

low; I have been remaindered against my will. Yet it is the same me as always, same me that once sold, only less of me now, and going for cheap. One can see this helps nothing. She got her story and was done with me. So: she's not buying. My head, she says on page 216, "is not all right." Though, in her defense, I use this quote out of context somewhat.

rappity tapitty tap

My father says not to funnel things. He says this. It makes for a messy affair, he says. Nothing is so simple. Pressure always builds and/or there is a backlog or something. Really awful, anyway. So we are not to take something large and make it small. There is simply no sense in this business, he says. This bad, messy business. Funneling.

Once, I laughed at this. At my mother's birthday party. My father, the eternal magician, appeared with flowers and a present. And words. The man wouldn't stop talking. So I was gestured to stay with him. My mother spent much of the evening in her bedroom with her sister. I was fourteen and not good company. My father spat on the driveway. The present was promptly thrown away. My mother took it upon herself to do something. She had her stomach pumped the next morning.

Funnels *are* a joke.

True blame requires memory examination, trouble and sorrow. And despite its apparent gloom, such is not entirely bad. Such gives me a purpose, a reason to be especially good in the coming weeks so that I can look through my journals. Yes! And with this, a flash of a thought: "Remembering is good if you don't let it be the fear in you."

MEMORY 17: *That thing of things. (And dreaded.)*

I consult the records for verification.

August 20 [the year we met]

Note to self: I'm pretty sure this girl occupies my mind because she is, as of late, the prettiest girl I've seen.

Yes, yes! Indeed here lies a staggering *no*. Somehow, I keep turning back to this, over and over and over—and yet, I do not buy this rationalization. All the paperwork in the world wouldn't convince me this was an exogenous love. Long before I met her, I had her in mind and settled on her as the focus of my love. She was always intangibly more than a curio, so there really is no answer here, no single words, only theories. Mine. The Professor's. My friends'. No true articulation of why she is what she is. Yet all agree she is something. Yes! of that there is no denying.

M: Something. Something . . .

A testament to this: the first time I saw her I about died. I about died and the moment she was gone I found myself drowning in air. Glorious trauma! I had no need for swimming lessons before that day. I never breathed before her. That was my natal moment.

This is a diary of love.

Before her book

Before anything, M. and I lived in the same city. It was nowhere, yet all our lives we attended different schools. I should have never met her—the system was aware of this from

the beginning—but even they were unable to protect me from myself. The law made nothing perfect. So I took a job at Johnson's. The local Opera House Theatre.

Without fail, M. came each weekend with her friends to see some new film. I used to make time to watch her watch the movies. Then, later, I would watch the same film myself, in the seat next to where she had sat.

One day I decided to be brave

•

My first encounter with M:

Waved to her. Did not talk.

Later:

Pretended I did.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

(From stage right, a young man in his late teens enters the fold.)

THE ME OF THE PAST
Behold as I embolden myself for M.!

(He smiles and sets fast to work.)

That night I felt compelled to write in my journal that she and I had talked, at length, about a great many and fascinating things, and that she found me, most certainly, extremely engaging. I was sure that following a healthy duration I would dissolve real reality with my contrived journalistic efforts. The latter of which would give me immense self-pride and pleasure. Given enough time and the nature of the human mind, I would transform into a man other than myself: someone M. could love. And in this instance I was convinced *could* meant *would*. (Poof!) A certain magic.

Lost in this, I had for the first time—in monument form—a motive in my life.

Facts

I saw her speaking with a group of boys.

Later that night, as M. and her gang were leaving the theater, I managed to catch a few words with one of her friends. What I said was stupid (as hell), but girls, it appears, even now, sometimes don't care. And I was flowers and puppy dogs that night. Flowers and puppy dogs! A few weeks later, M. and I were going to dances, seeing movies together.

Do you see, don't you see?

I should have stuck to the script.

The time I went to John's house

I wish I never went to John's house.

