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cultural narcissism

The Autobiography of a Narcissist

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**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF A  
NARCISSIST**

**M**y penis is quite good looking, really. It has a classic shape, is of healthy length and is boldly circumcised as though much too proud to hide its true form beneath a shroud of foreskin. Its girth is substantial and of admirable consistency for all of its length. In its disinterested state, it hangs down with perfect symmetry between my thighs, most notably when I stand with my feet eight to thirteen inches apart, knees slightly bent. When interested, it holds this line like a courageous soldier, lifting up to an angle of anywhere between ninety-three and ninety-eight degrees (depending, of course, upon style of protractor). It suggests the towering pride of a skyscraper. It intimates the cosmic symbolism of a church steeple. It makes the utilitarian promise of a grain elevator. I am most intrigued, however, by how different it looks in a mirror, where its reflection can strike me with such prodigiousness that for a brief moment I am convinced it must belong to someone else; but then, in the next moment, I can turn my gaze downward to remind myself that it is, in fact, my own.

\* \* \*

I wish to assure you this book is not about you. If the paragraph above says anything at all, it certainly says that; and I'm sure you agree, it says quite a bit. Then again, you might ask how any autobiography could be about its reader, unless of course the reader is the author himself rereading his

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words? The answer is plain: if the author is doing his job, doing it successfully, his readers will inevitably find themselves identifying with the hero of the story, fiction or non. It's safe to assume that you will do the same on these pages from time to time. However, know that I have gone to considerable Aristotelian lengths to remind you at every turn that the subject of my story remains protagonistically me. An example of such a length is my decision to leave the opening paragraph "as is." Those words were the first I wrote when I sat down to attempt this book; their subject was the first image that came to mind; the portrait they painted, the first still-life I deemed worthy of literary pigment.

Yet, now I wonder about you. Every reader brings to the opening of every book certain expectations, a curiosity, a healthy level of anticipation. What might yours be? And what brought you here? Perhaps you were told of this book by a friend, or read about it in a newspaper. Perhaps you stumbled upon it at the bookstore. Maybe you've already heard something about the remarkable event that occurred in my life, the unprecedented media circus that followed it, and the ultimate self-enlightenment that I was able to glean from the whole debacle. You may know that despite its apparent complexity, my story is very simply about Love; about my falling in Love. Indeed, I can guarantee that the story into which you are about to dive headfirst is a Love Story, one with simple hopes and simple dreams, pursuing a level of simplicity so pure, that it inevitably comes full circle to emerge as something grandiose. And with that grandiosity comes a clarity as to why you and I are here. For what better reason than Love should a writer write his life's story? What better call for his reader to read it?

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And yet there is still something writ large. Something I feel I should address right out of the gate: what of my book's title? "The Autobiography of a Narcissist?" It says a lot. It hints at something audacious, something honest, exorbitant. But then, is it really hinting? Certainly, everyone knows what a Narcissist is, or rather, everyone assumes they do. Trust me, I am well aware of what that assumption is. I, however, have been willing and able to step beyond it. For some time now, I have diligently sought out the meaning of the word, not at all restricted by its general understanding, not bound by the fetters of its lexicological limitations, but with the lucidity of its most legitimate context: me. You see, I know what kind of person I am. For twenty seven years I have seen him gaze back at me from his inextricable place in the mirror, just as he has seen me gaze back at him. And by the time you find yourself reading the final pages of this book, you too will see me; you will know me, and you will know why I've chosen my story's inevitable title.

Yet, as I sit here today struggling with the earliest pages of what I can only guess will be a rather voluminous book, I realize that I cannot merely tell you who that "me" is. In this writer/reader dynamic, my role is merely to mark for you a trail that will lead you through the dark forest of your prejudices and expectations about me, to the pearly gates of who I truly am. So I say unto you that the kingdom is at hand. Verily, the kingdom is in your hands right now, because the answer is in this book. The answer to your question is this book, this story, this story of this person who is Tyler LePerdu.

\* \* \*

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I have always had a name for my penis. I suppose this isn't so uncommon, yet, it is a rare individual who realizes the ramifications of such name-giving, let alone the significance of the naming process. Most everyone goes through life not giving it much thought, and if they do think about it, they generally consider only a name's sound or the number of syllables it has. What they typically overlook is the function a name serves, whether they are naming a part of their body, a drinking buddy or the family car. Unfortunately, I learned this relatively late in life. So many things might have been different for me had I only understood earlier the important role a moniker can play. As it was, I learned it during my sophomore year at the University of Southern California from a girl by the name of Joviál Goldstein, a bohemian liberal arts student who shared with me her vast knowledge of everything from veganism to Tantrist petting. During those years, I referred to my manhood as "Francois." I chose that name many years before in an effort to honor the late husband of my sixth grade teacher, a woman on whom I'd had an undying crush. During the year prior to that, it went by the name "Chuck." Before that, and as far back as I can remember, I'd called it "Vinnie"—a name that surfaced during the first grade as *homage* to a second grader who was taken away to juvey for punching a teacher.

"Honoring someone by using their name is a wonderful gesture," Joviál agreed, "however, a more dynamic approach to a name can directly affect the person, place or thing you are naming."

"Sounds like you're talking about control," I said.

"I'm talking about deepening relationships," she said, and went on with an analogy about a little league coach

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patting his player on the back with the words, “go get ‘em, Slugger.” The young player’s performance would be positively affected by this gesture, and more so by the implications of the name “slugger.” He would be encouraged, hopeful, and over time, grateful. More importantly, the young player’s desire to please his coach would become paramount, and their relationship would deepen accordingly. Thus, by choosing the right *kind* of name, one can maintain a powerful and constant affect upon that which they are naming.

A little background on Joviál: apparently, her youth had been somewhat typical, as she put it, growing up an “East Coast Prepster.” She came out west for college as did most of her peers, and like every other easterner expecting to find the east in Los Angeles, fell into a dark and bitter loneliness. Daily phone calls home and weekly care packages from her mother were of no help. Her loneliness eventually showed itself as an obsession with her chronic acne. She spent hours in front of the mirror with cleansers, scrubs and extraction devices, regardless of the futility of it all. When she realized she could barely bring herself to leaving the bathroom, she knew she had a problem to which there was only one solution: she would submerge herself in a sub-culture that would accept her bad complexion. She would pursue a different kind of “east.” She would become earthy.

Joviál’s new life was born when she went into a Venice thrift store wearing her plaid past and came out with a future that smelled of mothballs. To her, there was freedom in that smell, as though she’d returned to her Self on the magic carpet of a simple, musty fragrance. As her freedom grew, it evolved into a clear and certain spirituality. She “bumped into” Vishnu when she accidentally blended her new, musky

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odor with the scents of patchouli oil and unpolished brass. Best of all, she could see the results. Her good karma was evidenced by the gradual disappearance of her acne. And her hair was shinier.

"But," she said, "it wasn't until I changed my name from 'Brenda' to 'Joviál' that I was finally able to deepen my relationship to myself."

She could have taken any number of names, I suppose, and—as I understand it—she considered the millions of possibilities during a mushroom trip. She chose "Joviál" because it seemed to capture a more jolly side of her *persona*, a *joie de vivre* she claimed was ever-present but not always apparent. She'd always been seen as darkly maudlin, even morose. One of her favorite uncles predicted that she would become a great mortician and revolutionize the funeral industry in her small town. This concerned her. She'd wanted to be associated with cheeriness. She'd wanted to be thought of as chipper. So, when she arrived at college, she decided to enable the Mardi-Gras-side of her psyche to come forth by renaming herself Joviál.

