

The Son of a Stranger

One

THE MOUTH IS A weird place. Not quite inside and not quite out, not skin and not organ, but something in between: dark, wet, admitting access to an interior most people would rather not contemplate—where cancer starts, where the heart is broken, where the soul might just fail to turn up.

I encouraged my patients to floss. It was hard to do some days. They should have flossed. Flossing prevents periodontal disease and can extend life up to seven years. It's also time consuming and a general pain in the ass. That's not the dentist talking. That's the guy who comes home, four or five drinks in him, what a great evening, ha-has all around, and, the minute he takes up the floss, says to himself, What's the point? In the end, the heart stops, the cells die, the neurons go dark, bacteria consumes the pancreas, flies lay their eggs, beetles chew through tendons and ligaments, the skin turns to cottage cheese, the bones dissolve, and the teeth float away with the tide. But then someone who never flossed a day in his life would come in, the picture of inconceivable self-neglect and unnecessary pain—rotted teeth, swollen gums, a live wire of infection running from enamel to nerve—and what I called hope, what I called courage, above all what I called defiance, again rose

up in me, and I would go around the next day or two saying to all my patients, “You must floss, please floss, flossing makes all the difference.”

A dentist is only half the doctor he claims to be. That he’s also half mortician is the secret he keeps to himself. The ailing bits he tries to turn healthy again. The dead bits he just tries to make presentable. He bores a hole, clears the rot, fills the pit, and seals the hatch. He yanks the teeth, pours the mold, fits the fakes, and paints to match. Open cavities are the eye stones of skulls, and lone molars stand erect as tombstones.

We call it a practice, never a business, but successful dentistry is very much a business. I started out with a windowless two-chair clinic in Chelsea. Eventually I moved into a place off Park Avenue. I had half the ground floor of an apartment complex called the Aftergood Arms.

Park Avenue is the most civilized street in the world. Door-men still dress like it’s 1940, in caps and gloves, opening doors for old dowagers and their dogs. The awnings extend to the curb so that no one gets wet on rainy days stepping in and out of cabs, and a carpet, usually green, sometimes red, runs underfoot. With a certain cast of mind, you can almost reconstruct the horse-and-carriage days when the first of the nabob settlers were maneuvering their canes and petticoats through the Park Avenue mud. Manhattan suffers its shocks. The neighborhoods turn over. The city changes in your sleep. But Park Avenue stays Park Avenue, for better or worse—moneyed, residential, quintessentially New York.

I borrowed a lot to refurbish the new place. To pay back that money as quickly as possible, I went against the advice of the contractor, the objections of Mrs. Convoy, my own better instincts,

and the general protocol of dentists everywhere and ordered a floor plan without a private office. I installed a fifth chair in that space and then spent the next ten years killing myself tending to five chairs in five rooms while complaining about my lack of privacy and raking in tons and tons of money.

Everything was always something. It did no good to bitch about it. Some days I really held a grudge. I'd tell myself to get over myself. What could be better than a thriving practice and a management structure with me on top? My days weren't any longer than yours, except Thursdays. Some Thursdays we didn't get out of the office until ten o'clock. I almost slept okay those nights, when the pills seemed almost redundant. (First thing to go when you medicate to sleep are the dreams. Look on the bright side, I said to myself, as my dreams first started to fade. You're being spared, upon waking, the desperate need to convey to someone else the vivid images of a rich inner life.)

Everything was always something, but something—and here was the rub—could never be everything. A thriving practice couldn't be everything. A commitment to healthy patients and an afternoon mochaccino and pizza Fridays just couldn't be everything. The banjo couldn't be everything, either, unfortunately. Streaming movies directly to the TV was almost everything when first available, but soon fell off to just barely something. The Red Sox had been everything for a long time, but they disappointed me in the end. The greatest disappointment of my adult life came in 2004, when the Red Sox stole the pennant from the Yankees and won the World Series.

For two months one summer, I thought golf could be everything. For the rest of my life, I thought, I'll put all my energy into

golf, all my spare time, all my passion, and that's what I did, for two months, until I realized that I could put all my energy into golf, all my spare time, all my passion, for the rest of my life. I don't think I've ever been so depressed. The last ball I putted circled the hole, and the rimming impression it made as it dropped was that of my small life draining into the abyss.

So work, fun, and total dedication to something bigger than myself, something greater—my work, golf, the Red Sox—none could be everything, even if each, at times, filled the hour perfectly. I'm like that dreamer desperate to describe his dream when I try to explain the satisfactions of replacing a rotten tooth with a pontic so that a patient could smile again without shame. I had restored a baseline human dignity, no small thing. Pizza Fridays were no small thing. And that mochaccino was a little joy. The night in 2004 when David Ortiz homered against the Yankees to jump-start the greatest comeback in sports history made me simply happy to be alive.

I would have liked to believe in God. Now there was something that could have been everything better than anything else. By believing in God, I could succumb to ease and comfort and reassurance. Fearlessness was an option! Eternity was mine! It could all be mine: the awesome pitch of organ pipes, the musings of Anglican bishops. All I had to do was put away my doubts and believe. Whenever I was on the verge of that, I would call myself back from the brink. Keep clarity! I would cry. Hold on to yourself! For the reason the world was so pleasurable, and why I wanted to extend that pleasure through total submission to God, was my thoughts—my reasoned, stubborn, skeptical thoughts—which always unfortunately made quick work of God.

Non serviam! cried Lucifer. He didn't want to eat the faces off little babies. He just didn't want to serve. If he had served, he would have been just one more among the angels, indistinct, his name hard to recall even among the devout.

I've tried reading the Bible. I never make it past all the talk about the firmament. The firmament is the thing, on Day 1 or 2, that divides the waters from the waters. Here you have the firmament. Next to the firmament, the waters. Stay with the waters long enough, presumably you hit another stretch of firmament. I can't say for sure: at the first mention of the firmament, I start bleeding tears of terminal boredom. I grow restless. I flick ahead. It appears to go like this: firmament, superlong middle part, Jesus. You could spend half your life reading about the barren wives and the kindled wraths and all the rest of it before you got to the do-unto-others part, which as I understand it is the high-water mark. It might not be. For all I know, the high-water mark is to be found in, say, the second book of Kings. Imagine making it through the first book of Kings! They don't make it easy. I'll tell you what amazes me. I'm practically always sitting down next to somebody on the subway who's reading the Bible, who's smack in the middle of the thing, like on page one hundred and fifty thousand, and every single sentence has been underlined or highlighted. I have to think there's no way this tattooed Hispanic youth has lavished on the remaining pages of his Bible such poignant highlighting so prominently on display here in the hinterlands of 2 Chronicles. Then he'll turn the page, and sure the fuck enough: even more highlighting! In multiple colors! With notes in a friar's hand! And I don't mean to suggest he simply turned the page. Dude leaped forward three, four hundred pages to reference or cross-check or whatever, and there, glowing in ingot blocks, was the same

concentration of highlighting. I swear to God, there are still people out there devoting their entire lives to the Bible. It's either old black ladies or middle-aged black guys or Hispanic guys with neckties or white guys you're surprised are white. Thousands of hours they've been up studying and highlighting Bible passages while I've been sleeping, or watching baseball, or abusing myself carnally on a recliner. Sometimes I think I've wasted my life. Of course I've wasted my life. Did I have a choice? Of course I did—twenty years of nights with the Bible. But who is to say that, even then, my life—conscientiously devout, rigorously applied, monastically contained, and effortfully open to God's every hint and clobber—would have been more meaningful than it was, with its beery nights, bleary dawns, and Saint James and his Abstract? That was a mighty Pascal's Wager: the possibility of eternity in exchange for the limited hours of my one certain go-round.