We watched TV for a bit, then went up to his room. He wanted to show me something—the very reason I came over—a *very big deal*: he had just bought the new *Superman* in which Clark, after 50 years of sporting unsporty glasses and a different haircut, reveals to Lois that he is, in fact, no other than Superman. Poor Lois. Poor ace. How she let that one escape her, I'll never know—but that's not really the story here. The story is, I can't remember if John ever actually showed it to me or not. Between one of his walls and a nearby desk he must have had 8,000 pictures of this girl I knew who went to another school—she lived across the street from my grandmother, and as children we played together quite often. In any case, I had a good idea of what he did with those pictures. When I returned home, I destroyed every picture of M. I had ever cut out of the newspaper.

Transparent Courage

September 17 [the year we split]

Someone said something. I listened. Yes, yes. Sound advice, indeed. Sure I can do that. Thank you. Someone left and left me feeling inspired. Finally something I can believe in. Motivation in hesitation. Nothing could be more perfectly perfect:

I'll become a ghost.

There but not. And ever haunting.

Out of sight, into mind!

So when M. finally decides to, I'll let her conjure me up.

Anniversary

The night of our 100th kiss:

I expressed a concern that this needed to be special. She seemed unable to move past the idea that I had *really* been keeping track and that I was not simply inventing this to impress her (though the term she used was *vex*). It took some work but she agreed to my plan and we held the kiss, awkwardly, for some 100 seconds (me, holding a stopwatch in my hand). I failed to consider most anything beforehand, and with the kiss came the realization that every little thing about this was awkward: the breathing, the eye contact, the checking of the stopwatch. When M. came to the same conclusion, she unleashed a violently splendid chuckle that almost cost us the kiss. The best part—by far!—was M.'s attempt at explaining this discovery: muffled words, her very thoughts, passing directly through my mouth.

Affection

It was our second date we became murderers. She was driving my car and we were but three blocks from her house when it happened.

What there was, was a cat lying about the middle of the street.

We would have swerved out of the way, but there was a car coming from the other direction, and with no headlights. We were actually but a hairsbreadth away from something far worse. I recognized this immediately. But what-ifs don't cure the pain of what-happeneds, and M. took it pretty hard. She cried and cried uncontrollably. I said I'd be back and went door-to-door trying to locate the owners. I was prepared to give them money. I must have had a hundred bucks on me. Or more. But I never did find them.

When I returned to the car, M. was still crying. We didn't go out that night or in the week that followed.

As I pulled into her driveway, she looked at me for the first time since the incident. She put her hand to my face—the first time she'd ever touched it—and traced my jaw-line with dream-slowness. God! What a night for hyphens!

"I'm sorry," she said. "You probably think I'm awful now. But I'm not. I don't mean to be. I'll make it up to you. I promise. Are you free tomorrow?"

Simple

Professor tried telling me there is reason behind simple things. Grass does more than blow in the wind, he said. *Much more*. I stepped to the window, but couldn't see it. He wasn't surprised, he said, and walked away mumbling something about cutting eyeteeth.

"What kind of expression is that?" I asked.

"A good one," he said, and began his exit.

I stayed at the window, searching. "The eyes are used for seeing," I said.

"I want you to see this doctor friend of mine."

This was the first Professor ever mentioned such a thing to me. "You're asking me to see to see a doctor?" I said.

He patted me on the back, made me feel better for about two seconds. "I want you to see a friend," he said. He smiled and smiled. He said, "But yes," and went home to his wife.

From what I could tell by the red-and-white rotating pole outside the office, this doctor friend was no doctor at all, but a barber. And, confirmed by looking through the window, a woman. Still she ran a test or two. Mostly she asked questions. All kinds. And it was during the misty midst of which she suggested we go for a drive.

We kept circling and circling, swirling through sameness. Blocks, faces, buildings—all broken. All circling and swirling. And her: persisting I talk about women—as if one thing had something to do with the other.

“You really are a love sick pup,” she said. And though her tone was different, I remembered my second-grade teacher calling me stupid.

I said thank you.

She kept looking at me instead of the road. “So what is it you find particularly attractive in a woman?” she asked. “Breasts? Eyes? Personality? I know there’s something. Child bearing hips? The curve of a back? You can really help me here, if you want. There has to be something.”

