

!!! RECOVERED BL SUB *Version 1-1-2024 @ 1 am*

Rebuild this with photos end of chaps.

For BL 2023, need full book!!!!

-- Just finished adding b/w kelloggs photo (to page 42)

-- Finish adding poetry vid still to poetry chap (to page 57)

**** NEED TO GET ALL THE WAS TO PAGE 180!!**

ONE THIRD OF WAY THROUGH! 120 MORE PAGES TO ADD PHOTOS AND REFORMAT.



THE INVENTION OF FIREFLIES

A Memoir of the Magical & the Monstrous



DWIGHT OKITA

Dwight Okita
4250 N Marine Drive, Unit 2912
Chicago, IL 60613
dwightokita@gmail.com

*The firefly remains in a larva stage for one year.
Then it is a full-fledged adult firefly for just a few weeks.
I hereby apologize to all the lightning bugs
I kept hostage in a mayonnaise jar as a child.*

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. Pretty Nurses, All In A Row (1966)
2. Everyone Has An Origin Story
3. Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are (1976)
4. Corn Flakes Cover Boy (1980)
5. Reparations For A Japanese American Son (1983)
6. The Beehive Of Buddhism (1985)
7. The Six-Month Soulmate (1991)
8. Serotonin City (1995)
9. The Roommate Experiment (1997)
10. The Man Who Loved Contests (2007)
11. The Fall Of The Family (2009)
12. Magical Friends
13. Anxiety As A House On Fire (2014)
14. A Dangerous Leap Of Faith (2018)
15. Caregivers & Cuddlers (2019)
16. A House I Can Point To (2021)

Introduction

IN MY LIFE I'VE LEARNED IT'S MUCH EASIER TO DISAPPEAR than to appear. People disappear all the time. They keep their thoughts to themselves. They go off the grid. They stop being fully present. But to appear in the world, to open your mouth and throw your voice outward requires infinite courage. To will oneself back into the world after a long absence is not for the faint of heart. I've done it myself a few times. I'm living proof.

Coming back to life almost killed me.

Losing my voice was one way I disappeared. I'd fall silent for months, sometimes years. It felt like this. *I open my mouth – and nothing comes out. No words, no thoughts or feelings. Maybe just air.* My muteness was not physical in origin. If it had been, perhaps a skilled surgeon could have fixed me. But an illness of a spiritual nature requires infinitely sharper instruments. My voice had been stolen by a monster... a creature formed out of equal parts shyness, terror, and delusions. In some ways my decision to become a writer was inspired by silence. I was thrilled to discover that my internal thoughts and feelings could find their way onto the printed page intact and that my inner world and outer world could finally merge.

*Maybe a ventriloquist could breathe
words into me again, his hand
reaching up through a hole in my back.
What I wanted was so small: to be able
to enter any room with a story to tell.
But my legs were wood, they folded
in two, and the words came from a place
behind me.*

-- from "When the Night Finds You."¹

¹ *Crossing with the Light*, Dwight Okita, Tia Chucha Press.

Some years ago, I sewed a cloth patch onto my messenger bag that said: *Life is magical*. I can't tell you how the idea made its way into my head, but I can tell you that I custom-ordered the patch through a small company and it was the best ten dollars I ever spent, how it was stitched on a sewing machine by some worker in China I'll never meet, how the patch appeared in my mailbox a month later. The words were printed in navy blue thread against a white background and the font was like a font you'd use to tell a modern fairytale.

Weeks later I was leaving my condo, sharing an elevator with a woman with whom I wasn't familiar. We didn't speak for the fourteen floors of our descent. The elevator bell dinged and as we exited she turned to me and said: "I love your patch! I was having the crappiest morning until I saw those words. Thank you." That in itself seemed magical to me. How does a cloth patch woven from ordinary thread transform an unhappy woman into a happy one in one elevator ride?

