love with her again," I told Lucia, "and I simply don't know how."

More practically, Mel still wanted children before anything else. I was glad to be non-suicidal but definitely didn't trust myself to volunteer for fatherhood. I was not yet so rash.

It was late August when I told Mel through tears that I loved her to pieces but no longer in the right way. "I think we have to break up." She asked me whether I remembered the last time I'd said those words.

I did, sort of. It wasn't long before the ward. I'd come to her apartment and told her I wanted her to be free, that I couldn't do children, couldn't do anything, really, and didn't want to drag her down with me. That perhaps I was too insane to be a steward of anyone's love. I'd told her: *I wish I could break up with my friends, release them*. How maudlin.

I'd held few convictions over the past year. The big one was: *You cannot kill yourself; it is not permitted*. The others, as I remembered then, were mainly about how I'd wanted to be worthy of Mel.

Now the one idea that oriented me was the knowledge that we had to split.

This time I apologized profusely for having wasted her time, for not saying yes to kids. She held me and told me to stop talking like that. "Conceiving on my own was always plan A," she said. "You would have been plan B."

In what seemed like a pattern for me—for how things often ended between Ted Scheinman and the women in his life—I hated myself for falling out of love with Mel. It was another blot on my character, a referendum on my future. Couldn't I make it work with anyone? "That feels to me like the wrong question," Aaron said. Another friend was blunter: "If you can't love her, that's not her fault, but it's also not yours."

I told them that failing in relationships made me feel like the least flattering caricature of Dad, the version I remembered with slumped shoulders in the cottage in Scotland, looking like a boy called to answer for the shortcomings of a man. Later in my recovery, I saw with belated (and humiliated) horror how closely my persistent inner monologue enacted a version of my family as it had existed before the divorce. That is, I'd cycled between feeling for the wounded, wronged woman (Mom/Mel); identifying with the man who felt able only to disappoint (Dad/me); and simply *knowing*, as the child (me/me), that it was my duty to mollify everyone and keep the peace.

I didn't trust Pearl to do much with this insight, so I broke up with him, gently; his skills and responsiveness had served me during ECT, but now I needed someone I could really talk to. Lucia recommended an ace analyst, an upbeat older lady named Dr. Potts who practices Lacanian psychoanalysis, a form of analysis that focuses on how language structures and organizes the unconscious.

I told Dr. Potts about this triad of inner monologues, and Potts said I was describing a set of "rotating identifications"—precisely the sort of unconscious structuring of the self that Lacanians love to examine.

I said it calmed me to recognize the pattern, and it seemed to slow things down. "Slow enough that I can take the watch apart," I said.

We peered inside the mechanism.

In one dimension, I wanted to let Melanie be free to go off and have kids instead of wasting time on me. In another, I was convinced that I *could* say yes to Mel, to kids, to life, if only I expunged the rot. I thought post-ECT Ted would be happy and could therefore love Mel fully; now my post-ECT self was moving steadily closer to happy—but was unable to love Mel. Wynne always said I was hung up on chivalric love, on saving the people I most cherished. It was a gut punch to recognize how I'd failed to save Mel from me.

The guilt persisted and brought an overwhelming sadness. Not a depressive spiral, thank heavens, but a heaving grief for the relationship, for the children Mel would have without me, for all the unremembered joys of our shared past and severed futures.

I knew then and could say at the time, without self-deprecation or self-glory, that breaking up was the best thing for us. Which made it no less miserable. But I also felt a little . . . relieved? If you've ever made a firm, lucid decision after a long period of darkness or even just fogginess, you may know the feeling. *I am capable of acting and not merely being acted upon. Once in a while, I know what is right.*

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Chapter 21

The Resilience of the Fig

I knew I was lucky, as lucky as any fool ever kissed by the sun, that I still had a voice in my head that wouldn't let up, saying that I will not be the cause of my end. The very guilt that had been such a poison was also, for me, a life-securing force: *I will not do this to my sister, goddammit. I won't do it to Melanie or Brian or Noah or the rest of them.* And anyway, I promised Paula at Joey's funeral.

Around friends, I became careful about when and how I sighed, even a sigh of relief. You always want to spare your friends the split second of fear, spare yourself the glint of mortification in their glance that says, *Is he okay?*

Mostly, yes.

I stayed dogged in exercise, in therapy, and in my latest medication regimen: For an SSRI, I'd now transitioned back to good old Zoloft with a dash of the anti-psychotic drug Seroquel at night (so much smoother than Abilify to me), and occasionally a low dose of Klonopin for heading off emergencies.

As Aaron observed, my mood kept getting better, and my personality began to return.

But the memories did not.

So I called Harold Sackeim, one of the greatest living authorities on ECT and one of the handful of heroes most responsible for fighting against the anti-psychiatric movement in the 1980s to keep electroshock available to patients like me.

"One of the things that's always intrigued me about this treatment is it's a laboratory for learning and memory," he said. While other ECT researchers have sometimes denied or downplayed the memory effects,

Sackeim was up front about them. Even by the late 1980s, he told me, he was warning patients that ECT "can have permanent memory effects."