I feigned a smile as a sunburnt old man on a stoop flipped us the bird—we were driving by for the fourth time. I wasn’t surprised she missed it.

“What good is this going to do?” I asked.

Her tongue glided over her lips, “Who’s the doctor here?”

At the end of such fun, we returned to her office/shop. No sooner did I take a seat than she vanished to another room. I could not discount the possibility she had left in order to get, as so many television shows have taught me, more comfortable. I could never consent to

what luridness might follow, but . . . all the same, just being there, what would M. think?
Not good things, for sure. For sure, not good things.

Then—

From the corner of my eye, a plaque materialized. A shining golden stamp in its lower right corner. All of it calling to me. Upon closer examination, I found it to be a certificate from some type of institution I had never heard of—in addition to being a barber, she was apparently a practicing etiologist. I had to ask what it meant. This she explained through the wall, the only yelling in my life to ever clear any tension.

A moment later she returned wearing, thankfully, the same horribly uncomfortable clothes she had on earlier and carrying with her a bowl of fruit. “Apple?” She smiled.

“No thank you,” I said.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You sure?”

I grinned, shaking my head. “I’m strangely still sure.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, “but you’re really missing out.” She set the bowl down on a small coffee table and grabbed one for herself. Took a huge, loud, obnoxious bite. Slurring as she chomped: “Really, really missing out.”

She kept at that apple, and then another one, and somewhere in there she said everything pointed in the same direction. My case, apparently, was not hard to diagnose.

“Not hard at all,” she said, “and this is to be good. It will give you some ground upon which to start. And you’ll *certainly* need that.” She handed me a notebook with some

scribbled words on it. “Perpetual Depression,” she assured, tapping beneath her script as if I couldn’t read, “formed from Perpetual Deception.”

“Does it really need capitalization?” I asked.

She frowned. “Well, yes,” she said, lowering her head with the trained descending angle of a disappointed parent, “it is rather serious.”

So that was the prognosis, my lot. “And with no cure,” she added. She shook her head slowly, slowly and seemed to expect me to say or do something. I stared and stared. And amidst all the staring I think I was nodding too; all I could see was the past. Parhelic bursts of technicolor. I said some thanks and left. Sitting in my car was no better.

The radio reminded me that M. had paved the shit out of my paradise.

Or I had done it for her.

Yes, I had done it for her.

Shoo, bop bop bop bop. Shoo, bop bop bop.

As the music played on, I could see there were children down the street building a rather muddy snowman. Crazy: there was no difference to them between the snow-speckled dirt they played with and the perfect snow we hadn’t had for days. They took that snow and smiled and built wonderful things with it. And as they did so a second group of children walked by and laughed and threw snowballs at the mudman. After what I assume was a cruel exchange of words, one of the new arrivals made a charge at the artificial man, tearing through the middle hump, and utterly destroying him. These new and mean children high-fived the results and left. Yet the original pair did not cry. They looked at each other and

pointed about and immediately set to work building another Frosty. I must have gone four days without sleep after that.

I want to lift things up the same as them, I do; but this dog's paws are too heavy for anything sleight of hand.

Bowling with M. (and her friends)

Strikes were rewarded with piercing shrieks. Gutter balls with tap dancing. In between and always, singing. Wonderful and prophetic renditions of Hall and Oates. Humming of verses complete with imaginary drums. Always breaking out in the end: "*Go back to school, it's a bad situation. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. What you want is . . .*"

Calling

M. asked me to go to church with her, so I went; I gave it a chance; I took a good look; it made me mad. I have never seen such a collection of fakes in my life. Everyone was so nice and so good and so in love with God. So I despised it. These people weren't real—but I've seen the real ones. They treat their kids like crap in stores, go to bars on weekends, and cheat on their wives. And more. Yet come Sunday, make a production out of loving God. So I quit going. I don't need to surround myself with people like that, and I don't need Church to worship. We talk. He knows that I love Him. M. doesn't know why I stopped. I thought it better that way. I'd rather see her happy. I much prefer she think me an atheist than have to

argue with her over something she is so passionate about, no matter how much I want to scream to her that maybe some faith would do them good.