My affair with this future Earth-Mother was brief, a couple months at best, and ended on the issue of my inability to tell her that I Loved her. I couldn't do it, I'd thought, because although I guess I liked her, *per se*, I felt no real feelings towards her. Having never said "I Love you" to anyone before, I believed that I shouldn't squander them, that they should be reserved for that special moment in my life when I really meant it. At that time in my life, I knew nothing about feelings of any kind. I didn't tell her this, though. Instead I relied on a line that I'd seen in a movie: "you have a nice personality."



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“Without Love, there is no future,” she said.

The reason I remember all this so clearly, however, is because on the night before the morning of our breakup, I had one of my most epiphanic moments.

We’d been at our dorm floor’s “Casino Night.” After watching her do horribly at poker, the conversation naturally turned to country music legend Kenny Rogers. My reminiscence of how he used to mesmerize me as a boy by pulling a quarter from behind my ear<sup>1</sup>, seemed to make her palms sweaty. We went back to her room and I took a deep seat in her beanbag chair while she lit candles, humming her plea for Ruby not to take her love to town.

Very soon, Francois’ interest level rose in a determined manner. I confessed to Joviál that I was still a virgin; however, I assured her that my inexperience in no way lessened my burning curiosity about breasts and vaginas and whatever might lay between. She appreciated my confession and made one as well: she, too, was a virgin and intended to remain that way. Apparently, her good karma was due to the promise of her virginity to Vishnu. She knew the only thing keeping her from a dreaded return to chronic acne was her sacred hymen. She did add, however, that the promise was only restricted to the interior of her womanhood; if I was inclined, I was free to explore its outer regions. She then lifted her hemp moo-moo, laid back on her Moroccan pillows and introduced me to “Prudence.”

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<sup>1</sup> Note to Kenny: Kenny, I still value the silver plated money clip you gave me as a boy. And while I know that I mentioned it at Spago a few years back, your mark on my life is such that I find it quite appropriate to mention it again here in these pages: *a man with a billfold fumbles, a man with a money clip humbles*. May we never forget it!

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I moved in for a closer look. I was fascinated. Sure, I'd seen them in magazines, but this was like seeing Sylvester Stallone in person: it was so much smaller in real life.

"Prudence," I repeated. Francois was on his game.

"She was my most treasured, childhood friend," she said, adding with the eyes of a soul soon to transcend the Wheel of Life, "I've named some other things, too."

She explained that she'd wanted to establish a deeper relationship with the whole of her body, so her breasts became "Dominique" and "Pollyanna" to ensure their youthful firmness. Her hair she named "Zinfandel" to protect its full-body and deep color. Her tummy she named "Nebraska." And she chose the name "Prudence" for her vagina because her childhood friend's father was a Baptist minister, and such a choice would protect her commitment to Vishnu with more conviction than a cast-iron chastity belt.

As you might imagine, this was eye-opening for me. A name *can* have affect! Admittedly, the thought was a little too academic for the heat of the moment, but I was young and in complete thrall of the intellectual ramifications. Francois, on the other hand, was behaving as though I hadn't heard a word she'd said and I was petrified that Joviál would notice his attempts to pop through my jeans. I tried to push him down with my hands, hoping to force him into disinterest. Francois, however, upstaged me, gaining Joviál's undivided attention. She undid my fly, took him in her hands and sang, very maternally, "*Allouette*." Oddly, the more she sang, the more stubborn I became. In a flash, I was angry. Such a childish song she was singing! And with a *faux* French accent! It was insulting! I blamed Francois, mocking him under my breath, but to no avail. He raged on. I tried being rude with

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Jovial, but she thought I was “getting into it.” I knew I must regain control at any price. Then, a brilliant idea popped into my head.

I changed Francois’ name, right then and there, with my new understanding about the power of naming. I deepened our relationship with a new sobriquet, a reminder (for both of us) who was boss.

My mind raced with the possibilities. “The Bad Seed.” “Pansy-Ass.” “Thalidomide Dream.” The darkest, most humiliating concepts I could imagine flooded my mind. Then, I stopped. I had a strange reversal of thinking. What was I doing? I wanted to maintain control, yes, of course, but just what kind of control did I want? One based in anger? What kind of relationship did I wish to have with my penis?

“For gods sake,” I cried out, “surely you can be more positive than that!”

It was a slip-up. I didn’t mean to say it aloud, but that’s the way that things happen sometimes with me. Jovial was immediately confused. She stopped singing and stepped up the pace of her caresses.

“Like this?” she asked naïvely, and soon I was watching them both respond positively to my outburst. That was when the perfect name came to me, a name full of possibilities and hope. I silently christened my penis with his new name, and laid back and relaxed. My fists unclenched and my toes uncurled. I let out a deep sigh, relaxing more, and suddenly felt an immense wave of ecstasy wash over me—my first orgasm by another hand. The only intelligent thing I could think to say was “whoa.” Another wave washed over me and I knew how perfect the new name was. It

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occurred to me that the water-stained ceiling of Jovial's apartment reminded me of the Netherlands.

From that night on, I have called my penis my "Optimism."

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I'm the first to admit that I am not a "seasoned writer." Then again, that isn't to say you're in the company of a literary greenhorn. I'm enough of a writer to know that, regardless of how excited I might be about telling you about my life and my discovery of Love, I can't give away too much up front. I must be true to the suspenseful build that will more dramatically draw you into my story. Yet, I am also aware of the need for what some of us in the discipline call an "emotional hook." Placed in the opening to the story, this "hook" gives the reader a compelling reason to pursue the story. Were this a piece of fiction, I would simply make up some sort of contrivance guaranteed to tug at your sympathies. As this is the *true* story of my life, however, I must divulge to you some truth about myself that will achieve the same effect.

On top of all this, I intend for this autobiography to be non-linear in form, not at all a chronological, "start-with-the-day-I-was-born" re-telling of my life's story. Such a calendrical reflection would not only insult the both of us, but would reflect little more than a mundane story-telling technique. The reflection I prefer is not unlike the experience you have when you see yourself in the vanity mirror above the dresser drawer. Can you imagine standing there trying to find the "beginning" of your own image? I've tried and I can

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tell you it's impossible. Yet, there will always be something that you see first! Then, naturally, there will be something you see second and then third and fourth and so on until eventually, this seemingly unrelated chain of "somethings" makes a complete, non-linear and, on a good day, satisfactory reflection of yourself. Yet, when you think back on that one "something" which you did see first, you might just uncover a fascinating reason *why* you saw it in the first place (commonly referred to in my writing as "*Free-Associative Reality*," a term I introduce twenty-some pages from now).

Oddly enough, I have found that the actual *process* of writing has been a non-linear experience as well. This that I am writing now, for example, is not being written in the sequence that you are finding it here—I am writing this to you thirteen days after completing the entire book! I am very consciously placing this here for effect! Oh, how much more freedom there is on the author side of the author/reader relationship!<sup>2</sup> Call it dramatic insight, consider it artistic license, but the way in which I am able to move the parts about ensures that their sum will be more whole than even Gestalt could imagine.