Sackeim was also quick to add that these effects tend to be "worth it": "I've never seen a patient with catatonia that didn't get better."

We spoke for a while about ultra-brief pulses (ECT in micro-bursts that limit side effects) and transcranial magnetic stimulation (an even-less-intrusive process, using magnetotherapy to stimulate depressed neural activity) and whether different electro-stimulation techniques might ever approach the efficacy of ECT. We talked about why ECT gets such a bad rap and the various explanations for why ECT works. (Sackeim is in the school that considers the post-seizure brain changes to be more central to healing than the seizure itself.)

I also raised a paradoxical hypothesis that I'd wanted to test on him. "It sounds funny, but I've become convinced that if I'd gotten ECT earlier, I would've experienced far less memory loss."

Quite likely, Sackeim said. He brought up Lothar Kalinowsky, known as the father of ECT in the United States, who in the 1940s used to recommend a course of four shock treatments as suitable to bring a ruminative patient back to life. Then psychopharmacology began to take hold, and ECT was prescribed later and later in a course of depression, requiring more treatments, perhaps eight or ten, before signs of improvement. "Now people say it's around ten to twelve" treatments, Sackeim told me. "What we've done is essentially reserve ECT for the more and more resistant patients.

"When I first started seeing patients coming to ECT, the prototypic patient was severely depressed, probably like what you had gone through," he continued. "But they had a beautiful response early in their course and then were well for twenty years, thirty years. The prototypic patient now has been in episode for five, ten years." In such cases, means that ECT has to work harder to overcome a deeper depression.

Yet Sackeim also stressed the neural benefits that often come with the treatment. "Tons of cognitive functions improve dramatically with ECT. Basically, when you're depressed, it's really hard to learn new things; it's very hard to attend. You're so distracted by the things you're either worrying about, or you're agitated, pacing. And so you take in very little information about the world."

Finally, I asked him whether I should expect memories to return. He was admirably direct, didn't hem or haw like most other doctors I've asked about this.

"What I tell people is that if some things don't come back at six months, they're never coming back."

The highest chance of a depressive relapse is in the first six months after a treatment. I kept hoping that I might be one of those people who needs ECT once every few years or less. But I kept a go-bag ready (and still do), in case something slipped and I had to scuttle back into the psych ward.

But there was no slip. As the D.C. summer tipped into swampy autumn, I began to play live music again, rediscovering the pleasures of straightforward rock. I eased back in, filling in on piano in Jack's country band at Madam's Organ, a landmark of depravity on Eighteenth Street. The guys were easy on me, not blinking when I missed a cue or turned in a desultory solo on a George Strait song. An idea for a new band, sort of punk with quick bursts of slide guitar for the hooks, was beginning to percolate, too. It all felt very frivolous, but Dr. Potts said it's important to remember how to enjoy some foolish fun. Now that I'd begun to shed the weight of major depression, music was once again able to lift me, while this memory for keyboards and string instruments and vocal harmonies recalled to me a past that for many months had seemed nonsensical or compromised or worse. Harmony begets harmony.

I was still tapering my ECT treatments, down from thrice a week to one treatment a month. One of the first big feature stories I edited after returning to work was the tale of a lively, sometimes schismatic subculture of wild-fig collectors in California. David Burke, the main character in the story, sent me fig cuttings to plant in D.C.—"you won't believe how resilient they are," he wrote in an accompanying note. Burke fell in love with figs during a sort of Road to Damascus moment in 2019: Unemployed and driving back from a fruitless job interview, he spotted a hardy little fig growing improbably on the side of a state highway. As the author, Jacob Roberts, wrote in a first draft: "Its gnarled, spindly trunk burst out of solid rock, its branches laden with plump purple figs, flourishing where it had no

business being alive.” The hunt for these wild treasures restored a purpose to his life, Burke told my reporter. “Figs are survivors.”

As I pursued my own gnarled survival, some things still threw me. On a given early morning, I might spend several hours combing through my inbox and diaries, trying to reconstruct an episode from months before. As I followed these breadcrumbs into my past, inevitably, I got sidetracked, reading all sorts of things that reminded me only of how sick I was. Flipping through my journal from 2019, I was deeply unsettled to discover a two- or three-month-long relationship with a woman named Claire, before Melanie and I met. Seeing her name on the page, I could recall Claire’s smile, her hair and eyes and skin, the time she introduced me to *The Golden Girls* on her couch—but I couldn’t remember our dates, our conversations, or even how it ended.

In 2006, a Swiss-born poet studying in Minnesota named John Koenig began compiling a suite of neologisms that would help him evoke the modern world with a new precision. Koenig came to call this project *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. He went on to coin, and indeed mint, such novelties as “astrophe” (the yearning to explore other planets), “zenosyne” (the sense that time itself keeps accelerating), and “lachesism” (the desire to experience disaster). The entry I thought about most often, during those early months of recovery, was a 2012 addition: “anemoia,” the feeling of nostalgia for something you never experienced—for a time and place where you weren’t present. The word derives from the Greek words *ánemos* (wind) and *nóos* (mind), while also recalling “anemosis,” or “wind shake,” a nineteenth-century term for a tree twisting in a high wind until it looks like it’s bending over backward. (Arborists will also recognize “anemosis” as the term for the spacing between the rings of a tree trunk.)

