FATE’S INSTRUMENTS
For Alice Agatha Richards (Tant Alice) whose home provided the warmth, affection and nurture I needed at age 17
With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse.
—W.H. AUDEN
Jay and I are sitting on the ward where I’m recovering after the bout of radiation I received three hours ago. I look over at him. “Jay, would I be able to lead a normal life after this?”

Silence.

He’s taking too long to answer. Caught between honesty and diplomacy. *Might as well say no.* “When did I ever lead a normal life?”

I angle my head so I can look into his eyes and hold his attention. “You never led one either.” *You’re a voluntary eunuch.*

“Paul, that’s a question for the doctors.”

I almost say: *What, eunuchs?* “Now you’re being a hypocrite. What did they tell you?”

“What they haven’t told you.”

I hold his gaze. I know when he’s lying, much like he knows when I am. He withholds information and is never able to look me in the eye. “Are you telling me the truth?”

“As much of the truth as I know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Paul, what do you want me to tell you?”

“You haven’t figured that out?”

He gulps his saliva.

“I want you to say: ‘Paul, you will be well. You will write many novels. You and I will travel to places together. We will buy a house together and maybe adopt children orphaned by the civil wars in Africa. Paul, you will take care of me in my old age.’”

He’s smiling and nodding. “Great attitude. With that spirit we’ll probably do a couple of those things.”
Two weeks after he came to stay with me, he came into the apartment one late afternoon beaming. “J’ai un poste, Pablo. Finalement!”
He’d been hired by Quebec Immigration as a Spanish translator. “Maintenant, je peux partager toutes les dépenses et rembourser mes dettes. Il n’y a plus de raisons pour que nous ne revenions pas ensemble. Tú me manques.”

I was happy for him. Happy he’d be able to send money to his mother and niece, and perhaps bring them here.

He still didn’t know about my meningioma. Because of it my life had begun to take on an inexplicable urgency. It could be malignant. I felt I did not need to be as discreet as I’d been. I decided not to let bygones be bygones and to be candid with him about his behaviour.

I told him he’d made fun of me behind my back, had entertained his friends with what went on in our bedroom. I was sitting at the dining table. He was sitting on the sofa, about three metres away.

He stared at the floor and said nothing for a while. He got up slowly, came over to me, placed his hands on my shoulders, and remained silent for more than a minute. “I am sorry. I beg you pardon,” he eventually said.

I didn’t answer. The wound was deep. Forgiving others who’ve hurt me—an issue Jay and I have talked about many times—isn’t something I do easily. It wasn’t just a question of forgiving him. Forgiveness in his case meant resuming the relationship. My body went cold at the thought of having sex with him again. The one thing I wasn’t going to talk to him about was whether or not I’d lied to him about my mother’s and grandmother’s wills. After our discussion the Labour Day Sunday, he dropped the subject.

He wanted us to reconcile, and was clumsy at saying so. It’s one thing to say that gay men obsess over gym rats and are mostly interested in the young and handsome. Quite another to tell me we should stay together because we weren’t papasitos, mangos; that he looked like a papa rhino and I like its calf; that the only place we might be able to find sex once in a while was at the sauna and we’d get lucky about one night in four, when ugly old men couldn’t find anyone else. Ouch!

Children. When Carlos and I legalized our union, I wondered if we would adopt any. That notion got quashed pretty quickly. Poor fellow. Came here and went wild with freedom. After his imprisoned sexuality in Guatemala. Now he understands what happened to him here; analyzes his own behaviour without any help from me or any psychologist. In the end, I felt he was sincere about wanting to mend the break. I could find no fault with him during the time he stayed with me. In fact, the Tuesday after Labour Day when classes started, if he hadn’t been there to push me out of the apartment, I wouldn’t have gone. And once I became engrossed in my school work, the love of learning took over. At home I even found time to work on my novel. It was nice again to come home and meet somebody there, or, if he wasn’t there, know that he would be there. I knew for certain then how much of a hole his leaving had left. He stayed in at nights. I said I hoped it wasn’t on my account. He shrugged and smiled without comment.
Going to the sauna. That’s something I should screw my courage and do if I still have any sexuality left after the thwacking this radiation is giving me. You, Paul, go to a sauna! That will be the day. Your hands and feet will be dripping sweat and you’ll begin to tremble when the first man looks into your cubicle.

“Ever went to a sauna, Jay?”
He shakes his head. “I should have?”
“Yes.”
“Why?”
“To educate yourself and tell me what it’s like.”
“Aren’t you the one educating me about sex?”

“When you came down with malaria, I said: Jay seems to be having the same experiences I had in Central America, wonder if he’s going to come back here with his own version of Carlos.” My real objective is to find out if he’s had any sexual experiences in Africa. He has told me about a whole lot of things, but not a peep about that.

“I didn’t fare as well as you. No man ever came onto a bus and asked to fondle my beard and give me his phone number. Or invite me to live with him and his mother. If I thought about it beforehand I’d have grown a beard.”
I laugh.

“But if I were as extraverted as you I might have got into a little trouble.” His eyes brighten. “In Kumasi I stayed two days in a run-down hotel, where I never saw more than one employee. There might have been others but I saw only him. I was one of two guests. The other guest—he stayed one night—was a history professor from Burkina Faso.

“The hotel employee’s name was Kwame. Thirty years old. I’d already noted how beautiful men in Accra were. But Kwame was more beautiful than any I’d seen. Within hours of meeting me he poured out his soul. He wanted to leave Ghana; life there was oppressive; every time he went back to his village his father pestered him about getting married; the last time his father took him to see a shaman who prescribed potions, because his father thought he was impotent. At this point he stopped talking and gave me a long stare. When he resumed he said: ‘I told my father—my mother and my younger brother, father of three boys, were there too; they’d brought him along to shame me into getting married—I told them I didn’t want a wife and children. I want to go away and study. I’m different. If you’re ashamed of me I’ll stop coming home.’ He stopped talking for almost a minute and stared at the floor. We were in the hotel restaurant. I was sitting at a table about two metres away. He was standing with his back leaning against the counter with the cash register. Still staring at the floor, he said: ‘I’m different. Different. If they know how different they would want to kill me.’ He lifted his eyes to see my reaction. ‘I want to leave Ghana. I want freedom. I want to go to London, or New York, or Toronto.’”