MEMORY 48: *The mystery, continued*

We were sitting on beanbag chairs, her hair pulled back in a ponytail—something she almost never did, something that made me crazy. The gazelle neck showing . . . She was staring at me, too.

“Look at this,” she said, meaning her hair as she flipped it about. “Seriously. And we’re not even horsing around.”

I spent the next hour not getting the joke as we watched TV. At the end of which time—

“What’s your favorite 19 letter word?”

“I,” and I stopped to think for a moment, “don’t have one.”

“Gobbledygoo,” she said.

But I didn’t. I said, “I don’t.”

She stood up. Turned the TV off. Her look was that of a child whose parents fight in an adjoining room. “Liar,” she said.

She went to her room and slammed the door, hard.

I walked home.

The greatest smile

One time before her mom passed we were at the hospital. M. was sitting with her when I happened to catch it. I waited in the hall with her brother and only saw it for a split second through the door window—her hand swiftly raising up and hiding it. All I have is that moment, and the angle could have been better. I don't know what her mother said, and, given the circumstances, I didn't exactly inquire. I'd never seen M. smile like that.

Complications

M.'s brother pulled me aside for the first time: "Jenny and I are getting married."

"That's great! Wow. Congratulations."

"Thanks, yeah . . . She's pregnant, so . . . And anyway, that's why I wanted to talk to you. Things really haven't been that great since my mom died, you know. It's been real tough in a lot of ways—and now money—and I'm going to have a family. And we're going to lose the house—did she tell you that? And I can't take care of my sister like I should. She's got school, you know, and I can't do anything . . . Am I making sense?"

"You want me to take care of her?"

"You're a good guy—I really think so. You seem so together. You're so together and so much better than some of the other guys she used to go with. And here I am, a real asshole for asking this—especially being in the situation I'm in—but she doesn't really have anyone, not now, not anyone who's going to look after her."

"Yeah, but—"

“She’s got plans, good dreams. Do you want to see her lose that?”

“I don’t . . .”

“Well?”

“. . . know . . .”

“You have to do something.”

“. . . exactly . . .”

“You’re all she has.”

“. . . what it is you think I can do.”

A sigh erupted through his nose. With one hand on my head, he drew me close and slung his other arm about me.

“More than me,” he replied.

Question

M. at 26, on the topic of children: “I’m not about to board a train I can’t get off.” Then, adding with *her* smile, “Least not yet.”

Thanks to Ann Beattie

“She was just joking about the cure thing. My doctor friend,” Professor said. “You’re not hopeless. No one is. She just wanted to put a good scare into you.”

It was very, very funny.

Professor handed me a list of “recommended reading.” He seemed to think it particularly important I read *Gatsby* and this short story by Ann Beattie. So I read “A Vintage Thunderbird.”

The main couple of the story basically waste their lives in meaningless relationship after meaningless relationship—when it’s really very clear that they should be with each other. In the end, after everything’s ruined, the woman finally recognizes her mistakes and desperately reaches out to reclaim the past that never was.

Gatsby will forever be my undying hero, but this particular story left me quite inspired, so I made a few phone calls. It took a few days, but I was able to track down M.’s old Corsica.

Doug didn’t get it.

The thing with Doug is, he’s my best friend. The other thing with Doug is, he’s a terrific liar. He says, all the time, “If there’s one thing I could get back in my life, it wouldn’t be my wife.” He says, “You have to let things go sometimes.” He says lots of things, and all like this. And on the surface they seem right. If we see Sam in public, he’ll nod or at the most say “Hey.” So this type of talk appears far from big. But at the same time, I know he’ll do anything just to be near her.

When we were still together, M. told me she had heard through her friends that Sam had caught him stealing her mail and later returning it with their old address on it, and Doug claiming it was sent there by mistake. And this, I’m afraid, came after we heard about her throwing a divorce party. With *dancers*. So while Doug wants to pretend he’s a wall with me,

I know better. And despite his protestations he went with me to get the car, and even drove the thing back to my house.