I remember a time when I took part in some of the city's many walking tours. The entire point of a walking tour is to demonstrate how much has changed, how much is changing, and how much will have changed from some point in time before you were born to some point in time long after you're dead. Eventually the walking tours became so depressing I stopped cold and took up Spanish. But not before I learned how, as immigration patterns shifted, and one ethnic group supplanted another, houses of worship once vital to the neighborhood lost their significance. This was especially true on the Lower East Side, where a multitude of synagogues ministering to the needs of early Jewish immigrants had been retrofitted into the churches of later Christian arrivals. The architecture of the buildings could not be altered, however, nor the details of their facades. And so there are some

churches in the city where the Star of David or the relief of a candelabra or an impression of Hebrew letters sits fixed in the concrete alongside a roof-mounted crucifix and a marble statue of the Holy Mother.

Keep clarity! I cried. Remember how easily one house of worship can be transformed into an opposing house of worship, or risk your soul to changes in demographics and to man's infinite capacity for practical repurposing.

I was visiting Europe with Connie the last time I was in a church. We must have seen eight to nine hundred churches during our twelve days there. Ask her and it was more like four. Four churches in twelve days! Can you imagine? I was constantly taking off and putting on my Red Sox hat on account of some church. The church was always famous and not-to-be-missed. There was never any difference from one to the next. No matter the time of day or intake of espresso, I was overcome, when entering a church, with an attack of the yawns. Connie insisted that the yawning didn't need to be quite so vocal. She likened my yawns to the running of lawn equipment. She said she expected to turn and find wood chips shooting from my mouth. I frequently found myself reclined on a pew receiving her looks of outrage. But come on, it was just a yawn! I wasn't making crude gestures. I never suggested we party in the church. The one time, I said it would be nice to get a blow job *behind* the church, out by the dumpsters. That was obviously a joke. There weren't any dumpsters out there! We weren't at a grocery store. I have a sickness for blow jobs behind grocery stores. You can't do it very easily in Manhattan. It is most easily done in New Jersey, where it also happens to be legal. Connie took Europe far too seriously, I thought. She somberly studied the frescoes and fine print, worrying the infinite. Poets are a ponderous

bunch. (Connie's a poet.) They're hypocrites, too. They'd never step foot in a church in America, but fly them to Europe and they rush from tarmac to transept as if the real God, the God of Dante and chiaroscuro, of flying buttresses and Bach, had been awaiting their arrival for centuries. What thrall, what sabbath longing, will overcome a poet in the churches of Europe. And Connie was Jewish! On Day 3, I started calling it "Eurpoe" and didn't stop until we touched down in Newark. Being in Jersey, I suggested we stop for groceries before heading back into the city, but Connie had had enough of me by then. To me, a church is simply a place to be bored in. I say this with all due respect to believers. I'm not immune to the allure of their fellowship of comforts. I, too, like to take part in sanctifications, hand-holdings, and large-hearted sing-alongs. But I would be damned, literally damned, if any God I might believe in wanted me to go along with the given prescriptions. He would laugh at the wafer. He would howl at the wine. He would probably feel an exquisite pity toward those mortal approximations. Oh, what do I know? Only that the boredom that overtakes me inside a church is not a passive boredom. It's an active, gnawing restlessness. For some a place of final purpose and easy outpouring; for me, a dead end, the dark bus station of the soul. To enter a church is to bring to a close everything that makes entering church with praise on the lips a right reasonable thing to do.

My name is Paul O'Rourke. I live in New York City, in a Brooklyn duplex overlooking the Promenade. I'm a dentist and board-certified prosthodontist, open six days a week, with extended hours on Thursdays.

There's no better place on earth to live than New York City. It has the best museums, theaters, and nightclubs, the best variety

shows, burlesques, and live-music venues, and the very finest in world cuisine. Its wine stock alone makes of the Roman empire a sad Kansan backwater. The marvels are endless. But who has time to partake of the marvels when you're busy busting your ass to stay solvent in New York? And when not busting your ass, who has the energy? Since arriving in the city twelve years ago, a proud immigrant from Maine, I had been to a dozen art-house films, two Broadway shows, the Empire State Building, and one jazz concert memorable only for the monumental effort I expended trying to stay awake through the drum solos. I'd been to the great Metropolitan Museum, that repository of human effort mere blocks from my office, exactly zero times. I spent most of my leisure time standing outside the plate-glass windows of real-estate brokers, looking at the listings alongside other priced-out dreamers, imagining brighter views and bigger rooms that would sweeten my nightly escape from the city.

When I was dating Connie, we'd go out for a nice meal three or four times a week. A nice meal in New York might be made for you by a celebrity chef with several Michelin stars, a Rhone Valley boyhood, and/or his own TV show. The celebrity chef was not likely to be in the kitchen, which was usually peopled exclusively by Hispanics of disparate origin. Still, the menu was driven by the freshest seasonal ingredients hand-picked at farmers' markets or expedited overnight from the sea. The dining rooms were either chic and intimate with striking lighting or loud and packed with exclusive clientele. Both were impossible to get into. We managed only by remaining diligent and keeping up pressure on the phone and calling in favors and making bribes and lying. Connie once told a reservationist that she was dying of stomach cancer and had chosen that restaurant as her last meal out. We sat down at every table excited but exhausted, and we looked over each menu, with

its entrées priced with full period stops, and we ordered the things to order and drank the recommended wines. Then we paid and went home and felt wasted and dull, and in the morning we wondered where we should go next.

After Connie and I broke up, I played a little game with myself out on the streets of Manhattan. It was called Things Could Be Worse. Things could be worse, I said to myself, I could be *that* guy. Things could be worse, I said not a minute later, I could be *that* guy. Parading by everywhere were the disfigured, the destitute, the hideously ugly, the walking weeping, the self-scarred, the unappeasably pissed off. Things could be worse. Then a woman would pass by, one of thousands of New York women, coltishly long legged, impossibly high booted, always singly, or in pairs and trios, in possession of that beauty whose greatest cruelty was that it meant no harm, and as I died a little of want and agony, I said to myself, Things could be so much better.

Things Could Be Worse And Things Could Be So Much Better—that became the game, my running commentary on the streets of Manhattan, and I played it as well as the other slobs just trying to get by.

My life didn't really begin until several months before the fateful Red Sox summer of 2011. Mrs. Convoy came to me one day in January of that year and said that something strange was going on in room 3. I looked in. I vaguely recognized the patient. He was scheduled to have a tooth removed. A botched filling (not one of mine) had invaded the nerve, he'd put off the root canal I'd long ago recommended, and at last he was in great motivating pain. But he was not moaning or crying. No, he was chanting, soft and low. He had placed his hands palms up, with thumbs and middle fin-

gers touching, and was intoning something like, “Ah-rum... ah-rum...”

I sat down chairside. We shook hands, and I asked what he was doing. He had once studied to be a Tibetan monk, he told me, and though that period of his life had ended, when necessary he still applied his meditation techniques. In this case, he was preparing to have his tooth removed without the aid of anesthetic. He had worked under a guru who had mastered the art of eliminating pain.

“I have effected emptiness to the extreme,” he told me. “You just have to remember: though you lose the body, you do not die.”

