

**SIM  
ONE**



**S I M  
O N E**

**A LOVE AND  
THEN-WHAT-HAPPENS STORY**

**T O M   A H E R N**

*MyTommy*

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First edition

*More than thirty thousand visitors  
shared time with Sim One via her tribute  
site on [CaringBridge.org](http://CaringBridge.org). This is for them.  
A celebration of a loud life fiercely lived,  
with style and unruly hair.*



*Simone sent me an email.  
The subject line: "Just read."*



*“In airplane. Watching you  
sleep. I love you. You are what  
is dearest in my life. You are  
so special and and and . . .  
Thank you for being with me.  
Your Sim One.”*



# THE END . . .

## DEAR DIARY . . .

You can tell Dear Diary anything, right? Sacred, scared, sealed. You can safely tell a diary those bitsy things you'd never admit to the world or to friends or to family . . . never utter in the confessional (I was raised Catholic, always lied to the priest) . . . never admit to anyone except Seamus (shame-us), that truth-sucking demon in your head who deplores your existence every night (another definition of deep depression).

“Dear Diary . . .”

And then there's this admission by the remarkable Terry Tempest Williams: “As a writer, I have learned that each time I pick up my pencil I betray someone.”

Right there with you, Ms. Williams. I can't keep my trap shut.

Hello again, my Sim One.



# ACT 4

Questions of the day:

**Why her? Why now?**

Fill in your own blanks on those two. My puzzle's full. Living alone sucks. Next question?



# CHAPTER 1

7:07 a.m.

“Tommy, it’s me. I’m happy!” Sim One says.

Simone Joyaux. My wife for thirty-seven years, her death certificate confirms. Sim One is her favorite nickname.

“Tommy, it’s me,” she insists. Clearly. In my ear. Today. Though, bureaucratically speaking, she’s been dead for more than nineteen months.

The house we built together in the country as our work-and-play pen has many windows, no curtains; there’s a sleep mask handy on the side table. And just as dawn starts to knock on today, she’s bounced brightly into our bedroom to share: “Tommy, it’s me. I’m happy!”

Simone’s letting me know she’s still around and that something’s changed for her, for the better. Physically dead but otherwise, you know, not so bad. . . .

Then she laughs loudly. Not a giggle: a pleased laugh! With joy. Without pain. The same strong, steady, let’s-get-something-done

doorbell voice that made our life together for thirty-seven years a true love . . . yeah, warts and all.

A trusted voice I haven't heard in real time for almost two years. "Tommy, it's me. I'm happy!" *I'm alive*. She's supposed to be dead. She's mortal. Blood no longer sings in her veins. Injustice no longer insults her. Worry no longer flogs her face to wrinkles. She can't kiss me back.

She's supposed to be dead. Done. Done enough. There's proof. I have a hefty box of her cremated ashes next to me, in a rucksack, on the bed. We call it "SIAB": Simone in a Box. I use SIAB as a writing desk, as a weight for arm lifts, as a companion on hikes.

Still, I'm pretty sure I actually just heard Simone speak to me. I pray a second . . . a secular, existentialist sort of prayer.

Say aloud to our bedroom at dawn: "Want to do that again, please?"

# ACT 1



## CHAPTER 2

# Stuff we no longer do together

“You’re my ‘right,’” I remind her.

Our car slows to a country stop. Watch for deer.

When I drive, Simone has a permanent, ’til-death-do-us-part assignment. She’s in charge of reporting on traffic coming from my blind side.

In America, my blind side is on the right. We’ve managed it the other way around, too, with close shaves in Ireland, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand.

We’re back in America, a few miles from our US home.

Dusk. Coming up on a choke point.

Here, three roads converge into one. There are Stop signs all over the place, imploring, pointing up into space (it’s a traffic joke, except *we could die!*). This particular intersection gives me goose bumps. Old trauma: I was in an accident (my fault) at a similar intersection a long time ago.

But Sim One’s careful, trustworthy to a fault.

She has always been my “official other.” Driving in Australia and the rest, driving on the “wrong” side of the road (against muscle memory) requires OTHER eyes—four, not two. Since we both wear glasses, call it eight eyes.

This intersection at dusk is local, in the US. Nothing to be seen for miles. Still, I remind her: “Simone, YOU are my *right*.”

And so we survive as a traveling couple in our homeland, aging hands on controls, aging eyes spooked in all directions.

Simone’s in the passenger seat, on the other side of the console.

Her fingers trace mine. We touch hands a lot.

Mostly I drive, here in America and in France, where we have a second home. She gets to gaze. BUT she’s *also* the DJ. She curates our CDs.

Her top choice for the last year or so: classic rock. For some reason, Meat Loaf’s 1977 anthem “Bat Out of Hell” lights her up. We boost the volume beyond polite. Open the side windows, the rooftop.

Simone shouts the lyrics. Her avowed purpose: “I want people to see me and think, *Look how cool that old lady is.*”

Live long enough? Your wishes will seem pathetic, too.

Then we listen to Springsteen. Then to Nobel laureate Dylan. She’s also in charge of dispensing peppermint Altoids, the “curiously strong mints.”

Sim One’s a frequent re-minter; every half hour, she offers up the fire-engine-red tin. She likes to place the mint on my tongue as I drive, so I can keep my hands at nine and three, as the feds recommend (to accommodate air bags; back in the day, it was ten and two).

As our chief vehicular-safety officer, Simone’s in charge of making sure the coast is clear.

“You’re fine,” she says, at this moment, at this intersection. “No one’s coming.” I swing out at full speed without a second glance.

## CHAPTER 3

# What the soul is

You've already read Sim One's note to me *par avion*???" "You are so special and and and . . ."

"And and and . . ." became her favorite way of closing a burst of correspondence. Promising a treasure chest of important things to say, if there were only eloquence and enough time to spare.

There was time to spare.

Sim One's to-do lists could circle the planet, if you cared about time zones; that was part of her. She also conspicuously, ardently loved her family and friends. Forever. Staying in close, close touch: birthdays, graduations, life events, anniversaries, dinners, lunches, breakfasts, trips, meetups with beloved colleagues at conferences.

She said out loud and clear: "You are so special. . . ."

That was a lesson from her wand.

Now it's your turn and mine. Say this often and memorably and loudly . . . to "you know who(m)." To many a "you know who(m)." To as many as you can find. "You are so special. Thank you for being with me" is the newsprint lining my shoes . . . from that special, awkward,

awful day forward when Sim One's lips no longer responded to my lips' press.

"I don't know what a soul is!"

Wise witch (therapist #3) asked the obvious: "Did she kiss you back once the professionals declared her dead?"

No.

"That's her soul. When she didn't kiss you back, her soul had left her body."

But I have more to say, sweet Petey (we daubed dozens of nicknames on each other) . . . and and and there's so so so much more to say . . . and can now only be said by keystrokes. Radio silence. Battery dead; let's go back to bed. Mortality interference code 1.

When all else fails, write a book.

This is my Sim One book.

Books are something we did together. We coauthored one big doorstep; it still sells to college classrooms. The rest were solos: a cottage industry. Us updating what we thought we'd learned; more than a dozen books between us . . .

We wrote books. Traveled: learn, teach, vice versa. Be generally helpful, if possible. That was always Simone's core dream—to teach. Privately, we called it Joyaux/Ahern University, a concoction. A wobbly joke from our couch. We didn't have a campus.

Our little university was no more than a great collection of luggage: *This* is suitable for overnight, *suitable* for three days, ten days, a month (that would be us going to France). Our little uni also had an admirable, seasonal collection of Sim One's outfits: tailored, dramatic clothing purchased because she would be on stage for an hour or more . . . and people had to stare at something.

## CHAPTER 4

# Sim One's public declaration

She said this every chance she got.

Gospel.

Her time, her experience, her forthright genitalia, her staunch existentialist upbringing learned at the breakfast table. Simone arose in front of her audience. Legs in interesting hose and a very loud, embracing voice. Her stump speech. “My perspective. WHY you’re hearing what you are about to hear.”

Her audiences were not 100 percent receptive. Australia: “I came here for fundraising tips—not your political views.” In the US, a born-again Christian in Indiana was aggressively hostile. Simone, serenely: “When your eyes spin backward, showing just the whites? And those cute demon horns pop out, hiding just behind your ears? Does that hurt?”

Of course, her silent, nervous question was: “Is that an assault weapon you’re carrying, or are you just glad to see me? With all due respect, are your core beliefs that crazy? *Where’s security?*”

On the other hand, consider the scene. It's a fundraising conference. Benign. These are the good folks. The helpers. The ones who rush to aid the distressed. What do you say under the circumstances? "Nice to meet you. We probably don't agree politically, but . . ."

—

My cherished, admired Sim One made the following declaration publicly for decades, in front of countless crowds:

My name is Simone Joyaux. And I win. But not quite.

My name is Simone Joyaux. I'm a white, heterosexual, well-educated, affluent woman. I win—except for my gender. It's a disadvantage to be a woman in every country in the world and in every state in the US of A, where I live.

But because I'm white and heterosexual (accidents of birth)—and well educated (thanks, Mom and Dad)—I "win." It's called unearned privilege.

Stop talking about "disadvantage"! Instead, let's all of us focus on our unearned privilege. Try examining that angle of your life.

My life partner and I have a family slogan: "People eat, sleep, dream, and make love in languages other than English, in colors other than ours (white), and in pairings other than opposite sex. And we think that's beautiful. We fight for that."

"Life partner . . ." I once promised myself *not* to use the word "husband" until there was marriage equality in the USA. Now there is marriage equality here. But, hell, "life partner" still can agitate audiences, and I love that.

Thanks, Papa Georges, for raising me to recognize and respect differences—and welcome them. Thanks, Mom and Dad, for giving me the opportunity to experience life differently through family and friends and

traveling to other countries and trying different foods and learning another language and . . .

The US constitution talks about equality but never mentions *equity*. Equality isn't enough. Equality means fairness and equal rights and opportunities. Equality means treating everyone the same.

But that presupposes we're all the same. We aren't. Equity means ensuring that everyone has what's needed to participate in life equally.

Ah, such great advantages because I was born white and heterosexual. I got a good education because my family could pay for it.

I do remember, however, when newspaper job postings were separated by male, female. I sure know what it means to be socialized as female or male—awful for both women and men, boys and girls.

So I fight for equity. And that means I support affirmative action because that's the only way that we achieve equity.

I believe in justice—social justice. And that requires such enormous social change that I'm pretty damn sure I won't live to see it.

I live in a country that has to have the Black Lives Matter movement because we're still gunning down African American citizens. We haven't even had a female president yet—and, yes, that is sexism. And on and on and on . . .

I love philanthropy. I firmly believe that people and businesses have the right to choose where to give, in order to fulfill their own aspirations. One's alma mater. The literacy organization down the street. My favorite theater or dance company. Fighting global climate change. And on and on.

But I wish that more organizations and more people actually understood social justice—and the enormous need for huge social change. I wish more donors gave through organizations to achieve justice.

My name is Simone Joyaux. I win because I'm a white, heterosexual, well-educated, affluent person. But I lose as a woman.

## CHAPTER 5

# Grand thanks: New Year's Eve 2019

Simone sleeps.

I listen to her light exhales (and occasional borealis-deforming snores; “I snore?” she asks me, doubtfully).

Night sounds in a bedroom. If it were spring, I'd crack a window and listen to the peepers paper the darkness with desire. Too early in the year now.

Each time Sim One breathes, I think, *Thank you*.

Think. Clank. Thank.

Think. Clank. Thank.

It's a form of meditation, dubbed “beditation.” We're together in bed. She's sleeping. I'm not.

Beditation is a desperate, deformed effort to be everlastingly grateful to my wife, my lover, my trust companion for 35+ years; to her parents; to *my* parents; to all those who've helped me along. I don't know who(m) I'm thanking anymore, exactly; hundreds have shuffled me in

the right direction. In a shambles mood, I feel like I've gone out of my way to disappoint lots of them. In a shambles mood, I figure that those I've personally helped wouldn't fill a cup. While those I've hurt might fill a hall.

The math is wrong. And right.

Simone is the cherry on top.

Maybe thanking Simone each time she breathes is compensation of sorts. *Stay haunted; it's what you have.* Thank you. *It's a superpower.* Thank you. And you have Simone. Breathing. *Thank you.*

## CHAPTER 6

# Simone arrives on Earth

June 6, 1944: The Allies force a massive landing across the cold-water beaches of Normandy against heavy German resistance and unfavorable weather.

World War 2 was entering its final year in Europe.

There was supposed to be a simultaneous invasion of Southern France the same day. It would drive an irresistible anti-Fascist bulldozer north up the Rhône valley, from the Mediterranean to Switzerland. It would pinch German divisions between two well-supplied opposing forces.

Sounded good on paper.

But in the end, there just weren't enough Allied troops and landing ships to strike France top and bottom at the same time. The southern invasion was postponed. It finally began on August 14, with a massive demonstration of Allied naval and aerial firepower. Troop landings came the next day.

Before then, that same August, an intelligent and fit young man was riding his bicycle in a southern French city.

His name: Georges Joyaux. He'd grown up in "beautiful Nice," on

the French Riviera. Not a child of privilege—far from it. But smart, like his brother, Fernand. Family lore says they'd been a handful in school. Now Georges was himself a teacher in the small Mediterranean port of Menton.

And he spotted a checkpoint ahead.

Germans and French police were stopping everyone, examining papers, fishing for fugitive Jews (this far edge of France harbored many). Fishing, too, for fit, troublemaking-inclined young men on bicycles who might be in the Resistance.

## THE GERMANS WERE UNDERSTANDABLY JUMPY.

Up north, Allied forces rampaged.

They'd broken out of Normandy. Every battle now went their way. Generals like Patton and Eisenhower and Montgomery were fast becoming legends. The Allies pushed hard to liberate Paris, a huge symbol on the world stage. As long as their war machines were fueled (something of a problem, thanks to clogged northern ports), Allied motorized divisions were unstoppable. Allied pilots owned the skies. Allied troops owned the ground and enjoyed total freedom to maneuver. German forces up north were collapsing fast—a broken umbrella pelted by exploding hail—and everyone in Southern France knew it. The Allies' amazing propaganda offensive (some of the best war reporters and psych warriors on earth) saw to that.

Wondering who these "Allies" *were*?

D-Day beach swarms included (in some sort of order) the UK, France, Poland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia.

Versus Germany and Italy.

It was the biggest industrialized middle finger ever built.

Georges is on his bike: no sign yet of the Allies in Southern France. Rumors fly. Insiders know General de Gaulle has argued hard for the

capture of major southern ports like Marseille and Toulon. The French Resistance has been on high alert for months. Relief is in the air.

And Georges is approaching an inescapable checkpoint, carrying a concealed pistol, which in German eyes was an automatic death sentence.

As Andrée, one of Simone's five siblings, recounts:

"I always heard the story as Dad saw the Germans and knew he'd get arrested with the pistol. So he faked a spill on his bike near a street drain and threw the pistol down the drain. But, of course, I may be completely wrong about that!" Sounds successful to my ears.

Georges told me the same story. He told me a little bit more.

When he was stopped, Georges had a quick, frank talk with the French policeman clutching his elbow. In essence: "In a few weeks this will all be over. You know it. I know it. And you will be on the wrong side. So let me go. I'll vouch for you."

The policeman released his grip. Georges dashed off down a side street.

And so Simone-of-the-future's semen escaped certain death. She and five fascinating siblings would follow.

Enter Jane.

Life is serendipitous: those you meet; mostly those hoards you don't meet. How many could you meet, after all . . . with 8+ billion humans and counting (2023).

In 1947, what's today called Michigan State University was named Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science. It had been an early pioneer in coeducation and integration. It was the first year of the Cold War.

After the Second World War, Michigan State expanded rapidly. Its visionary president, John A. Hannah, flooded the campus with ex-servicemen pursuing a college degree on the GI Bill. Also included: Allies from European countries. Georges, who'd joined the French army after the invasion, was one.

In East Lansing, Michigan, Jane Peckham—artsy and tart, milk-fed

and attractive, an accomplished equestrian—finds herself sitting next to a handsome Frenchman with a big laugh, Georges Joyaux.

Georges pays attention to the lecturer. But she sees he's not taking many notes. She leans over and asks why. "I just write down what I don't know," he replies. Repeat that in your head, with abrupt honesty, spoken with a thick-as-sheep's-wool French accent and a shrug. You get the picture.

## **JANE AND GEORGES WERE JUMPY, TOO.**

So Jane and Georges met in class. As the nursery rhyme says, Jane and Georges eventually ran up a hill, to get a pail of water.

To summarize Darwin: What is life *really* about? Reproduction of the species. Knickers flew the coop. Sim One was conceived. Before their first-born's birth at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, Michigan, Jane and Georges had wed.

Simone was intensely proud of being their "love child"—the child who sealed the marriage of Georges and Jane.

Over two decades, another five children would emerge. The last were twins, Andrée and Paul. At which point, Jane turned a flame-thrower on the nearest doc in the delivery room and insisted, "Fix it. No more kids. Do it! Enough." Her primary care physician was there and nodded: "Do it."

And so it was done: no more kids. Jane retired her womb.

Or so the family story goes, according to Simone.

## CHAPTER 7

# Simone in France

Sim One told this dire-yet-dear story quite a bit: “How I became bilingual.”

Maybe this story was partly to offset why “her Tommy” hadn’t really tried to become bilingual, despite a second-home residence in France for twenty years.

PS: Here’s the honest answer. I never applied myself, despite sampling every online language-training product on the market. I’d pressed through three years of Latin in high school and eight years of German in high school and uni . . . and in the end couldn’t volley either language in a conversation worth shit (German: *scheisse*; *cacas* in Latin).

I judge myself a lazy bastard. If there’s a harmless (in my opinion) way to cheat, I’ll give that a go. Hence, in France for twenty years, as long as I had Simone at my elbow to enchant the locals and any gendarmes who stopped me for speeding (the once) . . . well, you know.

“How I became bilingual?” At the time, Simoney’s family were staying in Southern France for a year. Georges as a visiting professor. Jane wandering around her mother-in-law’s kitchen, picking stuff up and asking, “*C’est quoi en français?*”

Simone was, what, six? Seven? Georges took her pudgy hand and walked her to elementary school one day.

“Simone”—Georges stared down sympathetically from his considerable height—“no one in this school speaks English. Do as well as you can. I’ll be back at lunch to fetch you. I promise I will return.”

Which, of course, he did. And within a few weeks, Simone spoke tolerable French and could write without splotching, using a pen nib and inkwell. Call it “immersion,” or “expedience” by another name.

## CHAPTER 8

# Bit more: Simone in France after marriage #2

In 1984, Simone and I (a bit threadbare, both of us on second marriages) got married for the rest of our lives (as it turned out). Tied the knot during our lunch hour, in front of a police-court judge in Providence, Rhode Island, the city where we worked.

It was a low-key affair, done on my birthday, August 3. We also chose August 3 for our wedding date so I'd never forget our anniversary. It was Simone's idea. Expectations for me were clearly modest.

Coming to the event, guests passed through a metal detector (standard procedure for police court). The presiding official was Edward Clifton, a former public defender, soon to become solicitor for the City of Providence, later appointed to the state's supreme court, celebrated repeatedly for his "exceptional devotion to social justice and increasing access to justice for all."

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*—our wedding year—was George Orwell's target year: the year totalitarianism and mass surveillance perfected a state of perpetual war and civic control.

Simone and I were there as a counterpoint of sorts, hopeful wildflowers popping through the concrete. In this lunch-hour police court, before ten witnesses . . .

Two

star-crossed lovers

said their vows

and twined their

fates

“until death do us part.”

—

But who listens to that bit?

Mortality attends every wedding. No one hears the snicker.

—

It took about five years for things to settle down financially.

We bought a cramped starter home for a modest price at a ridiculously high interest rate (something like 22 percent, as I recall).

Then the real estate market went crazy in Rhode Island. Our little nest appreciated nicely, almost doubling in value in a few years. So we put it on the market and built a bigger place on old farmland out in the country, where I didn't have to listen to neighbors and their squalling.

That was Simone's life sacrifice for me: distance from others.

She became a consultant to nonprofits, making decent money

from the start. I got fired from my well-paid middle-management job (cause? look up Peter Principle), started a tiny ad/PR business with partners—one of whom was absolutely brilliant; both had talent. I handled copywriting and art direction. We had enough early success. Bills were paid. Simone and I even started to save.

Which then meant we traveled to France as much as we could afford.

Simone had a friend/colleague who rented her Parisian *pied-à-terre*. Simone and I moved in at least three times (despite hauling luggage up three flights of narrow stairs).

This rooftop sanctuary was plumb-dumb-smack in the city's most chic fashion district. What a pleasure to slowly consume those show-rooms after a decent breakfast.

—

Then, at her brother Alain's suggestion, from 1999 we co-owned with him a small, decaying (from the fifteenth century) French house in a wine-growing village called Valros. To our delight and surprise, neighboring Pézenas was one of Europe's busiest arts and antiquities towns (we had no closets, but armoires were cheap).

Simone and I would pounce on France a few times a year, to relax at a different pace, eat lovely food, sightsee, hang out with her dear Joyaux relatives (Fab, J-C, Toma; siblings and offspring).

As we indulged in a different life, we'd write books. Simone and I drafted at least a half-dozen books in Valros, while listening to fourteenth-century church bells and mourning birds. And feeding the cats that found our front window.

Common in Valros, for adult villagers: a daily walk. Street politesse was vital, too. Expectation: greet everyone you encountered, ranked by age.

Younger people greeted older people first. You're eighteen and I'm thirty-two; automatically, you'd greet me first. I'm forty-four and you're seventy-four; I'd automatically offer you the bonbon of my courteous greeting. Sometimes you stop and chat with older neighbors, exchanging ailments, local developments, the world stage. Being an

American couple in a small French village meant we were a novelty act. We reaped startled ovations from our neighbors whenever Simone opened her mouth and spoke fluently with a good accent.

As you know (Jean-Claude, my beloved and occasionally scolding French cousin-in-law, wag your finger freely; I agree!), I never learned to speak French . . . despite enjoying a second home in that epic culture and country.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Trade in Southern France goes back to the Phoenicians, far pre-Roman. Settlement goes back to humans' earliest days. Oh, the cave drawings and museums . . .

It's been an interesting area . . . for millennia.

In modern France, the best I could do was fake a good accent with the few polite words Simone drilled into me. I'd say hello: *Bonjour*. After 5:00 p.m.: *Bon soir*. Whenever entering a small local shop (pizza, newspapers, wine): *Bonjour* or *bon soir*. We kept our eye on the time.

Simone enthusiastically did most of the talking. It wasn't a burden for her (unless maybe she was dealing with a utility company). It was authentication, a stamp of identity: "I am French. I wish to be French."

People on the street would exclaim when they learned she was American: "You speak such wonderful French." Simone, of course, didn't think so. But it pleased her enormously to hear our neighbors say that she did.

Thank you, Papa Georges.

So we nestled into a village for twenty years. I was the smiling, nodding idiot. She was the savvy *Américaine*.

Together, Jane and Georges Joyaux raised six kids who cared about others.

Jane and Georges hosted parties for visitors from around the world. Visitors included the deprived, hungry, and thirsty. Faculty parties: "Come on in. Our house is your house." Sudden guests emptied the family's refrigerator and liquor cabinet. The right memories, no regrets.

Marcel Marceau was a one-time visitor, a mime world famous then

as “Bip the Clown.” Wikipedia: “The first time [Marcel] used mime was after France was invaded, in order to keep Jewish children quiet while he helped them escape to neutral Switzerland.”

Marcel and his older brother, Alain, joined the French Resistance. Marceau ultimately became “translation liaison” to General Patton’s Third Army, as it sprinted to destroy Hitler and the Nazi fortress. Not in time for Marceau’s father, who died in Auschwitz; his mother survived.

And in the Joyaux living room, this world-famous, suffering mime proved irrepressibly talkative . . . as Simone loved to recount.

Simone counted herself an outsider. Distressed that she didn’t wear the “in” labels, didn’t dress like the cool kids in high school, wore knee socks when no one else did.

She had internal status, though.

She also had a supportive co-conspirator: her best friend, Jan. Jan had pep you could see from space. She led Simone’s high school cheer-leading squad, playing the “popular one” to perfection.

In high school, Simone and best friend Jan operated undercover. They met, outsider/insider, for secret, hours-long walks, talking, talking, talking, talking about a better world. A better world without inequity.

Unconforming was becoming Sim One’s brand.

## CHAPTER 9

# Dear Diary: November 2019

It's thirty-five years of marriage later.

Back in 1984, we heard the ritual conclusion: "In sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part."

Bride Simone, groom Tom, *witnesses*: her beloved boss Tim (died in his sleep from heart failure); my beloved boss Iona (died from cancer a few years later, as her scientist husband declined into dementia); Dad (who could still drive to strange places; his rapid decline was a few years off; died of old age and neglect); my office mate Jan, who'd introduced Simone to me; my "other parents," Rosmarie and Keith (he died of Alzheimer's), professors who nurtured me and housed me for cheap in their third-floor apartment; friend Laura of the party balloons, then married to the day's photo pro, John (they divorced; he died of cirrhosis of the liver, denying to the end that he drank all that much rum); and driving down for this 1984 wedding from neighboring Massachusetts, Simone's next-oldest sibling, Nicole, and her hub, Larry, plus their suckling infant, Dave, who didn't understand a word.

But who listens to that last bit of the ceremony anyway, “until death . . . ,” on a bursting wedding day? Among the experienced marrieds, maybe that vow’s dour pledge stirred a silent thought. Maybe my widowed dad couldn’t help but wince. His bride, my mom, died by suicide; so, dead she DID part.

The reception was a low-key, cold-cuts affair, piled into Simone and Tom’s starter home. The doorknobs were at kneecap level. The stairs were half-height, like the family who built the place in the 1850s. They were acrobats and circus performers.

We had newlywed fever! Hope for the best! Decades of wonder and love and stress to go. Blissfully unprepared for the worst. “Tom, could you pass me the mustard . . . and, when you’re done with it, pass me that magic orb of optimism, too. Thank you.”

—

The first words to scrub from your mind thirty-five years later are “deal with.”

You don’t “deal with” a person who is changing.

If you love them—swore and swear to love them and mean it every day—you *endorse* any change, you *enjoy* any change, you *celebrate* any change, you adjust your own behavior to *any* change, and you try not to let that change discourage you, disappoint you, jam you up, freak you out.

Yes, it will be hard.

And you’ll fail. It’s what caregivers of now-ill life partners whisper about most in private, over dark lunches—their failures.

It’s hard to see that you’re succeeding . . . because you’re not. You don’t get things right. You can’t comfort your beloved. You have no idea what tomorrow looks like in *her* head, *their* heads; you’re the still-healthy one snookering the now-diagnosed one.

Other caregivers help. Dear friends and family help.

With all due respect: “Modern” medicine is miraculous. But there’s a lot of shit that nothing comes close to touching.

Caregiving is just hard. Granite hard. Like life is hard and

discouraging, disappointing, deflating, and why bother unless you have children and grandchildren to encourage and protect?

Which Simone and I don't. We married into an empty nest. Of course, we have nieces, nephews, and our friends' many kids. Simone dotes on them and worries about them; it's one of her superpowers. She never forgets a birthday. Every year, when she has her new (paper) calendar in hand, the first thing she writes in are all the family and close friends' birthdays. Her massive desk devotes an entire drawer to birthday and other cards. It's a household hobby: shopping for surprising cards, showing each other what's made us laugh.

"Until death do us part."

Now that prediction is in Simone's magnifying mirror each time she plucks those annoying hairs from her cheeks, a favorite grooming activity. It's in my bathroom mirror, too, as I shave—mowed once over with an electric razor; a second time, closer, with a blade.

There are good times, too. I'll save those for the abstinence meetings. If I attend one someday. First, I have to become a drunk. Which, spoiler alert, will turn out to be surprisingly easy. I've inherited the proper genetics.

## CHAPTER 10

# Dear Diary: November 2019 ~ Omens

I'm writing myself a pep talk.

Something happened in France in 2019.

Something happened at our other home, in a village we've enjoyed for two decades, a village where Simone marched alongside its capable, ambitious, young mayor on Armistice Day, November 11, striding past our front door with determination and in her cheesiest cowboy boots.

13 November 2019 ~ Weeping breakdown when she couldn't get some numbers straight in an email to the French realtors. "Oh, Tommy, what if I'm losing it?" We retreat to the couch, hugging. Marcus Aurelius said: "Live in the present." I can, about one minute out of sixty.

14 November 2019 ~ Stayed in bed reading until 1:30 p.m. in France. We're on vacay! Perfect, anyway: rainy, pigeon-gray day.

Finally got up. Clambered downstairs, plotting a pot of coffee.

Sim One and I had scheduled a talk to the US (which is six time

zones earlier than France), to maybe help a dearest of dear protégés plan her future (i.e., how to sell her on the consulting market).

Simone was frustrated technically. Somehow, today, she couldn't dial America from France. Numbers stored in her online contact list went through OK. But when she dialed the same number on a phone keypad from our kitchen with the blinds thrown open, listening to mourning doves, a French recorded voice said, in sum, "no."

Given that we're dealing with robots, I felt the obvious work-around was "Enter her number from your contact list. THEN dial."

Simone got cute and resistant. "I don't want to."

"I have limited bandwidth for this crap. Just do it." And stalked away.

My diary record: "This looks like less than it has become. By now she's dragging me into some technological emergency of hers once or twice a day. Most fixes are easy."

15 November 2019 ~ 11:52 a.m. ~ *The West Wing* is on TV in France. We have the complete collection. It's our alternative White House, in a time of Trump and other moral disturbances. Whenever Sim One wants to work (or just pass time), she turns it on. It's comfortingly sane during an insane, unforgivable, fascist administration.

16 November 2019 ~ 1:27 p.m. ~ Eating a picnic lunch from the morning farmers' market: sweet lemon fougasse (a bread), Roquefort, saucisson, lettuce, muscat grapes. "I saw blue mold" on something, Simone says. She's a fretter. I'm a raging avoider.

Simone collects her miseries: politics, aging, the houses (we currently own three, which is probably 2.5 times our true capacity, because we *are* DIY idiots who don't really understand how anything works).

Is our co-neutralizing, neurotic original pact (you're crazy, I'm crazy, and so we get along nicely), a pact sealed in Providence police court in 1984 . . . is that now fraying? Do we still balance out as a couple?

17 November 2019 ~ I think Simone knows her well-trained brain is

skidding a bit on the curves. She confides in me, close up, eye to eye: “I’m terrified of losing it.”

I don’t see a huge problem overall.

For instance, we spent hours this morning fixing her agenda for a board retreat. The client rejected the first draft. The complaint: “confusing.”

Easy adjustment. The agenda just needed an intro, some up-front framing, to help skittish board members flock into the same lush pasture. OK, fine. Done!

Yet Simone’s defensiveness remains five stories deep. “What if I’m losing it?” she asks almost daily.

Saturday, 23 November 2019 ~ [*Dear even deeper diary*] Her Tommy had a meltdown.

Today’s itinerary took us

- to the Pézenas post office (a check mailed to our property managers);
- to the town’s frame artist (who beautifully mounted two of Amy Montali’s photos, a gift for art-loving guests in our future);
- to our bank (for lumps of cash, because we are headed to the Abbaye de Valmagne [below]);
- past a beggar with lovely eyes (we deposited five euros of luck with her);
- to an annual, intense Christmas-season crafts and food display called the Cracker Fair, held at the restored (post-Revolution) Abbaye de Valmagne (do go).

We shared a list prepared by Simone of all the people we needed to buy for. So we quickly purchased

- an audience-dazzling skirt for her;
- knitted pens for somebody (now I have no idea what “knitted pens” are);
- a ceramic ring for her (more audience decor for her heavyweight public-speaking calendar);

- bio room deodorant (old houses like ours smell);
- two cloth bread bags labeled “*PAIN*” (French for “bread”; these will be popular back in the US);
- a two-sided, handmade, “modern-cut” bow tie for a consultant we like;
- artisanal candy bars showcasing six different flavors of the region, to hand out at our upcoming annual US Thanksgiving dinner with the Cornell-Feists;
- cork-fashioned coin purses for the Ducklings and Emma (the cherished children of dear friends; all were preadolescent girls in 2019).

Our next-to-last, shared, loving, joint act at the Cracker Fair? We gave money to a cancer society . . . and then explained to them why they shouldn’t add us to their mailing list (we live in the US, blah, blah, blah).

And then I blew my top.

## CHAPTER 11

# You fail. Or maybe *you* won't.

I failed. Repeatedly. I lived in a small picture, not the bigger one she needed from me.

Southern France that day: Simone fretted about gifts for US friends and family. Fretting was fun to her ears (she later explained). Fretting was how she took inventory. To my ears, her fretting was cumulative, deeper and deeper snow, depressing and unhelpful.

So I dumped myself in front of her, finally—my gorgeous, odd, amazing Sim One; my favorite person on earth; my inspiration, mentor, true love—in the midst of all this glory and grandeur and wonder and eager selling by talented artisans . . . I muttered, “I can’t stand this anymore.”

Low, emphatic. “I can’t stand this anymore.” Pause. “I can’t stand this anymore. Every day is a to-do list that must be to-done.”

I took Simone at face value as the same, compatible person I’d married decades ago. She always had to-do lists; so did I.

What I didn’t realize at the Cracker Fair was this: Maybe Simone’s

to-do lists were life preservers. Her lists kept her afloat—feeling competent, not drowning quite as fast.

Am I a “HAIR”: Husband Asshole in Retrospect? The Spousal Asshole Club? Check. Check. And mate?

We’d been happy enough at the bustling Cracker Fair. Artisanal vendors of all sorts did good business.

Yet . . .

In an instant, I was angry . . . miserable *because* I was angry. Sim One was miserable, too; she always took the blame. Whatever went bad was her fault. I knew that.

We were now one seriously depressed couple. And today’s outing was our shared misery.

As we left, in attempted reconciliation, we bought seventy-five euros of local *pâté de fruit*. Pounds of confection weren’t enough to break the mood. We hardly spoke another word on the ride home. I began drinking wine at the kitchen table as soon as we were in the house. She boxed herself into the salon with nothing on the TV.

—

I typed *this* on *that* day: “My working assumption is that we have no more than a few trips to our house in France left . . . before Sim One’s mental and physical deterioration make it unpleasant or impossible.”

We were about to fly home. I looked up from my laptop. Claude, the mason across the street, stepped out and power sawed a new tile. He’s tall, young, with an eight-year-old son. He works steady and hard, like a factory clock. Simone went out of her way to make his acquaintance. Last night, she invited him into our house for an exchange tour. He went out of his way to spare me from shaking his dirty hand. I dismissed that.

That was then.

Today, tonight, you can just tell: This will be one of those regrettable days when we go to bed at different times, having eaten different things, having poured salad dressing on different thoughts.

Sunday, 24 November 2019 ~ Things between us didn't improve the next day.

I'd had my first cup of coffee. Time to tackle pressing family chores: packing for our return home, cleaning out the armoires, storing away our clothes in the owners' locked closet.

As I climbed our French home's spellbinding 1890 spiral stairs that Sunday, a cartoon voice emitted from my mouth: "I just want to *die*. I just want to *die*. I just want to *die*."

Simone clumped a step behind me up our enrapturing stairwell, begging me, the *real* me, to clarify.

I couldn't. The "real me" couldn't explain what this cowardly chant truly meant to me, because this unwholesome crap is all I meant: *I hope I die before Simone's mental decline becomes unmanageable for someone as unprepared as I am*. I won't be there for her when she needs me most. And I'll confirm every low expectation I've had of myself since I was a child.

Not even thinking about the momentous, either.