When I saw it, I about cried. It was beat up pretty bad and much of the driver's-side door had rusted away. The owner wasn't looking to sell at all, so I did as the situation demanded, and really got jacked on the deal.

M. doesn't know that I've bought it, and can't. But as I refuse to drive it, and I doubt she'll ever read this, I don't fear too much. But if she did find out, well, I'm sure she'd kill me for being *sick*.

So it's just sitting and sitting in my garage, this one thing of M.'s I have.

On dreams

"I can't remember mine," Doug said. "Most of the time I wake up and it's like nothing, like I'm left with nothing. Like I go to bed, then get up--with nothing in between." He ran an index finger repeatedly, unconsciously over one of his sideburns, something he grew out post-Sam. "I tried writing them down for a while," he continued. "Someone on the TV said keeping a dream journal was a good idea—it'd help you know yourself better or something. It didn't do me any good. I tried it for a month or so and all I could write down were fragments from a dream, maybe two. Can you imagine? I'm dreaming every night, I have to be, but once I wake up, they're gone. Washed away. Nothing."

This was the type of insanity I'd dealt with for years.

"I've written down some," I said, "but I should be writing them all down, all of them. Take the other night, I dreamt there was a ghost outside the kitchen window, a little girl. And

she seemed like she'd be friendly, but she was a ghost. And she kept saying she wanted to come in the house because it was safer. But I wouldn't do it—because as soon as she'd come in, I was sure she'd turn on me. Then this other ghost showed up, a woman, maybe thirty-something, that turned out to be the girl's mother. A moment later, this man appeared in the distance, and he was scary-looking too—like Paul Bunyan or something—only he wasn't a ghost. And he had an axe in his hand, and the ghosts were scared of him. Somehow I found out this guy had killed both the mom and the daughter, and somehow I knew I was to help them. So this was my job in the dream, my task, the thing I just had to do, my saving grace or whatever. But I didn't know what was going on. Do you get this? The awful weight of all of this? They were ghosts and it was scary, and I just desperately wanted someone to show up who knew magic or spells and could stop the whole thing.”

Doug said, “What happened then?”

I didn't know. I didn't even know. I said, “I woke up.”

Doug bobbed his head, then continued eating—an apple, of all things. “I don't need dreams” he said.

2:08 A.M.

M., asleep—or half-asleep—or something, and rolling onto her stomach: “Rub my back so I can unhitch the trailer from the truck.

Gloss

We decided to try out a new restaurant at the outskirts of town. As we waited in line, M. noticed several people coming in and joining a wedding reception underway in the back. She pulled hard on my sleeve.

“Come on,” she said, “it will be such fun.” But she could tell where my thoughts were. “Besides, look at us.” We had just come from a play and were dressed up anyway; she was wearing a gorgeous greenish number for the first and only time. Her face stretched Pacific-wide: “Please. It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong. You know how much food will go to waste if we don’t? Tables and tables of it.” She stood up, tugging excitedly at my arm. “It will be fun. Please. Pretty please with sugar on top.”

I left the sandbox.

She told everyone she was Elly Higginbottom, rookie journalist from Chicago. I suppose that made me Mr. Higginbottom, not that anyone asked. Not that anyone cares about the person next to M.

“What sorts of things do you write?” an older woman asked of her.

“Investigations mostly.” M. put up a finger as she finished her drink. “Into business malpractices, corporate wrongdoings. Things of this nature. Boring, really. Occasionally I write reviews—which is kind of what I’d like to do—but as of now I haven’t done anything major.”

The woman’s husband was staring down M.’s dress. He must have been eighty.

“Did you and Helen go to college together?” the woman asked. Helen, of course, was the bride.

“Yes, yes,” said M. “Yes.” She signaled for me to fetch her another drink. “I hear it was a wonderful wedding. Just splendid. We had to miss it because our flight was delayed. Terrible, really. The airports in this country are dreadful.”

“We’ve had trouble ourselves, too. Perhaps there’s a story in it somewhere, why things are the way they are.”