All of which begs the question: why would I choose to break my dramatic rhythm and infuse it with an emotional hook. To answer this, I must force my hand on the presentation of a key player in my life's story. Though her official introduction is to come much later (and perhaps we

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<sup>2</sup> Note to Stephen King: Steve, your last letter was riveting! Especially your reflections on the writing process, all of which I agree with--it's downright "spooky" how much freedom we have on this side of the author/reader dynamic!

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can consider this a preview, or as we call it in the film trade, a trailer) I have no choice but to tell you about my therapist, Jean Taylor. She has had considerable influence on my life, and while the majority of it will be revealed to you in due time, I'm bringing her on stage now because it was her suggestion that led you and I so plot-rhythmically astray. When I finished my first draft thirteen days ago, I thought it only natural that Jean should read it, as she was the one who first encouraged me to jot down "a few thoughts about myself." And since those few thoughts ultimately became this sizable book, who better than she to find its typos and misspellings? Well let me tell you, what she found was far more important than any typos.

Jean's observation on the early portion of my story is that I have painted myself as something of an asshole. I'm paraphrasing, of course, as she used a much more psycho-appropriate term, one which I can't remember now because I refuted it outright. I took it as a sign of her jealousy. After all, wasn't I the one who had just completed this opus? Wasn't I the one who had struggled and then succeeded at finding the thousands upon thousands of words necessary to do so? I gave her an articulate counter-attack. She held to her point, and was so determined, that after forty-five minutes, I finally threw my arms up in the air, exasperated.

"Well then how the hell do you suggest I *not* appear as such an (asshole)?"

Her response was challenging, touching, and in the end, perceptive. She suggested I tell you of a certain vulnerability in myself, a vulnerability that I've only recently discovered; a genuine, heartfelt ovum of defenselessness that so unnerves me, I'm actually feeling my stomach flutter as I

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write these words now. Jean considers herself fortunate to witness this more delicate side of me. And it is only her endorsement of such delicacy that enables me to describe it to you here. She claims it has given her insight, not only into who I am, but into the larger picture of human psychology. Hence, she believes I need to give you a taste of it here in the first twenty pages. Otherwise, I run the risk of “dramatically” alienating you. The only trouble is, I’ve been sitting here trying to put something down and I’ve had a sobering lack of success. I’m not all that sure I can do it. But then, I suppose that is precisely the point she was making: that which makes it so difficult to share this turning point with you is the very element that will let you know that I’m really not such a (bad guy).

Here goes.

When I was six years old, I thrived as a speller. I was self-taught, had my own system of semi-flash cards, and showed particular strength with words ending in “ed.” My real talent, however, was for using them in a sentence. By the second month of first grade, I dominated my classmates in syllabification. My teacher, Miss Davis, chose me to represent our class in the elementary school’s spelling bee. The winner of each grade was to take home a blue ribbon the size of a Frisbee. I knew such a prize would make my mother extremely proud and so I worked like a dog preparing for the competition, with the aim of keeping the whole thing a surprise. I pored over my dictionary and semi-flash cards for a good three weeks prior. By the morning of the bee, no one could touch me. Two of the three other kids quickly failed, and it came down to me and a girl with big glasses. We battled it out for a full hour, advancing through the third,

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fourth and fifth grade levels until I beat her with “toucan.” She could spell it, sure, but I used it correctly in a sentence about a bird swooping down from a cereal box. She mumbled something about a man with one leg, and the ribbon was mine. The auditorium applauded me, the principal shook my hand, and Miss Davis pinned the big blue ribbon on my shirt. I wore it the rest of the day and all the way home. I showed it to a gardener, the postman, and then two nannies pushing strollers down my street. Finally, I flaunted it in front of my own nanny, who though quite proud, reminded me that she’d helped me study for the bee and pressed me to let her wear it in front of the mirror. After I complied, she made me an ice cream sundae.

The real reward, of course, would be showing it to my mother. The week prior, she’d been out sick with what she’d imagined was the Asiatic flu, and my hope was that the ribbon would please her after her first, tiring day back at work. I waited by the window all through the evening and late into the night, anticipating the look of pride on her face as she admired her “little man.” I imagined how she would hug me and kiss me and tell me how proud she was of me, and then offer to keep us both home the next day to do something fun, like shop for clothes or play miniature golf. As the night wore on, however, I found my excitement could no longer keep me from falling asleep at the window. I wandered into her bedroom and drifted off to sleep on top of her bed. When she finally came home, she didn’t see me lying there until she began to undress, at which point she let out a blood-curdling scream and then ranted on and on about how she thought I was an under-sized rapist. I thought it wise to calm her nerves with the news of my spelling bee victory.



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"What?" she asked.

"I won the spelling bee at school today. This is my ribbon. I got first place." I showed it to her.

"Well...that's good," she said, grabbing a People magazine and throwing herself on the bed. She was instantly absorbed in her "comfort reading," as she called it.

"I used 'toucan' in a sentence," I said.

"That's nice," she said.

"The other girl couldn't use it in a sentence, but she could spell it."

"I said 'that's nice!'"

I knew what she meant by "that's nice." She meant she was reading her magazine. She meant I was to leave her alone. But I couldn't.

"I wanted to give it to you," I said, handing her the blue ribbon. She didn't take it. She only became more annoyed.

"Thank you, now set it on my make-up table and go to bed." She didn't look up. She lay there on her belly, focusing on—I remember it well—an article about long-time friend and comedic sensation Rip Taylor<sup>3</sup>. I set the ribbon next to her collection of lipsticks, and went to my room.

I sat on the edge of my bed, stunned, devastated. What had just happened? I tried to think about all the hugs and kisses and exclamations of pride I'd dreamed up while waiting by the window. I thought I might be able to make

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<sup>3</sup> Though I'm reluctant to mention it here in this less than cheerful moment of my story, Rip "Rippy" Taylor's re-entrance into my life has been the much-needed fuel for my own comedic fire, thanks to a fortuitous brunch at the Chateau Montmartre. Cheers to you, Rippy!

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them come true if I could just think about them hard enough. I thought harder and harder until finally I began to cry. At first I didn't notice that I was crying, but as soon as I did, I realized that it was having no effect. I pictured my cries sounding out through my open bedroom door, across to my mother's open door and in to where she lay on her bed. But regardless of what I saw in my mind's eye, my cries were not noticed. Then, I heard my mother's door slam shut.

Something inside of me slammed shut, too. Honestly, I'm telling you that as I sit here now, I recall feeling something. I knew my mother heard my crying because I knew she was ignoring it. Ignoring me. I lay on my bed, my face buried in my pillow, whimpering. These cries, however, were not for her. I kept them as quiet as I could until they weren't cries anymore. My tears no longer existed. I decided in that moment that I would never cry again. I crawled into bed and fell asleep.

This is a memory I have to be careful with. When I came in contact with it a few months ago, I experienced an awakening. It was troubling to revisit; yet, once the trouble subsided, I experienced something I can only describe as "authenticity." Strange as it sounds, I felt *real* for perhaps the first time in my life. Only a few months ago! It made me think that somehow anything can be possible.

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Susanna Dellayelapa is a Latina princess with Incan blueblood pumping through her veins. She possesses the kind of beauty that encompasses your every hope and desire with the totality of a narcotic. Her face is like that of a Cherub

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whose innocence, though steadfast, yields just enough to a darker understanding. Her deep, exotic eyes call out to you from within a halo of jet-black hair, shiny and thick, flowing downward to the small of her back, cut in a way that directs one's attention to her bottom, as though pointing and whispering, "sure, as hair I am beautiful, but take a look at *this!*" It's difficult not to take a good, long look. Her bottom is near-perfect—tiny, tight, yet full, rendering itself smack dab in the middle of the flat-to-fat spectrum. Her breasts are near-perfect too, so firm and resolute in form they would surely humble Eve, perhaps even Adam. She moves with the lightness of a feather. She dances on moonlight. She is a melody. A dirge and a lieder. An ode to joy. *She is the song of a supermodel.*

But it is her toes that I cannot get out of my mind.