Early on I've seen moments in my life that were inexplicable, profoundly fortuitous, amazing. They made me believe in magic. The moments hovered before me like fireflies, those mysterious creatures that are part animal, part flashlight. Some firefly moments in my life include: The time I auditioned to appear on the cover of the Corn Flakes box and was chosen out of a pool of seasoned talent to be the cover boy. Or the time I fell in love with a red-haired poet only to realize I loved him after it was too late to do anything about it. Or the time I entered my first novel (typos and all) in an international contest and became a Top Three Finalist out of

There are times in this book I use footnotes in a traditional way to reference an information source as I've done above. But at other times I use footnotes differently: To flash-forward to show how a person I met in the past will reappear in my future. To shift point of view from my younger self to my older self, or vice versa. To connect the dots of my life story in a new way that occurs to me only as I am writing it.

5,000 entrants. The dictionary defines a magical thing as something "beautiful or delightful in such a way as to seem removed from everyday life."

But along with the miracle moments, came the monstrous ones, moments that were soul-crushing, nightmarish. They made me believe in monsters. Like the monster that stole my voice. Sometimes monsters took human form like close friendships that turned toxic, bosses that managed to darken every office they walked into, a serial killer here and there. Sometimes they appeared in the form of illness like when two members of my family suffered cerebral hemorrhages just months apart, or the time I was misdiagnosed as being depressed when I was Bipolar II which led me down a rabbit hole. The dictionary defines a monster as "a powerful person or thing that cannot be controlled and that causes many problems."

This memoir explores the pivotal moments of my life. Over the years, I've learned to encourage the magical because magic seems in such short supply these days...whereas we never seem to run out of monsters. It is my hope that by reading this book, the reader will learn some useful lessons on how to manage her or his own magic and monsters.



1. Pretty Nurses, All in a Row (1966)

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

-- Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*

WHEN I WAS 8, A BAD MAN CAME TO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD and did things that made many people sad. The year was 1966 and on TV, the first episode of "Star Trek" was broadcast. The plot concerned a creature that sucked salt from human bodies. That year my favorite song on the radio was "Monday, Monday" by the Mamas & the Papas. It was one of those carefree, hippie-dippie songs that got stuck in my head and stayed there. It was also the year I entered second grade at Luella Elementary School.

My Chicago neighborhood was called Jeffrey Manor. Its landmarks included Our Lady Gate of Heaven, Benny's Candy Store, synagogues, Grocerland, Sol's Drugstore. I think the amusement park on 95th Street was called Fun Land. I remember once onboard a terrifying ride there called "The Octopus," I screamed for dear life till the kid running the ride let me off. If nothing else, that was the day I learned that my voice was powerful enough to stop a whole amusement park ride dead in its tracks. I grew up in a duplex house with my mother, father and older brother Clyde. A duplex house meant that our house was joined at the hip to another house and if you put your ear to the right wall, you could eavesdrop on the neighbors.

I knew just two other Asian American kids, Roger and Janice and their father was a doctor and I knew they were kind of rich because they had a piano in their living room. I was Japanese American; they were Chinese American. Close enough. I remember a friend named Tommy who was a good guy, taller than me, Irish American. I liked to go to his house because his back yard had two magical things in it: an above-ground swimming pool and a large weeping willow tree. I liked to think that the tree was crying, that the leaves on the ground were tree tears.

One hot summer day, I had a bright idea. I'd see if Tommy would let me come over for a refreshing dip in his pool. He and I loved to create a Human Whirlpool by moving our bodies clockwise through the water. Once we built up a strong current, we'd lie back and let ourselves get dragged around by the whirlpool. It was the closest we'd probably ever come to flying and it never got old for me and old Tommy. That alone made the pool a magical place.

"Great idea. Swim party!" he said.

"Would it be okay if I asked Roger and Janice to join us?" I said. "The more bodies, the stronger the current." I was the social planner even back then.

"Absolutely," he said.

An hour later we assembled in Tommy's backyard with towels in hand. Janice and Roger wore sunglasses as rich kids often do.

"Thank you so much, Tommy, for letting us join you," said Roger. "I've never been part of a Human Whirlpool before!"

"Me neither. I can't wait," chimed in Janice.

And before we knew it we were in our designated positions, the four of us spaced equidistantly around the pool's perimeter. "So we just start moving in a clockwise direction," I said.