*Please, Goddess, let me predecease Simone . . . before our 30+-year-old septic system needs to be pumped again.*

Sim One relished this annual household obligation. She'd phone. A local owner/operator would drive over in his shiny truck the next day, jolly and on time. And they'd gab. She liked the gabbing.

Though, really, how much shit can two adults with few visitors add to a septic system's burden in just twelve months?

There's a rustle at my ear.

A cherub arrives: putto first class; male genitalia, though I'm not quite sure what the plumbing's for. Do putti pee?

Cherub hands me a nice card. I rip it open.

It is my *personal* invitation to become a member in good standing—*prime* standing, actually—of the Spousal Asshole Club. My application for membership has been acknowledged and accepted. I'm assigned to a special unit: "in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death."

I'm fully aware: I'm no caregiver of the year.

How do I know?

“OK, boomer.” I was a sapling amid a forest of nurses. My generation was thick with them. If you got sick at a family gathering, a half-dozen female faces would immediately stare down at you, sharing sharp, quick, confident advice. Pretty soon you’d either feel better or be off to a hospital. Hospitals were hometowns for our extended female family. Mom took it to the next level. She became a certified public accountant, managing accounts for a small city hospital.

Here’s what I know: I’m no nurse. Get sick near me, I’ll flee. Ask my dad (we’ll get to that).

## CHAPTER 12

### The nightly head rub . . .

My blood pressure's screaming. I file a complaint internally: *Why is Simone "always" in panic mode?* Returning from her self-imposed morning weigh-in, she's inconsolable.

She's gained back three pounds. Even though her embroidered college jeans now smoothly fit her waist and hips for the first time in decades.

—

#### “Always?”

Dear true lovers of anyone, anywhere, any time, “always” is the adverb to shun. As used in the sentence, “You always . . .”

“Always” is an evil, inaccurate, bullying, humiliating word in a discussion between partners.

“Always” means you're bad, I win. Means you're regrettably flawed, I triumph. “Always” is the adverbial killing camp where once-trusting relationships go to suffer and die.

Simone's defaults seemed to be three: sad, angry, terrified. Worse: I can no longer tell the difference between Sim One's jokes and her horrors.

She's always been teasing and lively. But something's busted.

And there's an emerging functional problem: Sometimes she can't complete simple computer tasks, tasks she did without a second thought for years. On the computer, she's been a wizard, doing things I can't imagine doing. Bear in mind, I'm no slouch; I've taught computer-based page design at a world-respected art school. And she and I both bang away confidently at a keyboard twelve hours a day unless we're on the road.

Not now, though. For the first time.

I overreact. Underreact. Disappoint her. Disappoint norms. Disappoint values. Disappoint our solemn vows. Disappoint me. (So, yeah, as ever: It's all about me.)

—

## And yet, my love . . .

Glory be. Each night . . .

Simone and I go to bed hoping, hoping, hoping.

Maybe there is a sacred promise the vows leave out—something personal.

Sim One's had devastating headaches since she was a teen. As an attempted remedy, three heavy-duty electric neck massagers stand ready near our bed.

Simone asks me to rub her head pretty much every night.

I love her for asking. This is how I know her, to her roots: by running my tiring fingers a hundred times through her once-blond, now-dyed, silver and impossibly twisted hair, hoping to relieve some of her head pain.

It's the highlight of our new day together: our end of that day together.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes of deep scalp massage, either with a machine or until my hand begins to cramp, and then she begins to sleep breathe.

I have a book. I read awhile longer. My book hits me in my face. And out of some responsible dream space, Sim One murmurs just once, "Tommy, put the book away. Go to sleep."

## CHAPTER 13

### A bit of Dad

*My caregiving story begins:* One long-ago night I called my dad.

Something was wrong. He was incoherent—voice slurred, couldn't answer simple questions. I hung up, then phoned the fire department in his town. And they crashed through his apartment door and rescued him.

OK, total sidetrack. This relates to Sim One *how*?

Hope.

Love.

Presence.

Simone was our home's moral compass. She kept us socially adept and agreeable. She exactly tracked birthdays, religious holidays (all religions, even atheist), who *really* needed a phone call right now, the various health and financial welfares of our joint, sprawling connections—family, friends, and business.

## Vis-à-vis my dad?

Once I became an ascending adult (none of us gets any younger) and Dad began his descent (ditto), I wagered that my one perfunctory, by-the-numbers monthly call would pay off my basic family obligation, son to progenitor.

We had almost nothing really in common, I'd calculated.

My sister, Alice, was firstborn. Dad was drafted into the US infantry. His war was in Europe. It wasn't all bullets; there was sightseeing, too. He was a good traveler. Good at striking up conversations.

He and Hazel McKay Ahern were separated for three years. His still thirtysomething bride welcomed him back with open arms. Open everything! Hallelujah. I was born in 1947. Soon though, Mom underwent a hysterectomy: Doctors removed her uterus. No more eggs in the family basket.

Our nuclear family peaked at one older girl, one younger boy, plus the dad and the mom.

Tom Sr. and Tom Jr. tossing a ball a few times is about all I remember from the early years. He worked hard and napped daily.

Mom worked hard and dragged off her girdle with relief every night. Ultimately the family formed bickering parties in a very small house: Dad and Alice vs. Mom and me. Two warring political camps in a family of four.

This is how I eventually came to see it: the stubbornly sane (Alice and Dad) vs. the who-knew crazies (my suicidal mother and me, with bent DNA). That at least is my late-in-life assessment, with a side order of scars and no apologies. (Or maybe Alice and I exchanged some oblique, small apologies about this or that, over lunch at her favorite West Hartford restaurant, the Fernwood, as we regrettably aged, not especially well. Mine was a sagging, florid face, headed for the floor. Hers was four years older.)

So, of course, with this shitty attitude through my twenties, thirties, then forties, the *real* interval between calls to Dad sometimes stretched to months. Some leprechauns sit on a pot of gold. I sat on a pot of guilt.

At which point Simone would begin asking once a week at least (another of her superpowers), “Did you call your dad yet?” I was a dullard. Yet with Sim One’s goosing, my self-loathing became unbearable. So I’d finally pick up the phone.

It felt like I was calling the dump. Or calling the person paid a pittance to make sure that cars entering the dump were truly local.

“What do you have in the trunk?”

“Dead body. Fresh kill.”

“You live around here? It’s for the bureaucrats. I need to check your registration, please. Nonresidents have been dumping bodies illegally.”

Dad and I talked about the same few things every call:

- We would discuss big-league sports. I had zero interest in the Red Sox, the New England Patriots, the Boston Bruins, or the Celtics (the local brand names). But Dad had been a remarkable athlete as a young man. Maybe *he* cared about these teams’ fortunes. He followed sports on radio and TV. Odd, it never occurred to me to take him out to a ball game. I liked the action as much as the next person. A night-lit big-league baseball stadium is one of the most beautiful sights I’ve seen.
- I’d ask him about his day. When it wasn’t raining, he sat on the docks with other retirees, nodding at whale-watching tourists and other daily catch. He’d retired to Plymouth, Massachusetts, after Mom killed herself. Sentimental? It had been their favorite day-trip destination throughout their marriage. It bored me stiff as a child, with its cranberry glass and 1620s costumes. Then it got a nuclear power plant, now an environmental disaster. “Would you like your locally caught fish broiled, fried, or radioactive?”
- I’d tell him a few things about my career. Since I’d displayed a gift for scorn and sarcasm, he’d wondered on occasion if maybe I might make a decent lawyer. But I didn’t go to law school, had neither the discipline nor the drive. A couple of other undergraduate poets like me did,

though. Didn't see them as role models. I just wanted to play with words for the rest of my life. Dad didn't see that as making a living. It's been OK work, though.

## CHAPTER 13 ANNEX

# Life of pie: More about Dad, puberty, pizza, and Sim One's reluctant approach to pissaladière, an ancestral Med dish

It wasn't always bad for Dad and me.

Sure, his occasional rages terrified me. He could go suddenly fog-horn loud if I wasn't doing my assigned chore well enough in his eyes.

That was just him anyway. Like all dads, he got a pass . . . until proven guilty of something. And he was guilty of nothing.

My dad had solid community values. Was an asset to our extended family (didn't gamble or drink, unlike other males one might name).

He'd survived the Great Depression, getting by with odd jobs (gig economy) . . . while caring for a bed-bound, invalid adoptive mother.

He survived being drafted into World War 2. Then worked hard for decades at a rubber-sole factory, rising early each morning with a

lunch pail, earning a living, his work clothes reeking. He bathed once a week.

Dad ran for our small town's water board. Was elected (we had a few lawn signs). He ran that office efficiently for years. Those annual water bills got out on time . . . in part thanks to Alice and Tom Jr., invisible child labor.

There was a hiccup much later.

As it turned out, one of the town's secondary drinking-water wells drilled down through what was later classified as a Superfund site by America's EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency.

The well drilled through sandy soil, as New England postglacial soil can be near the coast.

The same terrain was also the rogue, unmonitored dumping ground for a local chemical factory that concocted pesticides and surgical soap, all in the same vats, supplying huge army contracts during the Vietnam conflict.

I worked there for a summer, dumping barrels of goop into mixers.

The factory was a great place to drink beer Saturdays after work. The weekend foreman was jolly, known as an after-hours drunk. When the factory's time clock ticked off at 3:30 p.m., the beer came out for all ages, and we partied in the dunes.

I vaguely recall Dad telling me years later that he'd gone to inspect that secondary well. It didn't look right; there were black crystals around the well head. He was the town's water commissioner, which made him a billing administrator, not a scientist. He kicked his report up the chain of command.

That well shut down in 1982. Today, the drinking water in Holbrook, Massachusetts, is safe and rigorously tested, according to recent reports from the EPA.

Dear parents: Beware puberty.

Until puberty, I was blissfully in love with listening to my father. I looked up to him literally and figuratively. He was a champion, literally and figuratively.

In our ever-darkening knotty-pine kitchen (the cigarette smoke, both parents), he'd tell me war stories for hours, burning down

unfiltered Camels, stabbing them out in an ashtray, sipping coffee. Coffee was the drink of choice, until his stomach gave out. Then it was coffee and milk, alternating. Once a week, on Friday nights, he'd sip a beer. That was about it for his alcohol consumption.

Dad's stories put me in the middle of the action. I saw a German corpse at an intersection, crushed flat as cardboard by too many tank treads. I saw a captured German sniper-child summarily and unsentimentally executed by an American sergeant; an enemy with good eyesight and a steady hand is still an enemy, age aside; in 1945, Hitler was deploying child soldiers by the thousands. I saw French farmers trading cheese for gasoline, rifled off US Army trucks. I saw the Battle of the Bulge from a foxhole, where besieged GIs would use their helmets as chamber pots and throw the waste out across the snow, where German artillery airbursts drove yard-long wood splinters through GI backs.

Dad spun up war stories for hours on end. He had a memory. He was a keen observer. He brought back the sensory details: the crunch, crunch, crunch of boot steps in the dark.

I was rapt.

I don't know if my sister listened all that much. Mother was off reading in another room. Hazel devoured titles like *The Power of Positive Thinking*, now translated into fifteen languages, with seven million sold. It didn't save her from the garage in the end. Maybe, somehow, it helped her understand the garage. Maybe when there's power in positive thinking, there's power in thinking the opposite way. Or maybe suicide—attempt completed (Mom tried twice)—*demonstrates* the power of positive thinking.

But back to the comforts of preadolescence . . .

Ancestors discovered fire, cooked food, got together to swap tales around the campfire. Just like us.

On Friday nights, as the fights played out on our living room's small but mighty black-and-white TV, as six-inch-tall figures beat the jam out of each other, Dad would hoist me onto his kingly kitchen stool, to savor the last inch of his salted beer.

It gave me a taste of adulthood.

It was heaven.

And on special nights, we'd go first to the Lynwood Cafe (Randolph, Massachusetts) to grab a free pizza pie. Aunt Jen worked there; that's why they were free for family. She lived just across the street with her daughter, Barbie, next to the railroad tracks. Aunt Jen was a talented gardener; she raised memorable peonies in her backyard next to the railroad tracks.

Dad would drive to the Lynwood; it was ten minutes away, if you caught the lights. I'd hang in the back seat. My older sister, Alice, a hypercompetent tween, would rush into the busy, fragrant kitchen to scoop up a box or two, past the diners, past the drinkers, past the neighborhood regulars.

Seventy years later, the Lynwood is still known (to discerning palates around Boston) for its delicately spicy tomato sauce spread across a thin, charred crust. I grew up worshipping the taste of that pizza on my tongue. It dominated a lifetime of other pizzas.

Even after Simone and I had a house in France for twenty years, where Mediterranean thin-crust pizza resembling the Lynwood's came draped in pride and national medals, where agile fingertips spun the pies to size, I thought Lynwood's pie (once again: Randolph, Massachusetts) was the best pizza I'd ever tasted.

Maybe because I'd tasted it as a dad-worshipping child.

Maybe because it was my first pie: You know how first things tend to be. First kisses. First . . . well, however you care to fill in the blank.

PS ~

The NEXT best pie I tasted on earth came decades later from an oven in La Seyne-sur-Mer, a beach town just south of Toulon, which has long been home to France's Mediterranean war fleet. (Napoleon gave Toulon a proper bombardment.)

Port and center La Seyne are now between jobs. Both vibrant and flaking, seeking a fresh civic purpose the last time Simone and I drove through.

Seaside La Seyne, on the other hand, is picturesque: extensive beaches, period architecture, fresh seafood on hand, vitality, narrow roads, hillsides full of gated villas. Last time we arrived, we were headed for Fab and Jean-Claude. Fab is Simone's first cousin. Fab's father and Simone's were brothers. Much later, Jean-Claude married Fab. Fab and

Jean-Claude are intensely in love; you'd detect it in minutes. Both were devoted, now retired teachers . . . which says a lot in my book. Retired teachers, the ones who make it through the incredible bullshit of the public education industry—students clinging to their coattails—are my heroes.

PPS ~

The iconic margherita pizza was born in Naples in the late 1800s, fit for a visiting queen with a now-painful gall bladder saying NO! to any more rich French sauces.

So the story goes. My gall bladder declared exactly the same moratorium, on a driving-and-dining expedition up the Rhône river valley.

Simone rode shotgun, navigating. I drove. Gramma Jane was in the back seat with her best friend, Maryann, making fun of the way I said *oui*. My version sounded like “way” and popped out like spit each time Simone told me to turn.

We threaded our route through a slew of famous wine AOCs, from Châteauneuf-du-Pape in the south to Burgundy in the north.

But in Condrieu, famous for an unusual white and the highlight of our wine tasting, my digestive system just couldn't take it anymore. My gut was in pain. I was listless, no interest in food. We checked into our hotel. I told them all, “Leave me alone.” It took a day of salad and raisins and tap water to bring my organs back to the table.

PPPS ~

Like the ubiquitous margherita pizza (tomato, mozzarella, basil; red, white, green, echoing the Italian national flag), pissaladière, an ancient Provençal dish, comes to table on baked flatbread . . . but with a thousand-year history.

Caramelized onions sizzle across its thin surface. Those popping, savory onions support a dense cast of anchovies and their salty paste. Black olives accent the final, delivered meal. Venus and Jupiter, pissaladière is good!

Simone's beloved cousin, Fabienne Joyaux (alongside her ever-commenting sous-chef and husband, Jean-Claude), faithfully followed a family recipe handed down for generations, like a never-forget-me windup clock.

Bite into Fab's first pissaladière square . . . and you instantly taste centuries of local history: the travel, the trades, the battles, the swings, the people raising families, earning livings, getting by with events and smiles and ceremonies and sighs.

I don't know if Simone ever bit into her assigned pissaladière square all that deeply. She'd sample the crust. I left my crusts alone, so maybe she ate mine as well.

Every Joyaux I've met is a lifelong loyal member of the Clean Plate Club and the Sacred Order of Recycling, including Sim One. That went double when anyone else labored over the meal, like Fabienne and Jean-Claude.

Even so . . . as an adult, Sim One was strictly anti-seafood, except for the blandest whitefish ever allowed on a restaurant menu. "We think it's a type of fish. We're not sure: Maybe it's library glue in the shape of a fish. Somebody pulled it out of the ocean. Yet you can't taste a thing, not even brine."

Some kind of traumatic dining encounter in Simone's youth?

Everyone tried for years to help her along, down the menu. She'd talk cryptically about animals like oysters who owned their own homes. Never could break her distaste.

One last pissaladière comment: I've noticed that caramelized onions smell (pleasantly) like my armpits when I haven't showered for a few days.

## CHAPTER 14

# How Dad's diaper changed *me*

Over time, Dad and I became OK friendly. Clan friendly. Dad and off-spring friendly anyway.

Which meant we didn't exchange a harsh word for the last two decades together. He was my father. I was miles-deep self-absorbed. You could build a lovely second home from my careless ingratitude. We lived in different countries.

Now know this: I *should* have been profoundly, modestly, kneelingly grateful. Dad tried. He, Mom, my older sister, Alice—my lucky family chased me all the time, with daily phone calls, weekly updates, monthly resolutions, yearly recaps, plans for the future, who's doing what.

They tried. And I batted their lessons into the shrubbery, like badminton shuttlecocks.

So what the fuck *was* my problem, anyway?

I'd grown up on my parents' hard-earned dime. They'd swaddled

me and rinsed off my shit. Clothed me. Fed me. Tended my erratic health (severe asthma; a less obvious inclination toward mental illness). Educated me. Kicked me out when the time was right . . . and I didn't launch all that well. Helped me financially (thanks, Dad) when it was super-important (my grad-school stay in a private insane asylum; my first brand-new car [Honda ever since]).

Because I never apologized. We just didn't have all that much to talk about, Dad and I. And for someone who hoped to be a writer, it turned out I had very little imagination. I couldn't write fiction worth shit.

My first marriage failed within a year . . . as Dad had laughingly predicted it would . . . to my (briefly) future in-laws . . . *before* the wedding. He turned out (fucker) to be exactly right, almost to the minute. *Gold star for your honest assessment, Dad.*

He knew emotional incompetence when he saw it. And I never forgave him for that. *Fuck off, Dad. Your wife committed suicide.* Said another way, of course: MY MOTHER *committed suicide*. So where is the fault in THAT blame pecking order? His fault? My fault? Her fault? Your fault . . . if you've come down from laughing yet?

Dad and I were directly related through insemination.

Post-World War 2, Dad poked Hazel's inviting, jazz-clarinet-playing, hometown, Protestant, untrimmed, dark-haired, sanctified-by-marriage, welcoming womb target.

Spoils of war. Mom giggled, too. It had been a long time for her, too.

—

Eventually Dad moved into subsidized elderly housing in Plymouth.

It was plenty, enough. A bedroom, a bath, a pleasant balcony he never used, which overlooked woods—a few patches of conserved habitat pried from marching acres of condos.

Dad had a kitchen. He didn't cook, really: canned food and frozen dinners. Boiled water; made instant coffee, grimy stuff. He chain-smoked; a cigarette was always near his lower lip.

Mom smoked, too. Who didn't?

In 1929 (the year Dad graduated from high school), Edward Bernays, a New York-based public-relations pioneer who'd learned some clever mind tricks from his Viennese uncle, Sigmund Freud, encouraged women to see cigarettes as "torches of freedom."

His timing was good. The 1920 presidential election was the first time American women were legally allowed to vote in every state. Suffrage in the US had been an ugly battle, with prison atrocities. Smoking was a feminist protest (according to Bernays). The movement consolidated its gains. "Torches of freedom." Then came World War 2 . . . another boon to Big Tobacco. Cigarettes were included with the rations for troops overseas, addicting millions more.

Mom quit smoking finally in her fifties. I've wondered—idle thoughts—might I have grown one or two inches taller if she hadn't conjured smoke rings during her pregnancy. She and Dad both had the knack. Alice and I would chase the rings to stick our fingers in them.

—

Dad was affable. Hung out on Plymouth's docks with other retirees. Laughed. Traded tales. Watched the town's remnant fishing fleet do its hard work. Tide in, tide out.

Tom Ahern Sr. had been a small-town politician. He got along with people. He ate locally at unfancy restaurants. At eighty, he still had a car and a license. Then one day he knocked a pillar off the front of a local bank. They'd only had four pillars to start with, which was probably the minimum to assure the reputation of a small-town bank brand. They called the cops.

I wasn't there.

This particular bank was his "friend." Where he did all his senior-life business. Where attractive youngsters patted him on the back.

Dad put his key in the ignition.

He intended to choose reverse. Shifted into drive instead, I guess. Hit the gas.

The cops grounded Dad and took away his driver's license.

But Dad was a seasoned survivor. He was prepared. He had a

*second* license in his wallet. And he continued to drive . . . just not to that bank.

—

By age eighty, my dad ended up under my unsteady care in a series of hospital emergency departments, crisis after crisis: first the local community hospital; then kicked up the road to Boston; then into a nursing home back in Plymouth; then into a nursing home nearer to me, for my convenience.

Subsidized elderly housing had booted him. The final straw: pooped his pants, then sprayed blood from a pierced ulcer across the bathroom. State-subsidized elderly housing had its limits: If you were healthy enough, you were acceptable; unhealthy, we're throwing you out as soon as we can find a relative.

As next of kin and nearest geographically, I received that phone call.

Dad's health journey was not well timed . . . for me, Mr. Self-Absorbed.

I'd just been fired from a well-paying job. Sim One was now our sole provider. She was a consultant to nonprofits. And we were just two years into a thirty-year mortgage.

Over the previous five years, I'd helped build a banging marketing communications department for an upstart high-tech firm. We did trade shows, proposals, advertising. And the stakes were high. A single winning bid for new business could be worth hundreds of millions a year. And the firm was winning almost all its bids.

But I'd gotten lazy. The Peter Principle worked its magic. Oxford Languages: "[This is the] principle that members of a hierarchy are promoted until they reach the level at which they are no longer competent."

I'd gone well past my capabilities. Risen to be a well-paid middle manager, and I was lousy at it (yelling included). "My team" did impressive work. They helped reel in rich contracts. And maybe I'd even sort of led them once upon a time.

Now they carried me. On the org chart, I was still in the saddle, got

the biggest paycheck. “My team” didn’t need me, though. Up in their creative studio, out in our support bullpen, the real work got done. And done. And done. Successfully.

Down in my fishbowl office, bored and in a tie, I pushed memos around, compiled stats that didn’t matter, paid bills promptly, punished tardy vendors, scribbled, drummed my fingers, and (as it turned out) fostered terminal staff resentment.

Being fired is interesting.

I was assigned an Angel of Death, a much older man in a sober suit who worked for an outplacement firm.

Angels of Death are super-sympathetic people in black suits who guide you through the traumatic ritual that’s about to interrupt your expectations for a predictable future.

He knocked, entered my tiny office, and calmly handed me a small cardboard box. It was for my personal effects. I looked up from my desk. Pressed against the glass, my now-former staff clustered around the door, staring in—all the males, anyway: Barry; Stew; John; what’s his name, the new guy. Relieved, gloating, weary. I don’t know. Four faces were a lot to press into a tiny window. I’d had my five-year reign. And this fake, palsied Peter-Principled king was dead.

My Angel of Death ushered me out of headquarters—the corporate equivalent of the perp walk. My Angel looked to be 150 years old. I got in my car and followed him to a local lunch place, which was fine and forgettable. He paid (expensed) the bill.

Over food, he explained my executive-level severance package.

I could start remaking myself the very next week.

I remember Simone came home from an appointment that afternoon and found me on our back deck, in casual clothes, nursing a beer.

“What happened?” she gently asked.

Then, soon after, Dad’s problems crashed through the ceiling. . . .

I’d been fired.

He was gravely ill. It was no longer a lifelong game of Chutes and

Ladders. Now it was Chutes, nothing else. And not a game; a sure thing.

—

There's always a lower point.

Mine? I'd dressed in my sharpest custom-tailored suit, ready to drive to a Boston hospital to see what had become of Dad.

Before I could leave, my legs collapsed. I ended up flat on my back in our dining room, beating my fists against the oak floor, screaming something like "Not now! Not now! Not now!" Simone was out.

Got that out of my system.

Hitched myself upright. Patted out the wrinkles; adjusted my tie. Drove to Boston.

It was an impressive suit. Won me instant respect at the hospital. A nurse mistook me for a doctor and quickly obliged my questions. "Where's Tom Ahern?"

Dad was on a gurney in a vast open ward. It looked like a refugee camp. I held his scrawny hand, cased in paper-thin skin. Hemorrhaged blood still rimmed his untrimmed nails; no one had cleaned him up much. He smiled a bit, uttered these immortal words: "Getting old is hard."

I wasn't old then.

I'm old now. Lacking my daily "VS": Vitamin Simone.

Dad's words followed me through the coming decades like a scolding crow.

What a scene: He's on his back in an indecent johnny, penis lolling; *who the fuck cares?* I'm standing by in my expensive suit, hoping clothes, this once, really *do* make the man.

Had he cursed me? No, Dad had just passed along a life truth, which responsible elders do. It was his solemn duty to share. "Getting old," I now see, "is hard."

—

Being the designated caregiver for my dad was not on my list.

It was on my NEVER-WANT-TO-DO list.

But my sibling had her own serious health issues and wasn't driving. Plus I lived closer. So I was the default. Families have unspoken rules.

Dad's bills got paid. And insufficient visits by me got made.

The day his bowels overflowed his diaper was a special high/low point in our late-in-years relationship.

We'd gone for a ride. Sort of doctor's orders. Doc mentioned that the rhythm of a car ride could ease Dad's apprehensions. A snooze cruise, like you might do with babies and toddlers. The car rocked some part of his brain.

And Dad pooped en route. Which we learned firsthand back at the nursing home. He pulled down his sweatpants, and his adult diaper flopped open, catapulting warm shit onto my fingers. He smiled a sorry "oops." A practiced look. Not the first time?

I'd never had children. Never changed a diaper.

I freaked. Left a quick word with the nursing home's front desk. Ran to my car. Leaving Dad soiled and abandoned. The same pinned-down, foxholed GI who'd shat in his helmet in the Ardennes, casting his waste across the December woods to offend attacking Germans, using fresh snow daily to scrub his helmet clean again.

—

OK, rewind.

Who *does* deal with Dad's shit, if not his own family?

His shit, which was—you know what?—excluding the odor, no worse than chocolate pudding in texture and color. I'm sure he'd had to deal with *my* shit at some point (though I'm also sure Mom dealt with it mostly).

Yet I fled with booster rockets, acknowledging no link to this failing old man who'd once triggered my existence . . . after surviving the Great Depression, the atrocities of World War 2, a cooling wife, and a smelly, lifelong factory job.

Freaking from Dad's diaper was me at my very worst. That response eventually made me seriously question how well I'd do if Simone got ill.

In my own meager defense: I'd gone on a statewide search for someplace decent, accompanied by an official, experienced advocate for the elderly. So Dad's last home (this one) was the best we could find across Rhode Island.

Dad's last nursing home sucked less worse; on a scale of 1–10, it was at least an 8. It sucked less worse than being kicked out of senior affordable housing in Plymouth, Massachusetts, for pooping his pants in plain sight. It sucked less worse than local hospital emergency rooms. It sucked less worse than Boston big-city emergency rooms, where I visited him.

Dad uttered this and not much else: "Getting old is hard."

He was reporting to me from his front line.

It sucked less worse than living on the street.

It sucked less worse than living in a culvert or in his last cheap car, robin's-egg blue.

He was no longer a resident of anywhere. Now he was a patient of who knows where, decided by me. His body was failing. Housing authorities decided he could no longer live independently (they were right). Medical authorities wanted him in twenty-four-hour care (they were right, too).

## CHAPTER 15

# More stuff Sim One and I no longer do together

“Will you rub my head?”

Simone asked that almost every night, as we punched pillows and settled into bed.

“Rub my head” was foreplay of a kind . . . foreplay for her deep-dive, final nighty night, if she could sleep. She pleaded shamelessly, too. Sometimes rubbing helped her headaches. Sometimes rubbing with pills thrown down her hatch. Or sometimes I’d bang away on her shoulders and neck, for as long as I could (arms go numb), with our heavy-duty “thumper,” a powerful massage device that has no known application other than to beat stiff, cranky, glutinous muscles into limp submission.

Simone sought strong fingers pressed hard into her scalp.

I had strong but sensitive fingers. My hands came out of a machine shop where once I’d lifted one-hundred-pound bars of steel without a second thought and turned them into fussy automotive delicacies on a massive engine lathe.

*At your service, my dear.*

Repetitively, like a well-fed, -watered, -appreciated farm beast, my fingers plowed Simone's skull each night, smoothing out knots encountered. She had a weird point or two on her skull. Not horns exactly; something my fingers would catch on and rub smoother.

One thing never changed, though: Sim One was always ironclad tense.

The weight of the world is heavy. Simone took upon herself indiscriminately the blame for every injustice she could imagine: from Vietnam to women's inequality to white privilege to agricultural monoculture to our relationship, which maybe could be better?

Every night, flying buttresses of iron blame held Sim One's head erect. Painfully. My job in bed: to soften those flying buttresses of iron blame into room-temp butter sticks—or, anyway, to try.

## CHAPTER 16

# Dubay's

In our last sixteen months together, returning from errands, we'd co-declare, "Scenic route!" I'd veer the car onto country lanes, traveling by sun and hour and dead reckoning, getting lovely lost on occasion (hard to do in bitty Rhode Island, unless you run into fog).

Every so often we'd pass a family landmark. "Look, Simone, Dubay's Tractor": Selling and Servicing the Finest in Outdoor Power Equipment Since 1976.

Like most people near us, we'd done a bit of business with Dubay's over the years. It's in a semi-scenic valley a couple of miles from our house. Simone's Papa Georges bought us our first little lawn mower there. Dubay's fixed what we couldn't, which was pretty much anything with an engine. It's rustic. Ignore the interstate highway up the hill behind their barn. *Those people, almost all of them, pass on. Going home to dinner.*

Dubay's held an important place in Sim One's personal mythology.

In 2011, she'd gone to Dubay's just after Hurricane Irene bulled through. Irene killed scores on the US East Coast. I was (happily) half a planet away; I'd just landed in Australia.

Simone was by herself, alone in our house in the country.

Now, we'd always had a generator, from the time we built our house. Our contractor had insisted on it, knowing what we didn't know about living in the boonies. We're in a town with more horses than people, with more chickens than people, with more cows than people. And this is standard townie equipment: a pickup truck (yes), a dog (no), several guns (no comment), and a generator (yes).

But our generator was small. It kept the heat on, the refrigerator going, the well pumping, plus a handful of stairwell lights burning—the minimum. The electric company estimated that power wouldn't be restored for at least a week . . . and Simone had a home-based business to run. So she went shopping for something that would run the whole house, including the computers and the internet.

She found a soulmate at Dubai's: the mother of the clan. Two strong and moral people met for the first time. And that good Christian woman sold my existentialist Simone the store's own generator and made sure that her son had it installed immediately.

Two weeks later I returned to the US, having endured nothing worse than Snake Alley (a local decommissioned road on Australia's Gold Coast) and LAX. To navigate Snake Alley, I had a flashlight, gin & tonic courage in my belly, and Sean Triner. Among other things, Sean's a certified, volunteer venomous-snake rescuer. (I know what you're thinking; I wondered the same thing, but a vegan nature lover is a vegan nature lover.) As for LAX, I had suitably abysmal expectations; this poor dear of an airport, designed in 1958, became the world's third busiest, known to frequent fliers as the place you hope your plane will never land.

So how bad was the hurricane aftermath that Sim One endured alone?

It was a sheer domestic triumph. Not only did she buy a powerful new generator that still serves this house with "clean" (computer-suitable) energy a decade later, but she also had our wiring upgraded.

She never let me forget it, either: All this was her, without me.

And I remained her humble servant through multiple outages a year, cursed like the rest of our sickened planet by increasingly extreme weather that brings down trees and interrupts daily utilities.

Sim One prepared.

What I didn't suspect . . .

To paraphrase Jan, our long-long-longtime friend, my office buddy for several years, the crucial link who introduced Simone to me and me to Simone one day at work, one of the small squad that attended our lunchtime police-court wedding:

Simone was a strong woman. On purpose. That's a heavy cloak on anyone's shoulders . . . and we're far from being out of the woods.

That she could be that strong woman with you was such a relief for her.

## CHAPTER 17

# The day before: Will she be warm enough?

On New Year's Day, January 1, 2020, we went hiking. The big question before we left the house: *Will she be warm enough?*

Simone was always cold.

"Feel my nose," she'd demand. In our bed. Pretty much every night. So I'd touch her nose.

And, yes, Sim One's crested beak was ever cold, dented deeply by decades of glasses. It was as cold as a trumpeter's mouthpiece before the music starts.

And I was always warm to hot.

My body heat worked just fine in our spooning hours.

Simone, cold; *my Tommy*, hot: We held that clutch for thirty-seven years.

This hike celebrated yet another year put to ledger for Sim One and me.

Around us, three dozen others stomped, blowing vapor. On their sweatshirts and backpacks, the expected ecology brands, local to

national. All white—no diversity yet today. But that wasn't the whole story.

She'd had a quick word with the executive director. He'd seen the same thing. Yes, more racial/ethnic diversity on hikes! Dammit!! Nature doesn't discriminate. Trails don't discriminate. This organization, founded in 1895, doesn't want to discriminate. It has an aggressive education program, leading a lot of guided science hikes with all sorts of kids and their teachers.

How's this for a great midrange donor offer? It costs about \$2,000 per load to bus kids from an urban classroom to the woods. It's a good, easily envisioned thing to fundraise for. The yellow bus sighs to a stop out in the country; the kids pile out, herded by teachers; chaos becomes less chaos becomes quiet; a nonwhite scientist introduces herself/himself.

Look at her! Look at him! Like us! A life or two changes.

How *did* the year 2020 actually go in America?

Awful; very bad; then slightly better.

Awful for everyone: the pandemic. Life expectancy in the US dropped by almost two years, to seventy-nine (if you're Black, make that seventy-two years).

In May, a Minneapolis policeman would murder George Floyd, a Black man, igniting protests and wake-up calls internationally.

Some good news? A surprising turnout in that year's 2020 presidential election would soundly kick America's flag-degrading, Mussolini-loving, insurrection-inciting, wannabe, "*I will not leave!*" White House squatter to the curb. Last name rhymes with "dump."

And yet . . .

# ACT 2



## CHAPTER 18

# How it starts: January 2, 2020

Simone woke screaming around 3:00 a.m.

A tractor rocked its treads back and forth across her temples, grinding her skull to meat. She staggered into our bathroom and grabbed pain pills.

I followed. We went down to the kitchen. She swallowed her ibuprofen with yogurt. A while later, we hiked upstairs, back to bed, hoping the worst was over.

Less of the same? Hoping, we fell asleep again.

We always knew what evil was. It was the suffering of others. Playtime ends:

- This is us (best I know).
- This is her (ditto).
- This is me (we'll see).

We're down to the last couple of promises in our marriage vows. You know how that goes, right? If not in your own life, in a dozen films: ". . . in sickness and in health, until death . . ."

At 7:00 a.m., Simone burst back into the bedroom: "I can't read Adrian's email!" She's weeping, gasping.

Not sure I understand. *Sure, yes, yes, yes*: Emails from Adrian are special. He cofounded the Institute for Sustainable Philanthropy in the UK with psychologist (spouse) Dr. Jen Shang. We're longtime collaborators, reaching back almost a decade, became good friends. We adore their children, young James, younger Emma.

Simone panicked: "The words don't make sense!"

*Try a test?* Simone picked up her current romance novel and opened to a page. Tried reading. Tried reading to me. Tried reading to Fab, her French cousin. To anyone. To no one. Unintelligible. *Want to be sad for Simone? That bus is now boarding.*

Simone could correctly pronounce only one or two words in the novel. "Panting?" "Ripped?" "Ecstasy?" She could *say* individual words. She couldn't compile a basic sentence.