His canine, in an advanced state of decay, was stained the color of weak tea but was still rooted to active nerves. No dentist in his right mind would pull a tooth without at least applying a local anesthetic. I told him that, and he finally agreed to the local. He resumed his meditative position, I juiced him with the needle, and then I went at his canine with a vigorous swaying grip. Two seconds into it he began to moan. I thought the moaning part and parcel of his effecting emptiness to the extreme, but it grew louder, filling the room, spilling out into the waiting area. I looked at Abby, my dental assistant, sitting across the patient from me, pink paper mask obscuring her features. She said nothing. I took the forceps out of my patient’s mouth and asked if everything was okay.

“Yes. Why?”

“You’re making noise.”

“Was I? I didn’t realize. I’m not actually here physically,” he said.

“You sound here physically.”

“I’ll try to be quieter,” he said. “Please continue.”

The moaning started up again almost immediately, rising to a modest howl. It was inchoate and bloody, like that of a newborn with stunted organs. I stopped. His red eyes were filmed with tears.

“You’re doing it again,” I said.

“Doing what?”

“Moaning,” I said. “Howling. Are you sure the local’s working?”

“I’m thinking three or four weeks ahead of this pain,” he said. “I’m four to six weeks removed.”

“It shouldn’t be painful at all,” I said, “with the local.”

“And it’s not, not at all,” he said. “I’ll be completely silent.”

I resumed. He stopped me almost that very second.

“Can I have the full gas, please?”

I put him under and removed the tooth and replaced it with a temporary crown. When the gas wore off, Abby and I were in with another patient. Connie came into the room and informed me that the man was ready to leave but wanted to say goodbye first.

I should have fired Connie after she and I broke up. All she did for me was write the patient’s name on a card with the date and time of the next appointment. That was all she did, eight hours a day, longer on Thursdays. That and help Mrs. Convoy with the scheduling. And some billing, she also did some billing. But I had an outside service for billing. She never did enough billing that I no longer needed the outside service. And oh, right, the phone. Eight hours, sometimes more, of filling out little cards, inputting names into the schedule, doing not enough billing to save me from paying an outside service, and answering the phone. The rest of her time she spent glued to her me-machine.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Over there,” she said.

My patient stood as I entered the waiting room.

“I just wanted to say . . . thanks! Thanks for everything. This is the last time you’ll see me. I’m off to Israel!”

He was slurring just enough that I thought he might still be feeling the effects of the gas.

“Are you sure you don’t want a few more minutes to rest up?” I asked him.

“Oh, no, I’m not going just yet. I have to take the subway first. I just wanted to say how much I’ll miss you. I’ll miss everyone here. Everyone here is so nice. That lady’s nice. She’s super nice. And she’s super hot. I mean she’s really just, like, oh, fuck me. I would fuck that lady.”

He was pointing at Connie, who was looking on, as was the rest of the waiting room.

“Okay,” I said, “you need to recuperate a little longer. Come with me.”

“Can’t!” he cried, shrugging me off. “No time!”

“Then we’ll be seeing you.”

“No, you won’t!” he said. “I told you. I’m off to Israel!”

I started moving him toward the door. Connie handed me his jacket.

“But I’m not going to Israel because I’m Jewish. That’s probably what you think, isn’t it?”

“Let’s just get you in this other sleeve here . . .”

“But you’d be wrong!”

I opened the door. He got up close and whispered to me with a sour anesthetic breath.

“I’m an Ulm,” he said. “That’s why I’m going to Israel. I’m an Ulm, and so are you!”

JOSHUA FERRIS

I patted him on the back and then gave him a little prod.

“Congratulations. Good luck.”

“Good luck to you!” he said.

Gas makes people say funny things. I didn’t think another thing of it.

Two

SIX MONTHS LATER, THE morning of Friday, the fifteenth of July 2011, began uneventfully. Cosmetic consultations and a gum graft and one hideously black tongue. “Nowhere Man” played softly four different times, or I was in four separate exam rooms while it played once. Later I caught myself humming it during a crown lengthening. Connie’s chignon slowly dried into the afternoon, filling the office with the scent of her hair. Mrs. Convoy suggested a new solution to the file overflow. Abby was silent.

You don’t have to do much to be a good dental assistant. Commit the instruments to memory and hand them off in anticipation of my needs. It’s not cardiovascular surgery. But it’s not all fun and games, either. Victims of car crashes and bar fights would come in with their mouths wrecked, and in addition to committing the instruments to memory and handing them off when I needed them, Abby had to be a steely professional when they first opened their mouths. You don’t want to be the victim of a car crash. Sure, I can get you eating and drinking again, but you’re never going back to the way it was. You’ve had your run of luck, and now it’s over. From this point forward, it’s all a compromise. From now until death it’s a matter of the best we can do.

To be honest, you can't get a damn thing done without a good dental assistant. And Abby was very good. She would even hold a patient's hand. But I thought she had management issues. If she had a complaint or a suggestion or simply wanted an afternoon off, she wouldn't come to me. She'd go to Connie or Mrs. Convoy. She said it was because she was afraid to disturb me. Afraid to disturb me? We sat across from each other all day long! She probably would have preferred someone else to sit across from, like one of those cheery dentists who love people and make winning remarks that entertain everybody—which is all I've ever wanted for myself. I wanted her to stop sitting across from me in silence, constantly judging me. Maybe she wasn't judging me. Maybe I just couldn't read her behind that pink paper mask always obscuring her features. Maybe she was simply waiting to hand off the next instrument with the professionalism I required. But you try having a dental assistant follow you around all day and sit across from you when you're not feeling witty or cheery and see if you don't feel judged.

"Are all the rooms prepped?" I asked Abby first thing when I came in that morning.

I wanted nothing more than to say good morning first thing in the morning. Saying good morning was good for morale, conveying to everyone in their turn, Isn't it something? Here we are again, wits renewed, armpits refreshed, what exciting surprises does the day hold in store? But some mornings I couldn't bring myself to do it. We were a cozy office of four; three good mornings, that's all that was ever asked of me. And yet I'd withhold my good mornings. Ignoring the poignancy of everyone's limited allotment of good mornings, I would not say good morning. Or I would in all innocence forget about our numbered opportunities to say good morning, that horrifying circumscription, and simply fail

to say it. Or I would say good morning sparingly, begrudgingly, injudiciously, or tyrannically. I would say good morning to Abby and Betsy but not to Connie. Or to Betsy but not Abby or Connie. Or to Abby in front of Betsy, and to Betsy in front of Connie, but not to Connie. What was so good about it anyway, the too-often predictable, so-called new morning? It was usually preceded by a long struggle for a short drowse that so many people call night. That was never sufficiently ceremonial to call for fresh greetings. So instead I'd say to them, "Where's the day's schedule?" If I said, "Where's the day's schedule?" I was saying that to Connie, who worked the desk. Or I'd say, "Are all the rooms prepped?" as I said that morning, the morning in question, and that would be directed at Abby. I'd say that first thing, at the start of the day, as if I expected the rooms not to be prepped, and for the rest of the day, Abby would sit across the patient from me mutely breathing inside her mask, soberly handing off the instruments, and silently judging me in the harshest of terms. Or I'd say to Betsy, "You're alone today," meaning that she would have no help from a temp hygienist, and she would reply, "Somebody's in a foul mood." And I wasn't, in fact, in a foul mood, despite coming off another futile attempt at a good night's sleep, and seeing again all too soon my same three employees from the day before. I wasn't in a foul mood until the very moment Mrs. Convoy said, "Somebody's in a foul mood," which would invariably set the course for a day spent in the blackest of moods.

But good morning! good morning to ye and thou! I'd say to all my patients, because I was the worst of the hypocrites, of all the hypocrites, the cruel and phony hypocrites, I was the very worst.