When I first laid eyes on Susanna, I was at the Promenade in Santa Monica, maneuvering my way through the crowds, as I am wont to do. I buy things throughout the week—clothes, shoes, kitchen wares, frozen yogurts. Then, once I have ample purchases under each arm, I enjoy the afterglow by strolling the promenade, my bags as my ballast, past all the shops and the retail girls on their smoke breaks, past the movie goers and the tourists, past the homeless and the homely. On this particular occasion, however, I had yet to buy a thing. I couldn't; I had become consumed by a cloud of self-awareness. Everywhere I looked, the eyes of strangers were drawn to something in the middle of my forehead. I passed my fingers over it, scratched at it, pulled at my hair, but found nothing strange. Nevertheless, as I pushed onward through the hoards, more and more glances burned themselves into the center of my forehead. How could my

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forehead, the capstone to my face, betray me in such a way? The next thing I remember was running into a small shop, a blur of dresses and women's shoes, straight to a full-length mirror. I zeroed in on my forehead.

There was nothing there. Not so much as a blemish and my hair was perfect—I looked exactly as I like to look. What in hell was everyone staring at? Something that couldn't be seen with the naked eye? Some sort of energy emanating from deep within my psyche and soul, pouring out through a quite invisible portal positioned in my forehead? Maybe. Perhaps somewhere in that throng of people at the Promenade, I triggered a Zen-like breakthrough, an enlightenment of which I was not yet fully aware. But how? Could it be that all the focus on my inner self, the Hatha yoga, my knowledge of eastern philosophy and reverence for indigenous cultures had finally culminated in a transcendent moment?

That was when I saw Susanna looking at me. The Latina Supermodel. *La Modelita Superior!* She was watching me, not staring at my forehead, but, rather, looking at me. In the mirror, my eyes met hers and it was as though she was looking deep inside of me. I was overcome with the intensity of the moment, averting my eyes downward, all the way down to her feet. They were angelic. A statement of perfection offered up by the peg of her pants. I let my eyes pursue the smooth slope of her ankle to the point where her dark, supple skin disappeared beneath the black leather of the pumps she was trying on. What joy to see that the shoes were opened-toed, designed to give my eyes the gift of her delicious and delicate toes, all five of them. It was a gift in which I lost myself for what seemed an eternity.

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For the record, each toe on Susanna's foot is flawlessly straight, without the slightest crook. Her number one toe—a term I use because I simply refuse to insult its femininity with the vulgar term “big toe”—is clearly the leader of the five, not only in stature but also in what is best described as artistic inspiration for the other four. It is narrow and forthright, moves with flexibility and grace. It is powerfully seductive. The number two toe seems to emulate its larger sister with such careful attention to detail that one might suspect it has deluded itself into believing that they are identical twins. The next three toes down the line, though smaller still, do the same with enthusiasm, admiration, and without the slightest need for individuality. Together, in perfect alignment on her foot, they remind me of little members of the von Trapp Family, lined up before their father for inspection, eagerly awaiting the chance to hit their harmonies. And of course, her toenails are always painted with a fresh coat of “arrest me” red, emphasizing their seemingly illegal, seductive powers.

“Excuse me,” she said, her ruby lips breaking into a warm smile.

“Excuse *me*,” I replied, straining under the pounding of my heart. She stepped past me gracefully to take a closer look in the mirror. Her study of the shoes was one hundred percent focused. She turned her knee to consider an angle. She turned it the other way. Then, without drawing her focus away, she spoke again.

“What do you think?”

“I think...” *Think?* I couldn't think! I didn't know what to think! I didn't know what to *say*, let alone think! My mind was completely blank! I was in a panic—I knew I had only one or two seconds before my pensive, ellipsistic pause

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would become the creepy trail-off of a weirdo. And then, from out of nowhere, it came to me:

"...so many things," I added.

"Really?"

"Yes." I knew she was considering how I might be capable of "thinking so many things," so I quickly thought up some examples in case she was to push me for them. She didn't. She smiled and focused on the black open-toed shoes. There was movement in the fingertips of both my hands, uncontrollable movement. I was trembling? But why? And why was my heart suddenly leaping out of my chest? And why were my armpits sopping wet? *What was happening??*

That was when the image of a young monk came to mind: a naïve zealot who has stumbled across a newlyweds' nuptial consummation and is watching—*spying*—wracked with anticipation, as though at any moment his Faith might snap like a twig. Such an image! Where did it come from? I was petrified at the implication! Catatonic, I feared I might melt, pass out, keel over. It was mortifying and at the same time, invigorating. How could I fold at someone's whim so easily, especially considering she hadn't seemed to have exercised any whim at all? Hadn't she merely spoken to me? And, why the monk?

In the next moment, I had one of my more *major epiphanies*. Indeed, I was scared by the whirlwind of thoughts, a dervish I had ever allowed to be put into play by another person. Yet, there was an undeniable spiritual element to it as well. Yes! I was caught in the middle of something that I could only compare to a spiritual conversion! Of course! *A surrender!* Yes!

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But conversion to what? Surrender to whom? And in the next moment, I had one of my more *minor epiphanies*, something I have come to call a “sub-epiphany.” The conversion I was experiencing, though similar to one you might have when surrendering to a god, was surrender to another *person*. That explained my mental catatonia, as well as the image of the voyeuristic monk. Who knows? It might have even been connected to the spiritual glory hole in the middle of my forehead. It was all so profound and yet all so silly, really. Very silly: a surrender that left me *as silly as putty in her hands!*

“I’m sorry?” she said.

I’d somehow said “silly putty” aloud. It had slipped out. I was sure she’d heard it. Then again, I couldn’t be completely sure. She was staring at me, waiting for a reply.

“Nothing,” I said, mysteriously.

All I could do was concentrate on not letting any more “silly putty” type slip-ups slip out. I also knew I had to resist denying the slip-up, because I couldn’t confirm that she’d heard me say said anything at all. The context of it all was profound—that was all I knew. The image of a juggler popped into my mind. My Optimism stirred.

She stared at me, waiting, confused. I stared back. Blank. Nothing. Strangely, I felt an intense desire to beat someone in a wind sprint. She looked away. I realized the color was draining from my face. Moreover, it seemed as though everything was draining away: my nose, my brow, my cheekbones, my mouth. My entire face was melting down the front of my shirt like candle wax in the hot sun, leaving behind a flat, ill-defined surface. Next, my head began to droop forward. Then my eyes fell in shame. I could do

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nothing but look down at the puddle my facial features were forming around my feet. Was it humiliation? Not possible.

I only vaguely recall what happened next. I was outside the store, Susanna was inside. I knew I needed to do something before she came out. I thought of disguising my confusion behind the mask of healthy “shopping.” I’d be fine if I was buying something. But then, all I really wanted was an echoless hole into which I could crawl. Instead, I walked off, down the mall by myself.