**Get fucking serious fucking fast.**

Raced upstairs to my office, got online: *stroke symptoms*. Classics?

Face drooping or numb? *Not her.*

Can't raise an arm? *Not her.*

Speech slurred? *Not her.*

Sudden numbness? *No.*

Sudden, severe headache? *OK, now we're getting somewhere.*

***FUCK!***

Bottom-line advice: Go to *any* hospital's emergency room *as fast as you can*. Speed!!! "Some treatments must begin within a few hours of symptoms," says WebMD. "Early treatment can often help prevent death or disability."

We lived in rural Rhode Island: more horses than people; the land we could view from our desks supported a resident deer herd, bobcats, wild turkeys; second-growth woods for unbroken miles. The

nearest hospital was Day Kimball, across the state line in Putnam, Connecticut, twenty-five minutes away by car.

We trusted the volunteer ambulance corps in our town. (They did very well by me when I fell from a tree and broke a scapula.)

Still, I figured they'd take time to mobilize. Decision: *drive ourselves*. We bundled into sweats and jackets. I drove as fast as I dared. *Don't get pulled over. Don't have an accident. Repeat.*

I'd lost my copilot, too. Team driving, house habit: At intersections, driver cleared our left; passenger cleared our right. Now Simone was afraid. Distracted. Confused: *Where are we going? What's happening, Tommy?*

—

Thursday. Not yet 8:00 a.m. in eastern Connecticut; sun still rubbing its eyes. We have ER good luck: There are no other patients. Empty gurneys. Immediate attention. Day Kimball wheels Simone right in, to conduct preliminary tests, a CT scan to start.

The quick news was not good. "There's been a brain bleed."

It's a type of stroke. Also something about "a calcified mass at the base of the brain." I'm taking notes in a steno pad. This isn't odd. Other people breathe; writers take notes reflexively. I've shelved scores of exhausted notebooks, most never revisited.

—

*There's a new complication, too:* "There's no neurologist on duty." Which means we really *should* have driven the opposite way. And probably called our volunteer ambulance corps to begin with, all things reconsidered. My decision proves wrong-ish enough. An ambulance is called to take Simone to a major hospital, one *with* a neurologist.

In the meantime . . .

The lead nurse asks Simone, "Where are you?"

She gives the right answer.

"What's your name?"

"Simone," she replies.

"Can you tell me what prescriptions you're on?" *Tougher*. I go

digging in her purse. I'm pretty sure Simone has a list in her wallet. Doctors want you to carry that list at all times. The medical goal: to avoid reactions from cross prescriptions. *OK, you're taking THIS for this . . . BUT . . . when you cross THAT with this*, your neck can spontaneously sprout an angora scarf that will smother you like an anaconda. *Side effects include . . .*

Simone's panicking. She hates not being helpful, not being the responsible one. I can't find the list. Nurse: "Don't worry. We'll call your doctor." In other words, nothing's happening soon.

Maria, a tech, comes in to do an X-ray. I'm trying to find a corner to disappear into. A doctor and three other nurses arrive, Team Tender, apologizing for each pinch and needle. Simone thanks everyone repeatedly. She means it. She believes in thanking. Team Tender leaves, off to other emergencies.

Maria stays. She mentions that *her* husband had a stroke last year. "Still trying to get his meds right." I think, *Shit*. Speaking of shit . . .

Simone tries to talk. Can't form a sentence—trying to say: *need to poop; diarrhea; too much fruit*

bedpans

"sorry"

which becomes a series of plastic bedpans

"sorry," she keeps saying; it's what she has.

Her blood pressure's explosive; they lower that. But now she needs that neurologist.

The ambulance arrives. Tim the Medic tells me, "We're going to go sirens and lights." *Which hospital?* "Rhode Island Hospital." Where I could/should (?) have driven in the first place. We arrived at my first-choice hospital around 8:00 a.m. At 11:00 a.m., she leaves that hospital in a flaring ambulance. I watch them roar off. Walk to our car to follow.

There's no point in trying to keep up with sirens and lights. I stop for take-out coffee at the nearest Dunkin' Donuts. Drive home to pick up stuff that might be needed for a very long day. And night. Then who knows? A long week? A month? Years, I hope—many good years. A tin-tasting emptiness in my belly begs to differ.

—

Modern medicine amazes. Saints who perform miracles walk just as ordinary people do, down a hospital's antibacterial halls and surgeries.

Miracles such as?

I've had the jaw-dropping privilege of interviewing a pediatric heart surgeon who successfully fixed a newborn's heart. This heart was no larger than my adult thumbnail, a heart the size of a "be my valentine" drugstore candy.

And yet that surgeon made that teensy heart whole and healthy . . . in mom's womb.

I've had the giddy privilege of interviewing a scientist/physician who cured a child born without an immune system. Neither his family nor his friends dared to touch him . . . until this Italian doctor found a complicated, extremely unpleasant cure. This same child could now fall face-first into dog shit . . . yet wake up healthy the next day.

—

A sweet volunteer gives me a self-sticking "VISITOR" badge.

"Please follow me," he says. It's January in New England. I slam the badge onto my L.L.Bean puffy coat. A coat I soon shed because suddenly I'm hot. My well-tempered volunteer leads me through the maze of an overtaxed urban hospital—built, overwhelmed, rebuilt.

He's a volunteer now; he'll be a doctor himself in a decade. He introduces me to Jeff, the upbeat ER nurse overseeing Simone.

—

She couldn't read at 7:00 a.m.

Now, at 1:00 p.m., I'm holding Simone's hand again. She's finally (because I guessed wrong with the first destination) in a hospital with an attending neurologist, Rhode Island Hospital.

Simone is in and out.

A young doctor with dark-red hair arrives, teamed with a new nurse and an X-ray technician. This doctor calmly asks me to wait outside, just for a few minutes. I disappear.

Outside her room, ER reception is full of uniforms: EMTs, firefighters, police, hospital staff. No place to rest your eyes. Busy. Crowded. Anxious. This is where ambulances from all over Rhode Island ceaselessly dump their cargoes. I take the one open chair in the place. Patients moan on gurneys. I glance their way. Hope I look sympathetic. Empathetic?

One, two at most, meet my eyes; no connection.

Every marketing counselor, advisor, or coach I know highlights this truth: All humans are self-absorbed (though no one can speak for the Dalai Lama).

If you want to see unfiltered, indefensible, discarded, pointless, timeless, weary, reasonable (candles and scents won't help), pure, human, unjudged, real-life, true, Darwin-would-approve *self-absorption*? Hang out there, at an urban ER reception area. Self-absorption has an odor all its own. My nostrils are full of it.

Then Simone's tests are done. I'm invited back into her room. I hold her hand again. There's nothing to it; might as well be a latex mitten. She's in a lofty, windowless, utilitarian room with lots of equipment jammed in = charming as an oil-change garage.

She's on a drip. Small, clear pearls of pain relief shuttle down the tubing. Things simplify. Beautify. *Headache*? Jeff says she's on something called a "migraine cocktail." It's a "try everything, see what happens, adjust" cocktail.

I'm in the corner where they drop the mop. Us, a couple. The patient lacks any obvious superpowers right now. The patient pees a lot. Jeff deftly takes care of that problem.

I'm just there to nod. Spousal unit—there, to sign forms as needed.

## CHAPTER 19

# Other pretty private stuff we will no longer do together

*Why* I once or twice fished my hand through Sim One's cascading urine stream . . .

Because she didn't mind.

Define intimacy.

When Simone went to the toilet, sometimes I'd follow. In awe.

Fresh pee is warm, of course. It's an end product. It contains all of her that went before: her spirit, her heart, her guts, her life. *Her* at her most her-ish. As she peed over my swimming fingers in those rare moments (at my naughty request), as I reached for everything inside and tickled the frameworks . . . we were as close as could be.

Pure delight.

Though I was raised on this fucking dumb golden rule, too: *What will the neighbors think?* Our neighbors to the north were my mother's mother, a bachelor uncle, and a bachelor aunt. They would not have

approved, I suppose. In our family, nothing happened below the waist unless it was a medical condition. That included births and abortions.

“Don’t pee in the pool!” Yes, pee in my pool. I want it all, my true love.

## CHAPTER 20

# Ready for what comes next?

At 4:20 p.m., they wheel Simone up to a private room.

Room 718 is big enough to accommodate two beds. There's just the one, though. It's a relief to have the privacy, of course.

It also feels empty. Ye who enter these sacred, final chambers have no real hope.

But you knew that. I knew that. Simone will soon know that.

In this room every surface is easy to clean and therefore feels barren. There's a visitor's chair. I drop my survival kit there in Simone's private room: a large tote bag holding a laptop, the day's newspapers, my steno pad, a book, a full water bottle.

I sit on the bed with Sim One. Hold her hand. Her fingers don't squeeze back. I dub that a "not yet" response.

The view's OK as the sun sets over the city and state. The big window overlooks a parking garage. There's a landing pad on top. I'm staring

at a DEMANDINGLY loud thing: a helicopter landing with a critical patient from somewhere.

Nearby streetlights glow. You run your eyes over everything available. Up gentle hills, apartment lights begin to brighten across adjacent neighborhoods. Nearby dwellers earn their livings here, in this biggish-city hospital.

Looking.

A fading sky drapes streamers of eggplant and fresh tomato sauce across my dead eyes. Speaking personally. For two. The life we loved so much together: Will it end in room 718?

Another helicopter clatters in. It's an engulfing experience: noise, lights, full of purpose; a complete action movie, just add your own dialogue and exposition.

The mundane arrives. A sweet nurse: Do we want to order dinner? I'm included. The menu is like a hotel's: lots of choices and adjectives. Hotels we know. Hospitals we don't, not for decades; food service has clearly changed since the days of bland and blander. At least they've added adjectives.

Simone doesn't have an appetite, though.

I have a bottle of water in the tote bag, an energy bar or two. So . . .  
"Nothing, thanks."

## CHAPTER 21

# Tests

We affectionately name it the “**Larry test.**”

In the morning, in her initial encounter with the ER, Simone couldn't recall her brother-in-law's first name. She tried HARD. And couldn't. *Couldn't!*

Now, nine hours later, she can: *Larry.*

Her brother-in-law's first name is Larry. *This* is a triumph, a fresh rung on a morale ladder pointed straight toward . . . maybe normalcy? No long-term damage? Is she springing back?

I start to hope. *We* start to hope. Her beautiful eyes don't look so withdrawn.

—

The “**headline test**” doesn't go as well.

Sim One holds the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* on her belly. She hesitates, then reads a headline aloud:

“**Decidedly Fundraising Amid?**”

That's what she pulls from “Deadly Fires Strand Thousands amid Australian Heat Wave.”

We both consult with charities. That's probably the source of "fundraising." It's a guess, not a reading.

We try the "smile test" instead. *That* she passes. Simone can now smile. The smile test didn't work at all in the initial ER. Baby steps: Healing is baby steps.

Slow down;

*slower;*

slower *yet;*

*not* slow e-

nough. I've started asking around. There's good internet access in her hospital room. And there's an online support group at the Mayo Clinic for stroke victims and their caregivers. I cruise posts: the group's questions and answers, its fears and doubts, the looming *what comes next*.

What quickly becomes clear? Recovery takes time.

And no one in the Mayo group is talking about *full* recovery. Maybe happens; don't count on it. There's past normal; there's now normal; there's future normal. Oh, and this: Recovery to any degree takes work more than luck.

Not really for lazy people—my favorite self-confessed identity. Hoping it's not my real worth. Lazy along with hedonistic. Self-indulgent. Undisciplined. Ask my waistline. Ask a million glasses of wine.

It makes me wonder what kind of caregiver I will be.

Add a brimming ladle of anxiety to my tin-tasting emptiness.

—

## Spousal Q&A: *When DO you alert close family about the calamity that's swept off their sibling, your wife?*

Proposed stacking order: *Maybe by degree of separation . . . place, time, feelings, family ties?*

Sim One's parents are both gone; they're not a consideration. She has five siblings, though—wise, enduring, loving people; doing all sorts of good; scattered coast to coast.

Her sister Nicole is closest geographically and the one we see most often. Lives in Massachusetts, the neighboring state. Plus she's married to the "Larry test," so there's that.

—

Later.

Simone's up in her hospital room, sleeping. I've departed across the Sea of Linoleum. Still I'm in the hospital parking lot. Cell reception is good. So I call Nicole.

*"What?!?"*

Nicole demands confirmation.

Confirmed: *Simone's had some kind of stroke.*

Nicole straps on her jet pack.

She's gonna DRIVE down NOW, from Massachusetts to Rhode Island. Take her, what, 1.5 hours at most, home to hospital? "What can I bring?"

One reason Nicole has *hordes* of friends: she *doesn't* hesitate. Need something? She's in—hair on fire, belt and suspenders.

I BEG Nicole NOT to come. *Pathetically* beg her not to come. Not kidding either or being polite: Unless Nicole can somehow complete med school on her drive down, with a specialty in neurology, *do NOT come!!!*

Exclamations fence my plea: "I'm desperate, Nicole!"

Actually, I'm just . . . *just* at a loss.

I *just* want to go home later tonight, this "day of"—by myself, after Simone's all tucked in beneath a comforter of nurses and doctors and modern medicine. I'll drink a few brimming glasses of wine.

What I do NOT need tonight is a caring companion and conversation. That's Nicole. Not me.

## RIGHT NOW I need oblivion.

I'm thinking, in fact, this might be the last oblivion I'll see for a long time, maybe ever, in a responsible marriage. *Hey!* Maybe Sim One's stroke has made me the parent we never were—someone on alert, all the time.

There's the absorbing, demanding, no-rules birth of a child inside a responsible household. Then there's the absorbing, demanding, no-rules birth of an adult child. Same level of responsibility.

I NEED (not *want*) to adjust my assumptions and presumptions and predictions and habits. Give me a day, OK? I'm looking down the barrel of our marriage. Simone and I have been together thirty-six years so far, as copilots. Our world just flipped on its head.

*Am I flying solo from now on?* Mr. Selfish wonders.

Which means, right now, at a minimum, I NEED space and solitude (and the aforementioned wine).

I am fleeing the scene.

—

*You understand, Nicole?*

Of course she does. I knew she would. Counted on Nicole's wonderful self being her wonderful self.

A vein of gleaming, reliable emotional intelligence runs through Simone's siblings (and their children), held fast by a thick hawser of decency.

Some of that is nature.

Some nurture (powerful, existential parenting and grandparenting; thank you, Jane and Georges). There are so MANY good people in the world, despite the news, trying to spend their lives well enough, easily shamed.

Of course, saying the last name can be tricky. Acceptable pronunciation? Joy-O is close enough in the US.

Nicole briskly shoulders the next family chore: She'll act as a clearing-house of information on Simone's condition.

Nicole will let the other siblings know what's up medically, a couple of times a day, if there's news. At least there's a semi-reassuring fact sheet to share with the Joy-O far-flung family.

According to Jeff, our ER intake nurse, Rhode Island Hospital is southern New England's "best" stroke hospital. It's classified as a Level I trauma center.

Wikipedia: "A Level I trauma center provides the highest level of surgical care to trauma patients. Being treated at a Level I trauma center can reduce mortality by 25% compared to a non-trauma center. It has a full range of specialists and equipment available 24 hours a day and admits a minimum required annual volume of severely injured patients."

Stay calm. Stay reassured.

*In politics?* If POTUS were to suffer a stroke or some other traumatic injury inside Rhode Island's borders, the ambulance would automatically and without question bring him/her ASAP to Rhode Island Hospital.

*Can't deny it:* It's comforting to know that the same doctors who might revive the president of the US one awful day are currently treating my Sim One.

## CHAPTER 22

How an award-winning neurologist shit delivered her accurate diagnosis, inflicting devastating damage to Simone's final sixteen months of life

**Next morning, January 3.**

The medical team wants to know right away: "How's the headache?"

Right now, Simone reports, it's a *three* out of ten.

Since puberty, Sim One has suffered headaches at level three. At breakfast. Facing high school. Headaches always hung around. For some audiences (me?), headaches are part of her "brand."

Level three out of ten is tolerable, dismissible. And maybe, what the fuck, maybe she's even lying? Who can tell? Can you see my pain? I can't even see my pain.

Simone needs shields as much as the next person. But she's not a "sympathy harvester," either. Nope, truth be told, Sim One's head is a painful goldfish bowl . . . and has been for a long time. It's at the hot core of our marriage.

I must say (because, of course, I hope to rush things along, so our threatened marriage can get back to normal and predictable ASAP), Simone's brain seems to be improving quickly . . . *I think*. Other delusions beckon: *Can we just jump in a time machine and go back to before, when everything was lovely and manageable and the future was bright and promising?*

A specialist neurology nurse enters to conduct preliminary "**how are you progressing**" tests.

She shows bed-bound Sim One some illustrations.

"What's this?"

"Lion," Simone says.

RIGHT!

"What's this?" Specialist nurse offers another illustration.

"Rhino," Simone says.

RIGHT!

"What's this?" Takes awhile . . .

"Camel," though Simone isn't thick-ice sure.

Still . . .

RIGHT!

Neurology nurse then asks Simone to list words beginning with "f."

Wait for it . . .

In a minute, my admirable, desirable, delightful bride utters two dozen words . . . including "fuck" more than once.

Simone lies languidly in her indecent johnny. Whatever were once classed as "private parts" are now flagrantly on open-air display. She

was always immodest, pretty much from our second date. And I know she loves to swear; that's why we have separate offices.

Swearing is a sign of recovery, I'm betting.

—

"When can I drive again?" Simone suddenly asks; that's a top concern for a wanna-come-back-soon consultant. The neurology nurse offers this: "There are apps that exercise the brain, the executive function. We can look into that."

The nurse then administers a few last tests before she goes. She recites a number: "674." She asks Simone, "Can you say it backward?"

Simone *can*: "476."

Big smiles all around. How about some math, then: "Subtract 7 from 100. Equals?"

Simone can't handle the math. Still, not *that* bad. Baby steps. Learned *that* from Mayo.

This morning, she breezes through the romance novel she couldn't decipher just twenty-four hours earlier. *His Wagyu-beef-red loins. Her sweating hidden curls. His comforting tautness. Her moistness, opening to what must be an inner world of. . .*

I'm not quoting from the real book. I'm being a dismissive asshole. *Dismissive as well as learning*, though I won't learn that for more than a year. Then romance novels will teach me a profound truth I wish I'd learned much earlier in my marriage.

Romance novels aren't porn. They're relationship utopias.

Most-ever-in-our-lifetime-most-trusted-friend Ashley arrives. Ashley's a future-of-fundraising, superstar colleague, also an artist, a cat respecter, a leader in North America's exploding social justice space, a generation (or more) younger than us (*thank goodness*; Simone and I are running out of decades).

In a darkened room someday, just before my candle wicks out, I will tell Ashley with utter frankness why her relative youth is so comforting to us on this particular bleak morning. Not now, though; we'll see.

Ashley brings treats she's gathered from a good local bakery. It's amazing what an honest baker's paper sack can do that "modern medicine" can't.

We stare at each other. Cue-ball moment. Stares all over the place. Ashley [in LOVE]. Sim One [in LOVE]. Me, spousal bystander [WANNA BE AS LOVING AS POSSIBLE] = ready, eager, obliged to serve, with no obvious nursing/caring skills (guess we'll see).

We enjoy staring at each other. That's what *beyond-the-grave* friends are for: *staring* at each other in a god-awful crisis. We're about to go Shakespearean.

Then the room's door opens.

Medical royalty enters. The hospital's chief of neurology arrives with her residents, to deliver her diagnosis.

—

Residents arrayed: "It's bad," the chief neurologist begins.

Injecting a tinnitus of sorts into the bystanders. An earworm. An echo.

Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Stop.

Freeze time.

These are the first words out of her mouth. Simone glances my way. Ashley stops breathing. Minds go Anglo-Saxon: *Fuck!* Times an echo, times infinity, times reality. Stop the world; we all want to get off. NOW, please . . .



# ACT 3



## CHAPTER 23

### “It’s bad.”

THAT’s your opener, Doc?

Top-shelf credentials clutter your office wall. But *really* . . . THIS is how you *best* alert a patient, her family, and a close friend who’s hurried to be there?

Simone, Ashley, Tom: All of us are in prayer mode (secular version).

All of us will devote ourselves to every word, any word, that leaps from the specialist’s tongue and ton of knowledge.

And your considered choice as a superb physician is to feed us the same shit that passes for a bracing lecture to interns.

### “It’s bad.”

Who’s your messaging coach? Dr. Guillotine? Inventor of . . .

What do *you*, senior neurologist with your crew in training, *imagine* your wondering/hoping/confused “rest of my life” patient hears right now?

Or how about me, her husband? I'm just a few yards away. Or beloved Ashley, sitting bedside, with a gluten-free pastry suspended in midair?

Let me try to explain Ashley. She's not a bit player in our lives. Simone and Ashley are thirty-five years apart. Ashley calls Simone her "career mom."

Simone coaches Ash (also known as "Smash"; she's a kickboxer as well as a yoga, meditation, and cat devotee). Simone knows a soulmate when she sees one. Simone's helping Ash leap with impact into consulting for social justice nonprofits. That's their shared beat. There have been many intimate, long, tearful calls betwixt. Many. Twining.

I was Ash a generation earlier. Simone led me down the same remarkable path. That path took us as a couple around the world, speaking at dozens of conferences annually (with lots of laughter, friendship, food, wonders attached).

Ashley is eagerly in Simone's hospital room now.

Ashley and her wife, Amy, have stayed with us in France. Which is what we like to do with besties: Come stay with us in our French home for a week. Friendships ripen there . . . most surviving an extended exposure to quirks and meals and interests; not 100 percent of the time, but goddamn close.

And then this, this morning.

Doc: You busy? Distracted? Thinking about something else? Your imagination on break? What DO *you* IMAGINE we will hear with these two words, a thousand times more penetrating than an axe wielded in a Hollywood slasher film?

**"It's bad."**

The room freezes.

There's the patient, center stage. She's fighting to do more in her life; she's not done.

There's me, the spouse. There's Ashley, Simone's career child.

Across the room, at a distance, there is the medical team. They

hold the precise doom of CT scans in their hands.

*Phuck.* That's how I'll spell it from now on. It's suddenly the most serious, stupid joke on human earth. Mortality. It's not worth FUCK. It's worth PHUCK at best.

The precise diagnosis? CAA. CAA = cerebral (brain) amyloid (a waste protein that builds up in, clogs, destroys) angiopathy (blood vessels). The cerebral part is the worst of it. CAA: I'm busy accessing the Mayo Clinic's extraordinarily informative website. Typing. Handwriting notes at the same time. Paused in the moment. Attentive as phuck.

—

Today, though, dear Doc: Are you certified to attend real people? Or are you certified on dummies with no families, friends, nor futures?

This "presumed-competent" doctor's crew stands alertly behind her, hoping to ace their exams and graduate and help.

What did you learn today?

This is my report card: F for delivery. Artificial intelligence can now do the very same job—read the scans—and probably deliver the very same news with a semblance of compassion.

—

The scene from that moment on . . .

I (husband) sag in one chair, eagerly taking notes (which is what baffled writers do reflexively). Friend Ashley's in another chair, wondering if she should leave immediately (*stay!* we signal). Simone-of-the-past lies in bed, barely draped, wondering if she has any intellectual future.

- "It's bad," neuro doc will say again and again in Simone's head, for the next sixteen months.
- "It's bad" pushed Sim One's identity through a shredder. What was left wouldn't make a meal.
- "It's bad" aged her a decade inside a year.

- “It’s bad” robbed her of comfort. It terrified her waking hours and stole her sleep.
- “It’s bad” was self-dramatizing slob communication, delivered by a well-drilled technocrat doing rounds, teaching a next gen of technocrats.

Color me the Spouse Stunned. Mouth dry, brain orbiting Planet No Fucking Way. Simone’s best friend of a certain mentee-appropriate age? Color Friend Ashley stunned as well.

So “it’s bad.” What *does* that mean?

Simone the Patient lies prone in her utility-forward hospital bed, eagerly awaiting the news of her future, hoping for relief.

That pizza didn’t arrive. Instead, steady beeps. Surrounded by drips and monitors.

Care to know what floating around a space station looks like? This is close: Just add gravity and a doctor who needs a refresher week at Camp Empathy.

You can now color Simone black, blue, gray, and grave.

Stunned, like Ashley and me, by a single statement from the top neurology doc at a nationally ranked Level I trauma center—words uttered within Simone’s hearing at this moment on this nice, bright day—a sentence that is unrecoverable.

*How does it sound?*

To the prime target audience in this room, it’s a death sentence.

Right then, Sim One dies her first death (of many) across the next sixteen months . . . tattooed with despair by the smartest person in the room; indelibly marked with a wobbly, tenuous, fragile, makeshift, unlikely, uncertain, failing life, passion, will, belief, hope, and desire.

With all due, true respect for the insane accomplishments of modern medicine . . . words matter.

Make that a part of med school. Right after you dismiss bloodletting and leeches as the bad old days . . . and just before you get into the intricacies of gene editing.

Two words. Your choice, Doc. Pick two. You're smart. You're accomplished. You're exhausted.

And you're at the threshold between a patient's vibrant life and what likely happens next.

Pick two words.

Why not three? "Could be worse."

Five: "Could be so much worse."

*Admiringly yrs, phuckers . . .*

You picked the wrong two words, Doc. You're trusted at your technical job. You've trained for years with the best. An accurate diagnosis is *your* job goal.

Inducing panic in patients and their loved ones is NOT in your job description.

Speaking for Sim One, Ashley, and me (your witnesses that morning): Learn to lie better or at least enough. Maybe bring a comfort animal or a plush toy.

## CHAPTER 24

“How long do I have to live?” Sim One asks

I’m taking notes fast.

Simone’s neurologist fills our future with unavoidable, unpalatable data. We stare. “It was a lobar hemorrhage.” Source from somewhere, maybe Mayo: “Symptoms can include altered consciousness and cognition, severe headache or seizure, stiff neck and vomiting, reduced sensation and motor control, swallowing and language difficulties, and others. . . .”

Doc’s voice flutters a bit—the tax collector, with bad news. She tells the room, every surface hard, uninviting, easy to sterilize: “You have CAA, cerebral amyloid angiopathy.”

The doctor pauses. My pen pauses.

She adds, armor plating the gruesome truth: “There is no treatment. There is no cure. Memory loss is part of the evolution of the disorder.”

An eternity passes in a few seconds.

Simone asks, “How long do I have to live?”

“This is a white-matter disease. It can take years.”

On my laptop in Sim One’s hospital room, I’m plowing through credible online medical advice like a fishing boat trying to outrace a storm. It quickly becomes obvious: There is no safe harbor in sight. “A person with white-matter disease will gradually have increasing difficulty with the ability to think,” I read. “They’ll also have progressively worsening issues with balance. White-matter disease is age-related and progressive.”

—

There’s the ancient rub: The truthful medical answer even today is “No one knows! Days? Years? Decades, possibly?” A humane answer might be *How long would you like to live, given certain considerations?*

But we don’t have *that* answer, either.

Instead we have diseases without cures, without end dates, without treatments, without help, without a clue . . . yet. What will save the human race afflicted with amyloid bloom, the cause of Alzheimer’s as well as CAA? The most promising line of investigation into amyloid reduction in our brains depends on lab mice who did better when subjected to light and noise at certain frequencies. Even if it does pan out, any real treatment is years off. When a miracle happens, invest in that company.

—

“Is there anything I can do?” Simone asks.

“Exercise is always a good idea,” Doc says.

*Oh, shit.* Sharp curve ahead.

Since SimOney and I don’t care about exercise—at ALL, sunup to sundown. We prefer wine (me) and dessert (her). We’ll always choose thinking and talking over sweating and huffing (although hiking can manage both; we adore hiking, especially the part when you’re done for the day).

“A healthy lifestyle helps.”

More *oh shit*. Same general reasons.

“If it’s any comfort, the brain scan looks worse than you behave.”

*Huh?*

“It could take two months for this to heal.”

*Is that good?*

“Expect microbleeds.”

*What? SHIT!*

## CHAPTER 25

# Books: More stuff we no longer do together

Books are how we exercised.

Our car stopped by default at any roadside shop that crowed about used books. We've felt the magic in Maine, western Massachusetts, by the Connecticut shore, in Tucson, Arizona: book barns to get lost in, to revive in.

Simone and I loved the shape, thickness, craft of books.

Loved books' potential. Loved adding them to our world.

The smell of books. Friends had dear pets. We had dear books. Weight and texture. A cover's promise. Each wrinkle. Each "I couldn't help myself" dog-ear. The dirt left behind by earlier eager fingers: the many minds who'd traversed some of these same greasy, highlighted pages; headed somewhere important to them, as fast as possible.

Books connected Simone to me and me to her. We examined each other's book purchases the way newlyweds might examine one another's laundry, looking for clues.

Books made us capable.

Books made us independent.

To Simone and me, the presence of books *meant* . . . We're not alone.

To us, the wonder of books *meant* . . . There's more to know.

To us, the liberality of books *meant* . . . Sure, we're wrong—help yourself to a fresh perspective!

We devoted ten interior walls of our average-sized house to bookcases. That was just to shelve the stuff we wanted to keep on-site, for immediate access. Loads of books we gave away.

—

Simone and I were hopelessly, gleefully, proudly book addicted. We shelved countless books. College books. Life-changing books. Art books. Inscribed books. Reassuring books. Her dad's books. Display-to-impress books. Teensy-edition art books. Project books. How-to books. Sage books. Hundreds of books that might transport a lagging attention span quickly, irresistibly, into some delicious wonder.

And so we rested inside our book-packed nest, knowing something fresh and interesting would always come along. . . .

Reading was how we pretty much ended every day, in bed together, legs twined, our individual reading lamps on. As I got drowsy, my open book would repeatedly slam my face. You've heard this before: Simone would intervene as a first responder—"Tom, put your book down; you're asleep."

Click, click: Both lights soon went off.

Over our decades, hundreds of nights ended this way.

## CHAPTER 26

# *In pain? Call Wayne!* “No-decision week.”

January 3, 2020 ~ After sundown, the hospital discharged Simone. We walked to the parking lot. She was in sweats and trainers.

*That was fast.* Had a brain bleed, a small stroke, on Thursday.

On Friday, *see you later, agitator.*

Driving away, we pass a series of lighted billboards advertising lawyers. “In pain? Call Wayne!”

Makes you wonder.

Simone isn’t wondering. She’s insisting. What she cares about most RIGHT NOW . . . *this moment? As we head to bed that same Friday night . . .*

Client appointments.

We need to rest. Thursday was a shit show. Still, Simone-the-pro plans to be up and consulting by Monday. Less than forty-eight hours after a knock-her-to-her-knees ministroke, Sim One thinks a career renaissance is in order.

*This memory posted to my brain:*

Simone and I vowed our marital love over a basket of full-belly fried clams, stumbling at night across Aunt Carrie's packed, unpaved, puddled parking lot in Narragansett, Rhode Island, within hearing of the Atlantic if you stretched your ears to breaking . . . vowing to put aside all others, to kiss past the tartar sauce.

I told her I *thought* I loved her. (What *is* that strange feeling making me weak in the knees?) And Simone *thought maybe* she loved me back. (I feel it, too . . . or is it merely the breeze?). Who the fuck knew? My first proposal was primarily residential: "Let's buy a house together!" Her counterproposal was clear and based on her previous relationship: "Yes, let's go house hunting! Right after we've set a date for our marriage. . . ."

Sim One faked it that night in Aunt Carrie's overflow parking, though not as you might smirk.

*This* was her fake: She hated fried clams, then and forever; couldn't understand why you'd yank a piece of protein out of its secure calcium-carbonate home, bread it, excruciate it. But that particular night she wanted me to be happy. And I loved fried seafood (thirty-seven years later, my waistline would tell a culinary journey: boyish to barrel).

And so we went for dinner that night to Aunt Carrie's. Nothing much on its seafood-heavy menu spoke to Simone. She ordered dessert instead: "Indian pudding," cornmeal boiled in milk, sweetened with molasses and maple syrup, fleshy with unexpected raisins, dusted with cinnamon. Cinnamon turned out to be Sim One's favorite spice; she put it everywhere she could, morning oatmeal to afternoon cocoa.

She saw cinnamon as an all-purpose health supplement, maybe not a guarantee but generally a good thing to consume. We stocked the cupboard with commercial-sized bottles of the stuff.

—

In BIG RED letters, I print this across my paper calendar when she's finally asleep Friday night:

# NO-DECISION WEEK

Just me talking to myself, and I

- thank the tribe;
- don't make *any* major life decisions for at least a week;
- call our insurance agent for chutes and ladders (they deal with life's little shitfalls daily, right?);
- let the dust settle, OK? To that end, give our longtime biweekly cleaners (now trusted friends) a day off with pay.
- Simone is adamant: Get a second opinion ASAP.

## CHAPTER 27

# “Gratefully yrs, with love”: Two days after episode #1

January 4, 2020 ~ Simone’s home from the hospital. It’s past time to thank her enfolding, warm-as-wool family tribe (three of the five sibs have been in touch; they’re all being informed by Nicole).

—

In an email to Simone’s few-years-younger sister, crumbs-in-bed girl, Nicole Joyaux Kramer:

You have been a dream angel. Larry, too.

I measured: your wings are twice as large as the next angel’s.  
And spotless. (Good angel hygiene is important.)

—

Same day, emailing Andréé, Simone’s youngest sibling (in a sitcom, she’d be the lovable, brainy brat):

Right now we are secure inside a lovely "soft prison" of people we trust.

And you know what, everyone? [Simone's] diagnosis is not a guillotine.

Simone could live happily and well for another 20 years with this same diagnosis. Over age 70, 30% of Americans have this condition. Past 80, 50% of Americans have this condition . . . so scientists say.

Don't panic yet. Or feel free to panic, but just don't let us know.

Or DO let us know: it's reassuring to hear what you're thinking about.

While we probably won't pursue alternative healing in the Andes, we are open to ideas that don't prescribe alien abduction.

Our game plan as of right now is a slow, multi-year unwinding of stuff: two self-employed global consulting practices are in play; a house in France that's fully rented for 2020 is in play [the pandemic canceled that enterprise]; another house in France desperately seeking the perfect next owner is in play [sold just in time, before CAA closed the curtains; Sim One's last mental triumph, a shaky duet with her preposterously accomplished sculptor sibling, Alain].

You know, the usual. Families. Love to you all. This will be a class project. We trust every bone of every bit of every one of you. So, honestly, we're not all that worried.

love

simone and tom

## CHAPTER 28

# How bad is bad? Let's revisit . . .

*At 6:00 a.m., Simone couldn't read.*

*At 6:00 p.m. that same day, she could.*

Sim One's January 2 brain bleed sent a mixed message.

Something was definitely wrong.

How bad?

If you *couldn't* read at 6:00 a.m. but you *could* read at 6:00 p.m.? Maybe it was merely "I've misplaced my reading glasses" bad. Maybe CAA, in fact, was manageable. Simone's recovery right now seemed to qualify as a minor miracle! In just twelve hours, her terrifying symptoms had evaporated. Cue smiles, right? Because things might just be okey-dokey fine!

Hold it right there.

We now knew, based on scans, that Sim One suffered from an irreversible condition known as CAA = cerebral amyloid angiopathy. Breaking that diagnosis down:

- “Cerebral” means it’s in her brain. (Humans don’t do well with things in their brains.)
- “Amyloids” are “abnormal” (i.e., NOT good) proteins deposited in all sorts of organs, including the brain.
- “Angiopathy” means it’s a disease of the arteries, veins, and capillaries (prone to breakage).

Another way to look at CAA?