Among my patients that Friday morning was a man I'll call Contacts. Contacts was in for some cosmetic work. More patients were

coming in for cosmetic purposes than ever before. They wanted whiter smiles, straighter smiles, less gummy smiles, gum bleaching and lip repositionings, smiles whose architecture was remade tooth by tooth, millimeter by millimeter, until every bad memory from childhood had been eradicated. They wanted George Clooney's smile or Kim Kardashian's smile or that beefy knock-kneed smile of Tom Cruise's, and they brought in clippings of lesser celebrities whose smiles they hoped I could give them so that they, too, could smile like celebrities and walk the streets like celebrities and live forever and ever in the glow of celebrity. These were patients who could afford to indulge themselves, lawyers and hedge-fund managers and their spouses who had no more appetite for imperfection, and socialites who made the rounds of museum galas catching the light of every flash. And then, in contrast, there were those who, with no insurance, came in from complications from a self-pulled tooth yanked with pliers in the kitchen of a rent-controlled walk-up after putting away half a bottle of Jim Beam. They dealt with their growing toothaches not with dental exams but with aspirin, whiskey, and whatever scripts they could get from their disability docs. Some of them had to be immediately referred to the emergency room. These were the same people who were often resented in life for being closed off and hostile because they never smiled, but they never smiled not because of some personality flaw but from a lifelong embarrassment of their yellow stains, rotted grays, and dark edentulous gaps. If, after years of torment and slow savings, they came to see me before catastrophe struck, they often broke down in the chair, men and women alike, and then out it came, everything: their terrible nicknames, their broken hearts, their blown opportunities and arrested lives. All on account of some fucking teeth. There were days I considered myself singularly ill suited to my profession, which required the

daily suspension of any awareness of the long game, a whistling past the grave of every open mouth. I spent all my energy on the temporary, the stopgap, and the ad hoc, which made it hard to convince myself that a patient's biannual maintenance was anything more than a necessary delusion. But when I got to work on those chronic unsmilers, and they came back after the sutures healed and the anchors held steady to thank me for giving them their lives back—indeed for giving them any life at all—I felt good about what I did, and damn the long game to hell.

Anyway, I was bonding a new set of incisors to Contacts when he took out his me-machine and began scrolling through his contacts. It was a simple bond job, it wasn't brain surgery. Still, it required a little focus and some patient cooperation. Let me tell you something. If brain surgery could be done without anesthesia, you'd have the brain-surgery patients scrolling through their contacts, too. The array of activity people found acceptable in the chair never ceased to amaze me. Mrs. Convoy once had a patient unscrew a bottle of nail polish one-handed during a cleaning and begin to paint her nails. That provoked a passionate sermon on the deplorable state of respect in contemporary society, from which the poor girl could neither escape nor, with Mrs. Convoy's scraper in her mouth, offer any rebuttal. I asked the guy with the sudden pressing need to scroll through his contacts if he might put his phone away, which he did only after firing off a text. He got me thinking about a certain time in my life. When the Prozac stopped working and my Spanish stalled, I started going to the gym. My friend McGowan had encouraged it. Together we would lift things and put them down again. That was something that was almost everything for about a month and a half, the gym's racks of shiny weights and promises of sexual prowess, until the dismal lighting got to me and I took up indoor lacrosse. I remembered telling

McGowan how I'd been flicking through all my contacts the night before when it occurred to me that many of them couldn't be considered real friends. I decided to delete a whole bunch, even if they were people I'd known forever. It bothered McGowan that I would do that. "Those are your contacts, man," he said. "Yeah? So?" "Don't you care about your contacts?" "Why should I?" "I just don't get why you do stuff like that," he said. "I wish you wouldn't do stuff like that. It's depressing." I didn't see why it should be depressing to him. They were my contacts. He avoided me after that. Then one day I got a call out of the blue. "Hello?" I said. "Hey," replied the voice on the other end. "Who is this?" I asked, not having the number in my contacts. It turned out to be McGowan. We haven't talked since.

When I looked up from Contacts's mouth, Mrs. Convoy was standing there. Most of the time Mrs. Convoy looked like an unhappy docent. You got the impression you were about to go on a boring tour of something edifying and that she would make it as punitive as possible. Part of that impression came from her flesh-colored turtleneck, which was tucked severely into her slacks and fit tightly over her splayed AARP breasts, and part of it came from her silvered crew cut, and part of it came from her pale facial down, which stood straight up on her neck and cheeks as if trying to attract balloons. But on this occasion she was beaming at me.

"What?" I said.

"You did it, you!"

"Did what?"

"I thought you were dead set against, but you did it."

"Tell me what you're talking about, Betsy."

"The website."

"What website?"

"Our website," she said.

I swiveled away from my patient and snapped off my latex gloves. “We don’t have a website,” I said.

Turns out I was in for a surprise.

Betsy Convoy was my head hygienist and a devout Roman Catholic. If ever I was tempted to become a Christian, which I never was, but if I was, I thought I would do well to become a Roman Catholic like Mrs. Convoy. She attended Mass at Saint Joan of Arc Church in Jackson Heights where she expressed her faith with hand gestures, genuflections, recitations, liturgies, donations, confessions, lit candles, saints’ days, and several different call-and-responses. Catholics speak, like baseball players, in the coded language of gesture. Sure, the Roman Catholic Church is an abomination to man and a disgrace to God, but it comes with a highly structured Mass, several sacred pilgrimages, the oldest songs, the most impressive architecture, and a whole bunch of *things* to do whenever you enter the church. Taken all together, they make you one with your brother.

Say I would come in from outside and go straight to the sink to wash my hands. It didn’t matter which sink, Mrs. Convoy would find me. She’d sniff at me like a bloodhound and then she’d say, “What exactly have you been doing?” I’d tell her, and she’d say, “Why do you feel the need to lie to me?” I’d tell her, and she’d say, “Scrutiny does not kill people. Smoking kills people. What kind of example do you think you’re setting for your patients by sneaking off to smoke cigarettes?” I’d tell her, she’d say, “They do not need a reminder of ‘the futility of it all’ from their dental professional. When did you take up smoking again?” I’d tell her, she’d say, “Oh, for heaven’s sake. Then why did you tell everyone you quit?” I’d tell her, she’d say, “I do not see how the occasional show of concern is ‘utterly strangulating.’ I would like to see you live up

to your potential, that is all. Don't you wish you had more self-control?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Of course I will not join you. What are you doing? Do not light that cigarette!" I'd put the cigarettes away with an offhand remark, she'd say, "How am I a trial? I am not the trial here. The trial is between you and your addictions. Do you want to ruin your lungs and die a young man?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "You are not already in hell. Shall I tell you what hell will be like?" I'd answer, she'd say, "Yes, as a matter of fact, any conversation can turn into a discussion on the salvation of the soul. It's a pity more don't. What are you doing at that window?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "We are on the ground floor. You would hardly manage to sprain an ankle."

I'd come out of the bathroom and she'd be standing right there. "I've been looking all over for you," she'd say. "Where have you been?" I'd tell her the obvious, she'd say, "Why must you call it the Thunderbox?" I'd tell her, adding a few details, and she'd grow severe, she'd say, "Please do not refer to what you do in the bathroom as 'making the pope's fountain.' I know the pope is just a joke to you. I know the Catholic Church is nothing but a whetting stone for your wit. But I happen to hold the church in the highest regard, and though you can't understand that, if you had any respect for me you would mind what you say about the pope." I'd answer with an apology, but she'd ignore me. "Sometimes I honestly wonder whether you care about anyone's feelings but your own." And she'd walk away. I'd never learn why she was standing outside the Thunderbox unless it was to bring grief to us both.