It was then that I realized I’d fallen in Love. Instantaneously. Magically. Love at first sight, just like in a movie. The kind of Love for which I’d been searching my entire life. Sure, I could see the futility of it: what were the chances of ever running into her again? Los Angeles is a big city and she likely lived in one of its more Latin neighborhoods. As it turned out, we would meet again in only a matter of days, at that mysterious juncture where coincidence reveals itself as destiny—but how could I have known that at the time? I couldn’t have. All I could know was that I was nauseatingly dizzy and I had to sit down. I also knew I couldn’t stop. I had to get home, and that was not going to be a cakewalk, because as I navigated my way through the crowd, I caught someone staring at the middle of my forehead<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Note to Shirley Mac: thanks to your most reassuring, handwritten note, I’ve not yet “fallen off the mountain!”



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My therapist, Dr. Jean Taylor, told me I should write this autobiography. Let me rephrase that. She “encouraged” me to write this autobiography. At least that’s what she would want me to say. She’s constantly pointing out the difference between “telling” me to do something and “encouraging” me to; yet, you and I both know there is little difference between the two (her distinction is a blatant denial of the Doctor/Patient dynamic). It’s also safe to assume that, were Jean here with us now, she would make her professional claim that she doesn’t “want” me to say anything (see fourth sentence above). Just this morning, in fact, she said that therapy is rendered impossible if it is determined by what the therapist “wants” the patient to say. To this, I threw a bold conundrum her way:

“So tell me then, Jean, do you *want* me to say that I believe what you’re saying now?” I knew she couldn’t say “yes.” I knew she couldn’t say “no.” She paused.

“Want?” she asked, attempting to veil her stumpedness.

“Want,” I repeated, imitating her imitation. This is a tedious pattern of hers, ceaselessly repeating my own words back to me. She seems to consider it a therapeutic technique along the lines (but falling far short) of what I commonly refer to as a “Counter-Reflective-Non-Assimilation.” What really gets my goat, however, is the fact that she has the audacity to turn whatever frustration I suffer at her so-called method *back onto me!* On numerous occasions, she has suggested that my aversion to her parroting might say something about issues deep inside of me, beyond my conscious reach, at least for how that reach is defined at the present and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. What about the fact that her constant mimicking

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makes me want to throw her rubber tree plant against the wall?? What about how intellectually insulting it is, not to mention immature? And why should I have to go along with something that is nothing less than a professional laziness on her part. I mean can anyone honestly believe that Sigmund Freud would have allowed himself to recycle the words given to him by his patients? Hardly. Worse, Jean parrots, not only the words I say, but often the sentences made up by those words; and every once in a while, the very thoughts that those sentence convey! It's absurd!

Now, I will grant you that the words, sentences and thoughts that I bring to her office five times a week are of a different quality than those of her other patients. Years of lexicographical study coupled with a tacit talent for linguistics has given me a penchant towards fifty-cent words; though many others have suggested that they are more likely valued at around seventy-five cents, and on my more lucid days, a buck-fifty. So on one level, I suppose I can understand why Jean would want to hear them again. She appreciates a more expensive vocabulary, as it were.

I bring this up here because one, it seems a timely introduction of my therapist to the pages of my autobiography; and two, today she was really pissing me off. So intense was my irritation, in fact, that I know I have no choice but to keep it to myself, at least for now. I wouldn't want to make you gun-shy so early in the game. On the other hand, who am I to deny you your right to even the ugliest of details? It's a classic Catch-22. Perhaps I should simply cast my fate to the wind of your judgments and give you an example from today's session.

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Jean and I had been talking about my mother's funeral. I was making excellent progress. She, however, decided to derail me by focusing in on a rather unimportant issue. Less an "issue," it was more a throwaway line that I had mindlessly tossed out, a completely irrelevant thought that was somehow connected to my mother.

"A deep hatred for monkeys?" she asked, repeating only those five words from a sentence that contained well over thirty.

"Yes," I said, stopping for her, though she had nothing to say. I waited until I could no longer stand her "nothing."

"I think most people hate monkeys," I said, "I mean, they're creepy if you stop to consider how much they look like incompletely evolved versions of us."

"Versions of our selves," she repeated with a pensive tone.

"Look, that has nothing to do with the point. If it's not too much to ask, I would like to return to what I was saying," I segued.

She scribbled a "note."

"Now I've lost my train of thought! I've lost my train of thought," I said, "and it was important! It was!"

"Was it?" she repeated reflexively, a clever but obvious twist on *Counter-Reflective-Non-Assimilation*.

"Yes, it was," I said, and then sat up and turned around to face her. "I have an idea. How about for every word you repeat of mine, I get a ten dollar discount from the hour?"

Needless to say, she didn't repeat a word of that gem. You see, there was money on the line. Whether I actually said

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the words in front of her then or unconsciously formulated them here with you now is unimportant to the bigger truth: that psychotherapy is fueled by greed. Only by way of cold hard cash does one gain the therapist's "help." It is extremely expensive, and though it might serve to keep the riff-raff out, the patient gets very little bang for their buck. Furthermore, subjectivity permeates it to such a degree, psychotherapy amounts to little more than someone else's opinion billed at a hundred and fifty dollars an hour. To that end, a quilting bee would be a better use of your time—at least you get a comforter out of the deal.

Historically speaking, psychotherapy has been an overpriced stream of effluent since the first morning Freud remembered a dream; a dream that was followed by the larger vision of just how many *Kronen* per "hour" he could charge his patients. From there, this psycho-embezzlement grew into the biggest scam of the twentieth century, promising unimagined levels of fraud well into the new millennium. The whole thing is so predictable if only because it's all been so cleverly calculated. Can't you just hear the first advice Freud gave a student:

"Use the weight of my study to convince them that they have problems, use your attitude to convince them that an hour contains only fifty minutes, and then use these forms I've designed for a most efficient method of invoicing."

It's an affront on Man's intellect, his ability to use his intellect, and his ability to distinguish his intellect from mere intellectual manipulation!

Fucking Harlow monkeys.

\* \* \*

When I decided to autobiograph my life, I thought it best to familiarize myself with the reader's experience. I bought five accounts of "famous and intriguing" lives, read them, and noted that while all of their authors were rather long-in-the-tooth, their stories were remarkably short-in-the-page-count. They taught me the invaluable lesson that while autobiographies might sound like a great idea, most people who write them don't know what they're talking about. Moreover, each began at birth and was boring. I only choose not to name them here out of respect for you—and my story. What point is there to extraneous details?

If anything, the opening paragraph to this book is proof that I refuse to bore you with any sort of "start-with-the-day-I-was-born" beginning. It is my wish—nay, my *charge* to keep my narrative as non-linear as the experience of life itself. If psychoanalysis has taught me anything, it is that our lives, though lived in the line of time, are experienced in a continuum of non-linear realities. This experience is something I like to call the "Free-Associative Reality" and is best explained by the following example.

Let us say that during a typical session with my analyst, I am making associations. Perhaps I'm talking about something such as my childhood, a subject I've been through many times before without making much headway. Let us go on to say that I am—out of the blue—struck by the image of a

vagina in the folds of the rubber tree plant that Jean has next to her chair. I bravely tell her of the image. Naturally, since there's no actual vagina in the rubber tree plant, an obvious question arises: what might have caused the image to come to mind? After thorough exploration, I accept the possibility that something I said about my childhood triggered the image. The next question to pursue, then, is "why?" This fascinating process is common to my psychoanalysis; it is the "making of an association" and while certainly non-linear in form, it is clearly part of a bigger picture—a continuum. Our ability to make such associations is the fruit of our intellectual evolution and happens to be the one nut that computer scientists have yet to crack in the development of artificial intelligence. When in the throes of a *Free-Associative Reality*, we can deduce that something important is bubbling up from below the surface. Something of relevance. Something deep.