Simone now carries a time bomb on her shoulders, in her brain. She has eyes . . . and behind those sky-blue eyes is CAA. She has lips . . . and behind those breaths and kisses skulls CAA. There are experts everywhere. And she’s alone. No one knows how long Simone’s CAA dynamite fuse will burn: could be tomorrow, could be decades.

Was reading again *really* good news . . . or just *deceptively* good?

Reading has been Sim One’s chief passion-delight-informant-relaxant since early, early days. Laughing mother Jane would drag her firstborn out of the basement, admonishing, “Put down the goddamn book. Go outside. Get some sun. Play!”

Reading was core to Sim One’s quality of life. For me, too. Of course, our first, fresh-cut-flower sex was great. But maybe our strongest bond became reading. And writing.

Was food essential? So we know. Water? So we know.

Reading and writing: for us, indisputably. So now you know what’s at stake.

And now a second opinion, from one of the greats . . .

## CHAPTER 29

# Greenie

The verdict delivered to Simone's bedside:

1. There is *no* CAA treatment.
2. There is *no* CAA cure.
3. And calling all you nervous folks carrying the burden of awareness: CAA becomes increasingly common as you age. With laundry, you iron out wrinkles, push back stains with bleach. In the brain, in the skull—beyond the reach of any surgeon living as you read what I'm typing—things get worse, not better. Simone ages daily. I age daily. *You* age . . . See what I mean? Aging brains go in just one direction. And even if you're still too young to care about this irreversible trend . . . well, your parents and grandparents, love 'em or not, they *are* aging . . . into their CAA-most-likely years.
4. So, welcome. . . .

Which means the only question is this: *How soon will the time bomb on Simone's shoulders ignite?*

And the correct answer is: No one knows.

I stumbled across a panel of doctors discussing CAA. They agreed: If you eked out ten years after diagnosis, you were lucky. Not great, but not the worst. No medical expert we spoke to ever gave us a time frame. But this panel of doctors I stumbled across were talking before an audience of other specialists; they were willing to wager a guess.

Patients and loved ones get by on spider-weight filaments of hope. “How long do I have, Doc?” For one man I know, the answer was “Probably no more than a year.” The medical team proposed a triple bypass. The patient refused. Turned out he lived another decade and died in his sleep in his eighties, in Paris, with his wife by his side. Results vary.

We eked out a couple of days of false hope because she could read again. And false hope is fine. You’re trying to get through another day and another night.

There were so many unanswered questions. That morning in the hospital, slipping in and out of her johnny, Simone wanted to know WAY more, RIGHT now, as FAST as possible. Like when could she safely drive again.

The neurologist who led with “it’s bad” redeemed herself. She had just the guru up her sleeve . . . a close mentor/colleague in Boston. She’d make a referral.

His name: Steve Greenberg, MD, PhD. Massachusetts General Hospital had posted his latest bio online. We read it with reverence, astonishment, trust, enthusiasm, and hope. If anyone on earth could predict what the future held for Sim One, it would be Dr. Greenberg:

Dr. Greenberg, Professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical School, holds the John J. Conway Endowed Chair in Neurology, directs the Hemorrhagic Stroke Research Program, and is Vice-Chair for Faculty Development and Promotions at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Initiated in 1994, the Hemorrhagic Stroke Research Program has become internationally recognized as a leading authority on the causes, diagnosis, and treatment of cerebral amyloid angiopathy

[CAA]. Dr. Greenberg has authored over 280 research articles and 80 chapters, reviews, and editorials in the areas of hemorrhagic stroke and small vessel brain disease. He has served in many national and international leadership roles in the fields of stroke and neurology including principle investigator for the NINDS MarkVCID biomarkers consortium coordinating center, president of the International CAA Association, chair of the NIH Acute Neurologic Injury and Epilepsy study section, co-chair of the NINDS Alzheimer's Disease-Related Dementias Summit subcommittee on vascular cognitive impairment, and chair of the American Heart Association International Stroke Conference.

Simone right away dubbed him "Greenie" . . . maybe to keep his brilliance digestible.

Once she was home from the hospital, Simone called Greenie's office daily, to schedule a consultation as soon as he could see her. She was NOT taking CAA lying down. One of her consulting specialties was strategic planning. Step one: Gather information. Talk to the best people, those who know. She had a big new project to attend to.

Sim One was good at projects.

## CHAPTER 30

### “Stable . . .”

. . . the radiologist said. She was looking at fresh brain scans, four days after Simone’s hospital discharge. That was her assessment: Simone’s brain was “stable.”

“Stable”: Our world hangs off that (almost) comforting, (nearly) reassuring word. “Stable”: That’s good, that’s good, *that’s good, right?*

But Simone’s got pain in her arm this very moment, in her left rib cage, in her jaw. We’re parked by the side of the road, emergency blinkers on. Her general practitioner is on the phone. I’m in the driver’s seat, whispering, “Keep complaining until someone takes it seriously.”

In the end, they schedule an appointment for an electroencephalogram early the next morning at Rhode Island Hospital. Where they wire up Sim One’s head. The EEG uncovers evidence of seizure activity.

They have a pill for that, turns out.

I start something: *The Dictionary of the New Normal*. It contains two words at this moment:

- **Stable** ~ This has to do with Simone’s brain and outlook. Our current favorite word. I’d eat “stable” every day.

Maybe as a burger, with all the fixings: roasted peppers, artisanal mayo, succulent tomatoes, double the onion rings on the side, and add a bowl of BBQ sauce just for dipping . . . understood? Re: the cheese? Only cheddar, sharp as you have. With three strips of bacon. Of course, hormone-free, organic-certified, college-educated bacon. And bacon expects compensation for professional service, so add that into my bill. “Life” broadly defined has become wobbly and lost and who the fuck cares.

- **Recalibrate** ~ Marci delivers that one: a new word to me. She’s been recalibrating a lot lately herself. We met Marci ages ago. She was out of the Peace Corps, banging around the nonprofit world in the earliest days of charter schools. She introduced me to Cambodian soup; I floated my best tie across it (and met the miracle that is dry cleaning). She and hubbist Jonathan, with her entire BIG family, became intimate friends for decades; they raised two remarkable children, Merlin and Forrest. We spend holidays together. We plan food weekends together. We’ve traveled to France together. Together: birthdays, anniversaries, meals; with unwanted, unexpected, unfair deaths intervening. *Salut* Bayla and Richard. I’ve stood at your gravesides, throwing in some dirt, as is the custom. Simone visited Bayla on her deathbed. Sim One couldn’t go to Richard’s funeral; in the meantime, she’d had her own appointment with ceasing.

## CHAPTER 31

# A good Buddhist's view of life

It's exactly a week after Simone's incident. Her microstroke.

She's home, working again.

Between paying bills and catching up with correspondence, I watch John Haydon's new video about going into hospice care.

John is a pal. He's fifty-three, father of one beloved child. In America, John Haydon is a top guru in online fundraising. He's also a lifelong Buddhist, a dedicated gym-goer, a bass guitarist in a series of never-famous rock bands, and a sweet, thoughtful soul. About a year ago, he noticed a small lump high on his chest. That lump metastasized like kudzu. Much of his body weight is now tumor.

On his new video, he wants to talk about living in the moment.

"Living in the future is the number one cause of anxiety," says John. "Living in the past is the number one cause of depression."

John has shared with the world a series of frank videos about his

ongoing treatment. He endured chemo, radiation, and experimental drugs. Nothing worked. John's cancer was annihilating him.

"Life does not exist beyond a moment," he says. "I'm alive now. What can I do with this life now that's of value?"

## CHAPTER 32

# Simone does Simone

We had a deal.

If anyone had to be unpleasant to get something done, it would be Simone. I sucked at confrontation. She was gifted. So that was our household's default.

She was assertive, righteous, one confident and pissed-off human being. And yet she could sail across most situations without turning things toxic. She was the not-hated-but-maybe-they'll-like-me-finally "bad" cop. She made an impression; she started strong. I've seen people physically back off from Sim One's initial bark.

I was the forgettable good-cop balm mellowing nearby in a small jar, there for momentary emotional relief if needed. Maybe I'd smile slightly. A tattoo across the back of my left hand would have been a helpful reminder: *Don't worry; this latest outburst will be fine in the end.*

The event goes like this.

Simone and I arrive well in advance. There's no one in the office to check her in for her EEG appointment (the funny electrodes-bonnet thing), an appointment squeezed in on a rush, for 9:30 that morning.

Absolutely, don't expect precision. There's a clock ticking down,

though: an emergency MRI of Sim One's brain will follow later that morning, immediately after the EEG is done.

At 9:35 a.m., a nurse comes in to say that Simone's EEG can't be done in time for her 10:15 MRI. The nurse then asks, lifting something to the ready (clipboard, iPad?), "Would you like to reschedule the MRI?"

I guess there must be leisurely MRIs, too: scans that could be done next month maybe. Simone's MRI isn't like that. Her brain is imploding or exploding, and no one's quite sure *which* right now . . . and "Would you like to reschedule?"

Despite it all, Simone has her be-kind-and-humane shit in good working order. It is NOT the nurse's fault. It is the system's fault. I'm between them. Simone pushes me aside. She becomes Simone, assertive like a nail gun: "This is YOUR problem"—meaning the hospital's problem, *not* the nurse's; no humans were insulted in the making of this tense moment—"so YOU reschedule it for TODAY!"

Things moved briskly from that point on.

And so Simone's will *was* done, her EEG rescheduled for *that* day.

Smooch, smoochee, smooch: I love you, driven babe! What a wonder you are to watch.

## CHAPTER 33

# Fuck, it's cold. And it's Greenie day!

January 17, 2020 ~ Boston is bitterly cold. A wind chill has knocked the city's temperatures unconscious, well below zero Fahrenheit = minus twenty-four degrees Celsius, if that's your orientation.

A wound won't bleed in air this cold.

And yet . . .

## We're happy, Simone *amie!*

Why?

Because today is Dr. Greenie day!

As for the bitter temps . . . well, we've felt worse. And those shocking experiences are now cherished memories. Over the past two decades, Simone and I had flown to Anchorage, Alaska (and even colder environs), at least four times for work. Alaska is no picnic in winter. Once, Simone fell on black ice and cracked her head on the sidewalk as we left our bed-and-breakfast. A nearby husky broke into laughter.

We moved on, didn't care much for the iconic dog. Our Anchorage speaking venue that day was just a few blocks away. It might as well have been on another planet and you had to go through outer space to get there. We inched ever closer by ducking out of the wind into door fronts and muttering "Fuck, it's cold" with every depleted breath and forced step.

Simone in Anchorage, over and over: "I'm so cold."

"Can you do three more door fronts?"

"I'm so cold."

"Two more?"

*Fuck, it's cold.*

Thanks to Alaska, though, Simone and I both now have in our coat closet excellent technical gear. That *same* gear easily handled a cold, wet spring in Paris in 2019. It handles the short walk to Greenie's office in 2020 without a hiccup.

## CHAPTER 34

# Live your life HARD

The meeting with Greenie is scheduled for 2:00 p.m. We have a CD with us showing Simone's brain scans. We're early. To kill time in the parking garage, Simone makes a client call. We go in finally.

Mass General is a big-city, high-volume hospital—world-class, no mistake. Yet you meet kindness at every turn: Staff are personable; strangers hold elevator doors; you sense that “we,” the rising tide of those who are sick, are in this together—patients, families, professionals.

The enemy is no longer “us.”

Today's enemy is clearly the disease.

Dr. Greenie was wonderful. He gave us more than an hour of his time, of his guru's life. We asked every question we could think of. He was gentle. Deliberate. He did some tests: “Recite the months backward.” Sim One could. He did some physical tests: the sobriety walk, backward; hop on one foot; reflexes. All seemed normal.

He asked me about changes I'd observed. *Maybe two years ago, Simone started talking a lot more to young kids in airports and on the*

street. *She became more social than before.* None of my observations seemed worth much.

His own hands shook as he spoke to us. He had a nervous disorder, too, apparently. His tremor was reassuring.

“The best news in the world,” Greenie said, “*was how fast Simone had recovered from the bleed.*”

**We heard that LOUD and CLEAR.**

Drinking (too?) deeply, urgently of that sort-of prophecy.

—

Essentially, Dr. Greenberg said this: *Live your life.*

**Live your life *hard*, in fact.**

This is what it is. Yes, there is no cure.

**Ignore that part.**

So here we were, on Friday, January 17, 2020, driving out of Boston. Singing in the car: “Thank you, Dr. Greenie.” His advice was all we needed to hear that afternoon: *Live your life. Live your life hard.* Simone and I heard the same, wise theme: *Don’t smother your lives in worry. Live as much as you can.*

—

Next day, Sim One broadcasts this positivity email:

***Hello, family, friends, babysitting and chauffeur team members***

...

I saw the CAA guru yesterday at Mass General. Tommy and me and our pens and notebooks and file folders.

***BOTTOM LINE:*** I’m fine. Live my life.

I’ve been scared since January 2 brain bleed. . . . Until yesterday, January 17, 4 p.m. (That’s just 2 weeks of fear. So really, the bad news . . . then good news happened pretty darn quickly. I’m very fortunate!)

***THE KEY POINTS:***

***No restrictions in living my life.*** Remember the various questions some of you suggested? No restrictions.

50% of people over 80 years of age have CAA (cerebral

amyloid angiopathy). Amyloids are made by the brain. Amyloids are junk. Icky garbagy stuff produced by the brain . . . And there's no way that they get out of the brain. They just wander around and plug up the brain tubes and shit like that. That's what causes brain bleeds.

The thing about not driving? There are laws in various states saying that after a stroke, you can't drive because you're putting yourself and others at risk. So I asked Dr. Greenie about driving. And he was "confused." He asked me why I couldn't drive. His comment about driving: Practice driving. Have your partner watch you. Are you smart enough to pull to the side of the road if things aren't going well?

There's an 8% chance every year . . . that I'll have another brain bleed because of the CAA. That means there's a 92% chance—every year—that I will NOT have another brain bleed.

I will continue to be Dr. Greenberg's patient. I am also going to participate in various studies he's doing. May as well try to help figure this out. Annual checkups, whatever, in his special center in Boston.

### **OVERALL**

No imminent incapacitation . . .

Yes, fly in airplanes.

Nothing to watch for . . . No need to panic.

In general, avoid medication if you can.

No special diet.

***So there you have it.*** Thank you for all your kindness and care. Your thoughts and notes and and and . . . really made a difference for both Tommy and me.

We slept well last night when we finally got home about 7:30 p.m. And we've both said to each other that we feel kinda weird this morning. Like we're not worried anymore. But we spent 2 weeks worrying and so now we have to get used to the new mindset . . . and and and . . .



Sim One

Sim One Rock Hunter

DJ Sim One

SimOney

Mone

All versions of Simone Patricia Joyaux

## CHAPTER 35

# Consider: What's "Your Dash"?

Simone was grasping, gasping, flailing for any . . . any . . . any life jacket. Her brain had nothing to offer anymore . . . except slow regrets. *Brain here. Sorry, Sim One.*

She lived with it now, like a freeloading, too loud, unevictable boarder.

Her family hoped.

I slept by her side with no cure.

"Live your life," Greenie insisted.

He drilled Simone through the eye. She liked that sort of talk.

*Live it hard*; Dr. Greenberg, he promised. He knew he had the right ears listening; it takes one to know one.

She'd already lived her life hard; so had he. *No restraints. You've done well. Do more, as much as you can. No barriers.*

His hands trembled without embarrassment. It was in part a prayer, in part applause. He might be the doctor today. He was also a patient in love with more life. Maybe Dr. Greenberg even touched

Simone’s hand, with “who gives a bloody shit anymore about boundaries” permission. Do we even *have* boundaries with doctors? They’re the border guards for what comes (unfortunately?) next.

Simone had blue-pearl, intense, don’t-fuck-with-me eyes.

Greenie stared into them pleasantly.

Sim One’s eyes were the items on her face I loved most. The peach fuzz on her face was good, too; removing it gave her a lifelong hobby. Her gnarly, lightning-strike head of hair was good, too. Her accumulated decor—interesting jewelry and clothes—was, as intended, *très amusant* for audiences.

But Sim One’s infinity eyes? They were a stare-worthy masterpiece, shielded and aided by glasses since age three.

—

Two months earlier, John Haydon offered the same advice in a video, at the sold-out 2019 North American Nonprofit Storytelling Conference.

John was supposed to speak in person, on stage, as he stood dying. But his doctor advised him not to fly. John had damaged lungs that might not get him all the way across the country, from Boston to San Diego. So there was this last-minute video shown in a hastily organized side room. In the end, few people saw it. Yet it had a message for the ages.

This video . . .

In it, John Haydon pointed to the hyphen between the dates of birth and death on the gravestone of Henry G. Parker at Mount Auburn Cemetery. “Henry was born in 1836. He died in 1892. What’s the most important thing about this is The Dash [John’s finger hovered above the hyphen] . . . what we do in the middle of our life. . . .”

Tend your Dash.

When you can’t get out of bed, remember you *have* a Dash.

Your date of ENTRY and your date of EXIT aren’t “you.”

The Dash is the true “you”: the worthy, the beloved, the balance, the calm, the self-forgiveness, the patience, the tolerance, the humility, the help you give freely to others, the mistakes and the rectifications (bless all our hearts).

The next chapter shares the full text of John's thoughts about The Dash. If you have a couple of minutes to spare, it's a short read. I thank John every day for his way of seeing human life and lives.

## CHAPTER 36

What John Haydon said  
about “The Dash”—as he  
faced dying and no longer  
connecting with friends

**November 3, 2019**

**San Diego, California**

**A video transcript**

Hi, everybody!

I wish I could be there.

I really miss you guys a lot.

A quick thought: First of all, the cancer has actually spread a lot. But I wanted to talk about life and death for a moment. Not too long; there's a lot I could get into, because I've been thinking about that a lot.

The video follows John's hand as he points to the type on the gravestone for Henry G. Parker.

We're looking at a gravestone here at Mount Auburn Cemetery. And every single gravestone has four components to it. One is the name. I don't know Henry. We're just using Henry as an example.

Thank you, Henry! We really appreciate it!

Henry was born in 1836. He died in 1892.

What's the most important thing about this is The Dash . . . what we do in the middle of our life, you know.

And my life is unfortunately going to be shorter.

But in a way, to say unfortunate is not correct. Because many people die when they're kids. I was treated at the cancer hospital [Dana-Farber] for two years almost. I'd see little kids, old people, every type of person.

And every person has a precious life to live.

And we don't see, we don't recognize, what a person does in the middle of their life. [Simone Joyaux] has had an incredible life, an incredible body of work that has influenced hundreds and maybe thousands and maybe tens of thousands of fundraisers all over the planet.

My hope in the past twelve years is I've done some work that has influenced some people as well.

And that's precisely The Dash. The Dash is nothing but a ripple of cause and effect.

To take this a step further, as a Buddhist.

Buddhism has a radical view of death. And it's confusing, the non-duality of death, which is this: Buddhism denies the existence of a soul, a Tinker Bell that continues from one life to the next.

But Buddhism also talks about the eternity of life.

So those two things seem like they don't go well together; they don't fit. But actually, it's really about the [things that we all do] to influence another person.

I influence Simone. That will forever change her life. Simone

influences me. That changes my life. When I influence you guys, somehow through this video or some other way, in a positive way, you turn around and you influence someone else.

That continuation is, in a sense, the eternity of my life continuing.

So when I die, which is going to be relatively soon . . . when I die, I don't want you to be sad, I want you to be determined to say, "I'm going to live more of a John-ness today; I'm going to take John with me to this lesson or to this place or to this day or to this friendship."

That way you help make my Dash much more meaningful and much more powerful.

So we all help each other. When someone else passes away . . . My mom, she died maybe seventeen years ago and I still miss her every single day. And I'd ask my mom, "What would you do?" And she says, "Do this." So that's her life, literally. The cause and effect. The ripple of her life influencing my life to help influence someone else. It's all about other people.

I don't have a bucket list, by the way. My bucket list is entirely, 100 percent about getting together with friends . . . and that's it. Spending as much time as I can with the people who matter to me. Never wanted to jump out of an airplane. I have no desire to do that. If I want to see Moscow, that's a beautiful city, I can go to Wikipedia, I can get a DVD. But my friends aren't in Moscow. My friends are here. And that's the most important thing in my life.

So, thank you all so much.

## CHAPTER 37

# Meantime

January 20, 2020 ~ I hear her from the next room, her office. We eliminated two bedrooms to make her office. The wall between her office and our bedroom isn't soundproofed.

She urgently calls me from bed. I spring up. It's 8:30 a.m.; I know she's been up for at least two hours. But I always hope to die early in bed, painlessly, smelling of croissants . . . so I loll.

I know *why* Simone's up early: so she can reach someone at our French bank in time; Boston-area America is six hours behind.

Simone's on the phone with a kind English-speaking assistant at the bank, trying to arrange a money transfer. "My brain isn't working that great today," she confesses. Can't quite make it happen, sending a payment to a specific account; it's not crucial, either, thankie.

She's trying to do something she's done routinely for twenty years. It's a mystery to me. Dealing with French banks is her domain; we each have assigned tasks.

I don't see how I can help and turn to go. She grabs my hand: "Don't leave me!" After a frustration-laced minute or two, France suggests sending an email with the info; he'll take care of the rest. *Good. Yes. Done. Au revoir.*

—

At 6:30 p.m. that same night, John Haydon calls us from his hospice bed.

“I’m too healthy,” he says. Too healthy for hospice care: They’re kicking him out in a few days. He’s going home. His brother Jim and his beloved Kate are with him. I ask John what I can do: “I just need your friendship. That’s all.”

—

Next day is Simone’s “first day back at school” since the brain bleed.

She’s driving an hour away to service a client. It’s a full-day retreat with the board of a nonprofit. She summarizes by phone as she drives home: “I had all these meetings where everybody hates everybody else . . . a lot.”

*Did you feel successful, my sweet?* “I did.”

*No trouble driving?* “No. Nothing.”

Our hope bush sends out a bloom.

—

Simone’s brain bleed was almost/not quite a month ago. It’s become table gossip now among friends. And we’re at a table, with eight of those friends, two of whom are gifted physicians.

The table’s in a house in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It’s not a pretentious house, but it’s old, just up the street from Slater Mill and the Blackstone River, where America’s Industrial Revolution kicked off, long, long ago. The city’s textile mills once made their owners filthy rich. Pawtucket’s long past its prime, but it had its day on the world stage and raised a lot of children.

This is Bruce’s home. We converge there at least once a year for a fine dinner. It’s a Currier and Ives scene, with love, sarcasm, shared politics, catching up.

Six of the eight *à table* have “our house in France” in common. That’s the house Simone and I bought in 1999 in Southern France, in partnership with her brother Alain and his wife, Aimee. It’s not a

chateau. It's a creaky, endlessly collapsing, ancient house, squeezed inside the town walls and assembled over the centuries from bits and pieces.

Our House in France is the name of the website we created to introduce Americans to this last, least-known part of France, the Languedoc. It's not scented Provence (next door). It's not the glamorous Riviera (that would be three hours east). It's not . . . it's not . . . it's not . . . if you want to look at it that way. What it *is* . . . is spectacularly interesting.

The Languedoc is well known to weather-sodden Brits; it has actual sun. England tried to conquer it during the Hundred Years' War, maybe for the dreamy beaches. These days, as summer strikes, Brits dragging luggage invade by the tens of thousands. In popular towns, you might hear as much English as French on the streets come July and August.

There's no real winter in our small town of Valros. Cactus thrives. To be merciful, "it's a dry heat," as they say. It can also feel like you've been hit by a bright-red branding iron as you walk out the front door.

We've shared that place, those bad beds, that cramped kitchen, those medieval arched ceilings (it wasn't a cathedral; it was a stable, and a bomb shelter during World War 2), the occasional (medieval-appropriate) rat, the tapestry of time surrounding our French village for many years.

This annual dinner with recurring friends bubbles with reminiscences. SO looking forward to it. Bruce, our host, is a retired and distinguished restaurateur. His mellow cat prowls indoors. Another top restaurateur is also there. So, of course, the food and drink are the best on earth.

In response to some small-talk question, Simone desperately dominates the dinner-table conversation for a half hour: insisting, insisting, insisting; unstoppable. She leans in; I leave the dining room for the kitchen. She's loud in a small room; when impassioned, her voice cuts like a table saw.

Others stop talking. People sort of listen during soup and salad. They drink what's handy: water, wine. They endure, drink more wine.

Look at their emptied bowls, heads down, heads up/down; Simone's still talking.

They're patient. They know the main course will interrupt her flood. They know about the brain bleed, too. When she finally stops, amazing Dr. Peter, a gastroenterologist, the person at table we know least, gently thanks Simone for "trusting us enough" to speak her mind, to be that open, that vulnerable. You can say whatever you want, he assures her. We're all friends here, and we love you.

And it's true!

I've never seen humans perform better than right then that night, in candlelight, with a small fire in an old hearth, plus a roaming cat.

At the end of the evening, we gather our coats, hug, leave. We walk to the car, breathing winter plumes. Simone preempts me: "Don't say a word." She knows she's gone off the rails in front of an audience. And not for the first time: Something's happening.

## CHAPTER 38

# The remarkable Mr. Haydon

John Haydon passed away on February 9, 2020. His essence rejoined the universe.

There are different kinds of black holes.

Some are physics.

Some are people.

John Haydon is a black hole in the nonprofit universe. He clarified something important, in depth. His last—best, most contemplative—book, *Donor Care*, emerged a few weeks after his death. The publication date had raced John's medical sell-by; the editing team moved ASAP . . . and didn't quite make it. John ended as he'd wished, surrounded by love.

## CHAPTER 39

# “How’s *your* day going?”

February 19, 2020 ~ Five days after Valentine’s Day . . .

Dear Diary: “Still drinking afternoon and evening, to keep my nose buried in projects & to avoid what seems to be Simone’s decline into an intellectual wasteland. . . .”

When you talk to your diary, you must tell the truth as it pops to mind; it varies hour to hour, glass to glass. This does not make you a good person, a bad person, even an honest person. You’re just trying to be reasonably self-observant. Like a bird-watcher, with binoculars reversed, pointed at your costume, your uniform, your sagging chest.

Raising the question: Do these observations add or diminish?

I feel smaller. File under: coping poorly at the moment. That’s not just a single file folder: it’s a warehouse.

## CHAPTER 40

# Other stuff we no longer do

Simone and I had our 37+ years together. There are annual albums and thousands of photos.

For about fifteen of those years, a couple of times annually we'd scoop up Jane, Simone's mom, for some travel. After 2005 or so, Simone and I flew around a lot, mostly to speak at conferences. Before then, we rented an apartment in Paris regularly.

This became a default: "Call Jane. See if she wants to go."

I don't recall everywhere we went together. I don't think Jane was ever with us in Australia or Alaska. We went a lot of other places, though: memorably to DC, to Seattle, to Vancouver, to Toronto, Tucson, New Mexico, NOLA, Ireland and Scotland, all over France. Those trips pop easily to mind. I'm forgetting half of them.

Until she could no longer manage it physically, we automatically invited Simone's mom. A Jane-along. Her traveling chops were extraordinary to observe. Jane had birthed, raised, maneuvered, moved internationally six kids. She could pack a week's worth of clothing for

herself into a rolling suitcase the size of my seventh-grade lunch box. (Swear!)

Though it took quite a while, Jane did slow down, as time passed.

One time Simone and I retraced our steps to find her mom leaning against a village street corner in the Périgord, above the river Dordogne, a key frontier between English and French belligerents in the Hundred Years' War.

Jane was game. But it was a steep fortified hill town, now devoted to tourism, brutal to climb. It was a foretelling; bodies age. She was game . . . but she couldn't always keep up, her "I bore six kids and now I confess I'm panting" forehead slumped against the back of a parchment hand.

—

Apropos the aging? Some good advice from a psychologist, for those taking care of elderly relatives: *Don't interrupt. Don't judge.*

When someone of a certain age tells you the same story—"for the thousandth time, Gramma!"—that is them mounting the time machine for a ride. It only costs five minutes.

That story reassures Gramma, reconnects Gramma, fills in the blanks, restores Gramma. That thousandth repetition (by your impatient count) is a cup scooped once more from the fountain of youth.

The fountain of youth is a place inside us.

It's for fucking sure NOT some spring lost in Florida's wilderness, conquistador bones scattered around, armor rusting, dust ahead—a fading tint of paradise bound; centuries before air conditioning, condos, and cruise ships solved Florida's cruder problems.

Aging loved ones need vitamin P and vitamin M—Purpose and Memories. You're the pharmacist.

—

Dear Simone,

. . . only then maybe DO I wish that I had NOT rolled my eyes in your

company, tapped your knee at certain *get-along-pony* moments . . . smug signaling to some forgotten pal o' mine across the table/room that I'd heard this upcoming Sim One story one *too* (?) many times before. The story about . . .

- The time I moved salad adjacent to entrée on my single plate at the Joyaux evening table . . . to a chorus of in-law complaint! (“They’re touching. Gross! Tom, how could you!”)
- The time Gramma Jane forbade twin last siblings Paul and Andrée from tormenting me on my first visit to East Lansing . . . a *verboten* that led to decades of much-welcomed abuse. Simone often said, “You need teasing.”
- The time Simone sought to seduce me on an early date with a see-through blouse and no bra. (It would have worked better if she’d had high-definition nipples instead of flan; didn’t notice the invite, to be frank.)

As it turned out, my beloved, it was exactly the opposite: There were never enough times for these tales.

If one could wish upon a star, I’d hear Simone’s familiar family tales every day . . . just for the sound of her plow master’s voice one more time, hammering my ears, instead of what I have: a torn tissue coaxed unreliably from spoil and memory. The thing in your hands . . .

I can confirm with all infirmity and regret:

IF *your* she/he/they . . .

. . . wants to tell you the same cherished-to-her anecdote a dozen times . . . chip in a chuckle. Chip in a chorus. What’s it really cost you? A penny’s worth buys a nickel’s worth buys a heart’s worth, warts and all? Sim One was our life’s curator. She broomed along tiny tales and small legends . . . yes, yes, yes, yes!

YES!

You heard them so many times it would peel paint from the fifties. So FUCKING what?

My advice:

Don a mask. Then firmly shut the fuck up.

Because that's your best contribution to her/his/their story. By far, shut up . . . or splurge. Save everything you want to save and then read from it thereafter. When you're alone. I have dozens of notebooks. Thousands of photos. I can't come close to the real Simone. Photos and notebooks don't twine fingers like she did and we could.

It's a lesson you don't want to learn too late.

# ACT 3 AGAIN

From me to Sim One on Valentine's Day 2007:

*Happy Poopie Day*

My scrumptious little litter kitten.

You I love a quadrillion times infinity my dreams.

My girlie-poo. My little pearly-moo.

You're everything. And more.



## CHAPTER 41

# What Sim One told her BFF Doris

February 20, 2020 ~ Six days after Valentine's Day, uncoordinated hair appointments bring Sim One and me together. We happen to converge at Kim's hair salon, our for-years-now stylist for "deal with this mess atop my skull" matters.

Kim emerged as our household heroine when prior stylist/friend-fave-of-decades, philosopher-king Joel decamped for Florida with hubby Allan, chasing some palm-dependent, beach-sun-seeking, insect-managing, gator-avoiding, sorry-no-basements-here, flour-sand destiny. . . . Because why would that mean ole, immense Greenland ice cap melt and erase America's foremost penile land mass? Florida under water? To quote a movie Sim One and I loved beyond reason, beyond embarrassment, beyond measure, always our default (*The Princess Bride*, book and screenplay by the legendary entertainer William Goldman):

[The movie's big rat] Vizzini: "Inconceivable!"

[One hero of several] Inigo Montoya: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

—

Earlier that day, Simone shared breakfast with Doris, *most* trusted of our trusted advisors, wise and a data geek.

Doris's parents escaped Nazi Germany in time. Her grandchildren are multicultural and thriving. Today, Doris asked Simone openly, as true-blue friends do, "How are you *really* feeling?"

Sim One chose to answer honestly, as one does with Doris, who has seen and measured it all:

**"Sad and scared. All the time."**

And thank whatever, Simone shared that same honest answer with me at Kim's, kicking around hair debris on a well-swept floor.

—

If you just felt a big fucking nudge in your tushy right now?

Welcome to the real story.

Now I knew for sure, from the horse's mouth, from Sim One's mouth with her pretty teeth and sweet breath: Things would now change maybe daily in our nest, at an unpredictable pace.

Define "disruption"? *Things will change for an old married couple with trenches and grooves and ruts and places and dreams and ambitions and the undone that needs doing and the wreckage that needs repairing. . . .*

*Coming to terms badly.*

We are a household, a couple, a marriage, a pair, a unit, a joint intellectual enterprise speaking internationally before the same professional audiences, on topics salt and pepper, so no overlap.

And now we are skidding on the road: an "every-day's-a-mystery" disruption.

We're skidding. We have our roles, I assume. I do my thing. She does her thing. You first. Then me.

My Sim One encourages everyone, especially the newest, especially the newest and the youngest, in the fundraising profession.

Why? Because it's tough to succeed in fundraising . . . and most of the problem is internal.

In her first nonprofit job, as a novice executive director of an arts agency in Lansing, Michigan, Simone ended up in a dark office behind her desk on worn carpeting, weeping after being manhandled by a lousy board. About four decades later, Sim One, now a respected, experienced, skilled international expert on abuses of power, published her contemplative response to that experience. It was titled *Firing Lousy Board Members: And Helping the Others Succeed*.

## CHAPTER 42

### Culloden

My sister, Alice, said, “Simone, at fifty percent of capacity, is smarter than most.” Which was reassuring, as Alice is no fool. And yet . . . Simone is as cured as she’ll ever be, given there *is* no cure for what’s now in her head.

—

February 29, 2020 ~ Simone and I fly to Inverness, Scotland. It’s a long, cramped-in-economy nighttime trip across an unseen Atlantic from Boston, landing at dawn. Enthusiasm is muted: not so much an “are we there yet” as a “why did we bother.” As we descend, the airline feeds us something, enough to keep lab rats passive.

Simone and I arrive scruffy. My scruffy is worse than her scruffy. She always looks pretty good, thanks to her hair and jewelry. The transfer through Gatwick into the UK takes for fucking ever. Not really complaining, though. UK border control and airport security are as efficient as can be, *given* we’re all drowsy, short-tempered strangers with rolling luggage and they’re trying to sort out the clever terrorists among us.

It's early morning. We have hours to kill in prison-grade comfort before our connecting flight to Scotland.

This is my second visit to Inverness in two years; Simone's first.

I know the Inverness airport has a secret.

Arriving, it doesn't seem like much of a place. Low buildings. The airport occupies the same square footage as a midsize supermarket. In late winter, like now, the region is cold, damp, just starting to awaken. Tramp, tramp, tramp; gather your luggage; meet your driver. Leave.

But, as I said, this is my second visit. I know from experience that when travelers on *departing* flights get past security, they'll discover themselves in a vast waiting area partnered with a single-malt whiskey outlet the size of a village.

Inverness airport may be a tiny star in the air-travel galaxy. But it knows *how* to sell intoxicants. And it knows its target audience: bored travelers, hoping to bring home a delightful, rare gift no one expected . . . and maybe even get a bit drunk themselves the night after they return home. Plus: last chance at a Nessie (Loch Ness monster) plush toy, not to mention locally loomed, world-class woollens.

I'm in Scotland to teach a master class with two others: Jen (psychologist) and Adrian (marketing professor). It's our second year doing this gig together, at a boutique hotel called The Inch; sorry, never thought to ask where the name came from.

The Inch is an hour's soothing, curving, scenic ride from the Inverness airport. Out our windows are the Scottish Highlands, some still veiled in snow. The driver is gloriously companionable; once he realizes we're into politics, he goes on about how UK political con-nivers sabotaged the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, pouring money into false advertising. He also comments on landmarks.