In anemoia, a living thing, once healthy, becomes warped, perverse. It pretzels itself toward a past that is not its own. The term describes a trap, like Narcissus’ pond. We see ourselves in all things; during my recovery, I was struck by the knowledge that I was bent in a deep state of anemoia, pining for the memories obscured by my treatment. Yet in many of these lost moments, I was deeply ill and therefore at a remove from the conversation or concert or hike or what have you: keen to every inner abrasion, largely numb to the outside. Had I been truly present, then, in the memories I’d forgotten?

I eventually grew tired of such questions; grew convinced, in fact, that an obsession with these questions was hindering new life. Kant reminds us that “From such crooked timber as humankind is made of, nothing entirely straight can be made.” But I was sick of bending over backward. If I wished to avoid becoming warped and gnarled, I would have to let go of my anemoia, seek a new wind, and stand up on my own at last.

Around this time, I spent an afternoon convinced I was relapsing after a simple visit to Safeway. Amara came into my head, describing those enormous pallets of Froot Loops: *It’s the bulk aisle that sends me.* I surveyed the lakes’ worth of SpaghettiOs, the boxes of soap the size of a moped. I found myself starting to think in the old way: *Who would ever buy four pounds of Cap’n Crunch, or even a jumbo jar of pickles, with the certainty they’d be eaten?* Such purchases suggest an extraordinary faith in the future. I shoved a bag of arugula and some lentils and chicken sausage into a basket and paid and got the hell out of there. I did credit myself for taking the time to break a twenty-dollar bill and handed a tenner each to two dudes napping on the sidewalk outside.

On days like that, stuck between forgetfulness and still-brittle hope, I privately feared a deeper relapse. Lucia and I went on walks, sometimes pushing Phoebe in a stroller, other times just watching her roll around on a blanket in the park. Here in the grass, under the sun, more memories began to return, scattered and windblown, reminding me of moments from my deepest illness. In a sudden rush, I remembered weeping in a ball on Melanie’s couch when I had the place to myself with a gentle rain outside, perhaps six months before. The moment came back with such potency that I physically gulp.

Lucia handed me a napkin so I could dry my eyes, and I was mute with gratitude.

The doctors say that procedural memory isn’t affected in the same way as episodic memory. For example, ECT can rob you of having met your partner’s parents, or even of a whole month of your life, but it’s nearly impossible that it will rob you of your ability to ride a bike.

I became greedy for procedural memory. Like a hoarder, I collected and cached away new bits of skill and muscle training to tether me to something firm, if and when autobiographical memory failed again. Lifting weights, I worked to rediscover what trainers refer to as the mind-muscle connection, and I kept putting on more muscle, a shield against future illness and general decrepitude. And because a gym is a gym is a gym, I was transported, happily and otherwise, to times in North Carolina or California, before the worst of my depression, when I'd sweated my ass off to sculpt this or that. "Vanity can help sanity," as Lucia said. (I think it was Lucia. It *sounds* like Lucia.)

But most of my procedural memory caching took the form of *accomplishments*—slide guitar, jazz piano, anything with a learning curve. I taught myself to conjure the iridescent, impressionistic beauty of Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" and the elegant, strutting octaves of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Dutiful and often ham-fisted, I worked my way through the standards of Duke Ellington and the unstandards of Thelonious Monk. I stashed away these skills so that, if my memory should encounter any future shock, I'd have an ever richer library of tricks to bring me back.

Melanie and I stayed remarkably close as exes, ignoring the ease with which we might have slipped back into each other's arms, and after a while, we got good at it. For the next year or so, we usually had dinner once or twice a week. At Mel's suggestion, I began rereading old English and Latin texts that used to make me laugh in college and grad school. It proved an inspired piece of advice. Rereading Fitzgerald, then Dickens, then Horace, then the always hilarious Petronius, I began to remember all the people I'd ben when I first read these books, in the false castles of Yale and atop the sunny hills of Lakeville and even in London, above the ruins of Beatrix Potter's childhood home. A further small but important bit of myself returned when I marshaled some of this reading into a long freelance essay, about Petronius' unlikely lessons for staying sane in a mad world. I pitched the piece at 1,200 words and delivered around 5,500, and my editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books* changed three sentences and otherwise ran the thing as is.

The final paragraph of the piece was my first public admission of ECT. Friends and strangers began to email me about it, and the emails read like

whispers. “My mother got electroshock, but never wanted to admit it to anyone.” Or “My sister is beginning ECT. Is it ok if she emails you?”