It is my sincere hope that I can emulate this *Free-Associative Reality* within the experience of my autobiography, and do so with spontaneity, honesty and grit.

"But you must tell them about the very beginnings of your life!" screams my story.

"No, no," you, my reader might interject, "I want to know why you saw the vagina in the rubber tree plant!" Surely, I'd like to as well, but I must confess to you that the vagina didn't come to me on the psychologist's couch. It popped into my head right here. It is a creation of mine to help explain my concept of FAR. Therefore, I think it best to abide the demands of my story and pursue with you my birth.

Before I do so, however, you should know that for whatever reason, the memories of my past are quite dim.

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Sure, there are a few images here and there that stand out bright and clear; yet, most of my remembered past is born of another psychological phenomenon I call “Quasi-Subjective Psycho-Extrapolation.” That is to say, that whatever it is that I don’t remember directly, emerges as a profound creation directly related to a subjective interpretation of that which I do remember. For the non-psychoanalytic layman, I make it up. However, “making up” anything does not simply come out of thin air. Any history that I create obviously comes from my mind, and my mind has obviously been shaped by a history that actually happened. A poet would argue that *Quasi-Subjective Psycho-Extrapolation* is more truthful than the alignment of mere facts. Painters, too. So, I submit to you that the portrait of my past is more like Impressionism than a Polaroid; and we all know we’d much rather have a *Monet* hanging above our couch. Further, any *Quasi-Subjective Psycho-Extrapolation* of my past is less like approaching a blank canvas and more like enjoying a paint-by-numbers kit. I merely add the color which corresponds to its appropriate number, careful to keep within the lines predetermined by days gone by, by my life as I know it.

\* \* \*

This morning, I’ve been struggling to find a way to place the day I was born at the end of this book. I know that such a move would be daring, clever—a standard to which people would refer at book signings and literary clubs for years to come. However, that’s not going to happen. Oddly, the story is always subject to the whim of the story itself, my story insists on behaving like a demanding child. It’s unable

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to consider anything aside from what it wants, it stomps its feet, screaming and yelling until it gets it. Admittedly, this story is *my* child, my baby; I brought it forth into the world, it lives as an extension of me. So, just like every other parent who's grown weary of their child refusing to listen to them, I simply have to accept the fact that my own story is going to make stupid mistakes along the way. I can only hope that one day it will realize how much better off it would have been if it had just listened to me and placed my birth at its ending. Perhaps you are a parent and you know exactly what I'm talking about. Perhaps you are an author and know this firsthand. Whatever the case, know that I have struggled, I've been patient and that I've always known what was best for my story.

\* \* \*

I was born at Saint John's Hospital in Santa Monica on May 5<sup>th</sup>, during the mid to late seventies. According to my mother, I was an awful birth. During the final months of the pregnancy, Alexandra Hinkey LePerdu thought I would certainly kill her and was convinced that her body was filled with some infection the doctor couldn't properly identify. Our labor was even worse—she compared it to being held hostage in a muggy, dirty bathroom stall for thirty-nine hours. Doctors and midwives came from miles around during the final hours to witness the war I was waging. Two nurses fainted from sheer exhaustion. A candy-striper was said to have been so horrified that she had her tubes tied the following week, and she was a Mormon. So I had no one to blame but myself for a lack of siblings.



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Alone as a child, I grew up to learn that my mother was a dedicated and very important, professional woman, not to mention extraordinarily beautiful in her day. During my earliest years, I knew that I was important to her. She considered me a part of herself, and I don't mean merely a part of her life, she actually Loved me as *herself*. She once told me that I was not unlike the hair on her head, the one feature I knew she admired most.

My father, Connell LePerdu, was bald. Or, so I'm told. He disappeared early on and I have no memories of him other than those that my mother gave me—that he was quite wealthy, having been born into a long line of inheritors descending from some sort of colonial land baron, my grandfather's grandfather's grandfather or some such genealogical contrivance. Apparently, we LePerdus have controlled much of the world's resources down through the generations, right down to my own. That the LePerdu estate remained in tact proves the miracle of self-sustaining wealth, because each generation provided deadbeat heirs less and less motivated to do anything prosperous with it.

Still, my mother found it seductive. She described my father as a dashing playboy who, after two years of marriage, became a degenerate bum. He left, endowing my mother with only two things: 1) a significant share of his family's vast wealth and 2) a constant reminder of his suspicious looks in the form of my young face. He never again made contact with my mother. He has never made any kind of contact with me. To this day, I'm not even sure if he is alive and I don't care. I must confess, however, that I have often considered the possibility that on the night he left me behind, he might well have held me up in his arms, lifting me high above his head,

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whispering words of fatherly wisdom to me. Then again, I can't picture his face, so I can only conjure the image of my own; me, whispering to an infant me, giving me advice, telling me it will all be okay.

My mother, then, was left to the duty of my upbringing, and using the wealth that was now rightfully hers, she made sure I was raised by the best nannies money could buy. Naturally, she was too busy—remember that she was a great and powerful woman—so although her role in my life was significant, she was unable to make regular appearances in it. Social responsibility was her calling. Her destiny of living a life of charitable servitude dictated that she sit on the advisory boards of such organizations as ALF, PETA, PAWS, PSEYTA, SHARK and TCEPE, The Coalition to End Primate Experimentation. Her most important contribution, however, was her work as CFR (Chief Fund Raiser) of a Los Angeles-based shelter for lost cats, called “Operation: CATs! (Care About Them).”

I was only weeks old when she took on this responsibility and the facility depended upon her until the final days of her life. I remember reading in her obituary that Operation: CATs! was the one thing in her life she truly felt connected to. And it's no wonder. In five short years, she turned a small three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath home for a few dozen strays into a 25,000 square foot facility housing upwards to four hundred and eighty five cats. It currently operates on an \$850,000 annual budget. It boasts forty-two rooms, each carpeted with wall-to-wall-to-ceiling, natural-fiber shag in jungle hues. All cats are assigned a down-filled, combed-flannel pillow, a vinyl collar, two play toys of their choice and a volunteer to watch over them. Meals are

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organized by computerized feeders that play Schubert and Chopin while the cats eat. Litter boxes are more the size of a child's sandbox, with one unit available to every twenty cats. The newest volunteers at Operation: CATs! start out as sanitation monitors, a job that is unofficially referred to as "doodie duty," and because there is never a shortage of volunteers, scat and urine-clods are normally removed from all cat boxes within sixty seconds of evacuation. Climate control ensures that all the inhabitants enjoy sixty-seven to seventy-one degree temperatures with forty to forty-five percent humidity, the essential environment for maximum feline comfort. All feline guests are spayed or neutered, and as part of a Community Outreach Program (CATs!COP), altering is provided through a "house call" service for annual contributors of over \$500. A medical team made up of three, small-animal veterinarians is on duty seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. Other volunteers work around the clock as well, taking care of paperwork, entertainment and maintenance. And Operation: CATs! has been developing the nation's first Psychological Convalescent Facility (PsyCoFac) for animals who are emotionally differentiated. "It is designed for cats that are troubled, not troublesome," was the oft-quoted distinction that my mother made to the press, "because we know that there are some poor creatures we simply cannot help."