"Did you see that?" We're speeding up the wrong side of the road (to American muscle memory), holding hands in the back seat of the cab.

Nothing new about hand-holding. It's become a lot more frequent since Sim One's brain bleed. We're holding on to each other as long as possible.

She looks over. "See what?" Watery, weary gray eyes. It's been a long economy flight from America; hours in hard, "get off me!" airport chairs (relieved by one brief, easygoing interlude with two early morning puffy-faced Isle of Man guys in their fifties sucking coffee, also marooned by infrequent service); topped off by our final scratchy, price-is-right airline hop to Scotland, a space in a chair with wings.

Some of the 92 percent Greenie confidence factor has faded from Simone's tiring, thinning face. "You saw that?" Meaning the sign for the Culloden battlefield.

Simone smiles. Maybe. Long night. Long day. The sign is kilometers behind us now anyway.

—

### *Culloden.*

On that damp soil, in 1746, the Jacobite rising of Bonnie Prince Charlie, would-be monarch of the United Kingdom, ended. The battle lasted an hour. Cannonballs plowed ditches through legs and cut off heads.

The Jacobites suffered up to two thousand heart-and-hearth casualties; the Brits a fraction, just three hundred. And so, you know what happened next: The subsequent political crackdown was brutal and meticulous. Least of it: For the next twenty-six years, British overlords banned the wearing of tartans, seen as flags of sedition.

The Bonnie Prince himself escaped that day. Surviving loyalists dragged him away for "a next time."

But the bloody, muddy April fields of Culloden were in fact the end of his fevered campaign for the UK throne. More than forty years later, this same Bonnie Prince Charlie died in Italy of a stroke, "embittered," they recorded. Who wouldn't be, finding a life's goal perished and without reasonable reclaim? Later, I'd maybe like to talk with you about that exact subject re: myself.

Hold that thought? Please?

The place name *Culloden* holds meaning for family reasons.

Why? Slide between our nightly sheets, dear reader.

For years Simone and I enjoyed, trod, savored, maundered, reread, occupied, believed in, argued with Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels. We read the novels in shifts. Sim One would finish a chapter, head for nod. I always stayed up later. So I'd grab the book from her fading hands and catch up.

Now, children, hide your eyes.

Simone mostly read two things in bed: novels about couples—and their stormy, loving relationships—and romance novels with steamy sex scenes. Dr. Gabaldon's novels had both. They are vivid, minutely observed, historical-romance epics with a time-traveler twist, even wisps of passing magic . . . plus loads of nail-biting conflict, sword-play, bodice ripping, what's actually up a man's kilt, and, yes, frequent steamy sex scenes.

We read the first five volumes together, our grumpy legs twining in bed, exchanging heat, *hallucinating over a dead tree*, as someone has described the beguiling, addictive act of reading a physical book.

The awful, just-past-noon Battle of Culloden concludes the 1746 portion of Gabaldon's volume 2, *Dragonfly in Amber*. The aftermath of Culloden opens *Voyager*, her series' volume 3. For Simone and me, the *Outlander* novels were a shared, gripping, enthusiastic, across-the-bed read. *Are you done yet? Can I start?*

By volume 6 in 2005, though, we'd started to fall behind. These are long books, offering intense, accurate detail and waterfalls of dialogue. In the end, we never did break cover on the last volumes. Of course, as earnest, devoted "readers," we felt guilty for our failure to complete the series. Yet we *did* buy (and number, for our own convenience) all the volumes, giving the author's royalties their due.

We just never managed to burrow through the later stuff. The usual excuse for daily readers: too many books, too little time. Still, Diana Gabaldon's novels put us to sleep nightly for a happy, well-entertained decade at least.

That's meant as a compliment.

## CHAPTER 43

# Near and on Loch Ness, Simone's confidence undergoes a sea trial

It's a master class for about twenty-five fundraising professionals, four continents registered. It starts Monday, March 2, 2020; we meet and mingle the night before.

Our classroom overlooks Loch Ness. Highland cattle bagged in thick copper hair and lengthy-enough horns graze the sloping fields in front of The Inch, our inn and school. These animals are an ancient Scottish breed; we're staring at Neolithic-period meat and milk.

Loch Ness isn't all that wide. It's on an ancient, rarely active fault line—more a slit in the earth, filled with vast amounts of murky water.

But it is the very, very, *well-fine-not-really-all-that-implausibly* deep home to the (please adopt this lovely word) “cryptozoological monster” touristically known in gift shops as Nessie.

And you know what, when you're teaching a master class?

The Nessie legend is an effing distraction. Delegates can't help glancing out the windows, hoping. Walk a few minutes to the nearby

village of Fort Augustus, and Nessie is unavoidable. Nessie burgers. Nessie squish toys in tartans. Loch Ness energy drinks: “Guzzle the damn stuff!!! You’ll feel like a dragon trapped inside a fathomless lake for at least ten thousand years!” Nessie petrol. And Nessie boat patrol, riding the tiny waves.

Along with meals, lodging, and pitiless instructors yapping about expertise for 2.5 days, our master-class students get a complimentary boat trip up Loch Ness from Fort Augustus.

It’s a sedate ride. A colony of feral goats chewing the scenery on the loch’s sheer cliffs is the highlight; that plus sunburn if you didn’t bring covering.

In several places, the boat’s windows offer a pasted-on Nessie silhouette. Through that silhouette, you can shoot your very own pretend “I saw Nessie” photo. Everyone does it. It’s the highlight of the tour. The silhouette features a couple of arching black spines and the famously erect swan’s neck topped by that fierce, presumably ancient, fish-crushing head.

I notice that Simone has cornered one of our brightest, most eager master-class students. He’s from the Czech Republic. Went to Harvard. Now back in his home country, where he’s set on reforming public school education. The vision: to make the Czech Republic a superstar among post-Communist states, which ended almost thirty years ago. He’s got grant funding, which puts a warhead on his missile (to slip back into Cold War terms).

Sim One lectures him throughout our one-hour ride re: her disgust with politics in America. She’s not bothering with photos of Nessie. He’s attentive, polite, calm, respectful. He’s a remedy, too, I suspect. His unremitting, much-younger Czech attention span probably spares Simone’s stomach a messy countdown.

She is spectacularly prone to seasickness.

More than once, within seconds, I’ve witnessed her explosive reactions to being afloat on any boat, on three continents.

Even on today’s prim, flat lake, aboard a tub in the Scottish Highlands, with waves no higher than careless gestures or a gent’s pocket square, I can easily imagine Simone collapsing on the deck,

eyes rolling up, gracelessly puking without caring much, like a wan fire hose.

So PS: The cleaning crew for this Loch Ness tour boat wishes to thank the Czech Republic. Which I kept mistakenly calling Czechoslovakia in his presence, a political entity that dissolved peacefully on January 1, 1993. He was adoringly patient. He forgave me because I was clearly too elderly to castigate. My references were obsolete. My childhood stamp collection was old. My atlas was useless. My globe was an antique. I just needed to shut up and let the next generations have their say. Rocking a bit on Loch Ness.

Students at The Inch paid a swell price for their 2.5 days on-site, learning from some of the best in the English-speaking fundraising world (as we styled ourselves, with circus-grade hyperbole [yet not without a hint of reason], based on results, research, and mentee reviews).

For a plum price of admission, our master-class students ate well . . . and with anticipation. We were quite proud of that.

I wrote the sales copy that brought in maybe half our class. My “food promise” was, I think, a big part of the total “sales romance”—that and, for sure, a chance to spot Nessie. Never underestimate the power of magic.

The Inch’s chef had won a Michelin star at a different venue. He was a foodie; so were many attendees. As much as possible, the chef sourced his ingredients locally (the Highlands have no great reputation for fresh veggies, but fish and meat are splendid). The chef even offered our students a vegan option. And The Inch boasted a single-malt whiskey bar on its ground floor . . . for later, after the heavy learning was done.

In that same bar, the year previous, a master-class student turned out to be a superbly trained operatic singer; her arias soon rattled the old inn’s pipes. Want to suck on a lousy ending? Her same astonishing voice and vibrant personality died of COVID less than a year later.

Here’s the weirdest thing that happened at this master class, as February 2020 crawled unawares into March: Suddenly we’re told there’ll be three fewer students at The Inch.

The Chinese delegates to the master class have abruptly canceled.

Some kind of virus prevents them from leaving their country; that's all we know.

On March 6, master class done, Simone and I fly back to the States.

We arrive at Boston Logan airport. *The world is locking down!* the news blares. You hear doors shutting behind you for a *very* long, no-one-knows-*how*-long time. Airports empty. Cruise ships skulk home. Business offices clear out by the tens of thousands, soon by the millions.

On March 11, the World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a global pandemic.

—

How well did a recovering Sim One do in Scotland?

Good, not great.

This was a test trip, about two months after her ministroke.

Could she help the master class? Yup. She had long sit-downs with students, advising them, answering questions. These would be the same eager, early-stage fundraisers who would typically write Simone years later, thanking her for guidance, reassurance, and—as much as anything else—acceptance into the trade.

Did Simone feel like her old, confident, know-enough-but-humble self?

No. Not at all. Over and over. No matter what Dr. Greenie said, she was trapped in her head. And her head trap wasn't good. Panic and fear clamped her skull, an inescapable basin. She was drowning from the inside out.

Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad."

We hoped Sim One would recover her warm core and her dignity and her expert authority and her presence in Scotland. But like the Loch Ness monster, nothing much manifested in the end.

Dignity, authority, presence?

They fled down cold halls. Just beyond reach. She pleaded: *Where did you go? Where am I? Who am I?*

## CHAPTER 44

# When a pandemic is the least of your problems

Friends ask, “How’s she doing?”—i.e., how *is* Simone doing since her brain bleed on January 2, 2020?

Core folks want to know: lovers, platonic and flesh; truest of true believers; a global army of followers; her warm, immediate family. Simone was the first of six kids. If she passes, is that domino #1 for the Joyaux siblings?

My standard answer to all inquiries is short and formulaic: *good days/bad days*. As the pandemic grips an entire planet tighter, everyone can relate to that. Few probe. Glad they don’t.

Simone, on the other hand, likes talking about it. It’s her story now. But this isn’t a board game you can study and practice. This is death. Death has a name: amyloid buildup. *Your* brain—everyone’s—is susceptible, too: The human brain cannot by itself flush amyloids. So no one can come to your/her rescue: not me, not you, not science, nothing at the pharmacy. The research is feverish. A fix is still years away.

Simone is doomed. She knows it.

Greenie told us there was an 8 percent chance of a brain-bleed

recurrence each year. Initially, that seemed like a bet she/we could win. But Greenie's prediction glowed for just a few days. We soon realized it was fool's gold. Experts knew and spoke privately: Amyloid buildup is a killer.

Sure, you *could* maybe survive ten years.

Really, though? Get your affairs in order.

Inquirers have two questions: Is Simone terrified? Is she back in the saddle?

*"She's trying"* covers it.

For clients, she's back in the saddle.

With others, a few, I admit: The brain bleed seemed to kneecap her confidence, maybe blew a fuse or two. Sim One doesn't sleep well. Brain rehab could take a while, if ever, and, hell, it won't work anyway. She's headed for a bleak future, is our best guess. It will suck. Follow a certain oath: Be prepared.

## CHAPTER 45

# Fear is a cancer, too

Simone crawls around in threadbare doubts.

Her slippers, her gowns, her hats are doubts—daily doubts, doubts at every turn; doubts as she goes to sleep; doubts when she’s up pre-dawn, unable to sleep (again); doubts as *any* phone rings (we have five lines incoming); doubts each time there’s a loud/sharp/sudden/unexpected sound.

She showers. I softly crack open a door into her steamy privacy. Announce myself quietly.

She recoils.

Since the brain bleed, surprises of any kind, at any level, make her recoil. As if this will be THE END.

Then there is this episode. Something happened. I’m dismantling our despised (enduring, suffering) exercise bike. Simone flies into our bedroom, tossing herself across the made bed, despairing: “I want to be Simone Joyaux. I do *not* want to STOP being Simone Joyaux.”

Rewind: “I want to be Simone Joyaux. I do *not* want to STOP being Simone Joyaux.”

Once more:

# “I want to be Simone Joyaux. I do *not* want to STOP being Simone Joyaux.”

Honest explosions like that. Welcomed. Broadside.

I’m in the 24/7-hug business. I feel like a convenience store with absolutely nothing on its shelves. *A hug. That’s all I can give you.*

And my spousal customer-service ratings *can* be harsh. In the last ten minutes of some recent Tuesday since the brain bleed: “Fuck you,” Simone loudly tagged me when I couldn’t resolve her latest technical Gordian knot.

You know what? Her dismissal was faint enough *not* to draw blood. I was *already* feeling guilty, unresponsive, inadequate, pointless—nothing new.

If I know one REAL thing NOW *worth* knowing, post-Simone’s brain bleed, *it’s this*: Stay humble. Stay very, very, very humble in the face of death. As learned from John Haydon.

Then there are her doubts about me: *Mr. In Sickness and In Health*.

Re: that binding oath we swore in a city police court on our lunch hour, in front of witnesses.

A faded photo of that ceremony is pinned to my office wall, just beyond reach.

Simone has her doubts about what I think of her *now . . . now* that she’s had a brain bleed. *Now* that *maybe* she acts a little differently?

Is she a burden to me? *Now* that she’s been diagnosed with CAA. *Now* that she’s become *fragile* biologically. *Now* that she’s some kind of creature in jeopardy.

Yet I’m thinking: *Simone, honey? You’ve ALWAYS been DIFFERENT. That’s WHY I love you! Sure, it’s your brain bleed, Simone. . . . BUT I—me, me, me—just got a fresh lease on my wasted, strewn life . . . because*

*of your brain bleed.* This is *where* I step in and try *not* to be a loser.

Now I see an opportunity to exceed expectations in our marriage. Simone's in mortal danger. I'm envisioning Nurse Tom: me! me! me!

You still there? Anyone?

I'm not sure I'm ready for any of this. But I am going to *fucking* try.

—

What we now know: The *mild* part of the brain bleed wasn't *at all* "mild," not for her. It has been a trauma-horror personal experience ever since—every waking hour, awful day, and miserable night.

In my files, I called us "Ahern-Joyaux University." In Simone's files, the surnames were reversed: Joyaux-Ahern University.

We were a unit. Bonded across thirty-seven years. No boundaries. Everything shared (except, of course, dumb darkest secrets; everyone needs that sanctuary).

"We" underestimated Sim One's trauma.

We underestimated how long CAA had hammered on her brain's lower right lobe already, prediagnosed. The presence of CAA in that particular lobe, neuroscience suggested, made her angry.

The presence of CAA in her lower right lobe made her fearful. In her last year, Simone begged me repeatedly, "Why am I such a bitch?"

She knew something was wrong and unfixable: a neon, inescapable, incandescent question blasting across her head as soon as she woke up . . . sometimes at 4:30 a.m., to face every fucking fundamental moment of every identity-crushing day.

"Am I losing it?" she wondered to me.

The answer was "YES!" A more honest answer would have been "YES! But who cares. . . ."

She cared. "*I do not want to stop being Simone Joyaux.*" I don't think it mattered what came next. She was thrashing against quicksand. Her CAA-invaded brain was on a fast sled ride into an unyielding fence at the base of a fatal hill.

Medicine had nothing to offer.

Best wishes could only say bye.

Brace for impact, ye who loved her.

You're in a movie starring you.

The words come on-screen: The End.

## CHAPTER 46

### Our stoop

We didn't do birthday gifts, anniversary gifts, holiday gifts.

We did special-to-us gifts.

Simone, for example, felt it was her duty to prepare me for each upcoming year. She felt that I was underorganized. So in early fall, she'd gently tap on the wall beneath my office and ask, "Shall we meet on the stoop?"

That was her name for it. In New York City vernacular, a stoop consists of the stairs from the street to the front entry of a brownstone: a zone for discussion and shared experiences on pleasant days.

At our house, the stoop consisted of the stairs between my home office and hers.

These stairs were a special place. They were a place for what Simone called "family meetings," where something about our life together was to be decided. It was also a place for board meetings of our pretend "university": the two of us going about our shared international education initiative.

Simone always set the agendas. Tap, tap, tap. "Yes, my sweet . . ."

She'd sprawl across a couple of stairs, like a sack of sunflowers. I'd sit on the landing above her with my back against a cupboard made by a friend.

She and I would gossip. Complain. Weep. Admit. Reveal. Forgive. Plan . . . always plan. Simone was a zealous planner.

She was a sticky-note factory, a sticky-note proud peacock. She published daily sticky notes about her life, about my life, about us, about the world. Her office flew great distances, its wings feathered in sticky notes. Sticky notes were one of Simone's magic wands.

Simone rose from bed, aiming to change the world by at least one creak every day. To get her personal world changing off to a good start, she was fully, firmly, regularly organized . . . and had been so since as long as her family could recall.

Each autumn on our stoop, she'd shyly present me with a new appointment calendar. It mirrored her own; though, in deference to my minimalist attention to detail, mine was simpler.

She liked to customize these annual appointment calendars with tabs, special pages, all sorts of "can't forget" entries. She tracked dozens of birthdays across the months. She penciled in loads of time for us to be away in France, blessedly far from the United States of Exceptionalism.

Sim One worshipped order. Process. Systems. If she'd allowed herself a tattoo, it might have read "systematically yrs." This was her special, oh-so-personal annual gift to me: the gift of organization.

Versus my native inclination: disorder, chaos, apologize.

Don't get me wrong. I admire organization.

I liked to stare at it across a mountain meadow, maybe take a photo.

## CHAPTER 47

109 days after her  
CAA diagnosis, she  
shared this with *Simone  
Uncensored* subscribers

For years, Sim One published an occasional e-newsletter titled *Simone Uncensored*.

It wasn't for everybody. It wasn't *meant* for everyone. It was her being personal: angry, passionate, revealing, out loud, brakes off; uncensored as promised, as opposed to "professional advice" (Simone had another e-newsletter for that).

One of my nicknames for her was Sea Monster. Like-minded Sea Monsters were the audience for *Uncensored*: feminists, had-it-up-to-here progressives, existentialists (like her French dad), one-of-a-kinds (her core identity), optimistic pessimists (like me), pessimistic optimists (like her), idealists, fighters, worrier-warriors, the afraid-but-brave, those like her willing to shout truth at available power.

*Simone Uncensored* talked without filters to her truest of true

believers; these were friends, people she trusted who trusted her: her values, her wisdom, her heart, her pain, her doubt.

—

On April 21, 2020, just after noon, less than four months past her diagnosis, Sim One proclaimed to her accumulated *Uncensored* audience that she “felt weird.”

### *SUBJECT LINE:*

PERSONAL . . . Writing to a colleague

Sometimes I just feel weird . . . and kinda sad . . . and . . . (And, of course, so do you and so does everyone else, too.)

I was listening to DANIEL over and over . . . The Elton John/Bernie Taupin song. Elton is the famous one. But without Bernie's lyrics?? . . . So maybe I feel badly for Bernie?

And DANIEL always makes me think of Nam. Nam (Vietnam) was my war. For my generation. My first husband. My brother. Even my father . . . as Papa Georges used to say: “Why do you Americans think you can win in Vietnam? The French never did.” Ah yes, French Indochina . . . L'Indochine . . . My dad served in the Free French Army after the liberation (World War 2). He and a bunch of his friends re-enlisted. (I should have asked him why.) His re-enlistment papers were lost. That's good. Because all of his re-enlisted friends went off to L'Indochine—and died there.

Have you ever read my journal entry about Vietnam?

Or how about this Simone Uncensored?

Shit . . . How did I start thinking about Nam this morning. WTF? Talking with my great accountant . . . another Tom. Talking about gift giving and then Elton John and then Daniel . . . And then Nam.

Maybe I need to cry?

Cry because of the world. The older world and Nam. The newest world and the coronavirus.

One more listen to Elton and Bernie's DANIEL. And then

BENNIE AND THE JETS—to change the mood. Getting ready for a 10 a.m. client meeting. And I have 20 minutes to get it together!!

—

She wrote me immediately after:

Despite my sad Simone Uncensored email of a few minutes ago.

Now I'm fine.

I'm going on a 10–12 noon client meeting.

Your Sim One

Please note: She's about to launch into a two-hour client meeting. She will perform. She's a figurehead on a plowing sailing ship, bucking the waves.

Earlier that day I'd watched Simone try to book a flight online unsuccessfully, repeatedly. Slowly, with deep breaths, with two heads applied, the booking got done.

—

Different note: What's *your* opinion about *my* behavior that day? And, no, sorry, reversal, I really *don't* much care about your opinion; in fact, forget I asked. Is getting drunk before 2:00 p.m. one of the Seven Relationship Wonders of the World? Besides helping Simone book her flight, I began drinking wine by 1:30 p.m.

At 3:30 p.m. I could only walk in S curves down our long, curving driveway to the mailbox, to harvest the daily appeals, bills, and publications. En route I farted. But as the Germans say, "There was land in it." Within a step or two, I felt warm, wet crap crawling down my hairy, once-beautiful legs.

I'd had no breakfast. So far that day my intake had been exclusively coffee and wine. So I'd ingested an enema, in effect. Now it paid off. Yeehaw. Poo. Pucker. Giddyup. "Pucker isn't working, captain!" Racing poo. Pucker, pucker, PUCK-AH. I hurry toward today's mail. Clench. Clenched. VERY clenched . . . enough, *just enough* control. I hurry back to the house for a shower and change of clothing.

Then I told Dear Diary: "Deliriously happy."

Don't know *where* that came from.

From the heart. My dead heart. My observant heart. My looming heart. My heart transplantable, anytime soon.

## CHAPTER 48

204 days after Sim  
One's diagnosis, she  
wrote this and gave me  
a copy, so I'd know

**July 25, 2020**

Each day I wake up . . . Saying I'll make it a good day.

And most days I'm just angry and sad and scared.  
I cry at the drop of that proverbial hat. Sometimes just  
sniffles. Sometimes big sobs.

So many possible reasons why. But I still don't ac-  
tually understand.

And I'm so scared of what I might do to myself.

I don't want to kill myself. There's so much to live

for. So much fun left and and and. And I can still work as much as I want to work . . . or as little as I feel like working.

I know people older than me who are still top-notch. I can be, too. I have the health and money to still enjoy experiences and and and . . .

I'm scared that I actually think about killing myself. I don't want to be dead. Because I won't remember anything or be anything. I'll just be dead. No god or goddess for me.

Is this some game I'm playing? Oh, poor Simone. Woe is me. Such a bad and sad life. Blah blah blah. What the fuck?!

I've been lucky and fortunate and had/am having such a wonderful life.

So is this stupid darkness a game to gain attention? Or a real fear that I'm so sad I'm scared that I might do something really really really stupid?

I'm not remembering stuff that I always remember/remembered. Like John Whelan's name. Took me 15 minutes of not thinking about it and then popped into my mind. Do I have/am I getting close to Alzheimer's?

What the fuck is happening to me.

## CHAPTER 49

# Sim One pens the conclusive title

*What the fuck is happening  
to me.*

What she typed ends with a period. Because it's not a question. It's a rocket fired at the heavens, fueled by Sim One's all-too-mortal confusion in the face of disease and decline and random selection.

We'd wondered on our hikes: *Which of us will go first?*

Simone, *being* SHE, was our household's actuarial front-runner. Husbands die first, wives later; so the stats stand.

Insurance firms leak this: Middle-class white women in America tend to live [much] longer than their spousal males, no matter which age cohort you choose. For instance (personally relevant): *In the US,*

for the age group 65–74 (as reported in 2018), 2,200 men kicked the bucket for every 1,400 women who died.

Come on: That's not even close!!! Me, I have a penis: hence, I'm dying soonest! Simone: no penis; a longer life awaits. My dear, I'll die first, obviously! (As I tell her repeatedly on our walks.)

And I was supremely happy with that. Why? Because whichever spouse dies first is *least inconvenienced*. Fuck your appointments. Fuck file folders. Fuck taxes and oil changes. Fuck responsibilities, big and small.

What is the purpose of life, as Darwin observed? Reproduction. What is the purpose of human life, when you throw that big brain on top? Responsibilities be finished.

Full confession: I've always been a lazy SOB.

## CHAPTER 50

213 days after Sim  
One's diagnosis: On our  
wedding anniversary/  
my birthday, she sent me  
a love song that made  
me explode in a smile

Happy birthday and happy anniversary  
To my dearest most special Tommy . . . Husband.  
Lover. Best friend. Exercise pal. Book pal. France pal.  
Yard pal. And and and . . .  
I love you.  
And I'm so sorry for what I've become. Chat with  
counselor today. More

and more understanding of how fucked up I was in  
my youth and how it

affects today and and and . . .

Nothing new. Nothing special.

But I don't want you to leave me. And I don't plan  
on leaving you through any manner.

I'd go to a depression program at Butler [local  
mental hospital] before I'd leave you.

Do you realize how special you are? From your  
silliness to your head petting to your reminding us to  
meditate and exercise.

My pride in you and me for the work we've done  
for the philanthropic sector.

My pride in your book about your dad and the war  
and . . .

My respect for you.

My happiness that you love France so much. The  
kindness you gave

Grandma Jane. Your fun with other members of  
my family.

Together.

You and me.

I love you.

## CHAPTER 51

### “Can you help me?”

She'd arise before dawn, freed of her nightmares, the sky still as black as any bleak future. Then bleak grew gray: another vast day of human potential spinning its way toward the recycling bin.

She'd slip soundlessly from our bed, a bed she'd criticized for years as too small (compared to hotel beds we'd enjoyed on three continents), into our also-too-small en-suite bathroom.

Where Poop would ablute. I had a portfolio of nicknames for Simone. “Poop” was a fave. “Pedunky” was another. “Sea Monster” and “Sea Monkey.” Another: “Boops.” In our later years together, she'd sometimes ask me to inspect her poops. “What do you think? OK?” What did I know. If you eat light-colored stuff the night before, your poops are midrange. If you eat BBQ the night before, your poops are darker.

She'd pick, probe, tweeze. Add makeup. Then head into our walk-in closet (as big as our bathroom was small).

To emerge ready for business!!! Zoom call? She'd be prime-time from the waist up, with plenty of cheap, gaudy jewelry and French fashion on display. Then she'd shut our bedroom door behind her,

quiet as a kiss on my cheek, and pad to her office desk, to check emails from around the world.

Half the year, the sun was still below the horizon as she left.

—

Around 8:00 a.m., though, the air pressure would change in our bedroom. I'd hear the door open as silently as Simone could manage. I'd open one eye.

My fond eye would meet her fond eye, tufts of her wild, blond, gray, curling hair framing her half face in the doorway. Maybe I still treasured a light hangover, left from last night. It wasn't a major obstacle. When Sim One suffered her ministroke, I'd cut way back on the booze for a short while; you had to be ready to drive in an instant, after all.

Half hidden by our bedroom's pine door installed in 1988, a door ornamented with enamel signs purchased at a suburban Parisian flea market decades ago, modest signs denoting our birth years, she'd ask tenderly: "Can you help me?"

With computer stuff mostly.

Sometimes it was a bank transfer to France. Sometimes it was about updating her website. Or filing a new post for *Simone Uncensored*. It was always technical, what she needed from me. It was always routine stuff she'd done without my help a year ago.

I liked it.

I *wanted* Simone to be my one-of-a-kind "burden." I prayed, prayed, prayed that Sim One Rock Hunter would become my bloody, special, motherfucking, so-called "burden."

So I *could* care for her.

So I *could* prove something to her and to her family and to the universe and to my checkered past and mostly to the current edition of myself: that I wasn't a failed human, a wannabe kind person wrapped in a mean and loveless person wrapped in carelessness and irresponsibility and disregard.

*Self-esteem issues, my friend?*

In a way, Simone had become an addiction. A thirty-seven-year-long

indulgence. With her, I could live a somewhat responsible life . . . and still feel full to the brim.

Like I mattered.

Like my life could contribute something (because Sim One showed me how). Simone was the moral face of Joyaux/Ahern, our family amalgam on display to the world. She was the front man, the front woman, the brand. I was her prime beneficiary.

## CHAPTER 52

# 254 days after: The ER again

Sunday. Her symptoms: vomiting, nausea, dizziness.

We start with a telemedicine call. That doc's best guess is that Simone's newly prescribed antiseizure medicine is causing the symptoms. The immediate danger is dehydration since she can't keep anything down.

Yes: Go to the ER.

So we're at Rhode Island Hospital, in the emergency department. Three hours pass until they can see her and run tests. It swipes into Sunday evening. Her EKG goes fine, so her heart's OK.

I'm now firmly told to leave. Pandemic rules still prevail. A city ER is usually on boil, jammed with anxious family. Even now, there are at least ten other patients waiting to be seen. But all nonessential family and friends have been ushered out. For an ER, it's oddly quiet. I head for the parking lot, to wait in our car until they release her.

Tuesday, just two days later. We're back in the ER. "How you doing?" I

ask. "Worse," she whispers. The TV changes from sports to a paranormal horror channel; who's running this thing?

Simone reports: The headaches get better for five minutes, then worse. "It's really weird. It's at the top of my forehead and then starts down to the bottom of my neck." She winces; I know she hurts a lot. "Hugely powerful." I knead her head.

The wait is only an hour this time, about average for American ERs. In the meantime, she's on the phone apologizing to clients. She's apologizing to me, too: "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." That's Simone. She apologizes for everything. She's the most responsible person I know. Screwups are almost never her fault. Yet she rushes to take the blame, so others don't have to.

Nurses sweep her away, to the indignities of probes and what little else they can really do, given CAA's "no treatment, no cure" mantra.

Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad." Gong. "It's bad."  
I go back to the parking lot, to wait in the car.

## CHAPTER 53

# Thanksgiving 2020: No Toronto

*From our daily domestic diary, Joyaux/Ahern University:*

Left until last minute on Wednesday?

Speed shopping for tomorrow's dinner, our indifferent nod to America's Thanksgiving holiday. Which occurs the last Thursday in November on every calendar sold in the US. In real life: There's often an incinerated/undercooked turkey involved, surrounded by impatient, banging forks, and, among close relations, conflicting political views preapproved by Genghis Khan. *Kill your enemies. Then we'll talk.* This year was different, though: 2020 . . . the first BIG year of the world's creeping pandemic.

This Thanksgiving year, Sim One and I would dine alone. Once world travelers. Now unravelers. This 2020 American Thanksgiving: just intimate us facing each other, plunging our forks into g\_d knows what we could buy at a local supermarket the night before the holiday.

What an odd year. For you, too?

Maybe for the first time in a decade, Sim One and I weren't somewhere else on earth spilling our gobs of opinions.

In 2020, everyone on earth within sound of a shutdown was a loser. Civilization ran short of everything: plumbers, carpenters, electricians, teachers, scientists, vision, resources, hope, ideas, friends, family, strangers . . . while everyone waited for a medical miracle. (And one *was* on its winding way, thanks to a little-credited nonprofit laboratory in San Francisco funded by a billionaire couple.)

Political "leaders" came in unfathomably behind.

Turned out they were "leaders" in lawn signs and promises, not the useful, good stuff.

Except for friends, America's Thanksgiving had little to recommend itself to Simone and me, culturally, historically, emotionally.

There was this fact, for instance. The Pilgrim settlers who were saved from starvation by generous, tolerant, Indigenous neighbors . . . the offspring of these same Pilgrims posted the severed heads of Indigenous leaders at the gate to Fort Plymouth (Plimoth) fifty years later, to make an unmissable point about winners and losers. Plimoth is a popular tourist attraction founded in 1947. It's a living-history museum with reenactors in authentic (unstinky) costume speaking an antique language . . . minus the Indigenous heads on spikes, of course.

What happened next, for a few centuries, ramping up fast once the United States of America was established? Ethnic cleansing: the coast-to-coast genocide of Indigenous peoples, federally sanctioned and vigorously pursued. Natives had successfully made their living in North America for ten thousand years. It wasn't always an easy land. But there was plenty. Where the Pilgrims landed, the Indigenous prayer went: "Thank you for the deer. Thank you for the turkeys. Thank you for the bounty of seasonal crops and fish, inexhaustible oyster beds, lobsters crawling so thick you cannot swim without a nip."

The invaders had a different goal: to clear the land of its original humans as you'd clear good farmland of trees—without regret for where the axe would fall—then resettle it with property-hungry Europeans in overwhelming numbers. Indigenous people had two options: (1) follow firm mandates re: removal, reservations, and reschooling; (2) die.

“The European colonization of the Americas fundamentally changed the lives and cultures of the resident Indigenous peoples,” Wikipedia summarizes. “Although the exact pre-colonization population count of the Americas is unknown, scholars estimate that Indigenous populations diminished by between 80% and 90% within the first centuries of European colonization.”

—

Simone and I skipped Thanksgiving in America when we could.

Our two-person household wasn't much re: any national holidays. Martin Luther King Jr. Day was a start toward recalibration and honesty. Juneteenth, celebrating the end of slavery in the US, was made official only in 2021, two months after Sim One's passing.

If organizers invited us to speak, Simone and I would gladly fly away to a favorite conference in Toronto. Its timing overlapped with American Thanksgiving, a lame but acceptable excuse.

Our families requested us *à table*. On the other hand, we could be easily dismissed yet appreciated. After all, with who knew how many books and appearances globally, by this time Simone and I had become world-class industry experts, easy ornaments/endorsements to speaker rosters.

We'd board in Boston, on Porter Airlines.

Porter was sort of like stepping back in time. Between Boston and Toronto, Porter flew powerful two-engine commuter prop planes. LOUD. Interior seating was limited. It felt like aviation turned back thirty years . . . then tuned up for today's demanding customer. Porter was different. Had a sense of humor, too. We looked forward to flying with them.

Qualifier, though: I don't know what Porter is up to these days. Buyer beware and all that jazz.

One Porter flight to Toronto was especially memorable.

A bulked-up, outta-my-way, glaring, young tough guy boards. Plane takes off. Over Vermont, we hit an air pocket and the prop plane suddenly falls straight down. He starts screaming, “Let me out, we're all going to die!”

Let's unpack.

I know panic attacks personally, repeatedly. *You want screaming, I'll give you screaming.*

I also know that Porter aircraft are not fragile. They're well engineered for these rare moments. So here we have a screaming passenger five seats behind . . . Simone's eyes wandering my way . . . and an arctic-cool aircrew up front. The answer pulled from a hat: "Nope. Not this time. Not even close." And as Dr. Greenie will eventually say, "Live your life hard." This episode made me adore Porter even more. The motto we learned that day: *Keep flying. Show the world what your wings are made of.*

On landing, we'd rush to reconvene with our professional buds. We'd explore the city as much as we could.

Toronto has been deemed the world's most multicultural city (Sydney second, NYC third, Paris fourth). More than half of Toronto's population came from some other country.

G\_d, we loved this zestful, restful place and these zestful, restful, caring, competent people. (Hey, Pearl! Sharilyn! Steve! John and Jen! And you are just the lovely dears I recall who invited us to your homes for meals. Homes are where the psychotherapy starts. First stop on any home visit: what magnets are on your refrigerator. . . .)

Simone (+ me, or both) were invited to speak eleven times across sixteen years at the annual Toronto fundraising conference. The Toronto conference was the working equivalent of a Canadian national fundraising conference; it was the biggest, gaudiest at the time. One couldn't speak every year; there were "resting" rules, to open the door for new voices, new ideas, new technologies. (And, yes, there were a few complaints about my early stuff: "Not enough Canadian content!")

Still, eleven times in sixteen years: Our almost-annual run to Toronto was a real family gathering, for Joyaux/Ahern University.

Psychologists call them "synthetic" families: the families you choose rather than the family you're born into.

Synthetic families have plenty of blood and joy in the water, despite the lack of DNA. These bonds run deep. Sometimes they endure: best friends forever, thick and thin.