"That gets the water swirling."

Tommy continued. "-- and then when we've gotten to a good speed, you just lie back in the water and let the current take you!"

"I should tell you guys now. I can't swim," said Janice.

Tommy perked up. "Well, the rim of the pool is only three and a half feet tall, Janice. So I think you're safe." He winked at her.

"Besides, I'll rescue you," said Roger. "You know how mad Mom would be if I let you drown." Janice seemed reassured.

We got the water moving at a good speed and then we leaned back and started floating in circles.

Everybody was having fun.

We were flying. We were shouting.

We were magical -- not only because we were flying -- but because friendship was magical too.

And then Janice screamed, "Owww!!" Turns out she had stubbed her toe on the drain plug thingy and broke a toenail. Her toe was bleeding a bit.

"If you're bleeding, Janice, you got to get out of the pool! Don't pollute the water," said her brother Roger. She climbed carefully out of the pool. I spread her towel on the grass while Tommy went inside for a band-aid.

"Did you want me to keep you company out here?" I asked her.

"No, just go back into the water. Have fun for the both of us," she said putting on her sunglasses.

And on that day I learned that sometimes you stub your toe in the Human Whirlpool and have to lay down on your towel, and sometimes you float in perfect blue circles carried by the strong current and float forever. If stubbing your toe was the biggest problem in a person's life -- I knew it wasn't the end of the world. I still had my friends. What I didn't know -- what I couldn't know -- was how big problems could become, and how completely life could change in an instant as it would change in just a few days when a strange man with a pock-marked face arrived and turned our neighborhood into a crime scene.

A monster is a powerful person or thing that cannot be controlled and that causes many problems. By any definition, the bad man who was coming to town was a monster.

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

On July 14, 1966, a dark shadow fell across Chicago. At 11 p.m. Richard Speck knocked on the door of a townhouse where student nurses lived and studied and found comradery. The townhouse stood on 100th St, not far from Benny's Candy Store and Luella Grade School. It was also adjacent to the playground where I regularly swung on the swings. By the end of the night, eight women lay dead on the floor. They were strangled, suffocated and stabbed. During the commotion somehow Speck lost track. There was actually a ninth nurse. Corazon Amurao was one of three Filipinas that night. In a moment of chaos, she saw her chance and dove under the bed to hide herself. How could Speck have forgotten her? She was the one who first opened the door. But she was Asian and there were two other Asian student nurses he'd killed already.

Maybe to Richard all Asians looked alike, were interchangeable. Maybe this was one night where that worked in favor of an Asian American.

I wanted to crawl under that bed with Nurse Nine and live too. We could've grown up there together under the bed in a world where you only identify people by their shoes. I admired this woman. Her survival instincts took her to a place away from the danger at hand. There amidst the lost coins and dust bunnies she surely must have held her breath and prayed. The least I could do was keep her company. And though I was just a young boy, maybe I could provide her some comfort.

I would be the one to tell Nurse Nine that the killer was gone, that we could crawl out from under the bed, that the morning sun was rising over 100th Street and her long night was finally over, that she was free to walk from this house into the future because at least she had a future, that she shouldn't think of that other room where the bodies of the pretty nurses lay on the floor all in a row.

When Corazon was certain the killer was gone, she climbed out onto a balcony and screamed for help. "They're all dead! All my friends are dead!" she shouted from the second-floor ledge in English and Tagalog. What a strange sight that must have been to the few passersby on 100th Street -- night shift workers, insomniacs in the wee hours of that morning. A lone nurse standing on a ledge screaming out her nightmare to the audience below.

*

The next day I went to the park. There were police everywhere and reporters. I didn't know what was going on. I played on the swings as usual. When I returned home my family was glued to the TV. "I went to the playground today!" I announced though no one was listening. "There were tons of policemen and reporters --"

"There's a killer on the loose, dum-dum," said my older brother Clyde. "If you want to get killed, don't look for me to rescue you."

My mother hugged me and said, "Promise me you won't go to the park again."