“Of course,” I responded. Soon I was an unofficial sponsor to a few people considering ECT. Not overstepping my bounds. Just answering questions as purposefully and constructively as possible. Never advocating any specific course. Simply offering a view from the other side of the tunnel.

As I read the warm responses to the essay, I felt a noticeable lightening, a reprieve. I’ve been exonerated from a murder charge: The alleged victim has walked into the courtroom, head held high, reciting Petronius. *I’m a new man, but I’m the same ridiculous figure I’ve always been. I am, in a sense, free.*

As I kept coaching a handful of ECT aspirants, Dad, who sympathizes with my memory challenges, recommended a book by Charles Fernyhough, the amiable British psychologist. It’s called *Pieces of Light: How the New Science of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell About Our Pasts,* and if you happen to have a memory disorder, reading Fernyhough is invigorating —and comforting. As a scholar and a humanist, he shows a deep understanding of amnesiacs, who “are caught between two identities, without the ability really to inhabit either.” Fernyhough says we can look for hope in the associative nature of memory. Each memory exists as a network, drawing from various parts of the brain to constitute and reconstitute itself. In depression, those networks begin to fray. But just as associative memories thrive when activated internally, company stirs memory in measurable ways. Fernyhough observes that remembering is “a social process”: “it happens in collaboration with other people.”

A truism, perhaps. But it’s true. Talking with Brian brings up all sorts of little things I never would’ve expected: the time I met Zuri in Aaron’s backyard and the mischievous way she kept trying to pull the hood off my jacket, and the smell of barbecue from a few houses down, and the extra-long hug Brian bestowed on me before we parted ways. Talking with Lucia recalls me to old, sad afternoons in the garden with Phoebe outside my apartment. How Lucia comforted Mel while Phoebe, in her way, comforted

me. How one songbird sounded so angry, so indignant. How Lucia tried so many different ways to feed me when I was sick.

"Memory is not just about remembering the past or predicting the future," Fernyhough writes; "it is also a way of being with other people. If you lose memory, you lose that opportunity to connect." Relearning your connections with friends is the outward expression, catalyzing and nurturing new neural connections the inward. Sackeim once mentioned to me that remission statistics among depressives with strong kinship circles are much higher than among patients who are more isolated. It's not an accident that memory, too, benefits from sustained, loving company. I think of a compromised memory as a static page, and a healthy memory as one with hyperlinks, connected by invisible threads of logic and fellowship. Socializing is the shortest path to remembering and the surest way to reestablish your sane, functional self. Recovering your ability to socialize, to joke, to act, to help, is the single greatest thing you can do to restore personality and memory and joy.

In early October, a week removed from my last ECT maintenance treatment, I was cleared to drive, so I visited Jane, Jim, and Theo in Boston. There, in a belated nativity scene, I bowed to Theo, now ten months old, and began to make his acquaintance. *I would die for this kid*, I thought within minutes of meeting him. I plopped him in my lap so we're face-to-face, and he surveyed me pensively, then thoughtfully tried to remove my nose. I thought about Mom's anxiety, about Jane's brushes with depression, and wondered what predispositions Theo might have, scrawled genetically or epigenetically in his physical being, and whether we pass down some memories silently.

But he seemed pretty well adjusted. At least for a baby.

Jane was long out of the worst of her postpartum depression. Pushing the stroller like an old pro, she told me about conversations I don't remember from early this year, when I'd tried to comfort her. The SSRI was working pretty well, she says. The world didn't have as fearsome an aspect as it did in the first two or three months after Theo was born. Then she whispered to me, as though it was a shameful admission: "I think I might be . . . a good mom?"

Why are we always the last to see the truth about ourselves? I hugged her tight. As we walked, *some* of our old conversations start to come back. Advice about tricyclic antidepressants. Whispered concerns about Mom's health and mobility. How very badly I'd wanted to avoid hurting Jane—a big reason why I never hurt myself.

That night, I read Theo to sleep, and Jane cried watching us because there was a time when she'd feared we'd never meet. On Monday I returned to D.C. with one more strong reason to stick around. To imitate the humble fig—surviving, improbably, magnificently.

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Epilogue

Against the Past

“My children are going to think I’m crazy.”

It’s November 2022, and I’m on the phone with Jillian, who doesn’t remember that we talked yesterday, or the day before, and who is leaning toward skipping out on ECT tomorrow, perhaps forever. She has me worried.

“Your children just want you to get better,” I tell her.

“Before you called, I looked down at a pile of folded linens and asked who folded them. It was *me*, Ted. I did it yesterday. Now Thanksgiving is coming up, and I can’t even cook.”

Jillian is a woman from my hometown, younger than my mother but with children around my age. The family used to live right across the street in the tiny town where I grew up. Playing stickball with my sister in our yard on a good day back in 1996, I’d send a tennis ball streaking off my broom-handle bat directly into one of the windows on the second floor of their house. Jillian got in touch with me for the first time in twenty-five years because she was beginning ECT, and Mom told her I’d be happy to field questions.