There's a dark side, too. Sometimes they break or crumble or wear out for some reason no one will ever admit. That grief can be stunning.

—

The last time Sim One and I spoke in Toronto was 2017. I mark that year with a personal headstone: it was the last time I snuck a container of food-truck poutine up to my hotel room for lunch.

Simone later: "What's that smell?"

If we weren't headed for Canada, Marci would invite us to join her family's groaning board.

There would be a half-dozen accomplished cooks in the kitchen, assisting matriarch Bayla. This Thanksgiving board truly did groan, and smell, and seep. You had an assigned seat around a very long table, overlooking a salt marsh.

Simone and I were the designated (lucky!!!!) "civilians" at these annual gatherings. Bayla, mother of Marci, liked having what she called "civilians" in the house at family gatherings. Bayla felt that the presence of a few hungry civilians would improve the baseline behavior of the four accomplished, opinionated kids (grown adults now) whom she and Richard had raised spectacularly well.

At her dad's graveside, Marci put a bow on it when she described Richard, a Harvard-trained research physician, as the "smartest person in any room." And gregarious and curious and sweet and kind, a perfect match for welcoming, sweet, "really, don't fuck with me" Bayla. They were high school sweethearts, from the three-decker ethnic thickets of Fall River, Massachusetts. Bayla became a lawyer. Then put that aside to devote herself to making a nest and launching pad for four great humans.

## CHAPTER 54

# Thanksgiving 2020: What happened next

Here we were, the two of us on a couch we'd sized so our hips would touch: *following common pandemic safety tips*, anticipating this evening's Thanksgiving meal together in medically safe isolation (from other vampire, zombie, infected humans) after a quick run to a closing-early supermarket.

Where we found tag-end leftovers: whatever remained unbought under bright lights and pleasantly repeated dongs of "This store will be closing in thirty minutes. . . ." We grabbed store-made stuffing, canned cranberry sauce, and a roast chicken in a recyclable plastic tub because the supermarket had been stripped clean of traditional turkey.

We'd spent the day together, civil and understanding, sharing body warmth on our tight snuggling couch, confronting our way-too-smart-for-us TV. (Though, good news for nonengineers: We'd found that if you reconnected enough cables, rebooted enough software, called the streaming provider's helpline a few times, and pressed certain buttons on one of three remotes *long* enough—more a plea and a prayer than

a click—*eventually* something reasonably entertaining [because your standards had gone to the dump] would appear.)

From noon on, we'd watched favorite cop shows.

Where everyone (except bad people) acts and looks like someone you'd love to depend on. Multiracial. Multiethnic. Multi-wonderful. Multi-everything. And for sure NOT multi-asshole. "Good" in these shows *mostly* triumphs—except, of course, for the sad, scarred, sacrificed initial victims. (*Lesson learned*: Don't be a sad, initial victim? *Or*: Insist on a trustworthy police force in the end?)

Then Sim One and I gulped down a soup-length movie together: *Outlaw King*, watching agreeable actor Chris Pine and the film's feverish story arc. (*Lesson learned there?* Whoa, don't fight for the throne of Scotland in the harsh fourteenth century . . . *if* you treasure your personal comfort or your wife's dignity; they hung her young in a cage outside the city's wall for days, weeks, months, pooping, peeing, barely fed! Yet she survived. Now you try it. Try to even imagine it. Try to imagine it with royal-yet-rustic dignity. Imagine it with swelling music at the end, when King Pine and poopy wife reunite by a calm Scottish shore. . . .)

Simone and I had done OK until dusk.

Dusk is my marital limit most days. Then to wine, maybe even a cocktail some days. Because to wine is to write. And to write is to exist in some wormy fashion: in my low estimation of what life might be, what level of life was possible for me—write enough, life enough, good enough.

But Simone and I had agreed.

We would share our Thanksgiving meal that evening. We'd negotiated a convenient time for that meal together = 6:00 p.m.

Then, shortly thereafter, around 5:00 p.m., with a timer palmed in my hand, I turned to Sim One on the couch with a request: *Honey, can I go away to write for an hour?*

Boon granted . . . with a pinch of frown.

From countless other disappointed evenings, Sim One knew what to expect from my fly-by requests. Even so, once more, my beloved, betrayed, bewitching Simone folded her well-founded doubts into her

pocket . . . and said *sure*. “In relationships, trust is a renewable energy source,” right?

I reacted to her doubts: *I know! I know! I know!* AND I pinky-swore promised [holding up my timer]: “I will be down here, in our kitchen, preparing Thanksgiving dinner with you at 6:01 p.m.”

## Count on it.

Which meant that at 5:55 p.m., I jammed down two flights of stairs to tell Simone, “The writing’s going well.” Hence, could I claim another hour of her indulgence?

Yeah, of course, what else is new . . . and so on.

—

This is an old, smelly story . . . for Simone and me.

We know where we wipe our private, personal truth-boogers, the ones the rest of “our world” can’t know about. Based on 3+ decades of personal experience, she instantly and knowledgeably dismissed me, with contempt and expectation and disgust and sighs: “Whatever.” Or the equivalent.

See, here’s the thing, dear reader: Two arrows hit home with that one message.

She meant: *Failed me again.*

I heard: *Good enough!!! I’m released.* As I fled upstairs, back to my architect-designed temple to writing, to my boxed-wine reserves, to a beckoning keyboard ever in need of cleaning. “Freedom’s just another word . . .” YEAH!!! Kris/Janis/me: “for your soulmate won’t punish you *too much, all things considered*, tomorrow. . . .”

Oh, by the way, if you’re enjoying this emotional litter box? Now you’re a co-conspirator.

Readers don’t get away free.

—

By 7:15 p.m. that night, Simone gave up waiting for me to join her. So she ate her Thanksgiving meal alone in front of the TV. Two floors up, in my temple, I typed away happily.

—

Around 7:30 p.m., I heard her tramp upstairs to our dumb, vast “master” bedroom to watch our even-smarter-than-downstairs TV . . . and attempt sleep.

She softly shut our bedroom’s pine door.

That *soft shut* is a special sound. It’s the sound Simone grants me as she leaves our bedroom for her office just after dawn; she doesn’t want to wake me. Of course, as soon as she rustles out of bed, I’m awake. Yet I fully appreciate her intentions. Recite my gratitude-for-Simone prayers. To whomever/whatever is listening; mostly me and the pillowcase.

I interpret tonight’s soft-shut door as a good sign.

Good-ish *enough* anyway?

Is it something I can build my next day’s behavior on top of? Hey, a softly shut door could mean an inch of *forgiveness* in the morning (as signs go). Assuming *this and that* compensating behaviors on my end

...

(Maybe.)

—

Around 8:00 p.m., I finally made my way down to eat whatever was around.

I was on Tommy-selfish-time, with plenty of booze in my brain veins. The time: two hours past my promised reunion with Simone.

I found in the kitchen a plate of cooled helpings, nicely arranged in our special dishware: a divided TV-dinner tray we’d bought in Three Oaks, Michigan, on a wonderful vacay with friends.

This meal was Sim One’s Thanksgiving gift to me. I ate some of it (again, no clear recall; two dirty trays ended up in the dishwasher, that I know).

Probably *gobbled* more than ate; this being US Thanksgiving and all, which as supra-self-indulgent national holidays go is a world-class genocidal bad joke, given how it began (teaching settlers how to farm lousy soil and obtain protein) and then how it ended (King Philip's War, which effectively erased, eradicated, and expunged Indigenous peoples from any further influence in southern New England, lighting the fuse for three centuries of genocidal white-government policy, coast to coast).

—

Let's get smaller. Unhistorical. Just us: Simone and me.

Back to *our* kitchen *that* night. . . . Did I actually notice any of Sim One's special pains for *our* scheduled, pinky-sworn Thanksgiving dinner together?

Her origami napkins (e.g.) and such? Did I notice?

**No. I did not.**

Simone had tried.

Sim One had tried.

She'd tried for "us" (whatever that pronoun might mean wholesomely, existentially—at our address). She'd folded napkins for our meal. She'd arranged things artistically on our special dishware.

*And I did not notice.*

Tonight, this special night, Thanksgiving during the pandemic, she had wanted to be together with me. Because we couldn't be with others.

And I'd wanted to be alone, my jackass usual default, to write badly.

I don't forgive myself. I don't accept myself. Certainly don't admire myself. Don't surprise myself, either. To want to be a writer of things like this is to want to be a lonesome asshole. Ask any writer (add truth serum as needed).

As noted earlier, writers *betray* everyone/everything they know: wives, friends, lovers, intimates, pets, posters, wall colors, appliances, mentors, dinner mates, acquaintances, secrets, confessions, rumors, hints, brands, enemies, dozens of strangers seen from the corners of our eyes.

Everyone.

Writers betray everyone/everything. That's what writers do. That's what writers *enjoy* doing, furtively. Drop pen to paper . . . and betray. Drop fingers to keyboard . . . and betray. Or seduce.

Writers love writing *more* than life. As basic as  $2 + 2 = 4$ . As basic as alligators. To fill those shouting empty pages, writers need to betray as many/as much as they can. Anything that comes their way: A lover is a start; a spouse is even better.

—

Anyway, our 2020 US Thanksgiving dinner together crashed.

Simone went to bed livid . . . *and* crushed.

Crushed that night at 6:00 p.m., when I didn't appear as promised.

Fully crushed at 7:15 p.m., when nothing else happened from my end of the bargain.

(Hear typing? Mostly deletions?)

And recrushed, I'm guessing, each time Sim One reviewed "what's happened to us." Each time she compared "*now* us" vs. "*then* us." We began our relationship hung on that common fine spider's thread of sex (as she'd whispered to a friend in our earliest days, "the best sex I've ever had") . . . and then of respect and admiration . . . and perspiration and determination.

When sex becomes conviction, *then* you have a marriage.

## CHAPTER 55

# NOW, NOW, NOW!

She woke up brokenhearted, her gorgeous smoke-blue eyes red rimmed.

The national flag colors for Sadland.

The day after Thanksgiving . . . and she was no longer thankful for my company. She got that off her chest right away. “I’m going to spend the day by myself,” she announced, bandaging the squall. “I’ll probably go out.” Tears flowed beneath her undemanding voice.

She left our bed.

I eventually opened one eye beneath the pillows. I deposited her review of my Thanksgiving dinner’s subpar, shit-ass, dumb-fuck, jerk behavior into my personal, stomach-malignant, password-unprotected, ever-expanding, self-loathing account.

Where I *am* a rich man.

Where emotional inadequacy is gold.

Where losing your loved one to righteous contempt is some kind of wealth.

If you’re screaming, “I don’t want to live in that insane, awful

country,” please join this chorus: “Nor do I.” But how bad could it be? I dozed off again, hoping for the better.

—

Both eyes open finally.

Around 11:00 a.m. that same Friday morning, I’m lazing in bed, mildly hungover—as one often is after a decent writing session. Nestled and negligent inside my pathetic pillow fort. I’m eagerly consuming the latest crime thriller by Irish/Vermont writer Tana French (think as good as Shakespeare without the Elizabethan-English barrier).

Have given up on anything more demanding than hardcover murder mysteries. Have already preprayed that tomorrow comes/goes swiftly through Joyaux/Ahern University. Eager beaver to throw two days away, to distance myself from my LOUSY Thanksgiving domestic performance. Doubts are landing. Simone depends on me now, in our seventies. I depend on her every day.

I wonder: Did I ever really graduate from high school? Hormones? Intellect? *Let’s look*: What’s the secret password for my online account a half century later? “Where did you share your first kiss?” “Holbrook. Kathy’s breath smelled of candy apples.” True, true, true, true, true: her willing fresh lips, my hungry, consuming first lips; sixty years ago, under yellow bug lights, in a local backyard.

I’ve even prayed, if I want to be honest as lambs, that medically assisted suicide is something fed-up Americans could/should soon purchase at a nearby parking meter. With a few coins.

Think how that could drive down the cost of the country’s health care.

—

Reading Tana. Just got to the part . . .

A bit past 11:00 a.m., Sim One bursts into our bedroom . . . like lava, throwing on

“we’re going out” clothes; loud, urgent, in FULL “we must deal with this NOW!!!”

Giddyup. Painful. Simone proclaimed in my ear, bending close to my pillow fort, her voice sharp as a gull’s . . .

“We have to GO. We have to DO something. We have to pay our electric bill in cash. NOW!!!”

OK, OK, OK.

Though not on my Friday’s flaccid, slightly hungover agenda, I grab a minimum number of moods and body parts from bed, throw myself at our walk-in closet for enough clothing to make some form of public appearance. (Maybe court?) [Mentally whining: *This is not on my list!* Followed by: *SHUT UP, ASSHOLE!*]

My beloved, betrayed, bewitching Simone is clearly panicked about something vital to our household . . .

Confused? So am I!

## CHAPTER 56

# Scammed!!! ~ *A public-service announcement from Simone and “her” Tommy*

TO OTHERS who are now AGING in America:

BEWARE!!!!!! You ARE far more vulnerable than you realize/believe/expect/presume/assume/care to or wanna be.

> As Simone and I *personally* NOW know from firsthand, near-bitter experience (it will be a happy-ish ending, though; promise)

> Yes, dear elderly! YOU are *right now*, if you're a certain age, RIPELY victim class (despite any previous competence you might have counted on).

> “We” presumed. *We rocked in a cradle of SAFE. We ate arrogance for three square meals daily.*

> We trusted the universe and our reactions . . . because of simple shit like knowing your *childhood* street address, your *current* street address, your

phone number, or how to drive home successfully, how to turn on your windshield wipers if a down-pour says howdy (that's a recent true story of sudden *incompetence*).

What happened ten months past Sim One's brain bleed, disturbingly:

Today (2020, November),  
a well-organized gang of  
scammers successfully  
penetrated our complacent  
middle-class household's  
mental defenses.

Defenses we'd assumed  
were *thick* castle walls.  
Against which: "You—  
falsehoods, fakers, cheats,  
scoundrels, rascals—  
cannot touch us, not here,  
behind our calm reason  
and decades of common  
sense, our self-preserving

## modest skepticism,” and . . . yet . . . but . . .

Submitted into evidence: a high-quality, beguiling, well-scripted scam that reached my Simone by phone.

The pair of us went into free-fall panic mode.

And our *seasoned* castle walls turned out to be cobwebs, one fine Friday morning, the day after America’s Thanksgiving.

—

### What happened?!?

Why was Simone rocketing in, bringing me to my feet, on a day she didn’t want to be with me at all?

Why was she talking to me, shouting at me, demanding we do something NOW, NOW, NOW?

Because she’d answered the phone and listened. And obeyed.

Simone and I shared a longtime customer-service best-practices creed: *Try to answer any phone call within a ring or two.*

In a typical business day, we might together field a dozen or more inquiry/customer/colleague calls from fundraisers, from nonprofit staff/board, from assorted others (spammers be damned; even so, Simone was kind). To obey this self-imposed creed and belief, we tried to be surprisingly responsive, jumping around like bunnies wearing headsets. We wanted to welcome. We were overconfident at the same time.

Now, a brusque robocall had *just* informed her that the electrical power at our street address (10 blah-blah-blah; all accurate) would be CUT (severed, terminated, ended) in *under two hours* . . .

. . . UNLESS we paid our overdue bills IMMEDIATELY.

Overdue bills?

The robocall challenged: “Did you NOT know? We’ve been sending you reminder letters for months!”

Embarrassing.

Humiliating.

Not who we are!!! “Maybe I’m calling the wrong number?!? So sorry! What’s your account number again?”

How to build a convincing scam?

**Tip #1:** Trigger strong emotions right away! Simone usually pays a bill the same day it arrives. While I’m not that prompt, still it’s been family policy for our 30+ years together: Pay bills quickly; put them behind you, Satan. Carry as little debt as you can. Die without owing a penny. Her upbringing. My upbringing.

**Tip #2:** Make it urgent. And, in this case, *awful*. Don’t let your victim reason. Make your victim *react*. This robocall warned of our fast-approaching calamity. You see, once power to someone’s home is shut off, it takes *at least a week* for that power to be restored! As the message pressed upon us.

**Tip #3:** You’re looking for a sucker in a haystack. Make lots of calls. Reaching Simone at just the right time wasn’t luck; it was persistence. Her call might have been one of a thousand made that minute.

—

**So, of course . . .**

. . . as anyone who self-identifies as an upstanding, bill-paying, community-worshipping citizen *would* do, Simone *immediately* phoned the 800-ish toll-free service number that the brusque robocall offered . . . *to get things squared away ASAP*.

A friendly voice named Mark Callaway quickly picked up. This was not a robot. This was a person.

Clue #1? “The name Mark Callaway sounds pretty Anglo. One of golf’s big brand names, too. But this *particular* Mark Callaway clearly had an accent painting his excellent English. Articulate? Absolutely. But like *maybe* English wasn’t his only language?” *Don’t be prejudiced, ever. Is our household inherently racist?* We SO don’t want to be! Part of our sworn creed. Still: Mark Callaway with a Puerto Rican accent? To trust? Or NOT to trust?

**Dear reader:** Dismount your high horse, please. Here’s your scam-avoidance insurance policy. The basics:

1. Shouldn’t you—we *all*—be cautious in business dealings with strangers who announce themselves via robocalls? English be damned. Accents be damned.
2. *Kitchen-table learning:* My father raised us NOT to be TOO trusting . . . ever. (Mom never disagreed.) He’d say with conviction that stretched back millennia: “All politicians are crooks.” A dinner-table mantra. Of course, he was a minor politician himself, in our hometown, in it for the pension, not for the graft or the bribes. What Dad meant was that scams come in many shapes and sizes, politicians being just one.

—

Simone shouted at my slowly emerging post-Thanksgiving ears:

“Get up! Get up! We have  
to GO. We have to DO  
something. We have to pay  
our electric bill in cash.  
NOW!!!”

These robocall plundering, piratical, demeaning assholes also told her,

soothingly (“actually, Mark was quite nice,” Simone mentioned as we hustled downstairs . . .):

## If this IS a billing mistake, “you will be compensated.”

How to build a convincing scam?

**Tip #4:** Admit you could be wrong . . . and offer a remedy. Some computer record says we’re behind in our payments? Mistakes get made. And, heck, if that dumb, “we all hate them, right?” computer is actually wrong, “you WILL get your money back!”

So there’s zero risk if you DO respond . . . *and* you’ll clear your family’s good name and reputation.

Pause.

Let’s count this scam’s high points so far: (1) You’ve embarrassed your family’s core values [**Holy horrors! Protect our credit rating at all costs!**]; (2) you’ve started the countdown (“in less than two hours . . . and that was an hour ago”); and (3) you’ve removed any real risk of financial loss if in fact the system messed up. We HAD canceled checks proving our home’s electric bills were paid. That was the first thing Simone checked, as well as she quickly could.

### **Other tips?**

Create excruciating tension. Create excruciating tension inside people with doubts (i.e., all of us). Hammer home a fear of loss! (They awarded a Nobel Prize in Economics for that one.) Chance on a household with an unhappy wife who’s suffering bouts of confusion and a guilty, hungover husband who flunked Thanksgiving dinner together. I question nothing. I shake off the cobwebs. My silent vow: *We’ll work this problem out together. You’re NOT alone, Sim One. We WILL [together] get this done. And you’ll be thrilled by the final result.*

## Bourgeois panic, Simone and me!

“We have to GO. We have to DO something. Mark told me we have to pay our electric bill in cash. RIGHT NOW!!!” She said we had less than an hour to get that cash into the electric company’s hands.

By this time, I’m crudely/adequately dressed.

I grab my wallet, flip through what’s lazing there. She grabs hers, ditto. We bang for the garage. Between us, we calculate on the fly: We’re leaving the house with about \$800 in cash, enough to cover the stated electricity shortfall, ready to do whatever needs doing to make this surprise billing calamity whole/right/go away. *Just please, please, please, electric company, do NOT cut our power!*

## CHAPTER 57

# Question, though . . .

Where can we pay the bill?

Fucking fast as possible!

I drove crazy-like, aiming for stronger cell coverage.

We burst through the public golf course up the road.

No ball hit us. It's a wild-ass shooting gallery planted here in the country, right down the street from the 1920s nudist colony. Driving through the Foster Country Club (Rhode Island), you stay alert for "those about to swing." Many are novices. They come for the game, to clip a few tees. They stay for the at-times excellent kitchen and brimming martinis.

—

Simone repeatedly dialed the 800-ish number. Heard each time a message that sounded patently legit. "If you're calling to report an outage, press *one*. If you're calling about your bill, press *two*."

Reassuring; exactly as you'd expect. Simone pressed *two*.

Receptionist came on. Familiar voice. Simone's third call in thirty minutes. "Mark Callaway, please."

Mark picked up immediately. “Hi, Mark. This is Simone Joyaux again.” She pressed him for an address where we could drop off our payment.

## And that’s when there was a ripple.

We couldn’t pry an address out of Mark. *Just no point. You’re too far away. You’d never get there in time.* But he vowed, “Let me see if I can find you an alternative.”

Simone said something. This is all coming out of the dashboard in surround sound; Simone’s cell is synced to the car.

He added, “Know what, though? I can hardly hear you. You’re breaking up.” That’s authentic. We live in hill-&-dale country, often have bad reception. Mark is on our side, too; we hear that in his voice. He wants to reassure us. “You still there, Simone?” *Affirmative.* He promises, “We’ll figure this out. Let me see what I can do on my end. Call me back in five minutes.”

We knew for sure that we’d lose our electricity in under an hour. And, once lost, that power wouldn’t return for a week. Our new reality: no light at our house, no heat at our house, no water at our house, no cooking at our house, no computers at our house, and no business done from our house, affecting two consulting businesses with international clients.

Simone and I don’t pray very often (which is a zeppelin-sized overestimation).

But we are somehow praying now.

She weeps as hard as I’ve ever seen her go. Some of her tears are about a ruined Thanksgiving (*mea culpa*). Some are about our household’s ruined credit rating (embarrassment tears). Some are about losing electricity and suffering a week of severe inconvenience (letting-down-her-profession tears).

Some of them are about our future as a family.

## CHAPTER 58

# And yet: How gullible *are* we?

With scams?

It's just you against the tormenting world.

Something about Mark Callaway bothered us both. His non-Mark Callaway accent? We called him back in five minutes. He started to explain his work-around. "Go to a pharmacy. CVS, whatever you have nearby. Buy enough \$10 cash cards to cover your bill. Send them to . . ."

We saw a Dunkin' Donuts ahead. We parked. "There's something wrong with this."

She hung up on Mark.

"Let's go home." We left. "Worst case, we won't have power."

The power was on. The electric garage door lifted.

We went online to the electric company and set up an online account, a chore we'd long ignored. Having an online account meant we could check our payments. *And there was the evidence:* Our payments were fully up to date, a pattern that went back years. We were triple-A customers.

Then we phoned the electric company. Their preliminary message

was similar: “If you’re calling to report an outage, press *one*.” But then the options got richer. What was NOT the very next choice: “If you’re calling about your bill, press *two*.”

—

*Aging in America: Where rainbows end*—that was an alternative, honest title for this tale. . . .

*This scam came that close.*

We were aging: Simone was seventy-three; I was seventy-four.

You have to wonder: *Are we just victims now? Are we prey?*

And, if so, why not?

Hey, my dad met an actual leprechaun at the dog track. The teensy fella gave Ahern Sr. the winners in the next ten races. And Dad made a relative fortune that night. Which he ended up spending on nursing home care until there wasn’t a penny left rattling in the can.

He’d graduated from high school into the Great Depression, slogged through World War 2 as a private first class, endured a disdainful wife and her princely son (that would be me), and worked in a factory until he retired.

Dad’s vanities were few. But he appreciated watches. Not extravagant Swiss status pieces, mind you. He appreciated dependable, durable watches that told time accurately. He went into his last nursing home with just such a one on his hairy, mottled, thinning wrist. Someone there stole it, cunningly swapping his Hamilton for a drugstore Timex, to conceal the theft.

We are prey.

And don’t you forget it.

## CHAPTER 59

# Stuff we no longer do together

Simone groomed me without hesitation.

On airplanes, at home in bed at night, she'd wet the tip of a finger and swab loose flakes of orange wax from my ears. "Hey, come on in!" She seemed to take some small, smug pleasure from my imperfections. I loved her for that.

I groomed her, too: top, bottom; head, toes, in-between. What is intimacy if not that precious "in-between"?

She shed hair like a golden retriever; there was that.

And after any meal (and always before a speech), she'd ask me to check her teeth, pulling her lips back into an *open-wide* grimace. Usually there was nothing hiding. She was a remarkably clean machine.

I admired Simone's teeth. I envied them! They were splendid. White as new dice. Small and perfect and purposeful.

When I hugged her that one last time and kissed her unresponsive lips, her enviable teeth no longer looked their best . . . they'd shrunk,

gone slightly ivory. A bit dull, more worn than I recalled; receding, as if smiles were now currency just for the living. *Here, take my smile when you leave. I won't be needing it anymore.*



# **ACT 1 AGAIN**



## CHAPTER 60

# The reporter asked

“How did you and Simone first get together?”

She wanted background about her article’s hero: Simone Joyaux, role model for countless feminists, minorities, and up-and-comers in the nonprofit world.

“She was horny.” Truth: Simone was often horny. “We’d met. Had dinner. Gone to an art show. No touching. Then she called the next day at my office and invited me for a purely sexual fling, if I was interested. Zero strings. Zero expectations.” Her approach stuns me decades later. “Just to have fun, basically.”

Reporter: “And you said?”

“I said, ‘I’m a functioning heterosexual male.’”

Bitty pause. “Right.”

## CHAPTER 61

# When *do* you know?

In 2018, before Sim One was hospitalized and diagnosed with her first ministroke, I asked and Googled and Mayo Clinic-ed these questions:

*When can you tell?*

How *soon* can you tell?

What are the signs?

Changes a spouse might note that another might laugh off?

Alzheimer's symptoms?

Who is Alzheimer anyway?

Dementia symptoms? Not idle curiosity . . .

Twice I've witnessed the decline and fall of an imperial intelligence . . .

Whaddabout just plain crazy?

> Signed *Concerned*

I later learned I wasn't the only one wondering.

Family and friends, they'd noticed changes, too . . . so they said.

As chief married-to-Simone asshole, here's mine, anchored in time; years earlier in our 24/7 bubble, my 2012 Dear Diary (DD) entry: "Tonight 7:51 p.m.—my spy is downstairs. Watching TV. Alone."

Got it?

*My spy* is Sim One. This is me disappointing her again; she's lonely. She tells me that a lot (once a week?). As a joke gift she buys me a pair of socks that say "selective hearing specialist."

Not a subtle hint. I'm sub-ceeding expectations.

Same Tom's DD entry: "This morning SPJ was confused by her Travelocity directions . . . and threatened to cry"—that was a fact. This was my DD comment: "All mistakes terrify her into assuming that growing old is a brain death sentence." Also noted: "8:16 p.m.: my third Count Negroni." The Count Negroni is an inescapable drink, where gin boosts an otherwise low-key and charming tippie into something else: You reel down the street, pitch into a ditch. Sway to join a revolution. Collapse in a gutter.

Same DD entry: "on TV: a cop show; on couch: Simone with a saucer of cheese and cherry tomatoes from today's farmers' market"—I'm finally downstairs with her instead of chewing my computer.

Too late, asshole. She picks at her food and announces bedtime. I'm useless; where was I an hour earlier?

Next morning, she drove off at 8:00 a.m., still ready to weep "because the directions to her destination confused her." I was awake enough to write that DD note before I reclutched our six pillows, my brain lightly tapping a snare drum, my liver entering Class III rapids—predictably, invitingly the worse for Campari, sweet vermouth, and gin, in equal parts.

A Dear Diary entry nine years later:

There was no version of me I much liked for long  
until Simone dragged me into her world by the hair:  
France, obligation, dependability, activism, enough  
causes to erase the Milky Way.



# ACT 3

# AGAIN

In her home office:

Two buttons on a “you pick what suits you today” card. One button says “NAUGHTY.” One says “NICE.”

Another button: “I like to stir the pot.”

Attached to an oft-used filing cabinet, there’s a magnet that says: “Something like a peach, I’m solid, luscious, and slightly acid.”

Pinned to a bulletin board is a Wonder Woman PEZ dispenser with a voice balloon: “Happy Birthday, Simone! We love you!” From her grad students at St. Mary’s.

Button on the same bulletin board: “Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding. ~ Albert Einstein”

Everywhere were pictures of her family, now and then.



## CHAPTER 62

# Cage-Rattling Questions

In our bedroom, there were printed signs:

Happy Burpday to you  
Happy Mirthday to you  
Happy Earthday, Dear Seemun  
Welcome home, Simone!  
Welcome home, Schmookins!  
Welcome home, Sea Monster!  
Welcome home, Seepie!  
Welcome home, Smeckens!

A loving nickname a day keeps the doctor away? Well, they're magical.  
But not THAT magical.

—

Such signs/subsigns around the house greeted SimOney each year in July when she finally returned to our Rhode Island nest and unpacked

from her annual summer teaching gig at St. Mary's University in Winona, Minnesota (pronounced: Win-OWN-ah).<sup>1</sup>

Wikipedia: "Saint Mary's University of Minnesota is a private Catholic university with an undergraduate residential college in Winona, Minnesota; graduate and professional programs in Winona, the Twin Cities, and Rochester; and course delivery sites in Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as Jamaica."

When Simone was there doing her summer teaching, St. Mary's was a bit of a Catholic citadel. Catholic charities sent their staff there to study safely.

Oops.

Simone's classes were amply stocked with people who predictably disagreed with her ultraliberal views and values. She adored them and the ensuing debates. Many fell in love . . . not with her views necessarily, but with her. She'd spend hours curled in a corner of a student lounge, discussing stuff with open but objecting minds.

Some St. Mary's students were recent undergrads or new to the fundraising field.

Many, though, were midcareer professionals—accomplished veterans, some with big gifts under their belts. One fast example who turned into a lifelong friend? Laura from Tucson. She arrived at St. Mary's with her newborn. Bring an infant to class (or a puppy, for that matter), see what happens. People turn gooey and ooey and kind. Laura breastfed comfortably in class during Simone's two-week summer residency.

And from Canada, bordering Minnesota? A bunch of loud highfliers who couldn't *at that time* find a demanding-enough graduate program in their own country (all that's changed; now Canada leads the way).

---

1. "SimOney" = a nickname Andrée invented. Andrée was (eventually) the smart, edgy brat . . . one of the last two sibs whom Jane, exhausted matriarch residing in East Lansing, Michigan, popped out. Delivery wasn't easy. Andrée came with a twin: Tall Paul. At the same time, Simone was finishing high school, entering college: her prime fun and fuckable years . . . and now had a fresh for-the-whole-family project: infant twins. Let the diapers and worries begin.

In Sim One's classroom, minds changed on purpose . . . *maybe*.

Positions softened *maybe* slightly at the edges.

This was her. In obscure Win-OWN-ah. (Good place for truly rugged shoes; visit the nearby Red Wing outlet. She did.)

Sim One in obscure Win-OWN-ah.

Trying to change the spin of our shared, customary, devolved, fatalistic, where-*are-we-now* planet? . . . one wandering graduate student at a time.

—

For Sim One, St. Mary's was a pilgrimage . . . not a gig. A journey into the light. An annual journey toward some bright star that hopefully mattered.

Amazing fundraising practitioners, a next gen, arrived and left from these July residencies. Some grew a new dimension at St. Mary's . . . challenged, challenging back in Simone's summer classrooms.

Simone loved St. Mary's each summer because her students annually forced more growth rings on *her* professional tree. She was ignited by other serious, uneasy minds (love you, Sim Two) seated in steamy summer classrooms.

Simone listened. She recalibrated, based on what she heard.

A main theme for her: What Simone called "cage-rattling questions," known affectionately as CRQs.

Remember: These students were mostly experienced fundraisers committed to making a big leap in skills and thinking. Many were parents, raising kids as well as pursuing a career. Many had suffered bad (sometimes terrible) bosses and boards.

CRQs could be deceptively simple: "What are your assumptions [about donors, volunteers, bosses, boards, colleagues, the community you serve]?" Sim One had dozens of challenging or provocative CRQs. She invited thousands more from her students. And she didn't want firm answers. She hoped for earthquakes instead. At St. Mary's. Every summer. In every head, including hers.

## CHAPTER 63

# Did too much sex kill Sim One?

Married thirty-seven years.

And tonight, we've made love again. Good, comfortable love. "I know you so well" love. Exhausted love, too; our naughty drawer wantonly open, every device and gimmick considered. It's a threesome: her, me, a formidable electric incentivizer plugged into the wall. An old and trusted friend: It boasts a grainy vibrating head the size of a snow cone, capable of acceleration, too.

A minute after Sim One (how to put this?) *culminates* for a second howling time, she complains of a sudden headache.

It's 11:00 p.m. She fetches Tylenol, the only pain relief her doctors allow; she has to stay away from blood thinners because of CAA.

The headache gets worse, much worse: "Tommy, this is the worst pain I've ever felt."

Pain seems to be on the left of her skull. No, it's on the right. Wherever: It's bad. She sits up, face scrunched. I scoot behind her to massage her neck and shoulders, thumbs plunging deep into her

muscles, bearing down hard in case it's a tension headache. Which is a likely bet: Simone flew from the womb *tense*. Worried. Combative. Courageous. Insistent.

Eventually Simone did sleep. It was late for her. She'd had trouble sleeping well since the neurologist's "it's bad" diagnosis sixteen months before. Simone daily faced undermining fear, ranging all the way up to horror. Doubt draped her face. She forced smiles. Heartbreaking: her shame-faced apologies for being a burden to me . . .

## CHAPTER 64

“What’s happening  
to me?”

It looked good until about 2:00 a.m. that same night.

I can’t

I cannot

I really can’t

Simone’s death was less complicated than making a meal.

She screamed with pain at 2:00 a.m.

She fell out of our bed. “Tommy, what’s happening to me?”

She crawled toward our en-suite bathroom to vomit, getting halfway across some designer’s rug we’d liked.

Phone in hand.

We tottered down a flight of stairs. She made it to the kitchen. I'd dialed 911, the emergency number. It answered immediately. "My wife is having a stroke." The voice confirmed our address.

Simone was down. She was on the other side of the kitchen island by now. Crawled there. She was on her right side, unresponsive to questions; on her right side, on the splashy linoleum pattern she'd chosen during the last redecoration.

Already a carcass.

The garage doors were open. Late dank night. Stars, I suppose. The moon off somewhere. Me looking again outside. Down our long curving driveway, crossed by deer, by turkeys. Bobcats dropped their scat in piles to say: *This is our land*. Looking again. Down our driveway. In a reasonable while, the volunteer ambulance team arrived, parking all over the place. They were good. Mostly women in charge. Fast. Trained. Efficient. They hauled Simone off our kitchen floor, onto a trolley, out the door, into flashing lights surrounding a big wheeled box.

I never spoke with my Sim One after that.

Sure, I read to her in her hospital bed, stroking her chilled fingers, hoping she'd follow the trials and tribulations of the characters in her latest romance novel. But once they'd hauled her carcass from our kitchen floor, I never spoke with Simone again on earth—not in the mortal realm, the place you and I both occupy at this moment. (*So start talking, dammit!!!* Sorry: I'm shouting at myself.)

She was thereafter a body (not a mind) in a throwaway hospital johnny, with tubes.

You *do* get my message, right?

Hug the one you love. Immediately. Right now! Race toward that embrace. Don't let go . . . until they plead "lighten up." Speak with her/him/them! Hug + speak + ask + weep. Again. Again. Again. Now! I'm praying for you. Simone and I pray for you.

And we don't pray for all that much.

So trust us: This is important.

## CHAPTER 65

# And then this: A recap and the paperwork is in

Connie, a deep friend, emailed: April was indeed the cruelest month. Side-swiping T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as Ivy Leaguers reflexively do when despondent. We've all taken the same courses. Revered the same poets. Have forgotten most of it except the headline verses, I suspect; me, anyway.