“Yes.” M. shot me a look and snapped her fingers. “Are you going to get that?” she said, right before she turned her attention back to the woman, laughed, and said, “Perhaps.”

Dinner Conversation

M, amidst flowers and candles and eating the parmesan-crust ed eggplant premavara I made special for her: “I’m probably going to leave you this week.”

Imbued Blue

January 15 [the year we split + 2]

I’m done with hiding. It’s been 16 months and I’ve nothing to show for it. She’s been through eight guys. She’d rather have six months [this, apparently being how long she kept one of them] with some jerk than accept my Calypso-an offer. Which means I may have to go above her on this one. I’d put a bullet in my head, today, if I thought it’d mean we’d be together in Heaven. So while she may fight it, Time will see us together.

It just goes to show there’s some pain a bullet won’t cure, no matter how much better the breathing would be with one in my face.

My last encounter with M.

“What are you doing?”

The patio door swung open. I panicked and jumped about ten feet. She was near me, a car’s length to my left.

“What, are you stealing my trash?”

“No.” I had been trying to look in her windows. I hadn’t gotten a good position and didn’t see her coming. My hands were empty and I was nowhere near her garbage. She didn’t care. “Well, someone has been!” she said.

A neighbor rolled into sight, mowing the grass next door. I had to restrain myself from waving.

She said, “You can’t keep doing this, you know.”

I nodded. The phone was ringing and ringing and robbing me of this moment. All I could do was nod.

“No, I don’t think you do.”

She floated back towards the door.

She said, “I am going to get this, and you are going to go.” But she stopped just inside the house. “You’re not supposed to love me anymore, you know.”

She hurried in and answered the phone. I stayed on the porch, waiting. But she came immediately back, phone in hand, and slid the door shut from the inside. Locked it. “You are going to go.” She turned back to her conversation on the phone, leaving me to leave.

“I’m sorry,” I said, though I knew she couldn’t hear me, and began the hike back to my car.

Some seconds later I heard the door slide open behind me.

“And quit sending me cats! I just have to give them away.”

Dedication

Professor asked me, “What’s with the preface—the dedication at the start of her book? That zombie girl business? I couldn’t follow it at all. Dedicating her book to a zombie, I mean.”

I threw my head back hard as I let out a breath. “You *know* something,” he said.

I do. And I get this a lot. But most of the time, when faced with this question, I’ve simply played dumb.

“The girl is real,” I went, “for starters. So I can tell you what it stems from, but I don’t get what she means by the dedication myself, so, I don’t know how much this will do for you.”

“I’m sure it’s better than nothing,” he said.

But I wasn’t.

“In college,” I said, “I had a couple of classes with that girl, M.’s zombie. And I came to find out not only did she live on her floor, on M.’s floor, but that she had gone to high school with her as well. So I thought the coincidences were something. And then I made some comments to M. saying how I thought this girl was cute and smart and everything. Never even dated in high school, I guess. And, well, M. gave me a bunch of crap about it, which was fine—she was really actually pretty funny—saying how I was in love with the girl and all that. Then . . . some time passed, a few months or something, and this girl started to see some guy. A real jerk—another story. And that spelled the end of that. She was still cute and smart, but—”

I really lost it then. I really started to laugh like a madman. I felt awful about it, too—Professor probably thought I was crazy and sick—but I was thinking ahead to the rest of it.

“Then that summer,” I continued, “M. and I went for a walk, a long one, from our town to the next town over and then back again; and while we were gone we joked around that our town was being destroyed by giant birds, and that as the birds attacked they were killing all the people. Only what happened was the girl from M.’s dedication got turned into a zombie; she went around biting people, the dead people, turning everyone else into zombies. So, of course, the idea was that upon our return to town we would have to kill her to stop the legions of undead. That done, we could focus on the larger problem of the birds. A pretty sound plan. Unfortunately, when we returned there were no birds, no zombies, nothing, just the girl.”

Professor digested that for a while, then more than a while. He must have been disappointed or something. “So that’s it? I mean, that’s it? That’s the story?” he said.

I smiled something brilliant.

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