Jay takes a deep breath. He’s embarrassed. He swallows and resumes. “Later that day when I went outside to get a cab into downtown Kumasi, I met him waiting for one too—without his navy blue uniform and white apron, wearing beautifully laundered black slacks and a lilac shirt that complemented the blackness of his silk-smooth skin. He was truly stunning—palm tree straight, sleek, in every way symmetrical; intense glassy black eyes. Only flaw: no butt to speak of. When I checked out two days later, he gave me his address and begged me to write to him. When I got back here I wrote to him and wished him well in the pursuit of his dreams.”

“You’d have gained something from having sex with him: experience. He might have wanted you to, just for the experience.”

“I doubt it. It would have been wrong to take advantage of his vulnerability. Besides he was looking for a saviour.”

“I heard that all right, and know a lot about that. But you’re still alone, Jay, and will die alone if you let all these opportunities pass you by.”

“That wasn’t an opportunity, Paul. That was a trap. In the meantime life goes on.”
“It’s by falling into traps and getting out of them that we grow. I grew ten years in the nineteen months I went travelling because of the traps I fell into and extricated myself from.”

I feel suddenly nauseous. I pick up the kidney basin beside me and spit into it. Not spitting so much today. My second round of radiation. The spitting was a lot worse last week. Radiation knocked out my white blood cells too. Had to rush back here for a blood transfusion two days later.

I take several deep breaths and wait for the nausea to pass.

“No women chased you down? I hear they eagerly hunt down Western men. Once they grab your sleeve, you have hell getting away.”

“And many fall for husbands online and end up in brothels all over Europe and in Turkey. There’s a plethora of films dealing with the subject. Yet women continue to take the bait, confident that what has happened to others won’t happen to them.”

“No women, eh? You mean you’re no longer bi?” I giggle.

He shrugs.

“Time to get off the fence, Jay-boy. Time to become Jay-man. You’ve just turned thirty-one. You should have resolved all this by now.”

“It’s why you have to get better quickly—to show me how. Once upon a time I tried to be your guide. Now it’s your turn to guide me in areas where you’re the expert.”

“Cop out! Okay, would you like to go to a sauna with me when I’m over all this? Though, according to Carlos, I shouldn’t go there with you. You’ll score and I’ll be ignored. Just kidding. It’s something I wanted to do when I was under eighteen. Now, even though I’m tempted, I won’t go.”

He’s silent.

“Say something. Share your thoughts.”

“My thoughts: I have none.”

We fall silent again.

“I wonder if the fellow whose brother got killed—the Mohawk, who worked with Ma; his brother’s body was found covered with cigarette burns in the parking lot behind Place Bonaventure; you told me about it—I wonder if he and his two gay brothers did things like this together.”

“There are quite a few cases each year of men murdered by homophobes they’ve picked up, men they didn’t know before. It explains why some men choose to go to the saunas. It’s a safe place to have sex with strangers.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

He falls silent. He doesn’t like to talk about sex. I’m lucky to get this much out of him. A replica of Ma. “Jay, you’re still afraid of displeasing Ma. Right?”

He rolls his eyes and looks up at the ceiling.

“When I took you to Sky a few years ago, I told you that brothers who sin together bond better. Remember?”

“There’s nothing sinful about sex when the partners respect each other.”

“And one another?”

He frowns at me.

“More than two, Jay. Carlos, for example, loves orgies.”

“Paul, ‘Everyone cuts his cloth to suit his fit.’”

“You haven’t seen a tailor yet or bought anything off the rack for that matter.”

He chuckles.

“Ah, Jay, you just don’t want to grow up.” I sing a few stanzas of “I Don’t Want to Grow Up.”

He chuckles as I sing through the list “I-don’t-wannas.”

What would I do if my treatment team tells me my tumour’s terminal? Initially they were sure it was benign. Quite possible that they released cancer cells into the cerebrospinal fluid during surgery. They don’t seem concerned about that. They’ve ruled out chemotherapy for the time being. I’d have preferred it to this radiation. “Not so easy,” they said, “for drugs to cross the blood-brain barrier. For the time being, we’ll spare you the havoc they wreak on the body.” More havoc than this radiation is causing? They insist that my reaction is uncharacteristic. I told them that I’m worried about my sight, that I’d rather live six months with vision than two years without. In the end they
He’d found out about the surgery on October 8, three days before it happened. He’d come to my place around seven in the evening with a cheque for $200. “I begin pay you back my frais de scolarité. I know you no believe me when I tell you I pay you back. I start now.”

I shook my head and told him to pay Gúicho what he owes him, and send some money to his mother. “I might need this money down the road. Right now I don’t.” Mentally I had already agreed that the $11,000 I’d paid for his school fees would be my de facto separation settlement.

After he found work I remained firm that we wouldn’t get back together, and I persuaded him to move out — although it pained me to do so — so he could rebuild his life. His libido is huge. I opted to save both of us from the anger, frustration, or guilt he’d eventually feel when he could no longer be faithful. It’s unhealthy and ultimately futile to be at war with our physiology. “I want you to be free,” I told him. “In a relationship with me, you won’t be.” If I had known the brain tumour was malignant, would I have let him go? On October 1, he moved into a furnished studio apartment in the building adjacent to the one Bill lived in.

When I went back for a scan on October 3, the tumour had grown by two millimetres. My treatment team was alarmed and wanted to operate immediately. I told them they had to wait until my brother got home. He was in Lesotho. Those four days while I waited for Jay to arrive were difficult. I spent them mostly in bed. On evenings I went to the cinema, but hardly followed the films.

Jay arrived on October 7. I underwent surgery on October 11. The evening of October 8 when Carlos came with the money, I told him that I was having a quiet Thanksgiving because I would be having surgery on Tuesday. “Please don’t tell your friends. I’ll tell Gina myself when I’m out of the hospital. I don’t want to be overwhelmed by visitors.”

“Surgery! Why?”

“I have a small tumour in the outer membranes of my brain. Don’t worry. No es el cáncer.” I watched his eyes bulging with fear and his trembling hands. “I’ll be all right, Carlos.”

“You sure?”
He ignores me and looks at his watch. “I’ll go get my lunch so we can eat together.”