My mother's favorite part of the job, however, was the fund-raising. This meant she was responsible for the wining and dining of famous people, not only for the donations she could generate, but because everyone knows the value of celebrity endorsements. And what celebrity can ignore a road as morally high as the one taken by Operation: CATs!? So it

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came to be that personalities from all walks of fame floated in and out of my mother's life.

Celebrity was her manna, not just professionally, but on a personal level as well. She had a glassy-eyed reverence for it that I recognized was her only true personal happiness. Her most treasured moments were lived standing next to someone famous, waiting for the shutter to click; moments which were preserved in photographs, placed in expensive, hand-made mahogany frames and inducted into her collection. They were the faces I grew up knowing: Liza Minelli, Elizabeth Taylor, Tom Wolfe, Ed Asner, Al "Grandpa Munster" Lewis, Cher, J.D. Salinger<sup>5</sup>, Debbie Reynolds, former President Jimmy Carter and his lovely wife Roslyn, Glenn Campbell, Andy Warhol, Billy Barty, Mariah Carey, Tammy Faye Baker, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Wendy O. Williams, Charles Nelson Riley, M-M-Mel Tillis, Angeline, the entire cast of the L.A. production of "Cats," Bridgett Bardot—even revered, California plumber George Brazil found his way into one of her frames. Then, there were those whom my mother referred to as "familiar faces of misfortune," like the sole survivor of an airline crash or a liberated football-wife. And this is naming only a few: there were two hundred and forty two in total.

\* \* \*

Naturally, my mother's dedication and charity meant that she was rarely home. Her days started before I was

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<sup>5</sup> J.D.: though I agree it was never confirmed as you, I happen to remember that you had a very special connection to a certain feral Abyssinian.

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awake and would extend late into the evening, long after I'd gone to bed. Generally, she would spend six full days at the shelter, so Sundays became known as her "day of rest," which she would typically spend in bed. Even when awake she would lie there quiet and motionless for as long as possible, sometimes well past my bedtime. She'd heard somewhere that glamorous illnesses preyed upon glamorously active people, so she believed she needed a defense suitable for an opera diva. Twenty-four hours of sprawling out across her California King surrounded by a bevy of pillows would at least give the appearances of good preventative medicine. However, if she did rise, she would make it clear that, due to her otherwise relationship-oriented lifestyle, she needed one day of perfect solitude. If I needed any convincing, I could march myself right down stairs and observe the two hundred and forty two pieces of framed evidence that adorned our home.

I remember one time when she marched down there with me and gave a long, drawn-out narration of each photograph, describing in great detail each celebrity's relationship to the cats, to my mother, and to their own particular type of fame. She had them categorized according to the trajectory of their stardom: those on their way up ("shooting stars"), those riding the crest of their wave ("beaming" or "bright stars"), and those whose star was beginning to fade ("mourning stars"). The photographs of the "bright stars" were always right up front, easy to see. The "shooting stars" played a more supporting role, but were easy to grab, which my mother was quick to do whenever she felt like remembering some bit of "you're-gonna-make-it" advice she'd given. Naturally, she had very little to say about

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the “mourning stars,” and they were gradually pushed to the back like an overweight girl at a televised dance concert.

Unfortunately, she was rarely able to narrate her collection of framed fame as her schedule would simply not allow it. Hers was a schedule so demanding that I believed it to be the source of all her bizarre illnesses. I remember trying to help her escape from it, offering to donate hours from my own day to hers.

“That way you could stay home two days a week,” I suggested.

I was immediately scolded for not thinking of the cats.

“Who would look out for them if I didn’t?” she asked.

“We are people, we have minds that can think about what we need and go out and get it. But this is a feline-unfriendly world, Tyler, and I will not condemn my cats to living out of dumpsters and eating flattened carcasses from the middle of the road.”

I learned it was best not to spoil our rare moments together with such naïve questions. Besides, it seemed that the less I considered the cats and my mother’s devotion to them, the more she began to show symptoms of lentivirus, influenza and dropsy.

\* \* \*

Here’s something of interest: moments ago, I tossed my writer’s hat aside and replaced it with the one that you, my reader, are wearing right now: the so-called reader’s hat. I read and reread the pages above much in the way that you just did; yet, having written them, I couldn’t help but keep a watchful eye on ways to improve them, considering

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everything from more perspicacious phraseology to more prodigious adjectives. Despite the demands of this “editing” process, I was struck by something I have to believe struck you as well—the memories I have of my youth appear somewhat pathetic. Naturally, I can’t be held accountable for my memories, regardless of whether they are based on actual fact or the result of imagery flown to us on the wings of *Quasi-Subjective Psycho-Extrapolation*. When I made those memories, I was merely an innocent, living my life without the knowledge of any other life to live. How can I be held responsible for how they appear now? Is anyone responsible for the mysterious process of remembering? For the involuntary act of manipulating that which is remembered according to the even more mysterious demands of the unconscious mind? And would that really be so fair of you?

Keep in mind that the remembrances I have of my childhood are very few in number. Of those, there are a few that I will likely *not* share with you, for either the purpose of dramatic effect, or because they are so mundane that they don’t deserve any kind of acknowledgement whatsoever.

Fascinating!

After writing the words above, I stumbled upon another kind of memory I am unwittingly withholding from you: the fond memory! (Despite what I may have indicated thus far, I do have a few.) My fond memories vary in scope, impact, and as far as I can tell, are all based in fact. Yet, as I consider them here with you now, I discover a curious phenomenon—I prefer to withhold them *from myself*! If so much as a smile on my mother’s face passes through my mind, I quickly override it with, say, the site of her sprawled out diagonally across her bed, asleep. Come to think of it, I’m

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realizing something else: my attitude towards those fond memories is much like the attitude my mother had towards me! I want very little to do with them and I avoid them whenever possible; yet, on the few occasions that I do wish to engage with such memories, I make sure that I can manipulate them according to my needs in the moment.

Apparently, I'm on the brink of one of those moments.

\* \* \*

My mother and I were in her bedroom together. She was sitting at her vanity table. I was standing next to her like a little prince. I was four or five years old.

"You're a part of me," she said.

"I am?" I asked, hoping that she would say it again so that I could hear it again.

"Yes," she said, "You are as precious to me as the hair on my head."

"You like your hair," I said.

"I do," she said, "and if you ever want to know how much a part of me you are, you should—"

"Picture you with a bald head?"

"Don't interrupt," she scolded.

I hung my head low in a classic display of apology, holding it for as long as I could. Finally, I raised my eyes up to see my mother looking deeply into her image in the mirror. She looked beatific. She spoke.

"Picture me with a bald head and you will know how important you are to me," she said. I didn't move. I didn't want to budge an inch, I only wanted the moment to go on forever and ever.



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"You know what else?" She flipped one side of her hair aside, angled her head and focused on the other.

"I am like your feet?" I asked.

She smiled, "Yes, you are, and you know how much I Love my feet."

"Men Love your feet, too," I said, hoping she would turn her focus to me.

"Yes, they do."

"And women Love your feet, too, you've been told that on many occasions," I said.

"Yes I have," she replied. Finally, she stopped, looked at my image in her mirror and smiled. "Why don't you go pick out an outfit?"