Later, after letting it fester, she'd say, "Well, tell me. Do you care about anyone else's feelings? Do you have any respect for me at all?"

Of course I had respect for her. Let's say the day's scheduling worked out as planned and we had five cleanings to perform all at

once. To minimize wait times, and to maximize my turnaround, I would normally require three if not four dedicated hygienists. But I had Betsy Convoy. Betsy Convoy, with the help of one or two rotating temps, could manage all five chairs. She could X-ray, chart, scale, and polish, tutor each patient in preventive treatment, leave detailed notes for my follow-up exams, and still manage to supervise the staff and oversee the scheduling. Most dentists won't believe that. But then most dentists have never had a truly great hygienist like Mrs. Convoy.

"Well?" she'd say. "Why aren't you answering me?"

But most days I would have cheerfully stood by and watched her die. Better her dead, I thought, than being around. I would never have found anyone to replace her, but Betsy Convoy being around, there was the true Calvary. Poor Betsy. She was responsible for our efficiency, our professionalism, and a good portion of our monthly billing. Her internalization of Catholicism and its institutional disappointments suited a dental office perfectly, where guilt was often our last resort for motivating the masses. Handing out a toothbrush to a charity patient, she'd tell that person, "Be faithful in small things." Who does that? But then, out of nowhere, I'd imagine her getting fucked doggy-style by a muscular African on one of the dental chairs.

"Of course I respect you, Betsy. We couldn't go on without you."

Later, at the bar, I'd be the last one to leave, she'd be second to last. She'd say, "Don't you think you've had enough?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "How are you going to get home?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Connie's gone, dear. She left two hours ago. Come on, let's get you home." She'd put me in a cab, she'd say, "Can you handle it from here?" I'd tell her, she'd say, to the cabbie she'd say, "He lives in Brooklyn," and then I don't know what.

We'd take a one-off trip somewhere far-flung. I'd fight and fight and say no fucking way, but somehow she'd get me on that plane. We once flew from JFK to New Delhi and from New Delhi to Biju Patnaik and from there took a train fifty kilometers inland, where we walked through the cesspool streets in sweltering heat as limbless beggars crutched behind us issuing soft exhortations. The clinic was little more than two armchairs under a luncheon umbrella. We were stationed right next to the cleft-palate folks. It was enough just to see them at work. I'd say to her, "I can't believe I let you drag me to this goddamned country." She'd tell me not to take the Lord's name in vain. I'd say, "Might not be the best time to demand a show of respect for the Lord. How much respect did the good Lord show these kids?" Pulp necrosis, tongue lesions, goiterlike presentations on account of the abscesses. I could go on. I will go on: stained teeth, fractured teeth, necrotic teeth, teeth growing one behind the other, growing sideways, growing from the roof of the mouth, ulcers, open sores, gingival discharge, dry sockets, trench mouth, incurable caries, and the malnutrition that follows from the impossibility of eating. Those tender infant mouths never stood a chance. A sane person doesn't stick around in the hopes of making a dent. A sane person takes the next plane home. I stayed for tax reasons, that's it. A solid write-off. And I liked the roasted lamb. You can't find lamb that good even in Manhattan. Mrs. Convoy said we were there to do God's work. "I'm here for the lamb," I told her. As for God's work, I said, "Seems like we're undoing it." She disagreed. This was the reason we had been put on earth. "Pessimism, skepticism, complaint, and outrage," I said to her. "That's why we were put on earth. Unless you were born out here. Then it's pretty clear your only purpose was to suffer."

A finished biography appealed to Mrs. Convoy more than a

work in progress. All the important men in her life were dead: Christ the Savior, Pope John Paul II, and Dr. Bertram Convoy, also a dentist before a fatal stroke. Betsy was only sixty but had been widowed nineteen years. I always considered her alone, if not chronically lonely. But she was never alone. She was in the tripartite company of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, as well as the irreproachable presence of the Virgin Mother; in fellowship with saints and martyrs; one in spirit with the pope in Rome; deferential to her bishop; confessional to her priest; and friend and comfort to all fellow members of her parish. If the Catholic Church had come under assault for its many sins, inside the church the bonds had never been stronger, and Betsy Convoy needed no one's sympathy for widowhood, solitude, or the appearances of a barren life. I was convinced she would never die, but if she did, and though her funeral amount to a very modest affair, she was bound for happy reunions in a better world, in the brotherhood of a loving multitude, while her tombstone was still fresh with wreaths of everlastings.

She'd order a book. It was called *Stop the Scheduling Madness* or *The Way of the Zero-Balance Office* or *The Million Dollar Dentist*. This last was written by someone named Barry Hallow. He wasn't even a dentist. He was a consultant. Here's a guy fresh out of business school, he's desperate for a niche, he hears about the chronic problems that plague a dental practice, and he turns himself into an expert. He sits in Phoenix, Arizona, and writes a book. His proven methods can change your practice, your financial health, and even your life expectancy. Most of all, he writes, he can help you achieve happiness. Hey, who doesn't want that? Anything less than complete happiness is for complete losers, really depressed people, old people losing their eyesight, and child actors who turn out to be weird looking. It wasn't going to happen here, not with

Barry Hallow. “We schedule inefficiently, treat insufficiently, and bill ineffectively,” Mrs. Convoy concluded, in the words of Barry Hallow. I took exception to the claim that we treated insufficiently. “We do not spend enough time,” she countered, “instructing patients on preventive measures, which in the long run would make them healthier.” “Preventive measures don’t pay the bills,” I said. “We’re running a practice here, not a master class.” “I know we’re not running—” “And besides,” I said, “we do in fact spend a hell of a lot of time on preventive measures, relative to other practices, but remember who you’re talking about here, Betsy. Human beings. Lazy, shortsighted knockbacks who you try rousing to brush after four glasses of Merlot on a Wednesday night. Ain’t gonna happen, no matter how much we preach preventive measures every time they deign to remember an appointment and drag themselves in here like children sent to pick up their toys. Just ain’t gonna happen.” “You have a low opinion of humanity,” she’d say, and ignoring her I’d say, “And it’s not like we’re asking much. The hands take care of themselves, the feet more or less take care of themselves. The nostrils require a little attention from time to time, as does the sphincter—that’s about it. A little oral upkeep ain’t a lot to ask in exchange for the good times. The bonobos spend their days picking themselves free of ticks and lice. They could be the bonobos.” “Oh, for heaven’s sake, you’ve gone off the rails again. Just listen to me for one second, will you? Barry Hallow’s methods are proven, and if you just follow the twelve steps he lays out, then he guarantees... I have it written down here somewhere. ‘Take the time. The teeth will shine. And the patient will sign on the dotted line.’” “Swell little poesy,” I said. “That clown’s not even a dentist.” “I would like permission to put some of his methods into practice,” she said. “Will it require any more work from any of us?” “It’s likely to require a little more work from some

of us, yes.” “Are any of them me?” “It’s likely,” she said. “No chance,” I said.