I look out the window. It’s a blustery November day. The trees around St. Joseph’s Oratory have already lost their leaves, are stripped down to stalk and bark. Last week when I came for my first round of radiation they were still golden. In a week the wind and rain changed all that. From green to gold to grey. Today their bare twigs are tossing in the wind. Wonder what winter will bring to Montreal and me. Environment Canada forecasts a colder than normal winter. It’s a la niña year. The July I arrived here, fourteen years ago, and found Montreal just as warm as St. Vincent, I couldn’t have anticipated the ice storm that struck at the beginning of January. In all my years in St. Vincent I’d never experienced anything comparable. On TV we certainly saw the damage hurricanes did to the other islands. We collected money in school to send to the victims. Can’t remember a year when there wasn’t a collection tin on the counter in Grama’s store, but St. Vincent was never struck by a real hurricane while I lived there. A category one struck last year. But it in no way resembled Ivan, the 2004 category four that flattened Grenada.

Right now they’re rebuilding the bridges and sections of highways that Tropical Storm A12 washed away in Central America, and scrambling to find food and shelter for the more than 100,000 whose homes have been flooded or destroyed. Billions in damage. Thirty killed in Guatemala. Over a hundred in all of Central America. Stan struck while I was in Guatemala and buried a lot of people alive. Ma died wondering whether it had killed me. Emilia is collecting money for Nicaraguans. I gave Carlos some for the Guatemalan Association here. Haven’t heard if Güicho is doing anything for Salvadorans. In normal times close to half of all Guatemalans are malnourished, the government says. The UN puts it at seventy percent. To have even the little you have destroyed. Fate’s harmonics. To which Central Americans seem resigned. All the same Central Americans are fatalistic. Not far beneath their feet there’s bubbling lava. Pacaya, Masaya, and Santiaguito are perpetually erupting volcanoes less than twenty kilometres from major cities. In Guatemala hardly a week passes

I nodded.
“You afraid?”
“¡En absoluto!” I shook my head.
“You know this since September 2. ¿Verdad?”
“Yes. But not about the surgery.”
He clenched his teeth, swallowed. Then asked what time the surgery was.
At 6:35 the Tuesday morning, when Jay and I arrived, we met him waiting in the hospital lobby.
I’d judged him wrongly, dismissed him as egotistical and callow. But I can’t square this and his shenanigans with Gineta. I guess he’s too easily influenced. That or his father’s assassination made him cynical or for that matter ruthless. No, he isn’t ruthless. Weak, not ruthless. It’s why he quickly abandoned the scheme Gineta put him up to. In Guatemala we’d got along well. Like school friends. Marital relationships are plunges into the dark. Some things you can only know in hindsight. You can never predict whether your individual evolutions would bring you closer or push you apart.

On the day of my surgery, apart from Jay, who spent all day at the hospital, Carlos, Gina, and Emilia were the first visitors I had after I returned to the ward. Carlos had ignored my advice not to tell them; he even told them that I didn’t want them to know. When I tried to upbraid him, he said: “Es injusto sufrir solo cuando uno tiene amigos. En este caso no tengo culpa ninguna. Quieres controlar todo. (It’s wrong to suffer alone when you have friends. I don’t feel any guilt whatsoever for telling them. You want to control everything.)”

Certainly can’t control my body. Nor can the doctors. Everything that wasn’t supposed to happen did: excessive bleeding, oedema, and what should have been benign was malignant. One of the 1,440 annual cases. The exceptionality no one wants.
earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, to be expected. Not at all puzzling once we understand the intricacies of high and low pressure, tectonic movement, the earth’s molten interior, subduction zones, etc.—all under the governance of natural forces. Nature inside me is a different matter. Cells abandon their usual function and begin to destroy my body. The what and how of it science knows. The why they speculate about. Smoking causes lung cancer, they say. And those who’ve never smoked and get it? Second-hand smoke. And the smokers who live to be octogenarians, nonagenarians and even centenarians? Good genes, good attitude, good diet, lots of exercise. These priests of physiology. Priests of religion concocted life after death to satisfy our lust for immortality, justify life’s agonies, and palliate death’s pain. They were once the diviners and healers. Now priests of physiology create their own myths to fill the voids where anxiety might fester: explanations no more scientific than the reasons we give for loving war.

Makes me think of Josephine. She came into the store breathless one afternoon and demanded to see Grama. Lucy, the shop assistant, was in the back doing some paperwork. Grama wasn’t there. She’d gone up the hill to take soup for a dying woman who had no relatives. “Sonny, tell your granny I get a’ important message for she from the other side. Tell she I coming back here at four o’clock and she is to wait right here for me.”

Grama waited. Josephine came: pale-skinned, petite, a mole the size of a pea on the tip of her nose, head swaddled in white, which meant she had some sort of office in the Spiritual Baptist religion. She asked Grama to describe her mother. Grama hesitated. Josephine insisted. “This ain’t no joke, Ma Kirton. No joke at all. It is serious.”

While Grama spoke I perused Josephine’s face, observed the tiny movements of her lips, her dilating pupils, tiny frowns, wrinkling of the lips, gentle nods. “Well, Ma Kirton, that is the same woman who come to me in my sleep. She tell me: ‘Go and tell Cynthia I say that somebody is jealous of her success and is trying to harm her.’”

I was sitting on the high stool Grama had put there for me so I could watch and listen to the shoppers. A few shoppers reproached without the earth shaking, reminding you who has ultimate power and who does not. Central Americans take it all in stride and continue to worship a divine being who they believe responds to their supplications. (“Don’t let anyone here know you’re an atheist,” my Spanish teacher warned me. “It could get you into serious trouble.”) The ancient Mayans, who lived by conquest, venerated Nature’s destruction. They held volcanoes sacred, saw them as the sun inside the earth, and paid them tribute: the same sort of tribute they expected from their conquered subjects. During the civil war the Guatemalan military found their craters useful for the corpses they dropped from their planes. “To save Guatemala from communism,” say the newspaper ads opposing all attempts to bring them to justice.

The dome of St Joseph’s Oratory, Brother André’s oeuvre, is draped in clouds. Many terminally ill people are in there right now praying in front of the crypt containing Brother Andre’s heart and hoping for a miracle. An illiterate doorman at a college whose curriculum must have mystified him. A miracle worker too, a miracle worker who became a Catholic saint last year. The drizzle obscures the steps leading up to it, or I would see people climbing them on their hands and knees. Easier than a 780-kilometre pilgrimage on foot to Santiago de Compostela. I heard a devout Catholic, voice disguised, saying on radio that he undertook it at age fifty-two to find out if he should leave his wife of twenty-seven years and become a practicing homosexual. At the prodding of the journalist, he said that he eventually decided to hold on to his marriage while leading a secret gay life outside the city he lived in. He could not, he said, bring himself to declare his homosexuality to his children. I suspect it’s people like him who climb the stairs on their hands and knees. Easier, I suppose, than vocalizing the cause. Plumbing the psychic depths of the human beast will require much more than the unravelling of the human genome. A lot more. If this tumour doesn’t maim or kill me and I finish my novel, I might penetrate a millimetre or two into that darkness.