I quickly wrote her back:

Sim One had a massive stroke two days ago, on April 29, due to cerebral amyloid angiopathy (CAA). To quote: "Cerebral amyloid angiopathy (CAA) is a condition in which proteins called amyloid build up on the walls of the arteries in the brain. CAA increases the risk for stroke caused by bleeding and dementia."

She is in the hospital, at just before 11:00 a.m. EST. She is still breathing on her own. And they

have made her “comfortable”: the term of medical art for “no pain.”

I saw the scans of her brain. The arteries exploded. Her brain was destroyed.

—

Simone is brain-dead. Cauliflower everywhere. Implosion. Explosion. Where’s Sim One?

Dear humanity central: Yet another person is gone. Earth loses about two people a second to death. Simone is with you now.

She’d had that small “brain bleed” about sixteen months before, on January 2, 2020. Awakened with a terrible headache and found she couldn’t read. But that was a minor incident. Within twenty-four hours, the swelling went down and she could read again.

She was determined to find out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We visited the leading CAA researcher, Dr. Steven M. Greenberg, at Mass General in Boston. He spent an unhurried hour with us. He confirmed that there is no treatment and no cure for CAA.

We cherished his bottom-line advice: “Just live your life as hard as you can.” He told us there was an 8 percent chance each year that Simone would have another brain bleed. I don’t know if there was any real science behind that; he might have been handing us an optimism lollipop: 8 percent sounded so survivable-ish. We kept repeating the stat to each other on the long ride home.

Simone had been sad and terrified, though, ever since. Terrified of dementia. Terrified of CAA. Last week, she went for a drive in the rain and had to rush home because she couldn’t remember how to turn on the windshield wipers. “Tommy, I’m afraid I’m losing it.” As recounted before.

Simone would weep, “I don’t want to stop being me,” as she screamed, over and over, kneeling on the floor, pounding our bed with her fists. As recounted before.

On our walks over the years, we talked about our wishes for end of life. Basically, if there's no hope for recovery and any intellectual life, we both wanted the same thing: "Please let me die."

I expect she will be accepted into hospice at any moment.

The paperwork is in.

Awaiting the next call.

## CHAPTER 66

### How it ends

Not with a bang . . . but with slapstick.

5:30 a.m.

“What are your wishes?”

*Who’s this?* I’m in bed, in my get-to-hospital clothes, sleeping an hour. Fumbling for the phone. Fog. There’s a doctor calling. Calm and comforting.

“What are your wishes?”

*What?*

*What are your wishes?*

I want Sim One by my side right now for all time. That’s my wish. If modern medicine can’t grant that wish . . . then say something else. Say, for instance, that *your brilliant wife of thirty-seven years is brain-dead and will never speak nor walk again. So what do you think should be done with her remains?*

“What are your wishes?”

Now I know exactly what that carefully phrased question means: *Should we continue with life support . . . or remove it?*

Life support means a tube down Simone's throat to assist her breathing plus needles in her arms, supplying nutrition and water. And catheters. Keeping the carcass alive and drained.

So many times, she and I had talked about this, as one does when you're a childless couple. *What should I do if you . . . ?*

This is the demarcation line. This is childbirth in hard reverse. This is dreamy love hitting a no-future stone cliff.

I don't HAVE wishes now. I don't have hopes. But I DO know what she dearly wanted, what we both thought was best. And it wasn't this: "In tonight's news: A family hopes for a miracle. Their beloved son, Peter, remains in a coma, in his 345th day of life support after a five-car accident. The parents swear he's responding to their nudges."

Sim One and I had walked many, many, many trails in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe . . . and we'd talked often about this outcome.

We'd agreed, whoever goes first: *If my brain's failing, please let me die.*

—

Simone was a self-proclaimed existentialist. It was her family's faith of choice. She fed on its virtues like greens.

Papa Georges, her dad, semen source for Jane's six kids, taught existentialism at a university. Gracious, accommodating, undidactic Georges once debated an equally jolly, accommodating Catholic priest on that very topic for local (Lansing, Michigan) educational TV.

Here, for your pleasure or contempt, is *my* lay, shortcutting interpretation of existentialism: *You're responsible for your own actions.*

You define yourself through what you do.

It's the work of a lifetime. Good, evil? Maybe it's simply the sum of your daily choices and actions: math, really.

Simone was a moralist by inclination, with a sharply defined sense of right and wrong. To her, for instance, it was right to die and not be a burden. It was wrong to keep a carcass alive because loved ones couldn't bear to let go.

Simone's death in a nutshell.

---

And the slapstick?

I got the call. A nurse from the hospice unit phoned to say, "It's time. You should come."

"I'm forty-five minutes away!" I panicked. She reassured me, "Don't rush. There's time yet." She meant, *Don't kill yourself speeding here*. I was dressed. I slept shaved and dressed. I was out the rising garage door within ten minutes.

And then things got strange.

Driving into the city wasn't a problem. As I neared the hospital, I merged onto Interstate 95, one of the most heavily traveled highways in America. I couldn't find a safe slot in the flow. Hard drivers gunned for me, shutting me out, Cadillacs without mercy. I needed to veer off RIGHT NOW to Rhode Island Hospital's Eddy Street exit. To be there for Simone's last breaths.

And I couldn't do it! Without risking . . . *oh, fuck it, I'll just go around*.

After all, I reasoned, I knew the next highway exit well.

It would add no more than a couple of minutes to my journey toward her final moments. I began speaking aloud to Simone, up through the sunroof. "I'm coming, sweetie! I'm almost there! Just a few blocks away! Hold on, honey! I will be there with you!" *For you. At the end. Just as romance demands . . .*

---

SHIT!!!

What the . . . ?

My next ever-reliable, quick-turnaround exit was for the first time in decades blocked by cops and cones. Road construction? Overtaken truck? UFO crashed and burning, igniting the apocalypse?

I pressed on, across the river to the next nearest exit. Again: not *that* far from Simone's hospital bed, as the crow flies. Another few

minutes at most? I've driven these highways a thousand times. And the nurse had assured me, "There's time yet." I'm screaming at the sun-roof: "I'm coming, sweetie! Almost there! A few blocks more! Hold on, Spunk Fish! I will be there! I will hold your hand as you expire!"

And then I encountered the road race.

Detours. Cops with hands up. Some entrants crossing my windshield weren't even running. They hobbled along, with numbers pinned to their shirts, walking gamely to a finish. As Simone died in a nearby hospital. As she accepted one more breath. Exhaled another. Waiting for me to appear, to hold her hand, to say goodbye.

—

When I entered the hospice ward, I knew.

Staff stared, with sympathy and regret.

The lead nurse met me outside the room. "She passed a few minutes ago," she said right away. "I'm sorry."

I went to Sim One's bedside.

She was rigid and some strange color: a pale orange. I kissed her lips. Her slack mouth hung open, unresponsive; just three days before, she'd kissed me back. I cut locks of Simone's wild hair; the nurse brought the scissors. We took a handprint from Simone.

In a blur, her sister Nicole arrived with best-husband-ever Larry. I lifted Simone's eyelids. I photographed her compelling eyes. She'd lived a vision; now she saw nothing. Now her exploded brain had nothing at its command, nothing left to do, no apologies to make. Now it was up to me. Up to us. Up to others—to anyone who cared, who'd learned from her, who'd been inspired. Anyone who didn't agree that dust became dust and was just dust.

## CHAPTER 67

# Together just once more?

You vow the impossible.

I would trade everything for one more arms-around hug with Sim One . . . the usual slurred promise you make to whatever gods hang around after last call, riding someone else's bar tab . . . to hug her: my inspiration, my bride of thirty-seven years, my moral compass, my warmth at night, my best each day . . . I'd trade ANYTHING for just one more sweet breath from her mouth. And her breath was always sweet.

I'd trade it all for one more unfettered scream from her heart about something she rejected, some injustice.

But it's a lie. A way of gauging, How many buckets does my grief fill? These trades don't happen.

And don't you, dear reader and dear author, forget it.

In the hospital, I kissed Simone's dead lips. Kissed her a final goodbye.

Whence you learn the true meaning of never again. Learn the true meaning of forever. Are reminded that death is an enterprise, too. Complicated. Global, in our case—that second home in France.

Bureaucracy insists on its due. Death is not the end; it's the beginning, as far as paperwork is concerned. Next up? Offices. Officers. Certifications. Governments. Apostilles.

The pandemic doesn't help. Everyone's skittish.

Grief could launch a mission to Mars. With regrets.

**ACT 4**  
**AGAIN**



## CHAPTER 68

# So then your brain died

And our common world, my complete world, was left with parts. I have a junkyard named Sim One. What can I reassemble?

## CHAPTER 69

# Am I getting messages from beyond the grave (sweet and welcome)?

Of course, there is no grave.

Per her instructions, Sim One's remains were cremated. (Plan B. Plan A was donating any organ that was usable. But the pandemic shut down that organ pipeline. No one wanted her parts when she died, trust me; we called around.)

I draw that box of her ashes close every night. I like watching TV with Simone's dust under my feet. I sleep with her bracing my back. Sometimes I reverently use her ashes as a footstool. I also hike with SIAB (Simone in a Box) . . . and she's not a featherweight, in her carbonized state. The point is: We still go places together.

Oh, right. The messages from beyond the grave?

I dunno. Every minute of every day? My dreams are wild: Broadway shows, supermarkets, war zones. Simone's almost always in my dreams, taking charge. This is why I like to sleep so much. They're HER dreams. Just like real life.

## CHAPTER 70

# Clocks: Other daily stuff we no longer do together

I was firmly assigned the changing of the clocks across our domestic universe (watches, cars, even the clocks in France when we finally alighted) whenever daylight saving time came annoyingly around the annual carousel (blame Ben Franklin if you need a guilty party).

She'd hint. Hint. Hint. Simone would leave me Post-it Notes, reminding me of this twice-yearly obligation. Spring forward. Fall back. I'd reset.

Sim One assigned this task to me because she knew I could cope with something simple . . . at least within a day or so. She loved me. She calibrated me, too. Daily. To some micron. We were a binomial equation. If you're in a relationship, then you are a binomial equation, too.

I could do the family clocks, she guesstimated. And I'd feel companionate, competent, and whatever the third thing is that adds a tasty condiment to human well-being.

## CHAPTER 71

# Grief reporting in

Something's working. I'm getting more things done that need doing: the daily stuff, the bureaucracy (who knew that death was such a paperwork nightmare), the slight improvements in self-care. Our talks, you and me, Dr. Kane, my "paid best friend" (grief counselor); my upcoming week away with Michigan friends and family; my "started as a friend, now a psychotherapist in the UK" . . . well, she'd rather not reveal her name, ever again . . .

It's all moving me somewhere, inch by inch. Yay.

And then there was yesterday.

—

Did an important task at the local post office, getting another official document out the door to France—the local post office who adored Simone because she adored them.

Ken, a friendly clerk, asked me how it was going, and I managed this: "Not all that well." He knew. I added a one-word muffled

postscript: "Time." Wobbled out to my car, face flooding. Returned home, spent the rest of the day moaning and screaming and crying, walking our acres, up and down stairs.

I'm haunting myself.

I can't fix that.

## CHAPTER 72

# Six months later: The Life Reinvention Business (LRB)

We fall in love with offered bodies . . . with minds attached . . . and dancing.

Then those offered bodies fail. Age. Break. Decay. Neglect. Taken for granted. Not taken for a walk. Mine, yours. Minds prance and pose and accept the trophies. But in the end, it's just flesh.

If I may demonstrate . . .

Sim One's brain died. When that happened, she had nothing more to say—lips sealed. I held her hand in the hospital, overlooking the emergency parking lot. I read to her from the novel she'd enjoyed the night before.

Eventually, competent doctors got it into my thick head that she was no longer a viable mind.

Eventually, doctors got it into my thick and denying head that Sim One would never again wake up and speak to me. Not a word. Their science came clear finally.

Catching on took most of a day. It started with that blurred 5:30 a.m. call, when a doctor called about intubation and asked me, “What are your wishes?” Didn’t click.

Later I called to ask what Simone might need from home during her hospitalization. “Should I bring her cell phone, in case she wants to get in touch with someone? Her glasses?” The nurse answered, “She won’t need those.”

As I said, catching on took most of a day.

---

See, here’s the thing. With the second stroke, I assumed she and I were on the road to Simone’s next sort-of recovery.

We were not.

I could hold and rub her hand as long as I wanted; it was a dead monkey’s paw. Now I understood: She’d never squeeze me back.

That news was delivered gently enough. They were good humans; they weren’t cruel. But they were technicians. I was a lover. I was a romantic. I expected forever after. They were in a different business.

---

I slide into alone: “alone” being my body with a decent mind still afloat at age seventy-four, without Simone’s presence, without her voice, without her daily help, without her well-tuned moral adjustments, without her steady compass, without her sincere passion.

Without all that was her.

Indirectly, of course, for me, her voice continues as long as I look at—and live in—the life we assembled together. We have our family photo albums, years of them. As long as I want her, I know she wants me back. Which is good enough.

Good enough.

Good enough.

---

It should be noted: The Life Reinvention Business isn’t going all that well.

I miss Sim One like I've lost an organ. And scream. And roll around on the floor, cursing. Thank g\_d I live alone now (irony intended).

What's missing?

Her not being here at arm's length. NOT *really* here, not to talk with.

Every day my soul drank fully from a pitcher, a sink, a bath, a bottle, a cup, a glass, the palm of my hand, her hair, her breath, her everywhere . . . always refilled by Sim One's undemanding love.

She drank from my love as well, I think; I tried.

Her love of us as a reasonably capable couple doing a bit of professional good in the world? Went into the daily pitcher.

Our joint love of all those people we'd met over the thirty-seven years of marriage topped that pitcher up.

Now Sim One's not here to refresh our pitcher. Some days I think I'm drinking from drying puddles. But even drying puddles can produce abundant life. Ask a biologist lecturing above a vernal pool.

—

Sim One's presence, soul and body—I need her. Her surprising heft. Her durable moral heft. Her reliable moral presence. Imagine a sailboat without a keel: It's tippy.

Her loss from my daily life is beyond navigation, beyond measure, beyond acceptance, beyond squaring, just one inch this side of enduring; and even when that's barely possible? . . . not every hour of every day.

Yet yes.

Yet yes.

Yet yes.

Let's be rational. Mortality? Undeniable.

I've done my damage to living things. I pithed lab frogs in high school (whatever the teacher handed me). I've flattened over my lifetime who knows how many mosquitoes against my skin. (Enough to floor a ballroom?) So, yes, I've killed. I am not any kind of life-respecting Buddhist. I'm a human supremacist. Whatever I want? That matters. Whatever's best for my convenience and comfort? That matters most.

I DO try to release trapped house flies (inconsistently). But I also gladly pay quarterly for pest control, to keep ants and mice out of our dwelling. Otherwise we'd be overrun.

—

Sim One's absence, though, is a black hole.

Tonight, her absence is an itch past scratching. I went somewhere. She wasn't there. I enjoyed the company of people she would have liked and admired and praised on the ride home.

But she wasn't there with me, with that wonderful company; her shattered brain was six months past this interesting event. I was there without her.

All I could do, since it was a cold night, was wear my scarf in the French style, as a small tribute around my neck, a fashion Sim One and I shared. If an official, knife ready in hand, would have confronted Simone, asking, "Are you French? Or are you American?" She would have paused and deliberated. "Technically, I'm American. My core values are French. Fuck off."

I hope I'd have stepped forward right then to back her. We-ish of like minds fantasize heroism. We-ish of like minds will often try to work a deal.

—

Scribbled in my smallest notepad, this reminder: "I am in the Life Reinvention Business—LRB."

So I tell myself. I've got a brace of psychoanalysts. Just one seems to be in anything resembling working order. The other keeps trying to heal herself by telling me how wrong I am.

The good stuff comes from the nonpros, those I'm encountering (yeah!) in this board game of Death . . . each kind person who asks me to please accept their thoughtful condolences: like that banker two days ago; like that wonderful account manager at the cell-phone store two weeks ago, who pressed his hand against his heart, because in a time of COVID no one who's sane shakes hands—they all shove me along precisely.

Big question to my therapists, official and unofficial: *Am I retreating or advancing?*

Grief. Grief. You're feeling grief.

The other psychologist sends me diagrams in PowerPoint, to help me understand my emotional situation. She's telling me with charts: I'm a mess.

"You feel you're betraying her?" my Monday therapist asks, the one who's in working order.

Yes.

Erasing her. Losing her.

—

I took countless pictures of her and our travels together, intoxicated by her presence. I told her once, "When I take pictures, I'm happy." Because you're looking outward, struck by something. Grabbing at life and light. Unfolding the mystery and complexity. Rather than dwelling in the shadows under the bridge. Where trolls live, plotting their revenge.

The editing rule was this: Shoot 100 photos; delete 101. Impossible to achieve mathematically. But it kept your trigger finger semi-discerning. Maybe think twice about the angle. Maybe think three times about the audience (what can you show them that they haven't seen before?). I also liked to shoot without looking. Who knew what you might catch at an unplanned glance?

Hey, you'd flush the shit out of your lens later.

We'd come back from whatever was that day's adventure (a hike or a sight to see; buying a dress suitable for the stage; a loving trip to the "Red Door Bread Store," which was our nickname for a favorite bakery, where Simone and the owner would exchange fond pleasantries while I ogled the goods).

Wine (relax time) entered the process between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. I'd delete all the photos that were crap . . . and post online the few that

survived, in a blog called *The Little Words Mean the Most*. Last time I checked there were 569 posts under this category alone: “France.”

Sim One and I traveled. The “France” posts represent a fraction of the eye-opening, blessed wonders we experienced en route. Plus the routine wear and tear—also wonderful in its way. We weren’t guardian angels with silken wings, flying hither and yon. Our travels required massive industries to lift us from point A to point B. So, fellow travelers, good night, and good luck.

## CHAPTER 73

# Condolences

As the news spread of Simone's death, hundreds wrote to share their thoughts and tales. To bellow grief. Our rural mailbox howled. My inbox played an email requiem composed 'round the clock on keyboards 'round the world.

Disbelief was a common theme.

People couldn't imagine that someone as flagrantly endowed with drive and intensity *could* die. Sure, that sad fact was medically certified. And it happened to everyone. But still! Sim One's permanent absence from this earth was unthinkable to those who knew and depended on her. I'm looking at you. And you. And you. And you. And me.

Definitely including me.

I was a lab rat in a maze of my own devising. For weeks after her passing, my diet was mostly wine, as early in the day as was defensible. I paid bills and signed some paperwork. Otherwise, to-dos piled up against my profound indifference. Sim One's passing was a ball-peen hammer slammed into my skull. Firmly stuck there, too.

Condolence cards helped pry that hammer loose. So, bless you all, all who had the kindness, the care, the compassion, the wit, and the will to write.

Your condolences mattered more than you knew or I expected. Thanks in part to you, a subsequent, imperfect me finally began to emerge.

While we're on the topic of condolence cards: What *is* best practice? Do you reply to every condolence card? What's the proper, acceptable, *right* thing to do, per societal norms? I do not want to disappoint my beloved nor besmirch . . . oh, fuck, I just don't know.

So I asked an expert: Sarah C., Simone's dear, dear, dear, dear friend; earliest consulting colleague; coconspirator ("we ran in tandem"). Sarah was brought up in a proper Southern US household, where the rules for behavior are strict and dense. They might remain unwritten, but they are well understood and firmly enforced, especially rules around children, food, and occasions. An example, from *Southern Living* magazine (OK, maybe the rules aren't *so* unwritten): "No cell phones at the table, in church, at the cemetery, or anywhere near Memaw [Grandma]. She hates those things."

When Simone or I didn't know for sure how to behave, Sarah C. was our first-call, go-to source. Which brings me to my specific problem. One rule of etiquette in the South is this: When you receive a gift, *always* send a thank-you note. (A real note, too; not some text message. *What were you thinking?*)

So Sarah and I spoke.

And she assured me . . . with that soft caramel accent she'd acquired as a child . . . that replies to condolence cards, *my dear Tom*, are neither necessary nor are they expected.

Though one might argue that each card is a gift of sorts: a gift of connection; a gift of comfort in a time of pain; a gift of seeing you when you feel invisible; a gift that acknowledges the soul-piercing depth of your loss, personal if universal.

The Emily Post Institute offered nuanced advice. You only had to acknowledge certain things—mass cards, for instance; flowers, too.

This we did.

Many friends made contributions to charities in Sim One's name. Simone's youngest sister, Andrée, created a custom thank-you card and spectacularly handled the responses. Emily Post's etiquette, "based on consideration, respect, and honesty," adds one other caveat: "The exception is when the writer asks that her note not be acknowledged—a thoughtful thing to do. . . ."

Indeed, Sim One's death launched a great number of condolences.

They bulged from a shoebox on my desk. Uncompressed, boosted by pop-up cards and ephemera, they stacked as high as my knee. Of special note in that rickety stack: The Cornell-Feists sent a pop-up card of a life-sized hummingbird, in lieu of a beagle puppy. As Marci explained, while beagle puppies are *their* family's default top choice as condolence gestures, my superb record of being fatally neglectful even to houseplants curbed her impulse just this once.

Which leads to this question: *Does one save condolence cards?*

People do . . . and they're not sure why. Some don't feel right about throwing them away; I've heard that a few times.

Maybe the cards seem like some kind of memorial—a stamped, paper tombstone, signed by the living?

## CHAPTER 74

# I wondered, too

Here's a clue, maybe.

I had a rule: Both of us did NOT have to read the same business book.

Simone read her specialty stuff. Then I'd learn from her, if I had a question.

I'd read *my* specialty stuff . . . and share with her anything that seemed useful, as we walked.

Our long, local walks were enchantments. There was one rule: We had to stop and stare at running water. That meant three stops: There were three bridges on our four-mile loop.

Also, we had to wave YAY to every vehicle that moved aside to give us space, which was pretty much all of them. *Thanks, neighbor. Thanks, friend. Thanks, considerate people in the country.*

Shankar Vedantam's book *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives*, was one of Simone's all-time *blew my mind* favorite books.

Simone rubber-stamped her hardcover in various places, marking territory: This is MINE. Then she doused pints of highlighter across

its wisdom. (I begged her not to do that: “If you’re going to highlight *everything*, why not just print the book on bright-yellow paper?”)

That was only her first pass.

Later she annotated the book for her own future use with Post-it tabs. She labeled “Justice,” “Race,” “Life cycle of bias,” “Gender privilege,” “The lure of conformity,” and “Terrorism, extremism.”

She quoted it a lot. She was preparing for something.

—

I’m listening to the radio on a Sunday morning as I drive. I’m meeting up for a long walk with Jill, a psychologist and friend and work buddy. Simone is dead. Her ashes are with me in a box, in a backpack . . . because I’ve solemnly promised Sim One that I’ll keep her by my side and take her with me always and everywhere.

The expert on my car radio? “Shankar Vedantam is an American journalist, writer, and science correspondent. His reporting focuses on human behavior and the social sciences.”

This particular *Hidden Brain* episode features Brit psychiatrist and author Iain McGilchrist; he resides on the Isle of Skye.

Skye is magical, not in a Disney way.

Simone and I adored the Isle of Skye. We spent a memorable, busy few days there. Our traveling companion, her mother, Jane, had departed, flying back to the States after Edinburgh. For about a week, just Simone and me. We pushed on into the deeper Scottish Highlands, thinking we’d do some hard hiking (that worked out badly).

On Skye we saw waterfalls pouring from heaven’s own pitcher, over stone cliffs sliced like pound cake. We hiked mountains of gabbro, the same iron-rich mineral snot that continents slide around on. As we hiked, off to the side, British commandos chuted down from helicopters.

As I said, Skye is magical.

This *Hidden Brain* episode is called “One Head, Two Brains.” It looks at how the two hemispheres of the human brain divide up daily duties.

blah, blah, fascinating, blah

blah, blah, fascinating, blah

And then Iain mentions in passing, “And after a right hemisphere stroke”—exactly what Simone suffered—“the range of emotions open to somebody is limited. It’s mainly irritability and anger.”

*Bing!*

*Bing!*

She cursed a lot: *What the fuck is happening to me?*

We’d talk about this.

She’d complain to outer space and her ancestors: *Why am I so angry all the time?*

People look at this as a temporary emotional problem.

Maybe.

But are there sharp lines and fences?

Really?

Was it malfunctioning parts in Sim One’s case? Bits of brain wearing out? Getting worse? Failing the test of time? Maybe Sim One’s lower right lobe had microstroked for years.

Her January 2, 2020, ministroke demanded brain scans. The damage those scans revealed was not necessarily new.

The craters on the moon we love so much, that look so final? What if each moon crater were a ministroke? And these ministrokes cratered the brain of YOUR beloved? She’d end up where? As a dead, bright stone, orbiting nearby?

## CHAPTER 75

# Sad in a closet by the front door: Her rich array of winter coats

Winter comes. This was Sim One's least-favorite season; she was always cold. But winter weather dressed her well. I slide open the door to our coat closet. Her outerwear occupies two-thirds of the hangers.

Other people desperately need winter coats. Other people are cold! A responsible person would have given these coats away. I hoard hers. I want to lie with them. Sim One liked to wear my underwear in recent years. I want to dress in her clothes now. Did I just say that? Not true; babbling. I'd do anything to be closer to her, that's all. None of her clothes fit me.

I don't see a closet full of coats. I see Sim One many times over, wearing each coat as a day, a destination, a forecast advised:

- Fluted rain cloak with hood, thigh length ~ no one looked more bundled than Simone in a storm; a practical, stylish garment that got a good workout in Paris one nasty spring
- Quilted lime-green coat, bumping-around clothing, sold

by Habitat: “Clothes to Live In” ~ purchased at Martha’s Herbarry, Pomfret, Connecticut; Martha was loud and organic and taught herbalism, cooking; her store was personal, with good jazz, useful fashion; she died of breast cancer midlife; protégé Michelle took over; sorry to chronicle: Martha’s Herbarry was a 2020–2021 pandemic victim, situated across the road from The Vanilla Bean Café, a sublime foodie rest stop, alongside one of the great motorcycle touring routes in Northeast America

- Tight gray weave, Zapa, waist length, high fashion ~ Montpellier, France; adopted by a friend and now, for the first time, going to church on Sundays in colder months
- Wool shawl coat, gray/black/white, thigh length, Maryse Cépière ~ Béziers, France; still hanging in our coat closet
- Farm utility coat, gray, quilted, sold by Cluck! ~ still hanging
- Quilted vest ~ Sim One was always cold, a sign of high levels of estrogen, turns out; still hanging
- Classic black knee-length coat, Kristen Blake ~ family heirloom from Andrée, Sim One’s youngest, fashion-forward sister; still hanging

Bundled in a coat, Sim One, I had your arm.

You liked that. You liked me to touch you. You liked to show the world our union, our junction, our codependency (strength *and* weakness). You liked to walk hand in hand, even if we were wearing gloves.

I play a new instrument: the howl.

It bursts from me like a dropped egg with a loud voice—an egg with no hope of remedy, of being put back together again, with nothing but complaints and doubts.

I’m alive.

Which means nothing much without you.

Now what?

Oh, yeah, I keep forgetting: the Life Reinvention Business, LRB.  
The Life Reinvention Business.

## CHAPTER 76

# Uncomplicated pronouns

One wonders . . .

When do I stop automatically saying “us” and “our”?

*We* did this. *We* did that.

Oh, yes, please: Come to *our* place.

When will I be merely “me” again?

And/or/yet do I *want* to be merely “me” again?

**NO!**

I do NOT want “me-dom.” *Me*-dom was hell on earth. *Us*-dom was heaven, acceptable.

I remain your humble and trusting servant, “us.”

## CHAPTER 77

# Seven stages of grief: If you're lucky

Grief turns you into a robot. If you're lucky. Or maybe into a falconer. Floored by the sudden death of her father, English naturalist Helen Macdonald spent a year training a northern goshawk she named Mabel. "The hawk was everything I wanted to be," she wrote in her award-winning 2014 memoir, *H Is for Hawk*, "solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life."

—

Seven stages of grief—modified Kübler-Ross model:

#1 shock ~ *initial paralysis on hearing the bad news*

Silence, a breath rattle (but I missed that last, last, last rattle, the one that exhaled out her stiff auburn lips, from her orange losing-it face; I was stuck in traffic, then in a very slow road race, then I got there minutes

too late; there were no last words; she hadn't spoken since the stroke)—what is death really? No more voice, an attitude that no longer reacts (of course, others can adopt it), wild hair that grows for a day or two more just 'cause follicles do that; a sum, a body, a creature, yet another human, a person no longer capable of hugs and hugging back and asking. Oh, please, our suffering planet has a human population of 8.1 billion (2023) and counting.

And this is where I am.

Almost 67 million people will die in 2023, across the world. Loving couples aren't rare. We're as common as stubbed cigarettes.

After thirty-seven years within reach, with Simone, the sudden absence of a talking, speaking, arguing, complaining, worrying, loving, fretting, desiring, divining, opining mate and lover hollowed me out like a melon. I no longer existed.

So the question then became: *Can melons grow back twice?*

I asked the Magic 8 Ball. "It is certain" . . . and so the 8 Ball tolled.

Well, OK then. Good enough . . .

#2 denial ~ *trying to avoid the inevitable*

"What are your wishes?" the doctor on the phone asks at 5:30 a.m. My wishes are to have my beloved back at my side within forty-eight hours, if at all possible. Oh. That's not what you meant, is it? I've been here once before, with my father. When there's no real hope.

“What are your wishes?” I forgot. I haven’t read the “your wife is on her deathbed” manual. How did it get to this point so soon? What do “my wishes” mean? What are you talking about?

#3 anger ~ *frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion*

“Fuck.” “Fuck you.” “Fuck me.” “Fuck me more than you. You tried. I am residue.” “FUCK!” Like a nail gun: fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

#4 bargaining ~ *seeking in vain for a way out*

Existentialists and nonbelievers do not search for a way out. For them, “mortality” is as obvious as primary colors, secondary colors, black and white. A way out would be a violation of values. Did I pray? Of course. To some higher power, across a range of religions. I knew she/he/it/they would be too busy, of course. Maybe I prayed to the electric company because they usually showed up finally if you hounded them enough. Of course, we’ve just had a hurricane. This is not this utility’s best hour. I’m supplying my own power, via a wonderful generator Sim One bought a decade ago. She blessed it with her glory. I was in Australia in her hour of need back then, a week without power in New England. She handled the problem with distress and aplomb, a powerful blend of emotions. My song in progress. “I’m still on our state’s outage map. Yet I do not have an assigned crew (my hard-hat guardian angels). Is this electric-grid purgatory . . . or is this something entirely new, maybe technology-failure hell? We all knew it would come. Here I am.”

#5 depression ~ *final realization of the inevitable*

Noticing depression in an emotional life so much lived underwater, self-medicated, often breathing through a straw to make it through? I guess you could say I'm depressed; I guess you could say I'm suicidal. But is it the slowest suicide in human history? The same sadness as a child and now in my seventies? I tell myself I'm weak. But, in truth, I am strong as well. I know what strong looks like. I know what it is. I know what strong feels like. I also know strong does not mean immortal. It means you go on. Sometimes it means saying "enough," recalling a climactic scene from one of our favorite films, *Love Actually*. Sometimes strong is just realizing that you can't live life asleep.

#6 testing ~ *seeking realistic solutions*

Simone was a registered organ donor. The rest of her corpse was supposed to end up at some medical school. That was the family tradition. Both parents had been med-school cadavers. And Sim One was ever the teacher.

But it was the pandemic. The rules had changed. Turned out, no one wanted any part of her. And since the idea of burial would have earned her scorn, I cremated her remains. Now I carry her ashes in a sturdy cardboard box. We go on outings together.

After that dilemma, the hardest thing was getting out of bed. Also hard: eating. Breathing: autonomic.

Almost impossible: exercising. Easiest: drinking wine. Also easy: a six pack of hoppy beer. Always the default: writing. Writing while drinking wine. Writing while drinking beer.

I'd read that Jean-Paul Sartre began each day with a breakfast of three brandies. If that was good enough for the father of existentialism, it was good enough for me.

Little *old* me: I was short and I was aging.

Supporting my poor health decisions was this motto of my trade: Write drunk, edit sober. In other words, ink-stained wretches, get it out of you and onto the page. *Then* fix it, which means throwing out about half the stuff you'd started to think was wonderful after that third (sixth?) glass of wine.

Write drunk, edit sober. I'd taught that maxim to thousands . . . including myself.

That was my realistic solution #1.

In other words (and frankly, I'm sick of words, even though that's my hustle): Why bother? Who cared? Without Simone to share my daily life, what did I have to live for? No answers for that. Not a word. Not a sound. Just sheets gone clammy. A car we shared getting filthy. Where had this amazing, beguiling, thirty-seven-year presence in my life gone suddenly:

compass, guide, comfort, triumph, joy (and anguish a bit, too)? Every other lover led in the end to Sim One: All those extraordinary, patient, impatient, disgusted partners had made me capable of satisfying her. Enough. Adequately. We were enough for each other. Together, sometimes, we were more than enough.

My friend Sallie M. helped shoulder me through this “seeking realistic solutions” shit. She talked about her own transit through the valley of survivor death. “Eat all the frozen TV dinners you want,” she said. “If you don’t feel like washing the sheets, just start sleeping on the cleaner side of the bed.”

#### #7 acceptance ~ *finally finding the way forward*

Friends and family invite me to go places. So we do things together. So *I* do things, instead of doing nothing except lying in greasy sheets and wondering, *Why bother getting up?*

Doing things will help me heal in time, I’m assured. As soon as Sim One passed, other spousal survivors quickly warned me: *Say yes to everything*. Translation: *Don’t isolate . . . because I did that and it made things SO much worse.*

They’re right. I sense it. I *smell* it. I sprawl across this sudden raft. Mid-ocean. No compass, of course.

“Life goes on” doesn’t come with a compass.

## CHAPTER 78

# What if?

Because . . . what if you don't *feel* like healing? What if *healing* is just some weird form of "get over it" propaganda? Sure, life goes on. What else have you got to sell me?

Households are different.

What if I can afford to *not* care all that much about healing or any easily foreseeable future? I've put in four decades of professional grind-stoning, after all. Enough? More than enough, by some undemanding measure?

I'm working with a US nonprofit that dates back to 1760. The .org built its latest, state-of-the-art facility in 1907. The average lifespan, at best, back then: fifty years. Now? The 2024 average age span in the same neighborhoods is more than eighty years.

What if.

What if your popcorn heart hurries forward: *NO! I'm done. Great-enough career. Did my work above average; a thick file of unsolicited testimonials and data assures me. Always voted (once on LSD, against*

*Richard Nixon). Now my constant wife has died. And I have no hobbies. Losing interest rapidly.*

What if you can afford financially to follow *that* heart . . . and nothing bad is likely to happen?

What if, emotionally, for *you*, #2 of the 7 stages—denial—is enough? What if denial is plenty, actually?

It's been six months since Sim One's death. I haven't changed one paper in her office.

How do I still have Simone without still having her? Do I leave her clothes and jewelry and office and art and postings untouched? Her computer? Her phone? Her messages? Untouched; afraid to touch. Is this it: a state of suspended animation? Or is it daily memory? I think about her all the time. She's in front of me all the time, in this house that's on the inside settling into a museum. Spelled "mausoleum."

Does that make me a fool (I hope so), a weakling (welcome), a mourner (definitely), a caretaker (willing), a museum director (probably)? Her prescriptions sit there, remedies without a cause. All her makeup remains in place for her return.

My grief counselor ruled today: That's OK. If it comforts me to surround myself with Sim One, that's OK. "Maybe someday you'll bag it. There's no rush."