Ever since, it’s been wrenching to hear about Jillian’s suffering, all the more so because she recently underwent major spinal surgery, so she’s already in a lot of chronic pain. Jillian is the first of several ECT cases I will counsel closely, in person, and perhaps as a result I feel a deep personal stake in her recovery. My remission is only a year old, after all. I know that ECT works. But I also want to see what it’s like from the outside—and I pray that Jillian and I can each, in our way, offer the other sufficient hope.

Jillian’s most frequent question is: *Did* you *have memory loss like this?* Each time she asks, I remind her gently that I know very much what she’s

talking about. I tell her about my own experiences of disorientation, of feeling foreign or unknowable to myself. I say honestly that ECT was an incalculable blessing in my case. Mostly, I listen—to her fears that her children think she's a "lost cause," her anxieties about being a burden, her self-consciousness about appearing insane.

The texts keep coming in, sometimes repeating verbatim lines from a phone conversation the day before:

I wake up confused and terrified.

Who cooked this? Who made that bed? Who took that nap?

At the hospital. I'm having a hard time retaining the information. These treatments are really affecting my memory and I don't know if I want to continue . . . I skipped today's treatment. My next treatment would be Weds and the follow-up on Friday. I have time to think about it. I know it would be a shame but I don't feel like they're helping me.

I don't remember half of this past week. The thought of going back on Wednesday distresses me.

Did you wonder who you were?

I respond: "The shitty thing is that it feels awful until it finally works—which could be another week and a half or perhaps more. You've already done so much work in the acute phase . . . How do you feel about trying just one more week?"

I know how she feels, or I think I do. One way of describing the paradox of individual experience is that we're chained for life to a semi-stranger whom we can neither escape nor fully understand. That paradox, to put it lightly, is heightened for people like Jillian and me. With any somatic treatment, you're changing your brain in some fundamental ways: marinating in glutamate, ego-deathing, inhibiting (selectively!) the reuptake of prized neurotransmitters, locking yourself away from the world, finally zapping your brain to make it convulse, and grow, and heal. By the end, you might not feel much like yourself.

I start to feel that my continued remission is bound up with Jillian's.

On the next call: “I don’t know. The kids all think I’m a parasite. I can hardly even make my own food. They’re sick of me.”

“No one thinks you’re a parasite, you’re just ill. If you were in bed with a broken leg, or Covid, or after heart surgery, would you worry about being a parasite?” It’s a point I’ve made three or four times already, in earlier and equally delicate phone conversations. (That’s one benefit of hanging out with folks as they go through ECT—you can repeat your material and get a fresh reaction each time.)

Jillian issues a “hm,” as she did last time, and then: “You’re right. Am I being paranoid?”

“A little, and relatably so. But your children are not sick of you.”

“They say I’m seeming so much better, and it just makes me feel terrible. If anything, I feel worse.”

Jillian listens as I tell her I had those same fears, felt like a parasite, worried the treatments wouldn’t work and might in fact make me worse. It’s a gentle but fervent case for her to continue the treatment. “You’re so close,” I keep saying. “I won’t tell you what to do. But I know that you’re so close.”

That evening, I write to Jillian again. “I wanted to say again that I’m truly here whenever. One thing that stuck with me from our call is how people keep telling you that you ‘seem much better,’ etc., and I know how hearing that can be demoralizing, and I guess I wanted to say that I hope you’re not hiding *too* much sadness . . . Especially since you describe continued suicidal ideation, I wanted to overstep perhaps and recommend being open about those thoughts, not just with your psychiatrist but also with a couple of friends whom you trust. Of course you’re probably doing this already.”

Jillian decides to continue her ECT. Within a month, she experiences an extraordinary remission from her depressive symptoms. She tells me that some of the memories that were previously beclouded have returned. The other memories, the ones that haven’t come back, she doesn’t speak about, but Jillian joyously describes feeling like the treatments have *returned her to herself*. When I visit that Christmas, Jillian serves me tea in a homemade mug and smiles, moving from her chair to the couch so she can hug me. She asks if I’m doing well. I am. She talks of turkeys and ovens and how happy her kids are to see her happy. For a period, she won’t stop thanking me. Hearing that Jillian has gotten back both her capacity for happiness and her

bedrock sense of identity gives me a funny, rather unfamiliar feeling that I belatedly identify as joy.

Mel begins shuttling back and forth to Milwaukee every couple of months to collect samples from her sperm donor. She has a lot of colorful stories about messing up with the insemination syringe, or how one time she and her donor trusted FedEx and the contents spilled, leaving the package rank and sodden when it arrived. At work, she does a major national news appearance that we celebrate with a special dinner. Eventually, she discovers that she's pregnant with Ian, who turns out to be a beautiful big-faced boy. Her donor, like Mel and me, has blue eyes, and so does Ian. He's a delight. I'm fiercely proud of Mel. And I'm surprisingly protective toward little Ian.

Going through amnesia, even limited or temporary, teaches you a few things. For one, I have a new sympathy for Dad. He was always absent-minded in a way that stressed me out. Now we share an unsure grip on the past. It's so easy to blank, to zone out, to forget what someone just told you. Maybe I should cut him some slack.