My mind turns to my journal entry two days ago—something to this effect: Nature outside of me, following nature’s rules: storms,
Why didn’t you tell her that the woman she described wasn’t your mother?”

“Because I didn’t want her to go looking for someone else to make a fool of.”

Now I wonder. Josephine no doubt sent many people looking for the source of imaginary Obeah. But she didn’t ask Grama for payment. If there was any benefit to her work, it came from the status it gave her. She was a labourer on Laird’s estate. When Jestina, who was neighbour to Jay’s friend Millington, became possessed by multiple demons and began to attract a lot of attention, it was Mother Bernice and the Spiritual Baptists—not Father Henderson, her parents’ priest—they called upon to exorcise and drive away the demons.

Grama didn’t let me go to see it. She disapproved of what was being done to cure Jestina. She didn’t believe in demons. The chasing of the spirits took place on a Sunday. If Grama had been away I’d have asked Aunt Mercy to take me and to hide it from Grama. I’d got to go with her on a week day two weeks earlier. About twenty of us stood in the road and listened to Jestina’s voice change from an old man’s to an old woman’s to a clucking baby’s as she spouted all the obscenities that she knew: Vincentian, Jamaican, and even Black American. It was the first time I heard the expression mother fucker. She seemed to be enjoying herself. The Sunday of the attempted exorcism, I stood on our front porch and watched the minibuses full of Spiritual Baptists from all over the Leeward Coast heading up Pasture Road where Jestina lived. I watched Aunt Mercy leave. Grama was on the back porch reading. Jay didn’t go either. Next morning Aunt Mercy described the exorcism to Mr. Morris. Several pointers had come. Mother Bernice worked on dislodging the female demons and Pointer John on the male ones. “Them call the spirits them by all kind o’ funny names what I can’t even pronounce and ordered them to come outta her. And while they was doing that, the rest of us was singing and beating the sides of the house and the ground with coconut and sago branches. The last thing Mother Bernice and Pointer John do is sprinkle the ground with Dettol and turpentine.”

Tell Cynthia she must wear only black underwear, keep a black candle burning all the time, check her steps for grave dirt before she step outside, and be careful who she take gifts from. That is the message your mother give me. I didn’t know which Cynthia the message for. I didn’t even know your name is Cynthia, so I didn’t know who to tell. Then your mother come back a next night and tell me that if I didn’t deliver her message something bad will happen to me. Ma Kirton, I had to ask around to find out all the Cynthia-them so I could deliver the message. Is so I find out you is a Cynthia, and I see you is light-skinned, and the woman that give me the message is light-skinned too, and now that you describe your mother, I know the message is for you.”

Grama was silent for at least fifteen seconds. Finally she said: “Thanks for the message, Josephine. I will follow your advice and obey the instructions.”

When Josephine left, Grama said to me: “Not a word about this to anybody. You hear me?”

I nodded. “What if Josephine tells other people?”

Grama shrugged.

“Are you going to follow your mother’s advice?”

“My mother’s advice! Paul, my mother died a long time ago. And her skin was darker than yours. I got my complexion from my father. If you go looking for evil you will find enough to destroy you several times over. If you call yourself a diviner you could always convince some people that you see things they can’t.” I asked her what a diviner was; she explained it to me and then said: “Josephine would have better luck with Mercy. Maybe I should invest in black candles and black underwear, and hire her to do the divining.” She laughed then looked at me asquint. “It’s why I want you and Jay to be well educated so people won’t make fools of you.”

her for having me there. Felt that the issues discussed were too raunchy for my ears. I think I was around nine when Josephine brought her message. Grama was standing beside me, her arm around me, as if protecting me, while Josephine spoke.

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“I heard the singing all the way over where I was in Esperance,” Mr. Morris told her. “Did you all see the demons running away?”

“Teacher Morris, you want to get me in trouble, is that you want?”

For the first four days, Jestina appeared to have regained normalcy, and shoppers in the store praised Mother Bernice and Pointer John, but on the morning of the fifth day, they found Jestina’s lifeless body entangled in one of the fishermen’s seines.

After that the shoppers said that the demons had left too suddenly and unbalanced her. One woman, a Spiritual Baptist herself, was sure that Jestina’s spirit would reveal to some future mourner why she’d killed herself. I never heard Aunt Mercy or any of the shoppers in the store say that it ever did.

Mother Bernice. In my short story, I show her two-room wooden house on Main Street, perched on storey-high cement pillars, an external cement stairway without a railing. Far in the back and half-hidden by fruit trees was her mourning shrine, a small hut, where she piloted mourners. Her house was the only one of its kind remaining on Main Street. It stood out not only because it was small, two rooms, but because of the vast yard space and the two lots of land to the back where she grew sorrel, ginger, and saffron. Just before Christmas you’d see her sitting on a stool underneath her house—where she also had her kitchen, a small space fenced in with galvanized sheeting—cleaning ginger rhizomes and bagging dried sorrel, which people came to buy to prepare ginger beer and sorrel for Christmas. And she would be singing or humming:

_Sowing the precious seed_  
_Sowing the precious seed_  
_Reaping time is coming by and by_  
_Some day in glory you will find me_  
_Singing and shouting eternally._

When Jay and I returned home in 2007 to put Aunt Mercy into care, we found Mother Bernice looking after her: preparing her food, washing her clothes, and making sure that she had a bath. By then the pillars of her house had been walled in and two additional rooms added to the back. It was still small compared to most of the other houses on Main Street. She told us that Sonny’s children had visited her and given her the money to enlarge her house. “Them upbraid Sonny. Them make him shame. Now he does send me a pittance every now and again.”

Jay comes back with his food: a smoked salmon wrap, fruit salad, and coffee. I tell him that I was just thinking of Jestina, Mother Bernice, and Josephine, and ask him if he’d managed to track down his school friend Millington.