Of course, being utterly stupid was never a real choice. Your brain is what it is. Certain behaviors insult it. *Get your shit together; don't embarrass me.* That's my insulted brain speaking up for itself.

*But brain:* What if I don't want to see with new eyes? What if I only want to see with the same-old, same-old eyes, eyes shared for thirty-seven years with my irreplaceable Sim One?

*Well, sonny, there's no pot of gold at the end of that rainbow.* I can hear my Irish forebears now. They weren't cruel. They *were* frequently disappointed. They'd say: *Tom, this horrible movie doesn't wind in reverse. As you well know.*

Simone won't magically reappear at my side.

Nor again will I find beneath our sheets her odd legs. (She had dimples in her calves instead of her cheeks!) Nor again will I be kicked

by her cold and crooked toes (I wish). Nor again will she rise to pee in the middle of the night. I'd listen. In the dark: thump, thump, thump, thump, thump. Her heels on hardwood first, then two final steps across a madcap linoleum she'd chosen for our cramped en-suite bathroom.

She'll never ask me again to check my calendar, to see when we can carve out time for France. *That loss hurts.*

She won't worry about far too many things she could never, ever control anyway . . . things including her "it's bad" diagnosis.

## CHAPTER 79

# Salamander milk

Simone and I liked to hike . . . and talk and talk and talk. Now she's SIAB (Simone in a Box), her ashes in a pack on my back. The talking's a little one-sided sometimes.

*Where are we going today, my love?*

It was a good hike, with a university biologist lecturing. We saw four different kinds of salamanders, two different toads, and three different frogs (no snakes or turtles) . . . heard about their lives . . . heard about their struggles . . . and learned again that LIFE is HUGE and ALL around and that my grieving can be selfish, because it's all about MY pain. MY loss. Which is life. Which is everywhere . . .

Jim, an old friend, walked with me. He'd known Simone well. She'd mentored him when he was new to fundraising.

Jim was devout. He prayed more often than he peed. One son had become a priest, maybe an archbishop someday.

About a mile in, he asked sincerely, "How's it going?"

"Tell me a joke," I replied. "See if I laugh."

He didn't have one. Yet I laughed a dozen times on this two-hour

muddy walk . . . at what people said, the anecdotes passed around, at what the biologist said and showed. What could be more laughable than this? Our tender, guiding scientist milked out salamander toxins for our viewing pleasure.

We live on Planet Wonder.

We live on Planet Irony.

We live on Planet Pain.

When we're lucky, we live on Planet Occasional Laughter . . . when we can accept it.

There was this guy I recall who claimed he cured his cancer with comedy. I don't know if he's still alive.

One thing grief teaches you: self-absorption. The world becomes about you alone, until it isn't—as maybe you *just maybe* emerge, you hope, with lots of help (thank you *all* . . . again).

It's a big planet to spin atop just one person's pain.

## CHAPTER 80

# Stuff Sim One and I no longer do together? Holiday cards

Married for thirty-seven years. You already know *that* . . . but did you know *this*?

Over those decades, Simone and I annually made and sent non-denominational holiday cards.

It was our seasonal household hobby. A shared voice. A yearly outreach to our world: 150 to 200 cards out the door, depending on the year and a private census. For me, also a bristling chore I could easily fuck up if I weren't paying attention to my calendar. I was in charge of production. Simone was in charge of approving images and messages. Our shared art form. My presentation to her of images and ideas took days of consideration: "Mmmm, not that; that shot could have been better; think around the corner next time."

I'd show Sim One my top thirty picks from our annual photo roundup flea market. Her decisions took just minutes. Mostly her thumbs-down, a few thumbs-up for the Final Four, Five, or Six cards this address would emit. Some were right for family and friends (let

the Snark Marching Band pass through these groaning doors). Some were right for clients (no Snark Marching Band). Some were right for being inoffensive to eight billion other humans on earth: just saying “Hi!” and “We love you, too!”

The golden rule for our family cards: Avoid any reference to Christian religion. No Santa shit, no Christmas trees, no miraculous Mary was a virgin (my introduction to sex education in the Catholic Church), no Christ-child references like three wise men or some big star in the sky. Plus, Chanukah was in the neighborhood (many family and friends there). And Kwanzaa (founded 1966) hovered.

Since year-end cards were a “bound to offend someone” minefield, we stuck to our bland standards: photos from France (often of graffiti, an ancient art form); of Simone and her new glasses; of us on the road; with assorted goofy stuff; all bearing inoffensive sentiments like “Merrily Ever After. . . .”

We used that sentiment repeatedly, hoping it would piss off the fewest.

We hand addressed the cards while watching movies. Our holiday hope? That a card from our house to your house would momentarily light up someone’s mailbox (light it up, not blow it up).

Maybe one in twenty worked as holiday fireworks?

Didn’t matter.

These were Simone and Tom celebrations of life. Whatever holiday you loved, honored, respected, felt nostalgia for, bought for, cooked for, endured, feared, despised, or simply knew . . . Simone and I hoped to drop a thoughtful shiny penny into your holiday piggy bank.

To say *hi*.

To say *we see you*.

To say *we hug you so much*.

To say *good luck*—since who doesn’t need that?

—

*About those annual cards . . .*

Sim One didn’t make it to our wedding anniversary. My beloved died

on May 2. Three nights before, she'd leapt screaming from our bed, speared through her skull by a massive stroke. Later that dawn, her scans showed the damage. Her brain was mashed potatoes. Left behind: a loose cluster of functioning organs.

No real Simone.

Re: cards. I suppose it's up to me now, as the last one here at our rural address, to create a new holiday card.

No idea what that would be.

It was a slow or hurried *team* project for decades. Not in the mood.

Shout from left field? *Give it a try, as a pastime?*

No idea.

Leave *me* alone.

Leave *us* alone.

We'll come back.

## CHAPTER 81

# Grief and cheese

Grief has a pace you won't believe.

And your grief will be different from everyone else's. What unpredictable, zero-benchmarks "fun"!

Me? My grief? Goes through stages.

I haven't showered or shaved or eaten anything but quick-boil flavored noodles for a week, layered with a few slices of apple and some substandard cheese sold at premium prices (I blame Wisconsin).

On the topic of cheese for the grieving?

Dear US supermarkets: Please know, if any of your customers have shopped the outdoor markets of France . . . then *your* offerings of so-called French cheese are a lame, disappointing joke.

What's wrong with French supermarket cheese in America?

The Atlantic intervened.

And rules that turn all cheese into dust.

Where are the cows and sheep? The smells? Where are the farmers up before dawn, every day, year after year, for generations hanging on?

Where is the intense craft? Where is the pride, the terroir, the land, the slope, the muscles, the teats and children, the taste?

What is cheese anyway?

Cheese is how farmers store excess milk so it doesn't sour or rot.

That's what you're eating au gratin.

Macaroni and cheese?

Appreciate the millennia that went into your next gulped, dripping, savory forkful.

## CHAPTER 82

# 167 days on: Burn the condolence cards!

It's time for ritual.

Tonight, we're burning the condolence cards.

I feel absolutely right about sending these embracing condolences up in flames . . . to thank their warm! loving! senders! . . . to warm my palms over their kind thoughts . . . and in personal passage, too.

Our longtime friend Alene agrees. And she has just the spot: an outdoor firepit at her home and top-rated Superhost Airbnb, in Union Pier, Michigan. A few yards from a frequented, soothing railroad track; long freight trains; and shorter commuter trains. Surrounded by old pines and new fairy magic.

We'll do something a bit Viking, mostly Buddhist.

Start a good blaze. Read passages and handwritten notes. Smoke sends the messages skyward, where Sim One might, with luck, inhale them. I see her lounging beside her beyond-admirable mom and dad in existentialist heaven.

"Who knew?!?" They elbow each other. Who knew there was a

heaven where all good existentialists go to relax and share some laughs after a lifetime of dread and anxiety about the meaninglessness of life? Who knew?

I do.

Being a good existentialist is exhausting. Those who perform at that high level—like Simone did, like her parents did, like her siblings and their offspring now do—they deserve quite a bit of heaven. If that means pickleball and cocktails without hangovers: yes. Good.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

—

Five months after her death, pretty much all those condolence cards are here with me in my luggage as I make my way to Michigan, Sim One's birth state; small plane, direct flight, PVD to Detroit, my first flight in a year and a half.

Flying is odd again, familiar yet strange. Prepandemic, every few weeks, adding my lousy bit to global greenhouse gas emissions, I'd board an aircraft, jetting off to speak in front of fundraisers somewhere on earth. I had a "go bag." I could pack in twenty minutes.

At my favorite departure airport, what I most loved was the shoeshine I got from Other Tom. I was Tom. He was Tom. He'd bring my black Australian slip-on half boots to a starry luster. See your face in them? You could see the *future* in them.

Other Tom had a bachelor's degree; he'd graduated from the University of Pittsburgh. He was a small businessman with plans for expansion; the airport was just part of his empire. He'd learned the ins and outs of the shoe-shining trade from his mother-in-law, who'd raised her kids on a good income. He made a well-above-average middle-class living.

Other Tom was also an extreme progressive who listened to radio news all day. The person who shined my shoes was a well-groomed gym rat; he loved his wife; he cared about "our" (the world's) shared future. His secret sauce? Every politician who had the time would climb one of Other Tom's throne chairs. Where they'd get a fresh, fine, deep glow on their feet . . . and look great for the cameras in DC!

But, as he rubbed dye into the dead skins that cased their feet, then edged their soles from street gray back to black or brown, sprayed mist to open the pores, and slapped the chamois . . . then Other Tom would also grill his pro-pol customers re: their policies.

When I'd show up, we'd talk about what he'd learned from those political shoeshines. I learned more about the day-to-day maneuvering of Washington politics from Other Tom's shoeshines than I did from national news.

So, of course, I overtipped him. In thanks, he'd ring his bell loudly, telling the rest of the crowd, right next to the Starbucks franchise. I loved the sound of that bell.

Today, though, on my way to the gate, Other Tom was no longer there. His shoeshine thrones were gone, replaced by dusty carpet depressions. Even Starbucks was gone; I didn't think a Starbucks *could* disappear. *Fuck! Shit! Piss! Miss you, Other Tom!* For me, your semi-angry, semi-disgusted, reasonably optimistic political shoeshine was the best part of flying out of my local, occasionally award-winning airport: PVD, T. F. Green, the airport of next resort for travelers fed up with Boston Logan and preposterous traffic.

I wander the concourse to my gate. Half the stores are shuttered.

—

Simone was a creature of self-doubt when I met her. She'd come to Rhode Island following a piece-of-shit man who insisted you call him Robert, not Bob. He made her feel traumatically inadequate: as a mind, as a desirable creature, as a competent individual, as worthy.

So that became my secret marriage vow, to tell Sim One many times a day, "You are amazing. You don't always believe that. You don't always see that. Or feel it. Or really know how much you've mattered to others. How you've banged the future. Thanks to Bob the Asshole, who dipped his forgettable wick for a few regrettable months, you don't see yourself clearly anymore.

"But I do. And you, my dear, my wonder, my blessing, my celestial, existential gift . . . you are amazing. To me and to so many others. Every day. Infinitely. There's always more of you to give. You, Simone,

are amazing . . . of mind and heart and spirit: to me and to a world lucky enough to find you.”

And now, Sim One, if you're breathing this smoke, if you hear what these condolence cards say, you know that you *were* and *are* amazing. For a fact. You were a formidable pebble . . . not just in a pond but in seas and across oceans . . . an uncomfortable pebble, too, in the boots of some conservatives, bless their hearts.

## CHAPTER 83

# Gardening

In an email from Patti, in Anchorage; longtime friend, intense Francophile; she'd just lost her husband, Marshall: Cerebral hemorrhage described to me by the doctors as devastating and unsurvivable. It happened on Tuesday and he died on Thursday. He never regained consciousness. It's been brutal. I am wrecked. More later. . . .

To answer your question, Patti, yes . . . gardens soothe my soul. Like dirt under my nails. Dirt is better than any pill. It (sometimes) even brings me peace, Patti. I hope your garden works as well for you.

Nephew Dave had this wise thing to say: "Even weeding can be meditation." With Simone's passing, I'd asked him—begged him—for insight. A molecule of insight. Which he delivered.

—

Once recently, when she hadn't instantly found me, Simone had

panicked, yelling from the front door. "Tom! Tom!" I heard her, as I was coming back from the mailbox, five hundred feet away.

I don't know what she'd imagined. Heart attack? The biting Allegheny mound ants infesting our land had carried me off? An unwelcome demise.

Anyway, after that, we agreed on a new household policy re: me, re: her peace of mind: "If you're going outside, let me know, OK?"

—

Our seasonal outdoor routine was this: While Sim One tanned and read, I lightly gardened, orbiting her chaise, within sight and sound. She was barely draped.

As I type now, the wild-blackberry patch in our front yard is a few weeks still from ripening. This year's fruit will be abundant. The vines are as sturdy as dinosaur bones. Come ye birds . . . and feast!!!

More to my emotional point, this July's harvest will be the first without Simone's eager gullet on hand.

What is lost when a willing tongue departs?

She sunbathed and read business books and romance novels, half-naked. (We live in the country, no neighbors in sight. Wildlife takes naked as a given, of course. And Sim One was always a doyenne of immodesty: Clothes were fun, not a requirement.)

When she was alive, I'd pick the sweetest, most bursting fruits. Place each on her outstretched, ready, demanding tongue. My fingertips. Placing blackberries one by one. On her pink tongue.

—

Patti: You're the first to know my decision. As I clipped some hedge this morning, I realized that I will never willingly leave this house. This is the "we" house. Simone and I built it together.

We built it around home offices, the first year she became a consultant. We enjoyed it together (including temporary power

outages and other mechanical catastrophes) for more than three decades.

Simone had her massive stroke in our bedroom. A few minutes later, she lapsed from this world on our kitchen floor, atop linoleum she'd chosen because it was bizarrely beautiful.

It would be a blessing if the place burned to the ground, something scraped off by heavy equipment: files, memories, art, attempts. I think about that; not sure she'd agree: Just start fresh on this land, punching back through colonial dairy farmland; back through ten thousand years of First Nations working the seasons; back through an age of ice a mile thick. The eventual melt left behind a glacial erratic, a head-high granite boulder carried from somewhere else, now visible from our kitchen.

I'm not going to burn it down.

I hope to live in this—our—sacred household mausoleum until I die. Rising from my clothing soon: small moths, each with a single thought . . . as I peck away upstairs at any last, lingering duties for Joyaux/Ahern University . . . comprising books of fading value.

Then, with luck, when the final accounting's done, if maybe I've helped more people than I've harmed in a lifetime, I can join Sim One in existentialist heaven . . . on a cloud of laughter, ease, plus reasonable worry and "what are you going to do about it" . . . a firm cloud, something you can stand on, with an open bar; a firm cloud based on my family and hers, where suffering and joy are both valid passports.

Of course: That's a Hail Mary pass on the heaven thing, Patti . . . but what the heck. Try, right?

~ tom

## CHAPTER 84

# When giving 20 percent is all you have

True confession: Six months in, my Life Reinvention Business still needs work—though some days I’m happy enough.

Yes, sure, in a higher-functioning lifestyle (assuming you’re not a club musician or second-shift worker), you *really* need to get out of bed before 11:00 a.m. (*Or do you?* I wonder at least once a week.)

You also need to show up at your appointments, of course. (Or you *can* reschedule.) And you probably need to eat something for breakfast every day or so. (Emptying your first glass of wine by noon remains a common work-around, though; think of it as a fruit drink—grapes are involved.)

I do believe I am stabilizing six months in.

I think.

Dr. Steve thinks so, too, given the evidence I haul in weekly for his review and insights. Dr. Steve is my grief counselor “until morale improves.” He’s earned strong testimonials online. He publishes via his website a succinct monthly musing worth reading if your marriage is about to commence . . . or is troubled, or you need a laugh, or you

own a smartphone. He takes cash, checks, or PayPal. He doesn't take insurance.

Here's a sign of personal progress: I now show up probably 20 percent of the time for invites I've said yes to.

And that 20 percent is a formidable, character-affirming improvement!

*Improvement?* I knew you'd press for details. Well, there was this failure to finish. Two months after our town's volunteer ambulance corps gurneyed Simone out the door, I confidently and with pleasure bought a plane ticket for DC. The plan? To shovel myself into the laps of dear old friends, for a few days of reminiscing. This would be my grief condo: warm companions Sim One and I had loved for decades. She'd bicker with Steve over politics. He was left of center. She was left of Steve. It was play.

I thought: *This visit will break some spell.*

Yet, the day of the flight, when it came to driving to the airport? I fizzled. I balked. I could not bring myself to go . . . to see the kindest people I know, in one of the more interesting places on earth. Instead, I started climbing inside a box of dry rosé, incinerating a thousand dollars in nonrefundable fares.

Six months later I would have boarded the plane. How do I know? Because at six months out, I *did* board a plane to meet the very same people. You're ready when you're ready.

## CHAPTER 85

# Back at you, Sim One

It was buried in a phone call from Sarah in Chevy Chase: a grief-progress check-in. A welcomed call . . . though these things tended to get cut short by rising tears and snorting on my end and a hasty conclusion: “I’ve got to go now.”

At one point in her call, Sarah confided, “She absolutely adored you.”

Which was a relief to hear from a reliable source. Simone and Sarah talked about everything, the rough and the smooth . . . especially their partners.

And I absolutely adore you, Simone.

## CHAPTER 86

# The great truth

Stage #2 on the grief list? Denial.

Denial (#2) became acceptance (#7) pretty quick, I have to say. Or confess. Or pretend to ignore. *Emotions, you swill bucket . . .*

Stages are not decisions. Stages are not something precise in your hands. “Life goes on” is not a cliché. It is that great serpent truth it pretends not to be. And it’s brutal. What’s left in your hands as the sun sets? As noon sets? As 10:00 a.m. sets?

Please, everyone: I’m done with this day. Let me sleep.

D., a cherished, never-forgotten friend of Simone’s from the good old days in East Lansing, Michigan, sent this poem:

### SHE IS GONE

You can shed tears that she is gone  
OR you can smile because she has lived.

You can close your eyes and pray that she will  
 come back  
 OR you can open your eyes and see all that she  
 has left.  
 Your heart can be empty because you can't see her  
 OR you can be full of the love that you shared.  
 You can turn your back on tomorrow and live  
 yesterday  
 OR you can be happy for tomorrow because of  
 yesterday.  
 You can remember her and only that she is gone  
 OR you can cherish her memory and let it live on.  
 You can cry and close your mind, be empty and  
 turn your back  
 OR you can do what she would want: smile, open  
 your eyes, love and go on.

Close enough.

Yes and no. Wrong incantation: *Please let me black out right now*, any way I can. Please do not confront me with my beloved now gone . . . but here I am, awake. Dearly departed? *Fuck off, memories*, you have to babble.

Sim One's death doesn't begin to fill my coloring book. I would kill anything you put in front of me right now to bring her back, if that were a sure thing (*there's* the doubt). I would start a universal religion to bring Sim One back (*there's more* doubt). I would admit there is nothing I can do to bring her back . . . except the one thing I can do, and no one can stop me, which is write.

That was enough for her—that I write, regardless. So I'm writing.  
 I write. Hoping someone reads.  
 One reader is enough.

A parasitic virus is the most common organism on earth. A planktonic bacterium is also abundant. But tailed phages win the race. Humans?

At which ticket window should we register, Sim One?

Humans are lumps of here today, gone tomorrow. But they have

something special sometimes, a written record of what they did between birth and death—what John Haydon called The Dash.

Attend to your Dash.

## CHAPTER 87

# Stuff we no longer do together

“Honey, I’m home!” *That* cliché, shouted on entry.

We lived an idyll for decades.

In 1988, we bought a few acres cut from a dairy farm and had a house built in rural Rhode Island. The contractor’s original floor plan anticipated a couple of kids. Those bedrooms became our offices, and just before Christmas, we moved in. We lit a first log blaze in our new hearth. On the mantel we tacked up Santa’s stockings: an old one from her childhood embroidered *Simone*; a new one (thank you, Nini!) embroidered *Tom*. We weren’t religious. But clearly we were self-centered, tradition bound, and sentimental. I don’t recall if we had a Christmas tree that first year; we collected ornaments, though, in anticipation of the day. . . .

About a decade later, in 1999, we purchased a second home in Southern France. As Simone told the story, she gave me quiet (no close neighbors; cows on one side of our land, sheep on the other). And I gave her France. We were content in our places and spaces and travels. All those years, mortality looked exactly like immortality to us.



The hardest part of outings without Simone is the ride back from anywhere . . . to an empty house, to a couch bought small on purpose, so she and I could sit and snuggle, hip by hip, stealing the throw, restacking pillows, to read and watch TV together . . .

. . . to climb a set of dry stairs worn to bowls by thirty-four years of our footsteps; headed off on global journeys (the time we forgot the keys to the house in France, the time I forgot my credit cards, the time she forgot her passport; all discovered within miles of home); sometimes just doing laundry . . .

. . . climbing to our bedroom decorated with stuff Sim One and I had collected over the decades as we traveled from conference to conference, place to place, hike to hike, pleasure to pleasure, surprise to surprise. Stuff from an exhibit of young British Columbian artists. A banner from an art school in pre-Katrina New Orleans. Day of the Dead stuff from a chockablock, one-of-a-kind Tucson store (now extinct). Santons from France: pocket-sized (i.e., concealable) figurines invented in Marseille during the French Revolution to keep Christian idolatry alive.

We purchased each keepsake in tandem: "I like it. What do you think? Should we give it a home?"

Or hustling back downstairs, to our shadowed dining room, looking out on a land of deer, bobcats, squirrels, wild turkeys; a museum-quality stone wall from the dairy-farm days; and, lately, a pretty good garage band practicing a few acres away.

Masks circle the walls of our small dining room (comfortably seats six, three couples; happy family dining; easy access to the kitchen). The masks are extra guests. They wear expressions. They talk about other things. Unusual things. Dragged home with respect from Anchorage, Calgary, Paris, a street fair in Southern France, Tucson, Santa Fe. They honor us.

It's a small mask-wrapped dining room, where now no one much eats except the cleaners who come every two weeks to remove the dust; they're friends now. I no longer cook. Sim One is dead. Since the pandemic. Sim One is dead. Guests have become very few and very far between.

## CHAPTER 88

# New Year's resolutions

*Today.* Last day of 2021, morning.

The landline rings, not the cell. Name display: someone from Sim One's young-adult years in East Lansing, maybe even before, when she was an army bride in Kansas.

Yes, Simone was an army bride. In Kansas. During the Vietnam War. Against the war, living in a trailer near the base.

The basics I knew: Simone helped D.'s husband, Steve, put together the crib for daughter Courtney, D.'s firstborn, and so a lifelong bond formed! Most years, sure, it was just an exchange of cards. But each exchange was flush with love. Simone loved to tell stories from her days back then.

*Today.* D. called this morning because she'd just received the 2021 Simone memorial holiday card. Received in shock: On the back of the card (*collect 'em all—there are four versions*) is an obituary written by an Australian intimate who knew Sim One well. The obit points out that she had no interest in board games . . . which is oddly the exact opposite of her next sister, Nicole.

The thing is? Simone died May 2, 2021, seven months ago. D. was calling this morning to console me.

Twenty minutes into our call, she revealed that her husband, Steve the crib maker, had himself died just a few weeks ago. Of pneumonia. After a fall down the stairs. That she herself was a new widow, a fresh member of “the club no one wants to join.”

Yet . . . that was just the beginning of D.’s extraordinary tale.

—

From Andrée, Simone’s little sis:

Good story! And I know SimOney appreciated all you did and when you did it—even when schedules were misaligned. (She told me herself and she always referred to you as “her Tommy” which maybe you are aware of?)

For those who didn’t see the card I sent Toma—it read, “I know we’re all reaching high with new year’s resolutions, but first let’s just try to keep the microwave clean.” Ha hah hah!! I wrote in the card that Fred reheats his coffee in the microwave and the microwave always smells like burned coffee—ugh!

So Happy New Year to everyone and here’s hoping we can all keep our microwaves clean this year! That may be all we can ask for in year three of the pandemic. Shit!

I replied . . .

OK: 1st, Andrée, I have to thank you for your latest card. Whenever I think, “you know, you really should take up yoga again or meditation or use that BowFlex or hike,” a new card from you arrives . . . and I relax, drink some chardonnay, chill; burned some brush two days ago during a blizzard. . . .

You asked about my microwave. It does not smell. Because I do NOT reheat coffee there: I drink coffee old and cold, with pleasure. If it's made right in the first place, even if it isn't, well, there's always caffeine. . . .

However, microwave usage WAS a bone of contention with Sim One and me in recent years. She got up early. I got up later. Misaligned schedules. I'd work post-5 PM and wander down around 7 to heat something up for din-din. Then I'd work a bit more maybe. Forget about what I'd stuck in the mikey. Go to bed. She'd be reading. Watching TV. I'd apply the thumper to her seized-up neck. Rub her head until my arm drooped. And she'd drifted into gauzy-snores-ville; dreamland.

And next morning, there it would be in the microwave: my previous night's dinner, a forgotten pile of cold food scraps. Simone loved to discover that!!!

I wouldn't say Simone was a fan of my flaws. She was a curator. And she expressed herself well. So, especially after her first stroke-lette, I trimmed back working off-kilter hours and began hanging with her earlier in the day, to realign our schedules/lives. Imperfectly; no badges earned; trying, I hope I hope I hope times daily infinity.

Thanks for asking, BTW.

## CHAPTER 89

# Sad by the bowl? Breakfast cereal

Simone's body ran cold. Mine ran hot.

Opposing temps made for an equitable household . . . mostly.  
Not so mostly? She'd only eat certain things.

Seafood? I'm agnostic. She was against. Wouldn't touch the stuff.

I can do sushi. *Hard NO!* for Simone.

I adore oysters, as reasonable people do. Easy protein, widely available in coastal waters. They've been cultivated since Roman times and were once "a poor man's food" in New York City. And they do in fact trigger higher levels of sex hormones, real science has found (now you know). Plus, oysters are an "excellent source" of zinc, iron, calcium, selenium, and a couple of vitamins. A happy memory from my early thirties was gorging on oysters with strangers in some bare-bones neighborhood bar in New Orleans, washed down with local draft beer. I don't exactly remember what happened next. But I bet it was memorable, or staggering, anyway. I can still taste the brine. It was November; the Gulf water was especially salty.

Sim One wouldn't eat anything "that carried its home on its back" (her words). Shellfish were out. Crustaceans were out. That meant that when we traveled together, we'd sometimes end up grumpy, hungry, engaged in a low-intensity fight, simply because we couldn't agree on where to plant our forks.

Yes, indeed, I am profoundly stimulated by starred Michelin restaurants. Huzzah! In France! (Thank you, Fab and Jean-Claude!)

I've experienced with pleasure and patience three stars, two stars, one star, and really good wannabes . . . and I can recall almost every plate, every gesture, every route, every plotzed ride home (Simone would drive, since she didn't drink). I recall Jean-Claude vomiting a three-star meal into our kitchen sink as soon as we returned to our semi-fifteenth-century home. A bravo of sorts, J-C! Really. Constellations are stars vomited into myth.

My point? I'm happy to grab a bite anywhere. My default palate has low-to-no standards. In addition to three-star restaurants, I enjoy greasy spoons, diners, and fast food. And I thrill to snacks. That doesn't make me superior. It just makes me easier to travel with.

Simone was known for one culinary quirk: She always looked at the dessert menu first. She started there . . . and probably would have ended there, if anyone else had agreed. We're talking joints, cafés, brasseries, one star, Michelin three stars.

—

For more than twenty years, as you must know by now, Simone and I enjoyed the rare privilege of having a second home in France (thank you, Alain, for suggesting it originally).

Re: feeding, though?

Well, McDonald's conquered France. The franchise is everywhere: small towns, large towns, highways. Mickey D's even introduced French children and their compliant parents to Halloween. We witnessed that bizarre advent. One Halloween around 2014, there was a knock on our front door in France. There were two ranks: kids in costume with sacks for candy; parents in costume a few feet back, *en*

*garde*, smoking cigarettes. Thank goodness we'd already purchased all this luxury candy to take back to the States for friends. We gave it all away that night.

Simone emptied her bladder into many a Mickey D toilet. She'd deign to pee there. She wouldn't eat there. So we'd make our way empty sacked back to our rental car. "You're a picky eater." *J'accuse*. My most frequent tease. She'd counter with heat, her squinting face pushed into mine: "No, I'm not!"

## I loved Sim One so much when she said that.

I had no culinary standards. Throw anything down my throat, really; my belly harbored a dumpster. Refinement was Simone's domain.

If the real answer was to throw her on her back, skirts umbrellaed, pound away up the groomed middle, she'd be smiling! (Wait. I think I just confused eating with fucking.)

Sim One was the right kind of picky eater. She'd learned to discern *this* from *that* as a child in France, confronted by every edible known to survival. Not eating certain things was her way of saying *this is who I am . . .* while also saying at the same time *I'm certainly not that; please, no*. At McDonald's, Mickey D's, refusing . . . that was Simone at her French best.

—

For no reason I knew, flake breakfast cereals appalled her.

Couldn't stand them. Made scrunchy faces at the mere mention of flakes. You could shake a box of that flake shit: *They're coming for you!* And she'd run. Given that Michigan, her home state, pioneered flake breakfasts, you'd think maybe she'd be more accepting. Yuck, no!

Instead, she chose tightly woven little biscuits from Kashi as her breakfast go-to, swamped in nondairy milk (prone to tummy aches, she believed she was lactose intolerant). She worshipped cinnamon as a god, as a spice that could remedy injustice and more; so in her

end-times, she exclusively favored Kashi Cinnamon Harvest. If the grocery was out of the stuff, she'd pretend a five-second tantrum.

—

That was her favorite breakfast cereal? I'll have a bowl of it. Goes down like soft gravel. But still.

I tried the stuff, Kashi Cinnamon Harvest: half afraid, half in tribute.

Threw in blueberries. Gulped it down. Consumed the last of the last box she'd bought and shelved; dutifully recycled the cardboard, as she would want. And so, surviving spouses sometimes survive . . . barely: day by day, bowl by breakfast bowl of your loved one's favorite food, whatever you can stand now, right now; whatever you can attempt; whatever you can bear to recall, knowing here come tears again. We, the rainforest.

Wash your spoon when you're done.

## CHAPTER 90

# Beditation

One good thing about sleeping alone?

When you jerk, you don't kick anyone with your ungroomed nails.

The bad thing?

Same.

Empty bed.

## CHAPTER 91

Celebrated poet and  
feminist Adrienne  
Rich wrote about the  
deeper truth of human  
relationships and “love”

An honorable human relationship—that is,  
one in which two people have the right to use  
the word “love”—is a process, delicate, violent,  
often terrifying to both. . . .

## CHAPTER 92

# A pivot toward happier

Watching *tick, tick . . . BOOM!* on repeat.

A semi-autobiographical musical. Joyous. Ripping. Sacrifice. Disappointment. Perseverance. Backdrops: the HIV/AIDS epidemic; artists just getting by in NYC in the 1990s; the lure of money . . . if you shelve your dreams. Adapted for film by Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Hamilton*), released by Netflix in November 2021.

The protagonist? Jonathan Larson from White Plains, New York. He's famous now! Larson wrote the music, the lyrics, and the book for *Rent*, loosely based on Puccini's *La Bohème*. His career received early, vital, sustaining encouragement from Stephen Sondheim.

Yet the night before *Rent's* off-Broadway premiere in 1996, Mr. Larson, age thirty-six, died unexpectedly, of an undiagnosed heart disease. Then *Rent* became one of the longest-running shows on Broadway and toured internationally.

Simone and I saw it somewhere.

Broadway? We'd go there every so often, as opportunities arose. She liked NYC way more than I did. She could be a city mouse. I was

an apprehensive country mouse. It balanced: something vs. something in our makeup and backgrounds.

Influenced by the infectious *tick, tick . . . BOOM!* soundtrack, I returned today up the loooooong drive from our mailbox, lightly singing:

*Honey, I'm home.*

*But you're not.*

*Honey, I'm home.*

*But you're gone.*

*Honey, I'm home.*

*You fill my heart every day,*

*every night, every sweet breath, every word I need!*

*Oh, yeah . . .*

Here's the subtle pivot my outdoor boots found today:

- Focus on the things we will never again do together? Get *sadder*.
- Focus on the things we did together that were special? Get *happier*.

## CHAPTER 93

### Sharing with a friend

I call Alene, a friend and a widow, on a Sunday afternoon in December, as the holidays skulk. It's been more than half a year since Sim One's death.

The original gang consisted of four couples. We'd gather together at least once a year for a weekend, usually at Alene and Jim's home in Union Pier, a resort town on Lake Michigan. A tolerant, laughing, lightly hedonistic group; great meals every day, the arts, politics, sights, walks, cats and dogs. Alene and Jim. Steve and Lee. Marilyn and Paul. Tom and Sim One.

We're now down to six survivors. Jim, the watercolorist, went to the big easel in the sky; he's painting a lot of great sunsets. Simone's securely in existentialist heaven, having done her bit so well.

As our call paddles along, I admit to Alene: "I talk to Simone aloud more and more."

Which doesn't surprise Alene. She talks to her passed Jim as well.

Why do I need Sim One's help this often, I wonder? "She was my moral compass. I was born without one." Alene rejects that. So I have another idea: "Sim One's my secular goddess." OK, that's OK.

Acceptable enough. There are several cosmologies in the juicer. Praying to Simone seems fitting.

Alene adds, "I ask Jim about all sorts of things. I cry every time."

## CHAPTER 94

# One last time: The scenic route

I drove us a lot in the final sixteen months. Not always: Sim One drove herself to meet with friends and clients . . . right up to her explosive collapse.

Driving reassured her she was OK.

However, when we DID drive together, she was the car's official DJ.

She itched to do it as soon as the car went live.

But she'd wait a bit.

Still, no more than a mile from the garage, she'd ask calmly, "Can we listen to music?" She already had a CD in her hand. A lot of Dylan. Fleetwood Mac. A classic rock tribute album, with its pinpoint, polished copies of the originals, was probably her #1 go-to. She'd play her favorite albums over and over. She'd sing along. Creak along. Pump her hands along. She was enthusiastic. She knew all the words.

In good weather, we'd ride windows down, moonroof open, as loud as the car's system would crank.

As we swanned across the landscape, she'd also say, her eyes drifting out the window: "I don't remember this at all."

We might be cruising a local road we'd traveled for years and years and years. Simone didn't sound distressed. She sounded wondering, happy, surprised, even mischievous. She enjoyed taking the long way home.

The goal was to end each scenic-route diversion with "Bat Out of Hell" by Meat Loaf. We'd pull into our garage with that song still playing and Simone screaming along.

I'd liked the tune when it was released in 1977. It's good hard, operatic rock; a complex, fuck-it song. Featuring bleakness, tolling bells, wild love, and the singer's sudden death when his racing motorcycle (a metaphor for a life of passion?) meets an unexpected curve.

In 2021, Sim One adored "Bat Out of Hell." If she were on her own in the car, she'd listen to it twenty times in a row. At full volume. At fate-changing volume. I'd hear her music coming up the driveway and rush down to greet her in the garage of the simple house we'd designed together.

"Hello, my sweet." Hello again.

the end



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2016, the *New York Times* called Tom Ahern “one of America’s most sought-after creators of fundraising messages.” In 2021, UK guru Richard Radcliffe added, “Tom Ahern is possibly the greatest nonprofit copywriter on the planet.” Tom specializes in applying the discoveries of psychology and neuroscience to the day-to-day business of attracting and retaining donors. *Sim One* was written after losing his wife and business partner, Simone, to cerebral amyloid angiopathy in 2020.