I travel north to spend a weekend with Dad, to present my new self for appraisal. I want him to see how better I am. One afternoon before sunset, we go out on Skaneateles Lake in a small sailboat. We talk about Fernyhough and memory recuperation as the sky starts to paint itself. A team of ducks takes flight, creating a ragged cloud across the pinkening sky. I want to hold onto this day, but I still don't trust my memory. So I ask Dad if he minds my taping the conversation. He nods and smiles, and I click record.

We head for the middle of the lake. Dad has me pull some rigging or other, and I do my best with the white ropes. I think I know why we're sometimes distant, he and I. It's not any grudge. A straggler duck bobs alongside us as we pass.

Fact is, I remind him of Mom. Exacting, parsing, impatient, high-strung. Dad doesn't resent me for it. But I've seen him shift into a protective mode when I get opinionated about something. And I don't want that. He talks

about my mind as though it's some mysterious wonder—in part because he never quite cracked Mom.

I think my own side of the problem is even simpler: When the pain of living is too much, sometimes you're tempted to resent the people who gave you life.

When I'd phone him during my sickness, Dad tells me, he'd often be standing at a window, watching the movement on this lake, asking himself how to keep me afloat, as it were. I ask whether he was scared I might actually hurt myself.

Dad breathes hard, marshaling his words. "I trusted you," he says. "You seemed to have so much insight into what was happening that when you told me that you weren't feeling suicidal, I really believed it. I think you were completely honest in those conversations."

I apologize for worrying him and for worrying Jane. We're in the middle of the lake, and I make a throwaway joke about the ducks that sends Dad into immoderate laughter. (These days he's thrilled when I make a joke; he thinks it's the clearest proof of remission.) The sky has become a riot of pastels. Dad asks: "Honestly, you wanna know what I did when I did worry?"

"What?"

"I read your writing. The emails you sent, but also your first book, the Austen one, and a bunch of your essays."

"Oh no," I say, and feel every internal organ cringe. "Why would you do that?"

Dad speaks carefully, and there's a mist in his eyes. "A characteristic of your writing is that even when you're reporting about something terrifying, like climate change or addiction, there's hope. There's an inherently optimistic vein in you."

I think of Dad's own optimism and how I distrusted it for so long. It was foreign to me and seemed hopelessly wishful. Now I can hardly stand the weight of revelation: Whatever shreds of optimism or blind hope that served me in my illness are in large part an inheritance from Dad.

A childlike love for Dad rises within me. It's always been there. But at times I denied it to him, perhaps as punishment for the ideal family he'd accidentally denied to me. My occasional discomfort around him, I see now, is partly simple misery at what I've made of our relationship. *God I'm lucky we're both still alive*, I think. And in my halting way, I say some of

these things right here in the boat—because it's better than saying them too late. I apologize for judging him, for being difficult, for occasionally keeping his love at arm's length. Dad listens with a look of forgiveness and such dawning euphoria, you'd think I'd just given him a new grandchild.

We resolve to be better friends. We even start a two-person book club. For our first title, we take up *Don Quixote*, in the Edith Grossman translation. It is a tale of madness and sadism—and of an optimism that carries the resilient Quixote and Sancho through every trial. Perhaps their optimism is inseparable from the madness. Certainly, optimism is the madness that holds them together.

When you're sufficiently medicated, the primary emotions can grow muted or distant. I begin to tell myself that perhaps I've exchanged the deepest feelings for a set of gentler, more retiring ones: Joy becomes amusement, love becomes fondness, loss becomes wistfulness, and so forth. For a period, I accept this trade. Perhaps life will now be safe and boring and reasonably pleasant, a little lonely, a little cramped.

That all changes when I get a note from Tara, who dated me briefly in 2019 and left a major impression. I remember her absolutely besotting eyes, her lively jet-black humor, her elegant way of playing with words, her serious adventurous streak. (That I can remember her so vividly, when I've forgotten so much else from that period, seems telling.) I respond with assumed nonchalance, saying it's good to hear from her and suggesting drinks, and we end that first night rolling in the grass at Crispus Attucks Park, where her brown eyes act on me like a tractor beam. A few days after we start dating again, we book budget tickets to Reykjavik on a whim and spend the days hiking and bathing in sulfuric springs. We sleep little, straining to stay awake until that briefest moment of dark. One night, she murmurs to me: "This is the kind of chemistry where, if we'd met four hundred years ago, we still would've ended up together." I wonder whether maybe we *did* meet centuries ago and the process of reincarnation required us to forget. So now we get to experience this ancient and ordained love all over again. With graceful assurance, Tara leads me back into life and then, miraculously, into happiness—the deepest happiness I can remember since long before the zaps. Tara's effect on me is, if you'll permit, electric.