He shakes his head.

“These days with internet and Facebook, it’s easy to find priests and pastors.” Last he knew, Millington was an Authentic Methodist Church minister in Barbados.

“I’ll try to find him for you,” I say.

The food wagon stops outside the door. A scrawny East-Asian man, in white, his hair covered with a hairnet, puts a food tray on my bed table.

Jay moves his chair closer to the window so I can adjust the bed table over my armchair. Before I remove the plate cover, I smell the fish on it and I’m overcome by nausea. I point to the kidney basin on the bed. Jay reaches over and gets it for me just in time. When the heaves settle, I go to the bathroom. Since my first bout of radiation a week ago, I’ve lost five pounds. I return to sit in the armchair and watch Jay eat his lunch.

Is this how one dies? My own death is the last thing I want to think about. I turned twenty-five two days ago.

“Are you alright?” Jay asks, alarmed.

I nod. “Tell me about Africa,” I say, “about the beautiful fellow you were attracted to in Ghana.”

“There’s no more to tell. I know about his physical beauty, my interpretation of it, but I don’t know if he was truly beautiful in the
I’ve never had to think seriously about any of this. Carlos came into my life when I was on the verge of finding out and forestalled all that perilous exploration. If I get better, I’ll find out for sure. Abstinence isn’t for this cat. “I’m glad Jonathan got around to sleeping with guys. Jay, since you have to deal with his—what do you call them?”

“Post-coital blues.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you to be his lover: less work and some pleasure?”

“I seem to think we’ve had this conversation about casual sex before: the Sunday after your return from Guatemala.”

“Don’t remember. But if we did, you didn’t take my advice. I took the advice you gave me regarding Carlos. Remember? You told me to be patient with him, to understand the frustrations he would face as an immigrant in a strange environment without his family?”

He nods, presses his lips tightly, and swallows.

“Well, you see what came of that. But I don’t care anymore. I’ll be dead soon anyway. At least I hope so. I don’t want to live with a damaged brain. This shouldn’t be happening to me. It’s the only gift I’ve got from life. Now she’s taking it away.”

He comes to sit on the armrest and puts his arms around me and rocks me gently. “Cheer up, man.” I feel the convulsions, next the warmth of the tears rolling down my cheeks.

I hate being like this. When the convulsions stop, I say: “Thanks. I’ll try to control my emotions better.”

“It’s all right, Paul. It’s a raw deal all right. Don’t worry about my feelings.” He reaches over to the bedside table for a couple of tissues and hands them to me.

“I’ll try to control my emotions better.”

“It’s all right, Paul. It’s a raw deal all right. Don’t worry about my feelings.” He reaches over to the bedside table for a couple of tissues and hands them to me.

“Thanks. I’ll try to control my emotions better.”

“We both laugh.

“No laughing matter. Jonathan says they always afflict him the morning after a pickup. Says it’s an empty feeling that comes on immediately after the orgasm and worsens as the guy goes out the door; and he knows that next day or next week, if they run into each other they might not even acknowledge that they know each other.”

“So he picks up guys. He’s not an abstainer like you!”

He continues as if he didn’t hear my comment. “Once they’ve bedded you, you’re like the deer that’s been caught and eaten. They’re on to other prey.”
“When we get home I want you to rent a few comedies. Things that will make me laugh, keep down the nausea, and help me eat.” I feel the tears filling my eyes again as the weight of what’s happening in my body refuses to leave.

My mind turns to my first meeting with Bill in his office at Concordia. He seemed so confident, so sure of himself. Little by little I discovered his insecurities. So candid about needing Chai and others. We know what we would like to do, but will is only one element in this inscrutable colossus we call self. Then again, we pare ourselves, even damage our psyches, to hide those traits that displease others. What Freud calls civilization’s discontent. I try to envisage Bill as a younger man. On the gay desirability index he was one rung above bottom. Visibly androgynous. Walked with a wiggle. In St. Vincent he’d have been harassed the way Job and Neil were. When I met him he had a skinny slouching frame, a protuberant belly, bandy legs, and a gawky look. His nose formed a humungous ridge in his narrow face; his sad hazel eyes, deep in their sockets, were ringed with wrinkles. His piping voice made people turn to see who was speaking. A target for sexual exploiters and bullying homophobes. He came of age when homophobia was legal. He never spoke to me much about this. Not easy to talk about. You relive it. And you’d be baring yourself to the listener, who’d think you were begging for sympathy. Never a good feeling. I’d felt so ashamed of myself after I dumped my sorrow on him. He comforted and reassured me. Not sure if he’d had anyone to do that for him. I’d wanted to ask him about that while he was dying, but felt it would evoke painful memories.

Jay gets up to put the wrapping from his meal in the garbage bin. “Have my food,” I tell him. “I can’t eat it. Should have asked for Gravol before.” I think of having the small cup of apple juice, but the thought turns my stomach queasy. I press my buzzer, and tell the nurse who answers to bring me Gravol.

Jay picks up the book he brought with him this morning. Daddy forbade Ma to read anything but the bible to him. Grama corrected that. How did she manage to rise above her culture? Must have been because of the books she’d read. I wonder if Jay understands how exceptional she was. What would our lives have been like if we’d lived with Daddy? If we hadn’t had her? We were lucky. Jay less than I. What if Ma hadn’t walked out of her abusive marriage? Daddy would have dragged us off almost every evening to the villages around Georgetown to “win souls for Christ.” By the time we got to adolescence our backs would have been scarred from the welts left by his and teachers’ straps. There are five on Jay’s back.

I remember what Grama said when she and Jay discussed “Among School Children”: that in her school they memorized facts, like William the Conqueror conquered England in 1066; that they sang Rule, Britannia, Britannia, Rule the Waves and did not know they were praising Britons for enslaving Africans; that they were tested annually by the inspector of schools. In the early years he was a white man from England. After the inspector left the headmaster flogged those students who’d failed: the girls in their hands, the boys over their backs, and bloodstains would later show on the backs of the boys’ shirts. The flogging continued down to my time. Before I went to school in town I remember Jay coming to the shop one day with blood on his shirt. He refused to tell Grama why. He had fever and was put to bed. Aunt Mercy stayed with him. Grama held my hand and we went up the hill to where Millington lived. She asked Millington what had happened to Jay in school. He said that Jay had had ague and the teacher had flogged him for getting his math problems wrong. The teacher, Mr. Branch, lived where Havre bordered Laird’s estate. Grama and I took a shortcut along a muddy track to his house, one with two-rooms. A woman was in the yard tossing corn to chickens. Grama called out to Mr. Branch from the road. He came to the door. She told him: “If you put your hand on Jay again, it will be the grave for you and the gallows for me. You hear me? You beat a child unable do his work because he’s sick! What sort of brute are you? I wouldn’t hire you to look after cattle, never mind children.”