I kept a deliberately low profile online. No website, no Facebook page. But I’d Google myself, and what came up every time were the same three reviews: the one I wrote, the one I nagged Connie into writing, and the one Anonymous wrote. Don’t think I didn’t know who Anonymous was. I’d given the guy every opportunity to pay me. Finally I engaged a collection agency. I don’t like collection agents any more than you do. Their strategy is to treat you overtly and in more subtle ways like a fucking loser until you’re so demoralized by their condescension and exhausted by their hectoring that you strike a bargain so that in a couple of years you won’t be declined at Macy’s again. Have you ever met a collection agent in a social setting? Of course not. No one has. They all turn into call-center managers or insurance adjusters. So yeah, I get it. But this guy was in to me for eight grand. I did the work. I made it possible—listen: I made it possible for this jerk to *resume eating*. I was owed cost at the very least. So what does he do? He gets on a payment schedule of twenty bucks a month and then promptly broadcasts his resentment that someone demanded he act honorably by posting a review calling my work shoddy and overpriced. And on top of that, he says I have cave dwellers! I don’t have cave dwellers. I make it a point to inspect my nostrils in the mirror before I go and hover over a patient. It’s common courtesy. But now the world thinks I have cave dwellers. If somebody’s doing a little research on the Internet for a new dentist, are they likely to choose the guy who might gouge them for lousy work while showering them with his cave dwellers? No. But there is no countering, no appeal, no entity to whom I can plead my case to have the post removed. So I’d Google myself every month or so, and when the review from Anonymous came up, as it did without fail every time,

I'd curse out loud and feel the victim of an injustice, and Mrs. Convoy would say, "Stop Googling yourself."

She'd say, "What do you have against other people?" And I'd say, I'd be sitting at the front desk, in one of the swivel chairs at the front desk, doing paperwork or something, and I'd look up from the paperwork, and I'd say, "What do I have against other people? I have nothing against other people." And she'd say, "You alienate yourself from society." And I'd say, I'd turn physically in the chair to look at her, and I'd say, "Who alienates himself from society?" "You don't have a website," she'd say. "And you refuse to create a Facebook page. You have no online presence. Barry Hallow says—" "And for this I'm being accused of alienating myself from society? Because I don't have a Facebook page?" "All I'm trying to say is that Barry Hallow encourages everyone to have an online presence. An online presence guarantees more business. It's proven. That's all I'm trying to say." "No, that's not all you're trying to say, Betsy," I'd say. "That's not at all all you're trying to say. If it was, you wouldn't have accused me of alienating myself from society." "You have misunderstood my intentions," she'd say. "I think you have willfully misunderstood me." "I don't have anything against other people, Betsy. Do I *understand* other people? No. Most people I don't understand. What they do mystifies me. They're out there right now, playing in the fields, boating, whatever. Good for them. You know what, Betsy? I'd love to boat with them. Yeah, let's boat! Let's eat shrimp together!" "Jesus Mary and Joseph," she'd say, "how did we start talking about eating shrimp? I'll never forgive myself for bringing this up." "No, don't walk away, Betsy, let's hash this out. Do you think I can just willy-nilly without a care in the world go out there and go boating?" "Who said anything about going boating?" she'd say. "Think I can just toss everything aside and go tanning and rock climbing and pick

apples and shop for rugs and order salad and put my change in the same place night after night and wash the sheets and listen to U2 and drink Chablis?" "What on earth are you talking about?" she'd say. "I was only trying to convince you to build a website and get on Facebook to improve our billings." "I have no idea why I can't do those things," I'd say, "but I can't. I want to do them. Those ordinary night-and-weekend things. Holiday things. Vacation things." "Please stop stepping on my heels," she'd say. "You know as well as anyone just how small this office is." "Don't you know," I'd say, "how much I'd love to go to a bar and watch a game? Don't you know how much I'd love a whole bunch of buds, a whole bunch of dude buds hollering 'yo' at me when I come through the door, 'yo' and 'mofo' and 'beer me' and 'hey bro' and all that, all my best dude buds on barstools drinking beer, watching the game with me?" "I am going inside to tend to a patient now," she'd say. "I'm afraid we will have to continue this conversation another time." "I would really like that, Betsy, to cheer and jeer and hoot and root alongside a band of brothers. I would love that. But do you have any idea how much attention you have to pay to a Red Sox game? Even a regular-season Red Sox game?" "I have decided that I am going to stand here and listen to you until you are quite finished," she'd say, "because I feel I have touched a nerve." "But just because I choose not to have dude buds, don't think I don't worry about what I'm missing out on. Don't think I'm not haunted knowing that I might be missing out on things that I'd much prefer not to be missing out on. I am *haunted*, Betsy. You think I alienate myself from society? Of course I alienate myself from society. It's the only way I know of not being constantly reminded of all the ways I'm alienated from society. That doesn't mean I have anything against other people. Envy them? Of course. Marvel at them? Constantly. Secretly study them? Every day. I just

don't get any closer to understanding them. And liking something you don't understand, estranged from it without reason, longing to commune with it—who'd ask for it? I ask you, Betsy—who would ask for it?" "Are you quite finished now?" she'd ask. "This is turning out to be one of the longest ordeals of my life." "But do you want to know what I don't understand even more than I don't understand the boating and the tanning? *Reading about the boating and the tanning online!* I was already at one remove before the Internet came along. I need another remove? Now I have to spend the time that I'm not doing the thing they're doing reading about them doing it? Streaming all the clips of them doing it, commenting on how lucky they are to be doing all those things, liking and digging and bookmarking and posting and tweeting all those things, and feeling more disconnected than ever? Where does this idea of greater connection come from? I've never in my life felt more disconnected. It's like how the rich get richer. The connected get more connected while the disconnected get more disconnected. No thanks, man, I can't do it. The world was a sufficient trial, Betsy, before Facebook." "I take back my suggestion that you have something against other people," she'd say, "and I'll never suggest a website or a Facebook page ever again."

I was a dentist, not a website. I was a muddle, not a brand. I was a man, not a profile. They wanted to contain my life with a summary of its purchases and preferences, prescription medications, and predictable behaviors. That was not a man. That was an animal in a cage.

She'd say, "When was the last time you attended church?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Never is not an option. Everyone has been to church at least once. Try being honest." I'd tell her, she'd say, "Oh, for heaven's sake. No one worships a little blue leprechaun. First of all, leprechauns are not blue. Second of all, you know as well as

anyone that leprechauns did not make heaven and earth. I see no reason to believe in leprechauns and every reason to believe in God. I see God in the sky and I see God on the street. Can you really sit there and suggest that you do not feel God at work in the world?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "One cannot feel the work of the Big Bang. Why must you always bring up the Big Bang when we're trying to have a discussion about God?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "But you can't be good on account of the Big Bang. You can only be good on account of God. Don't you want to be good?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Metaphysical blackmail my patootie. I want you to answer me. Do you think you're good?" I'd say yes, I thought I was good. And then she'd say, she'd think about it for a minute, and she'd say, her voice would drop and she'd put her hand on my arm, and she'd say, "But are you well?" she'd say. "Are you well?"

Mrs. Convoy and I joined Connie at the computer station. Sure enough, up on-screen was a website for an O'Rourke Dental. So there are two O'Rourke Dentals, I thought at the time, and poor Mrs. Convoy is confused and will be disappointed. Then Connie clicked on the "About" page. There we were, the four of us: Abby Bower, dental assistant; Betsy Convoy, head hygienist; Connie Plotz, office manager; and me, Dr. Paul C. O'Rourke, D.D.S. It wasn't a second O'Rourke Dental. It was *our* O'Rourke Dental, *my* O'Rourke Dental.

"Who did this?" I demanded.

"Not me," said Connie.

"Not me," said Betsy.

"Abby?" said Connie.

Abby quickly shook her head.

"Well somebody had to do it," I said.

They looked at me.

"It certainly wasn't me," I said.

"You must have," said Mrs. Convoy. "Look, there we are."

We looked back at the screen. There we were.