We move in together after six months or so, to her row house near Mount Vernon Triangle, where we serve as mediators between Sophie, my cat, and Tara's ultra-tiny Yorkie, who labors under the name of Ulysses. When we're not playing music or lolling with books in the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks in Georgetown, we're visiting Aaron and Carina to hang with their kids, or driving to Maine, where Lucia and Alex now live, to check on them and Phoebe, or retreating to Jack's cabin in West Virginia to hike, play music until dawn, and maybe do a little target practice. About four times a year, we visit Jane and Jim and Theo. Before long, Theo is joined by a sister, Nora. One time while watching Tara goofing with Theo on the playground, Jane turns to me and says: "They wouldn't say no to some more cousins."

It's less than a year since Mel and I broke up, and while she's sweet about Tara, even happy for me, Mel is sent into a brief depression of her own while watching the new spontaneity and adventurousness that Tara elicits from me. *Why couldn't he summon more of that with me?* But of course, she has too much tact to say it out loud. Our dinners become less frequent. Among my many debts to her, I now owe her some distance.

A couple of years later. It's 2025. Mom spends the first months of the year dying of a sudden cancer that sets a Usain Bolt–level record for speed. Tara and I move briefly to upstate New York to help care for her, and toward the end of the period when Mom can still talk, she loves talking to Tara more than anyone. In private one day during a hospital visit, I confide in Mom that I'll be popping the question. I'm not sure I've ever seen her happier. Even with Mom's cognition slipping, she manages to keep the secret from Tara and even from Jane, who joins us when she's able to get away from her teaching job. Tara bowls me over with her kindness to Mom.

Once the cancer spreads to your liver and your liver starts dying, it makes you someone else. You might become mean. Certain tics will be exaggerated. When Mom does stir or animate, it's over some point of anxiety: Should she be cooking? Trying harder in some way? She's terribly vexed over everything and nothing, bitter and on edge despite formidable doses of multiple opioids. Seeing Mom's anxiety so accentuated and stripped of all compensation, I marvel at how she harnessed and rode that anxiety, how she found a way to use it as fuel through so much gardening

and cooking and teaching and mothering, so much hard, plain daily work. How much stronger she is than I. How much more gracefully she has borne it.

Mom opens her eyes little toward the end, save for an occasional look of horror and a rare moan. Memory has betrayed her and finally language, too. She made a career and a whole life out of language. To see her stripped of it is like watching a musician lose his hearing. The last sentence I understand from her comes when the local Episcopal priest, Reverend Brooks Cato, is administering last rites. She asks: “Do we need a witness?” And Brooks says, in his sweet Arkansas way, “No, sweetheart, we got everyone we need right here.”

The funeral is worthy of Mom. Jane reads with heartbreaking gentleness from *The Wind in the Willows*. I read with a tight throat from John Dryden’s “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day, 1687.” The pews are full. Brooks smiles through tears during his sermon. Like the rest of us, he’s a bit in awe of Mom. In the front pew, Tara holds my hand while I weep freely, shaking with sobs as I remember the last time Mom’s forehead was warm when I kissed it. At one point Tara leans toward me, her forehead against mine, and bathes her willing face in my tears. What have I done to deserve such grace? Tara keeps my hand in hers as we walk to the plot behind the church to plant the ashes, and the priest reads from Psalm 103: “As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone: and the place thereof shall know it no more.”

If we remember too much, like Funes the Memorious, then we will go mad. Nietzsche affirms: “It is possible to live with almost no memories, even to live happily, as the animal shows: but without forgetting it is quite impossible to live at all.” Grief is a rebellious exercise, a rejection of the forgetting that we need in order to live. Yet because we are perverse, and human, Jane and Tara and I do our best to keep Mom’s memory animated, alive. In this regard, I am particularly zealous, taking care to record every moment from the hospice period in my journal. It’s a project guaranteed to produce heartache: As I create a record of Mom’s last days, I find myself longing for a month ago, a week ago, even though I know that Mom was in agony every second. Grief makes us so very selfish.

It will be a while before I resume living as Mom would want me to.

No matter what you do, when a mother dies, a lot of memory passes with her from the earth. The rest of us are left to rebuild with a shortfall of

material.

A month after the funeral, I locate a handsome copy of the Warren Report—that famous and much disputed work of history, or fiction, depending on whom you ask. Tara, a lawyer specializing in congressional investigations, also nurses a charming obsession with conspiracy theories, and I've decided that my best bet for proposing will involve a degree of campy novelty.

The dust jacket is intact, and I carefully remove it before I begin my violation of the book. First, I use a paintbrush to spread watery glue along the outside edges of the pages and wait for it to dry. Slowly (over several days, because the Warren Report is long), I use a box cutter to carve out a cube from the book's pages, three inches on each side. After a bit, I exchange the box cutter for an X-Acto knife, to slice the deeper pages. By the time I hit bedrock, the excised pieces of the Warren Report have formed snowdrifts on the floor around my chair.