"Okay," I said leaping up in a show of insuppressible excitement. I skipped down the hall to my room and opened the door to my closet. I looked at what was hanging there, my heart racing, my mind hopeful. You see, this was our special game. We played it whenever my mother remembered how much a part of her I was. She would have me run to my room to change into one of the outfits she'd had made for me, outfits which matched perfectly a dress, pant suit or even night gown that she'd had made for her own wardrobe. Sometimes she would be very specific about which one I was to return wearing, from the *Tourista Tropicale* ensemble she bought while traveling in Scotland, to the *Judo Jumpsuit* she'd had her local girl whip up. Then, she would have me grab the equivalent from her closet, help her put it on and then we would sit on the edge of her bed, admiring ourselves in the vanity. Sometimes, she would have me make the choice and then decide whether or not it was a choice she liked, and I might be required to make three or four trips back to my

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bedroom until I got it right. However, on this particular night, I hit the nail on the head in one try.

"The *Little Luau!*" my mother cried out when she saw me standing in her doorway. She'd already had half of it on!

"Aloha," I said eagerly, awaiting her reply.

"Aloha," she said, the sound of her words sending a butterfly flutter throughout my body. I knew that "aloha" meant hello as well as goodbye, but more importantly, I knew that "aloha" also meant "Love." We looked at ourselves in the mirror, turned ourselves around, and I did my imitation of Don Ho swaying to the hula. I remember my air-ukulele gave her a smile. I remember my mother seemed happy because she called down to the nanny to make us both a hot fudge sundae that we ate in her bed. We used one spoon and split the cherry.

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I'm not sure why it's occurring to me now, but this morning I remember the first time I learned the valuable lesson that farts are considered "bad." I was probably four years old and busy on the swing set at the park where my nanny took me to play with other children.

Before I head down this anecdotal avenue, however, let me take a moment to address the idea that farts are bad. There was a famous comedian during my youth, a man who was both funny and illuminating, crazy, off-center, even maniacal at times. His calling, however, was showing us our hypocrisies. He used comedy to not only make us laugh, but to move us in our unmovable culture. And he succeeded. Unfortunately, his name escapes me now. He was the guy

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who said the line: “you ever notice that your own farts smell okay?”

At a very young age, I became fascinated with the social shaming of our bodies, particularly anything related to the existence, function or issue of the genitalia and anus. And the distinctions within this distinction only serve to perplex further. Hair, for example, which grows from follicles all over our body and in considerable quantities, is discussed at great length, especially that hair which grows on the tops of our heads. Indeed, entire segments of our modern economy revolve around the exaltation of that very ordinary outcropping of hair. It’s cared for, worried about, called beautiful, and whether the desire is to shampoo it or to shave it off, every corner of humanity finds itself on a common ground with that strange filament which grows from tiny cavities on our scalp. Yet, the very same filament, when located on, say, one’s testicles, is carefully avoided in any decent conversation. Pubic hair is simply hair, but made distinct for its location on the body. I remember making this discovery as a teenager when I marveled at how ironically private the removal of the letter “L” can make the word “public.” And how society—not the individual—has deemed it necessary to keep private the existence, function and issue of the genitalia and anus, despite how natural, indeed, how necessary they are; and, I might add, enjoyable.

Perhaps it is the *enjoyment* of the genitalia and anus that society insists that we keep to ourselves. Or is it worse than that? Is it a moral deviation? Could it in fact be even worse than that? Could it be a spiritual taboo?

This gets me to wondering about the Pope. Not being Catholic, I am able to allow myself to ponder whether or not

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the Pope has ever farted while deep in prayer. An odd consideration, perhaps, but one that I believe could be meaningful. For if, in fact, the Pope has farted while in such a reverent communication with god, then what happened next? Did he chuckle? Did he silently enjoy it? Did he acknowledge it before god? If so, assuming he prays in Latin, did he acknowledge it in his native, more spiritually vulgar tongue? Perhaps he begged forgiveness for such a prideful display while in a state of utmost humility; for who could pray in a more humble state than the Pope? Did he let it pass hoping that god didn't hear it? Perhaps he was old enough to be completely unaware of his fart; or the discipline of his meditation kept him from even noticing. All right, but what of its smell? Despite how unaware he might be of its sound, surely he would have been distracted by its odor.

Or could it be that in the entire history of the Catholic Church there has never been a Pope that has farted while on his knees praying to god?

Privately, we all know that we enjoy passing gas. Publicly, however, we are downstage, center in the theatre of shame. And the audience responds to our performance not with applause, but with groans and glares and shouts of "jeez!" and "oh...*man!*" After which, we return to our private dressing rooms, our heads hung low, knowing full well there was nothing wrong with the evening's performance. On the contrary, it went perfectly. It was so easy, so natural—still, no one liked it. Worse, they rejected it, even though—like all great art—it spoke of a truth we all experience in our own lives. So there we sit at our dressing table, no bouquets of roses to surround us, no fans waiting outside the door; there

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we sit alone, exiled, humiliated, knowing that we are the only ones who can truly appreciate our performance.

Let us now return to the first time I learned the valuable lesson that farts are “bad.” I was on the swing set at the park, playing with a little girl who was quite smitten with me, if for no other reason than I’d taken it upon my four-year-old self to teach her how to use the various contraptions that make up a playground. Thinking back, I’m not sure that I actually knew *how* to play at the time. Yet, I certainly knew how to give the *appearance* of playing, which is what I taught her. My remittance was that she told me I was her “boyfriend”—that she Loved me—and twice tried to kiss me in the pirate ship sand box. She liked when I pushed her on the swings and liked pushing me in return.

On this day, after I’d pushed her a good fifty or sixty times, it was my right to declare “my turn.” She complied. I situated myself in the leather sling-like seat, gripped the chains from which it hung and pushed off. I could feel her hands on the small of my back as she assisted me in climbing higher in my pendulous ride. Three or four more pushes and I was reaching my limit. For safety, the little girl stepped back away from my trajectory such that her hands could then only push on my bottom, which was flying high above her head. Then, something happened: I suddenly felt very unsafe. It was as though I’d been hit with the notion that I could easily lose my grip, fall from the swing and break my neck. I panicked. At the same time, however, I knew I must never reveal my vulnerability to the girl who valued my playground expertise. I clung to the chains for dear life. I fell silent. Back and forth I sailed, back and forth with a death

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grip on the chains, picturing myself spending the rest of my life on a gurney.

It was then that I passed gas; a loud, vibrant explosion from between my buttocks, and though I was frightened at the time, I knew that the sound of my fart was very brave. The timing, though I didn't consciously plan it, was quite bold as well. It came at the top of my back swing, just as I was rising above the little girl's head in the moment her hands were again placed on my bottom for a push. She cried out, first in disbelief, then in shock and ultimately, or so it sounded, in pain. I swung forth and then back, then at the top of my back swing when directly above her, I farted again. She ran from me, crying as though I'd smacked her on the head with a stick. I imagined the tale she was telling her nanny, painting me as a pariah for letting such a statement slip out.

I was confused. I'd farted all my life up to that point and received only giggling applause from my nannies. How could it be that this little girl was running from me crying? I let the swing come to a full stop, jumped off, regained my land-legs and went to my own nanny. She was angry. She sputtered some nonsensical Spanish in my direction and marched me home.

"You are rude to do this on her head," she said to me when she finally conceded to speaking English. "You should not fart on a little girl's head."

"Why not?"

"You make them cry," she said.

"My last nanny said that everyone has gas," I said in defiance, looking off in the distance.

"I am not your last nanny. Your last nanny was a..." and on she went with Spanish words that I had not yet

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