And so she sent me to Excelsior, where children weren’t beaten, and the brighter they were the harder they were made to work. She intervened once at Excelsior. I was in junior three at the time, and
He snorts.
I wish I could get into that head of his to know what he’s thinking. For a while we say nothing. He gets up, stretches and sits again. It seems as if he’s gained a few pounds.
“Come closer,” I say.
He does and I put my hand on his flanks and tap his sides. “You’re getting love handles, Jay.”
“But I don’t weigh a gram more. It’s flab.”
“You should go to the gym. Why don’t you? Afraid you’ll look so good, guys and girls would chase you down?”
He shakes his head. “You’re over-obsessed with looks and sex. Life’s a lot more than that.”
“Wrong. Life is about sex. Your kind of sex when you meet your woman.” I chuckle. “As long as there’s an orgasm in the offing, male praying mantises don’t mind being eaten. Life is the end-product of sex—some might even see it as the dregs of sex.”
“Well, dregs of sex or not, I won’t be creating any.”
“You won’t be having children! That’s new.”
Come on. I already told you that bit about wanting children and a wife was to put Jonathan off. But we have to help to feed some of the starving children around the globe. You see what’s happening right now in Somalia?
“And how do you get those who survive the famine to stop their irresponsible breeding? Catholicism and Islam urge them to breed.”
He shakes his head. “You’re over-obsessed with looks and sex. Life’s a lot more than that.”
“Wrong. Life is about sex. Your kind of sex when you meet your woman.” I chuckle. “As long as there’s an orgasm in the offing, male praying mantises don’t mind being eaten. Life is the end-product of sex—some might even see it as the dregs of sex.”
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“Come on. I already told you that bit about wanting children and a wife was to put Jonathan off. But we have to help to feed some of the starving children around the globe. You see what’s happening right now in Somalia?”
“And how do you get those who survive the famine to stop their irresponsible breeding? Catholicism and Islam urge them to breed.”
He doesn’t reply.
“Catholicism and Islam don’t feed them.”
“If we accept the golden rule we can’t let others suffer when we have the means to help them. Remember, children are not responsible for their parents’ stupidity.”
“You’re right. In Guatemala, I found it surreal watching fifty-year-olds and six-and-seven-year olds competing for shoes to shine in the parks. Some days not even making enough for a meal. When these youngsters become teenagers and see their future in these fifty- and sixty-year-old men ... Just imagine if we’d been born into those circumstances. What would you have done in their place, Jay?”
“I don’t know. In Africa, it was more children selling in the markets instead of going to school.”

“It’s why many Central Americans become pandilleros, and live by extortion ... If instead of sending you to school, your mother has been taking you since you were six or seven years old to pick coffee so that she could earn enough for tortillas and beans, and every day you walked by the finquero’s mansion, cars, and dogs better cared for than you — how would you feel? Many of those workers are Mayan, and they know that the land the finquero calls his own was taken by force from their ancestors. Can you blame them for wanting to take it back?”

Jay stares at me, the fork in his brow quite visible. “There are guerrilla fighters in Latin America and Africa who say they are doing that. But the peasants whose crops they destroy and whose children they rape or kidnap and turn into killers might want to differ. I’m not discounting their legitimate grievances, but I don’t countenance the remedy.”

The distraction has helped. Forms of misery different from my own. I look at my watch. It’s 2:03 p.m. I press my buzzer and ask to talk to Harriet, who is caring for me.

She comes and I ask her around what time I’ll leave. After a long pause, she says she doesn’t know, that Dr. Cantor will have to give the all-clear before I can go home. I ask what time he’ll come by.

She says: “Sometime before five.”

“But I want to leave now.”

She frowns and gestures that it’s out of her hands. She leaves.

Jay picks up the book from the trolley. He buys so many books he’ll soon run out space in in his apartment to put them. Suits me fine. I get to read them without having to buy them. He’s reading an author I don’t know: A.S. Byatt, “Read me a passage,” I say. He reads, and in the passage I recognize the lines from Tennyson that Byatt’s character is quoting.

“The style’s so antiquated,” I say.

“That’s the point. The story takes place in Victorian England. So the characters use Victorian diction and syntax. From what I’ve seen so far it’s about the tension between religious faith and science, with a heavy helping of romance thrown in. It’s an ideas novel for the most part. It’s your field.”

“Is there violence in it?”

“So far I’ve only seen it in one character.”

“Wonder what Bram would think of it. He’d be sceptical if there isn’t violence. He cites Freud all the time. Says good fiction is an oblique inquiry into the human condition, and because sex and violence are the engines of life, writing that elides them — elide, his word — is dishonest. One day he brought in a copy of the film Naked for us to watch to illustrate what he meant by honesty. I think he enjoys watching people squirm.

“‘Angels and Insects.’ Interesting title. Forget about angels, and I’m not being sarcastic. My comment’s based on biology. Did you see that Nova programme ‘What Darwin never Knew’?”

“No.”

“Well, if it is to be believed, all land creatures evolved from a single species that came out from the water. And all the genes of that creature have been passed on, to be turned off or on in specific species depending on the demands of the environment and eons of survival selection. You know what I think? Since we are at the top of the evolutionary chain, we embody the genetic codes of every creature that is below us, either in the decodable genes — the genome — or in the remaining mass of DNA. Those Wall Street bankers who’ve plunged us into this economic crisis and put hundreds of thousands of people out of their homes and tens of millions out of work are no different from bees and ants that expel their unwanted members to die when their services are no longer needed.”

“I think Byatt would agree with you. The novel mentions those ants.” He takes a deep breath and fidgets. He’s signalling that I should change the subject.

“Depressing topic, right?”

He doesn’t respond.