The picture of Mrs. Convoy on the "About" page of the O'Rourke Dental website was originally a senior-year portrait taken from her 1969 high school yearbook, a black-and-white headshot she found flattering insofar as she did not object to it and one that made her seem, despite a postwar bouffant painfully out-of-date by 1969, young and almost comely. It held absolutely nothing in common with the buzz-cut battle-ax to my immediate right. Abby's picture was a professional headshot, glossy and air-brushed. Was Abby some kind of actor? How should I know, she never discussed anything with me. The picture made her look glamorous and dramatic—again, nothing at all like her real-life counterpart. Connie had been denied a picture, which upset her unreasonably. She took it as an indication of the disposability of office managers. I said nothing about the fact that no one had ever called her an office manager before. The picture of me was surveillance grade, taken just as I was descending a flight of stairs—specifically, those leading down to the subway stop at Eighty-Sixth and Lex. I looked like a terrorist wanted by the FBI.

"Who did this?" I repeated.

My three employees looked at me blankly.

"This is unacceptable," I said.

"I think it's very nice," said Mrs. Convoy.

"I want it taken down."

"What? Why? This is exactly what we've needed," she said. "Whoever did this did a wonderful job."

"Whoever did this," I said, "did it without my permission and for reasons I can't even begin to fathom. Who would do such a thing? It's disturbing. We should all be very disturbed."

“You must have done it yourself and you just don’t remember. Or maybe you won it at a silent auction. Oh, they must have pulled your business card out of a fishbowl!”

“Not very likely, Betsy. Find out who did this,” I said to Connie.

“How?” she asked.

I had no idea how.

“Can’t you call someone?”

“Who would I call?”

“This is outrageous,” I said.

There was only a name at the bottom of our home page: Seir Design. A Google search for Seir Design yielded a spare website with a brief description of services and an email address: info@seirdesign.com. I emailed them immediately.

“Dear Seir Design,” I wrote.

My name is Paul C. O’Rourke. I own and operate O’Rourke Dental at 969 Park Avenue in Manhattan. I’m writing to ask you to please remove (or take down, or whatever it is you do) a website that you created for my practice without my permission.

Do you ordinarily go around making websites for people who haven’t asked for them? Or did someone represent himself to you as Paul C. O’Rourke? If so, I would like to know who this impostor is. I am the real Paul C. O’Rourke, and I’m telling you that I do not want a website. I hope you can imagine how disturbing it is to find that your dental practice suddenly has a website.

I look forward to your prompt reply.

I felt violated, and helpless, and repeatedly checked my email throughout the day, but I did not receive an answer.

• • •

Every year I renewed the baseball package offered by DIRECTV and recorded every Red Sox game using an old-fashioned VCR. I had every game the Sox had played since 1984, with the exception of those games lost to power failure. I was on my seventh VCR; out of fear of their discontinuance, I had seven more stacked in a closet. I ate the same meal (a plate of chicken and rice) before every game and did not make plans on game night. I never watched the sixth inning.

“Why the sixth inning?” Connie once asked me.

“It’s just a superstition.”

“But why not the fifth inning, or the seventh?”

“Why not the fourth,” I said, “or the eighth?”

“Why be superstitious at all, is what I’m asking.”

“Because it’s bad luck not to be superstitious,” I said.

If the Red Sox fell nine games or more below the New York Yankees at any time during regular-season play, I took the Holland Tunnel into New Jersey, checked into the Howard Johnson hotel in North Bergen, and watched that night’s game outside city limits, in an effort to change my team’s fortunes.

“If you hate the Yankees so much,” Connie asked me, “why did you move to New York?”

“To find out what kind of city could make a monster like a Yankees fan.”

Though everything had changed for me since 2004, I still watched the Red Sox whenever they played. I’d been watching the Red Sox for so long that not to watch them was to stand in the middle of my living room and wonder what to do with myself. Oh, there was lots to do. There was more to do at that moment than there had been at any other moment in the history of the world. And there was no city with more to offer than New York City. I could grab a slice. I could eat sushi. I could order a sheep’s-milk

cheese at a wine bar and drink Pinot until bohemianism and Billie Holiday worship saturated my soul and I was drunk, drunk, drunk. I could go down to the Brooklyn Inn and have a stout. There were half a dozen bars along the way where I could stop for a drink before reaching the Brooklyn Inn. There were bodegas and Korean grocers where I could shop for fresh organic fruits and vegetables. I could sit at the bar of the new Italian joint with a plate of meatballs and a bottle of wine. Cask beer was a new craze. I could have a pint of cask beer. Or do something totally unexpected, like return to the city, to Thirty-Fourth Street, and buy a ticket to the viewing deck of the Empire State Building—no, the Empire State Building was closed. Many things were closed or starting to close by that time of night: museums, art galleries, bookstores. You had to try not to let it limit you. Think of all the things still available. I could have a Starbucks. Or a bagel. Or a falafel sandwich. Once again it occurred to me that so many of the things I could do in New York involved eating and drinking. Had we been placed here on earth to do nothing more than eat and drink? Was I simply supposed to come home from work and eat and drink my way through the night, piling falafel and hot dog onto chicken curry and washing it all down with copious amounts of beer and endless nightcaps of whiskey, before passing out halfway to the bathroom in my Pride Freedom Mobility Chair? It seemed yes. But no. One had to remember all the many other things the city made available to someone looking to occupy his time and bring significance to his night. Like what? Like see a movie, for one. New York City gets all the best movies. Even better, attend a Broadway play. You could only do that in New York. But it was a Friday night in New York City. There were how many other people wondering what to do with themselves on this Friday night, not to mention all the tourists in town to do in New York

what they could only do here. The best shows would already be sold out. And as to getting there, you have to brace yourself weeks in advance to endure the tourists tearing their way through Times Square in anticipation of a show. Then you get there, to your theater, and there are crowds outside the marquee, the interminable first act, and the intermission, when all the lights come up and everyone, standing and stretching and sharing their thoughts about what they've just seen, wonders why you are alone with yourself on a Friday night. I was not going to spend my Friday night being gawked at. My Thursday nights never caused me any troubles. It was always my Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday nights that caused me troubles. On those nights, I was reduced to eating and drinking. The city had almost nothing else to offer, and if this great city had almost nothing else to offer, imagine what it was like in lesser cities, or the suburbs, or the small rural towns where so many people are clerks and farmers, and you will understand, finally, why this country has become a nation of fat alcoholics and the nurses and therapists who tend to them. We amble down our streets, we list. Skin folds turn into body parts not yet named. We are consuming ourselves alive as our physical grotesqueries grow in direct proportion to our federal deficits and discount gun shops. Throughout the land there is nothing to do but eat and drink and shoot, and if you're restricted by city ordinance to eating and drinking, you might as well turn on the game. So that's what I did. That's what I always did: take-out and the game—which wasn't, after all, such a bad fate. It temporarily took my mind off the website that had been created against my will and periodically made me forget about my helplessness before the webmasters at Seir Design. We were playing the Tampa Bay Rays that night, and I tried my best to concentrate. The real trick was to ignore all of the other possibilities forfeited