Once the cutting is done, I line the carved compartment in the book with a bit of red velvet. The hole I've cut is just large enough to conceal a small flip-lid box. Inside the box, I place a tiny diamond ring that Dad gave to Mom when I was born. I lead Tara to Crispus Attucks Park, site of our second first date, and hand her the book, casual-like. "No one ever reads the Warren Report anymore," I say airily, "how can they know what's inside?" Tara opens the book and can't speak for surprise. I lower myself onto a knee and say something about how I love her fierceness and gentleness and sense of humor and sense of justice, and how I want nothing more than to greet the mysteries and lies of the world together with her. Once Tara can speak, she says yes.

The next week, Tara's boss accuses me jokingly of having "defaced the Warren Report." Which is funny, given how the Warren Commission was itself accused of defacing truth and history. But the boss wasn't wrong. I literally cut a hole in a piece of history to create space for something new.

Because what is art or life if not vandalism against the past?

Mom kept telling me to write this book. So finally, I say sure, I'll try. Maybe she was right. Maybe it can help someone. Whether or not they get zapped, whether or not they get depressed. Maybe they have a memory disorder or a family member with one. Maybe they just want a success story—and though ECT has millions of success stories, most tend not to crow about it.

Anti-ECT voices continue to prattle on about brain damage and memory loss. I wish more people would talk to some of us who have undergone the treatment. Depression is leagues more dangerous than ECT. Even at its most demanding, modern ECT offers the rare chance to trade a finite bit of one's past for the seemingly infinite sweep of the future. Having made that trade myself, I can testify that it's deeply confounding and often scary, that it sends you down all sorts of paths trying to find where you might've left yourself. But I can also testify that losing those memories was the best decision of my life.

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A Note on Methodology

This book is a memoir and a report into unmemory. The illness I describe, and the dramatic treatments that saved me from it, have colluded to distort many of my recollections from late 2020 into early fall 2021. In some of the most difficult portions, I was not meaningfully present, and in others I simply don't recall having been that person in that room.

To tell the story truly and in full has therefore required a lot of reporting with everyone who knew me then. I conducted around a hundred hours of interviews with friends and family, and dozens more with my doctors; reviewed five hundred plus pages of medical records, in some cases dating back more than thirty years; reviewed lo-fi audio of those sessions which Dr. Wynne allowed me to record; and collated and triangulated diary accounts—my own diaries dating to when I was five, the diaries of friends, and, perhaps most obligingly, the diary of my girlfriend in the period of my deepest illness. Her generous support of me never wavered, not while we dated and not in our friendship since. The dialogue in the book draws closely on each of these sources. Much is verbatim; the rest is as close to verbatim as can be reasonably expected.

Electricity can beget fellowship, and I was lucky to spend time with a good number of other ECT patients, some of whom I sponsored through their treatment. They've offered crucial perspectives. (Many of these fellow combatants bear pseudonyms in the book, but no characters are composites.) I also interviewed the physicians and researchers whose insistence on telling the truth about ECT's efficacy and side effects has been singularly responsible for preserving the practice in the years when it faced stiff resistance. (With the exception of my childhood psychologist, all my personal therapists appear under pseudonyms and suppressing some personal details.)

Of course, I've tried to fashion a self in this book, and that self-fashioning has been more than a literary exercise. It was a crucial part of

my recovery. Anyone who has lost memory, or whose family members have lost memory, will know what I mean.

As for those interviews with my friends and family: It can take many people to save a life—and then you show up with a microphone and berate them with questions. These interviews have been painful, particularly in what they revealed about the depths of my loved ones' fears for me. They've also been humbling. If my recovery, and the electricity that powered it, have left me one gift more important than the others, it is the capacity, belatedly, to return the love so amply shown me when I retreated into a cavernous darkness. I have changed the names of some people to preserve their privacy.

E . . . C . . . T—people still look at me funny when I say those three letters. "Wait, that's still a thing?" And quite often: "Did they give you a choice?" More than once, I've gotten a startled look—weave a circle 'round him twice, and all that—behind which I can tell the person's brain is making an assessment: *Is he dangerous? Should he be in an asylum?* (Answers: no; and: been there, done that.) One time I caught someone examining my temples for telltale signs of singeing. In any case, those three letters are a durable way of bringing cocktail parties to a screeching halt. Sometimes folks will surprise you with a secondhand familiarity: "my great-aunt" or "my grandfather" or, occasionally, "my mother." It does tend to be an elderly relative, as shock treatment hasn't been fashionable for a long time. My friend Lucia captured the dated nature of the treatment with typical devastating simplicity: "Of course you did ECT, you're old-fashioned and essentially a midcentury figure—I'm surprised you skipped strict Freudianism."

In short, people still don't know quite what to do with the singsongy rhyme of "ECT"—largely because a successful coalition of anti-ECT zealots have spent the past half-decade or more waging an uncompromising campaign against the treatment, nearly driving it from the earth. I am reminded of the enduring success of this campaign whenever I get one of those seeking stares, the ones that say, *Isn't that just a high-tech lobotomy?*

To help demystify this treatment that has saved so many lives over the past eight decades and more, and to spare myself having to trot out the same mollifying shtick every weekend, I've written this book.

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