“I know, I know. I should be thinking of comic stuff, but I can’t. I’ll leave you to read quietly. I’ll lie down for a while and try to doze.”
I lie down. My mind plays with the idea that if these therapies don’t work, horror and death are waiting. I am twenty-five and cancer strikes—just when I am trying to make up for wasted time. I shiver. Tears follow. My back is turned to Jay. I’m glad he isn’t seeing any of this. It’s unjust for him too, a cruel way to spend the half-year sabbatical he took in order to travel. Now the rest of his time will be spent learning to care for a brother undergoing radiation therapy. I bring my lower arm up to my eyes and sop the tears with the sleeve of my hospital gown then turn around to face Jay.

He looks across at me, frowns, and says: “You’re crying.”
I shake my head.
He gets up and pulls his chair closer to the bed and puts his hand on my wrist.
“Tell me the honest truth, Jay. Don’t you at times wish I hadn’t been born?”
He scowls. “What sort of question is that?”
“In your place, I would.”
“Well, that’s why I’m Jay and you’re Paul.”
“I don’t have the right, Jay. I don’t have the right.”
“Quiet, Paul.”
“Taking up your time like this. I’ve been doing this since I was five. You should be pissed.”
“Don’t tell me how I should be. “
“You’re too good. You should be angry with me. I want you to be angry with me. I would feel better if you were.”
“Right now you seem angry enough with yourself.”
“You’re right. Stoicism is not my strongest trait ... I should take up Olinski on the offer to see a counsellor before these feelings shatter my sanity. You’re nodding. You agree.” Maybe you should see one too. All that calm—you should find out what’s beneath it. I remember how I was never able to make him angry. “You amaze me, you know that? You amaze me.”

He shrugs.
“Jay, I don’t want to die. I don’t want to become a vegetable. If I was going to die, it should have been when I wanted to—while I was in high school. I travelled and I lost my death wish. And then I met Carlos. A disaster. Jay, I want to write at least one novel before things worsen. I don’t want my life to be useless.”
“You’re not sure things will worsen.”
“What would I have done, if you weren’t here?”
“Carlos would have done his best.”
I nod. Yes that part of him surprises me. “He may yet have to, to spell you. Remember how it was with Bill: the CLSC during the day, I in the early evening, you at night?”

His face is taut.
“The wrong topic. Right?”
“Go on, talk. Doesn’t mean I agree with you.”
“As soon as I get home, I’m going to phone Gélinas.”
“Why?”
“To make my will. Brain tumours can be unpredictable.”
“And who will you be phoning about your will to live?” He snickers.
“Don’t mind what I say. I have plenty of that. Triple, quadruple what I had as teenager. Nowadays, gathering material for my novel, I spend long hours mulling over my life in St. Vincent. In spite of my asthma, I had a superb life. Even at Cousin Alice’s house. I had so much fun at school. In Junior five, when I finished my work ahead of time, I helped the junior two teacher correct her students’ work; sometimes I tutored the junior one students who were having trouble learning to read. Later you and I at the library; on the weekends and school holidays back home at Grama’s chewing sugar cane on the back porch, the juice running down our elbows, heaps of chewed fibre beside each of us. One time—I couldn’t have been more than seven—I stripped down to my shorts and turned the garden hose on myself, and Aunt Mercy gave me a tongue-lashing, saying it would cause my asthma to flare up. Remember that, Jay?”

He shakes his head, seems himself to be in deep thought.
“But the best part of it—truly the best part—know what it was? The days in the shop, listening to Grama’s customers commenting on what was going on around them and in the rest of the world. Some
but now I see beyond gender and think only of companionship; just be honest with her—or him—from the start."

"Put that in your will when you make it: ‘To Jay I bequeath the right to share his life with a woman or a man and to be always honest and happy.’"

We both laugh.

"I am managing all right, Paul. The psyche has its own rules that no one, not even psychologists, understands. I think I’m doing quite well, all things considered. And don’t worry about your care. I’m sure you’d be better by the time I return to work. In the worst of all scenarios, we’d simply use the money we’ve inherited to pay for your care. After paying my bills, I always have a little left over from my salary. And since travelling through Africa, that little has become a lot more, because all sorts of things that I thought were essential, I saw that they weren’t and now I bypass them."

"Like what?"

"Owning lots of expensive clothing which I hardly ever wear, lubricating my skin with expensive creams . . . going to expensive restaurants."

"Restaurant owners and workers won’t appreciate that. Neither will our governments: less sales tax. You’re not helping the local economy. Your spending keeps people working."

He shrugs. "I wouldn’t have even bought the condo I have. I’d have bought something further away from downtown for a few thousand dollars less, and it wouldn’t have a Jacuzzi."

"No need to feel guilty over being comfortable. They’re the little hugs we give ourselves. Look how hard Ma worked and how little she gave herself. So if we get her pension and insurance money and have a comfortable life, it’s nothing to feel guilty about. Granddad brownnosed enough for the money that set Grama up in business. They paid their dues, Jay, they did."

"And we must pay ours."

"You should talk. Look where I am and the state I’m in."

"How do your health problems square with world hunger and preventable diseases? You’re missing my point. It doesn’t matter who of it plain foolishness. And I could always question Grama about what I didn’t understand. She never missed an opportunity to feed my curiosity and make me feel wanted."

"You’re sure you’re not seeing the past as better than it was?"

"No. You only understand how privileged you were when you see how in many places children are a burden, burdens to be loaded onto others, or tools to make money, or satisfy the desires of the ruthless and perverted."

He does not comment. For a long time we say nothing.

"Grama gave me confidence … I came here and it vanished, and I became like a pebble that everyone kicked around."

"Really? In Ma’s house you were a tsunami threatening every moment to drown us."

"Ma couldn’t protect me, you couldn’t protect me, the principal couldn’t protect me. Sleep-walking, pissing my bed. If Grama knew this would have happened would she have sent me here? Remember that poem I sent to Mrs. Bensemana? Because of the attention I knew it would get me. Remember that? Imagine me, a fourteen-year-old, inviting my teacher to have sex with me.”

Jay is silent, the fork in his brow pronounced.

“I remember you back in St. Vincent, quiet and sombre. When I came back from travelling, you said: ‘Paul, when Ma fled Daddy’s house and didn’t carry me with her, it left a hole inside me, and it only half-filled when I came to join her in Canada.’ I wrote that statement down in my journal. I understood then why back in St. Vincent you always looked so unhappy. And your personality hasn’t changed. It’s as if you don’t expect to find happiness anywhere, as if you expect betrayal, and can’t risk trusting anyone.” He’s staring at me intensely. “Surprised I know you so well. Right?”