by falling back on the game, the possibilities that came to mind only now, with the game on and the takeout ordered, the many possibilities involving people, enterprise, and a definite sense of happening. These included the various professional functions I was invited to attend nearly every night of the week. But did I really want to participate in a professional function on a Friday night? The last people I wanted to hang out with were a bunch of dweeby dentists, I always thought the day I received an invitation to participate in a professional function, dismissing it out of hand as a complete waste of time until the night of the function came around and I found myself at home again, alone, the takeout ordered and nothing to do but watch the game. Then I would consider the professional function in a different light. Unlike me, those dweeby dentists had something to do on a Friday night involving more than watching a regular-season baseball game. Unlike me, those dentists might find themselves in an engaging conversation or making a connection with an unlikely someone or even just learning some new technique that improved the health of a patient. That alone would have made the night meaningful. It revealed a closed mind, a crabbed disposition toward the possibilities when, two weeks earlier or even just a week earlier, I received the invitation to the professional function and dismissed it out of hand because there was a game on that night. I never did anything on game night, even though I recorded the games and could always watch them later, because those nights were sacrosanct, and if I gave up the one sacrosanct thing, where would I be and what would I have? Any true devotion is a condition to be suffered. If my devotion to the Red Sox had waned after their extraordinary comeback during the American League Championship of 2004, their truly historic comeback after being down three games to none, and against the Yankees of all teams—probably objectively

the most crass and reviled team in the history of sports, with that obnoxious logo so well known, the interlocking *N* and *Y* you can find on swag in every city of the world, a symbol so offensive that only the Nazi swastika compares with it, and yet still regarded by so many as benign, something to admire, even worship, revealing the true extent of the human capacity for mass delusion—if my devotion to the Red Sox had waned since they beat the Yankees and swept the Cardinals to win the World Series and end an eighty-six-year title drought, my thirty years of devotion to them would have been a fair-weather devotion if it did not require sacrifice of me, true sacrifice, sacrifice indistinguishable from suffering. So of course I passed on the professional function and sat down in my leather recliner with my beer and my chicken curry to watch us play the Rays. It was only a regular-season game, and against the Rays, of all teams, the middling, third-place Rays. The game's outcome, while potentially a factor late in the season, if a wild-card situation should develop, was completely inconsequential that night. It was only another regular-season baseball game, one of thousands watched over the course of a lifetime, a game of extraordinarily low stakes and deserving of no genuine emotional investment. Ask any non-sports fan how much yet another regular-season baseball game means to them and they will tell you: nothing. Less than nothing. I only had to consider the multitude of non-sports fans and their rich evening dockets to feel paralyzed by the free world on a Friday night, its alternatives and variations whispering their seductions, while the innings crawled by without urgency or consequence. But then something would happen on the field, it could be as simple as a double play, or the slow development of a no-hitter, and all the old excitement would rush back, all the unbidden excess of mystery and thrill that came at me as a boy of six or seven when I would watch my father watching the game, his

eyes on the TV while the Bakelite radio provided the color. All that comfort, all that cushion, and yet he would perch on the edge of his easy chair as if monitoring a tough landing from the space deck. He called me Paulie. "Paulie, run and get me a beer from the fridge." "Paulie, stay awake, now, it's the sixth inning, Paulie, you gotta watch the game and tell me what happens." "We lost, Paulie, it's another loss, goddamn it, that's how it is with them losing fucks, they lose on you, the fuckers." We always began the games with me in his lap, but before the first inning was over, he would no longer be aware of me. In contrast, I was carefully attuned to his every move, to the sounds of the springs inside his gold recliner shrieking with his every shift. Those springs were as tired and tortured as an old flogged horse, but they were just as dependable, singing the song of his unbearable tension, his unbearable despair. He kept track of the game on a scorecard laid upon one flat arm of the chair. Sweat dripped down a can of Narragansett into the carpet's cheap weave. He might have been in the dugout himself, so physically did he involve himself in a game. Up, down, up, down, pacing, pacing, back and forth: biting a thumbnail in an unnatural twist of the hand; on his feet cursing, which overwhelmed me with alarm; down on his knees and peering up at the TV with me beside him. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. I pantomimed his expressions. I calibrated my reactions to match his in mood and degree when anything of moment shook the stadium to its feet. His intensity blanketed me. What *was* the Boston Red Sox? What *was* the world? Every pitch was a matter of life and death, every swing a chance to dream. And what are we talking about? A regular-season baseball game. Nothing. Less than nothing. How I loved that frightening man. How he was everything awesome and good, until one day he sat down in the bathtub, closed the shower curtain, and shot himself in the head.

We were losing that night. We were in first place in the American League East, ahead of the Yankees by a game and a half, and losing to the middling Rays. It sucked, but it was only right. It gave us the chance to come back from behind, which was the only way I cared to win. But in the end we failed to come back. Nine to six we lost to the crap-ass Rays on the fifteenth of July 2011. I turned off the TV absolutely disgusted. I pressed STOP on the VCR, rewound the cassette, ejected it, labeled it, and filed it away with all the other tapes. Then I went to bed.

When I woke, it was a quarter to three in the morning. I couldn't believe it. Almost four hours of continuous sleep. It was really only a little over three hours of continuous sleep, but I chose to think of it as four. That much continuous sleep hadn't come my way in what, three or four weeks? and I lay in bed happy, almost rested. But then I had to decide: get up, or struggle to fall back asleep? Every three or four weeks I could struggle my way back to sleep for another hour or two, for a total of five or six hours. It was only ever a total of four or five, but that's not how I chose to think of it, and on mornings like that, it was always, "Good morning, Abby. Good morning, Betsy. Good morning, Connie." So I lay in bed struggling to fall back asleep, diverted from sleep by thinking, first, of how frustrating it was when we lost to a team like the crap-ass Rays, and then of how I alone had chosen to spend the previous night. I'd forfeited all other possibilities to another regular-season baseball game, and now, at quarter to three in the morning, it was too late for me and my onetime options. The night was now as dark as it could get, and from thinking of how dark the night was and of my forfeited options, I proceeded to think of how alike this one night might be to my last night on earth, when all options, and not just one night's options, expired. Every night was a night of limitless possibility expired, of a life forfeited, of a foreclosed

opportunity to expand, explore, risk, hope, and live. These were my thoughts as I tried falling back asleep. Inside my head, where I lived, wars were breaking out, valleys flooding, forests catching fire, oceans breaching the land, and storms dragging it all to the bottom of the sea, with only a few days or weeks remaining before the entire world and everything sweet and surprising we'd done with it went dark against the vast backdrop of the universe. The chances of me falling back asleep were nil once again. I got out of bed. I checked my email. There was still no answer from Seir Design. I made some coffee and eggs. I sat in my kitchen eating and drinking again, eating and drinking to sustain myself another few hours, always sustaining myself by eating and drinking, or eating and drinking in order to distract myself from how ultimately pointless it was to sustain anything. I was, if not the only person awake in the city, the only person awake at that hour who'd fallen asleep at the hour I'd fallen asleep, and who was now unable to get back to sleep. Perhaps, by a series of miracles, the night had worked out for the other insomniacs, and now it was only me awake among them, alone at my kitchen table, hours from daybreak, absent of options, and wondering what to do with myself. I considered calling Connie, but that would have required me to look at my me-machine and discover that Connie had not called me, or even so much as texted, and then I would have had to wonder what she was doing when she was not sending me a text or trying to call. I would have had to conclude that at the moment she might have been calling or sending me a text, not only was she doing neither, in all likelihood she wasn't even thinking about me. It hardly mattered that she was probably just sleeping. And anyway, if I called her, what would I say? There was nothing more to say. Everything that could be said had been said. Calling Connie wasn't an option. I called her anyway, but she didn't pick up. It was

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early. She was probably still sleeping. I hung up. Then I took down the game tape from the night before, popped it into the VCR, and watched the game again until the light of dawn, forwarding through all the bullshit and wondering all over again how we could lose so badly to the crap-ass Rays.