The fork in his brow deepens and the furrows move further up his forehead. He snorts. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“It’s all I have to say. Well not all. When my relationship with Carlos was going well, those were happy days. I want you to experience something like that; even better: a relationship that lasts. If anyone deserves it, it’s you. I used to think you should be with a man, but now I see beyond gender and think only of companionship; just be honest with her—or him—from the start.”

"Put that in your will when you make it: ‘To Jay I bequeath the right to share his life with a woman or a man and to be always honest and happy.’"
Harriet comes at 4:17, takes my blood pressure and gives me the okay to leave, reminds me about being hydrated, to make sure I have Gravol on hand and to rush to the emergency here if any unusual side effects develop. She talks, staring alternately at Jay and me, implying that he should make me carry out her orders.

We leave. It’s almost 5 p.m.; rush hour has started. I think of the smells in the metro. Now meat, fish, or egg smells make me want to retch, and perfumes and colognes in the minutest amounts cause me to wheeze and my chest to tighten. Two mornings ago the smell of bacon came through the ventilator in my apartment, and I vomited until my stomach was all that was left to come up. Before this it was always touch and go in small spaces crammed with people. Three months ago I chanced it to the Comedy Nest at the Forum; halfway through the performance I began to wheeze and had to leave. “We have to take a cab home,” I tell Jay when we get to the lobby. This is getting to be expensive.

When we get inside the apartment, I say: “I’m taking a dose of choral hydrate and heading straight to bed.”

“First try sleeping without it.”

“You don’t understand. I want to sleep for as long as I can — until after sunrise tomorrow morning.”

He says nothing.

“Perhaps not even wake up.”

He frowns and scratches his upper lip with his right forefinger and pretends not to hear me.

“Fine. You can pretend. You’re not the one whose life is hanging in the balance. This murderous shit in my body is what I wake up to every fucking day! Each week I go and they fill me with deadly shit to fight other deadly shit.” I drop heavily onto the sofa. Jay sits beside me and puts his hand on mine.

After sitting there silently for about ten minutes, I remove his hand. “Thanks. It must be hard for you too.” I remember his cry for freedom in 2007 when I proposed that we continue living together.

“Why the frown?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

earned what or did what. We don’t have the right to gorge while others starve. I’m not speaking specifically of myself, but of all of us — society as a whole.”

“So you want to live like those folks who devote themselves to — what do they call it? — voluntary simplicity, and give your extra income to the NGOs who pay themselves hefty salaries and give crumbs to the people they say they’re helping?”

“That’s an unfair generalization.”

“Don’t you hear the stories about food aid being sold in markets in Somalia, about guerrilla groups intercepting the food, about the huge sums celebrities receive for the fundraising campaigns they undertake, about the affluent lifestyle recipients of cancer research money lead: jet-setting around the world, staying in five-star hotels? There was this woman who lived in Laird’s Shanty who used to stand outside Grama’s store and sell the soy milk the clinic gave her to supplement the nutrition of her children.”

“Let’s change the subject. You won’t convince me. You’re not seeing the whole picture.”

Dr. Cantor arrives. He’s in his early thirties. He wears thick lenses that make his eyes seem cavernous. The top of his head is completely bald; elsewhere his hair is raven black, including his very thick beard and moustache. He’s a trifle taller than I and has massive shoulders and bulging biceps—definitely spends a lot of time at the gym. He smiles at me, nods at Jay, picks up the clipboard with my chart, and writes on it. He puts the chart back onto the trolley and asks how I feel.

So-so, I gesture. “ Couldn’t eat lunch. Felt nauseous.”

“I see you got Gravol earlier.”

“Too late to make a difference.”

“I could let you go home now, but you must try to eat when you get home. And drink lots of fluids. Or you could stay here for another two-three hours and let us run an intravenous.”

I shake my head. “I prefer to go home.”

“Okay. Harriet will do a final check and then you’ll go.”

He writes a prescription for more Gravol, and then leaves.
I go into my bedroom, pick up my journal, sit in the armchair, and begin writing in it:

There are days when all this writing, especially of my novel, seems futile. Today is one of them. While we boarded with Cousin Alice, Jay joked once that if at birth I could have chosen between Ma’s nipple and a book, I’d have chosen the book. Now I wonder how much sustenance there is in books. Helpless now anyway. Beyond satiating our curiosity is there anything more? In Gravity’s Rainbow, there’s a section where Pynchon’s narrator is exploring the loss of innocence that literacy brings to a community that’s now under Soviet influence. Right now books and their ethereal knowledge feel like a burden. If the end of knowledge is to solve problems, the time I’ve spent amassing it has been wasted, and reading has turned out to be just another addiction. If we faced the truth, we’d admit that we are hardly more than what our senses are assessing—the eye mostly, with the other senses subserving or complementing it. Immediate reality is that point, real or imaginary, that the eye fixes on, oblivious to all else. It’s true that what our senses apprehend is mediated by what we already know. But even that knowledge is restricted in its usefulness, depending on whether it was acquired abstractly or practically—a point those who argue for hands-on education have been making strenuously since John Dewey.

At some level we fear that we are nothing, and do the utmost to convince ourselves otherwise—via offspring, via the records we leave behind, via belief in an afterlife. When the offspring go, we’ll still be swallowed up in the oblivion of time. Unless we are a Shakespeare, a Shelley, a Michelangelo, an Auden, or a Leonardo da Vinci and leave stellar works behind us—but they’re no substitute for the living self. If the gods had offered them a choice between art and eternal youth, I have no doubt which they would have chosen. Longfellow urges us to emulate great men and put footprints on the sands of time. He must have known some would do so by being Hitlers, Stalins, Pol Pots. And what’s the value of footprints after we’re dead! At its nadir living is finding activities that distract us from the weight of time. And if we think that some activities, intellectual pursuits, for example, are better, it’s only because we’ve been manipulated into thinking so.

And as to the belief that we will live again after death, it’s a wilful turning of our faces away from the decay that inheres in nature and sustains nature. “Humankind cannot bear much reality.” I’m with Tennyson’s Lotus Eaters: Why should we alone toil ... And make perpetual moan, / Still from one sorrow to another thrown ... ?

I close the journal and get up to take my pills, and I’m tempted to take them all and might have done so if I were alone. Jay would intervene before they take effect. I see now why doctors want someone to be with us at such times.
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