My parents insisted that I not go near 100th Street at all. That I should stay inside where it was safe.

"I wonder if they'll close down the schools tomorrow," said my ever-practical father who was a grade schoolteacher on the South Side. "If they close schools for a snow day, they should definitely close them for a mass murderer on the loose!" The whole family huddled round the TV that hot summer night. Mom made a pitcher of iced tea for us all.

That night I asked Clyde if I could sleep in the attic with him. He agreed grudgingly. I lay in the dark trying to sleep for several minutes but not being able to.

"Uh oh, it's 11 o'clock," said Clyde.

"So?"

"That was the exact time the papers said Speck knocked on the door of the nurses. You know what happens at 11 o'clock, don't you?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," I said sarcastically.

"The killer appears," he said.

Then Clyde clicked on a lamp. He turned to face me but instead of his face I saw melted flesh, deformed eye sockets, stringy white hair down sprouting from his head. It was my old Halloween mask.

I screamed. Even though I'd seen the mask dozens of times, it scared me. It scared both of us when the other wore it. Clyde laughed hysterically.

"You have to throw that mask away, Clyde," I said. "This is NOT funny anymore."

He laughed louder, almost crying. "I think it's hilarious."

"I'll just cut it up with a scissors. You think I won't?"

"You better not. I'll tell Mom and Dad on you," he said.

I ran down the stairs to my room. When I returned I had scissors in-hand.

"You're crazy," he said. "Don't destroy public property."

"I bought it with my allowance. I can do whatever I want."

Clyde tried to pull mask away from me, but I held on. We pulled the mask in different directions like a taffy pull. We pulled and pulled. To my surprise, it ripped in half and we fell to the floor laughing!

I proceeded to cut the mask into tiny pieces so it could never scare anyone again.

"You are possessed, little brother. " He turned off the lamp and the room went dark again.

*

Over the next few days, all of Chicago was on edge. People weren't accustomed to locking their front doors at night in those days, but you better believe they locked them from then on. Later I learned that Speck had seen the headlines about The Nurse Killer, saw the police sketch of his face plastered everywhere. He tried to take his own life with his knife -- but failed and was rushed to a hospital. It was there that a young doctor wiping blood off the wounded man's arm saw a tattoo: "Born to raise hell." He remembered the tattoo from a news story and called the police. That's how Speck got caught.

That message was a little different from the patch message I'd sew on my messenger bag years later proclaiming that "Life is magical." A lot different. For better or worse, people tend to see what they want to see in the world. Call it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Call it the Law of Attraction. Each of us arrives at a unique *worldview* based on our life experiences and the

lessons we learn or fail to learn. One person believes the earth is flat. One believes the earth is round. One person believes in science. One believes in hearsay. One person believes that life is magical. One believes they were put on earth to raise hell. Self-fulfilling prophecies.

The tall weeping willow tree in Tommy's backyard began to shed its leaves that summer and wouldn't stop, the leaves fluttering down like slivers of paper. The tree wept for the eight student nurses who perished too soon and all the good deeds they would have done and for Corazon who hid under the bed and had to live with the memory. In her recurring nightmares, she lives under the bed still.

The tree tears were real after all. They never stopped falling. Some days I stood under the tree with Tommy, Roger and Janice and we let the leaves rain down upon us, catching them in our hands. Other times we lay down on the grass till we were completely buried by leaves. Like children who weren't there anymore.

CONJURED

Twenty-five years later, Richard Speck appeared once again in my life. This time I conjured him by writing a ten-minute play about a woman who grew up near the Speck murders. By this time, I had become Buddhist and I was writing plays for the stage. I'd heard American Blues Theatre was soliciting work for a show called "Monsters" which would explore monsters both real or imaginary you might find in Chicago. I wrote a short play about the nurse killer, but I shifted the focus from the killer to the survivor. My ten-minute play was chosen to be produced along with a handful of others.

ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN

Sometimes at night, I walk through the hallway of my building. You might think I'm tempting fate, but the truth is I just want to feel free to walk wherever I want, whenever I want. I don't want to be one of these paranoid urban dwellers with twenty-two locks on their doors. There is plenty. It's kind of nice when you walk through the hallway. You hear TV shows, people leaving messages on answering machines, sometimes a typewriter late at night. When I walk past the doors, it reminds me of tuning in a radio station and you hear bits and pieces of things, but never the whole thing.

Those women he killed, they weren't just nurses, you know – some of them were Asian American. Most people don't think about that, but I do.

The Windy City Times described my piece as "...a burning portrait of a young Asian-American woman still haunted by the memory of growing up one block from where Richard Speck killed eight nurses."² What did I learn from this early experience? Ask the older, wiser me and you're asking a man who went on to embrace Nichiren Buddhism. Instead of seeing the events of my life and the world as random, the elder me now saw them through the exacting lens of karma. The tragedy no longer seemed a freak act of violence as the press described, but rather an expression of cause and effect from previous lifetimes. Reporters had first stated, "Speck could've stopped at any house." But the Buddhist me disagreed. I came to believe that Speck could *only* have stopped at the nurses' house because he and the eight women had a karmic relationship. Their destinies were inextricably linked in a way that my life never was.

Ask the younger me what he learned that summer and you'll get simpler conclusions. I learned that the world was not a safe a place as I had thought. There were things that could happen that even the police couldn't protect me from, nor my parents who loved me. At the end

² One supreme irony was that the real Richard Speck actually died during the run of the show! My friends congratulated me. They said obviously I had killed him with my art. For my part, I neither confirmed nor denied.



2. Everyone Has an Origin Story

IN A CLASS PHOTO FROM KINDERGARTEN, I AM WEARING A SPORT COAT with a handkerchief tucked into my breast pocket, one eyebrow is raised in defiance. All the other boys are just wearing button-down shirts. I suspect it was my Mom who dressed me that way. I look like an old soul trapped in a little boy's body.

I grew up in a home that valued the imagination. No one ever came right out and told me that but there were clues. My mother loved to visit the Art Institute of Chicago. She could stare at paintings and lose chunks of time. She wondered where these painters got their bright ideas. My father loved philosophy books; they lined his shelves. He loved how every book represented a different way of looking at the world, of moving *through* the world. My brother was drawn to photography. When he was older, it would've been unusual to see him leave the house without a camera in his hand. He loved and worked with images the way I would later love and work with words. We each pushed ourselves to stretch our imaginations the way that other boys might stretch their muscles lifting weights in the basement. Without saying a word, my family nurtured in me the idea that indescribable, magical worlds awaited me.

Sometimes in my own quirky mind I imagined I came from a long line of magicians. After all, members of my family could levitate at will, could disappear at the drop of a hat, could even time travel. I thought all families were like mine until I learned every family is magical in its own unique way. When my mother bought a dress that made her look ten years younger, she was so happy she couldn't contain herself. She levitated four inches into the air and stayed there

till it was time to fix dinner. When my brother daydreamed about being famous in the future, or my father remembered fishing in a pond in the past -- they were time travelers. I don't think there's any other word for it. But my specialty was the vanishing act. If I stopped talking for a very long spell, if I kept my ideas to myself, if I hid my light under a bushel basket...people stopped seeing me, stopped expecting to see me. Because I had disappeared.

So how did I get here in the first place? It was magic. I made my grand entrance one day into a world that was too loud and too bright and too much of everything. Or maybe the reverse was true: I was not enough. I was a quiet child in a world that did not appreciate quietness, a world where the squeaky wheel got the grease. I was a highly sensitive person before that term was coined and I lived in America, a country that did not seem to value sensitive people, did not know what to do with us.³

Still I was determined to find my voice. In that way I was like a ventriloquist, and the ventriloquist's dummy too. The voice I was searching for would not be a loud, flashy one but a voice that was mine. Why was I shy and nervous? I didn't know. Years later I would learn concepts like heredity and karma and nature vs. nurture. But I knew none of that then. I had lived the first five years of my life happily at home. Then one day my mother dropped me off in front of a big building. Outside there were kids that were loud and goofy and couldn't keep their hands to themselves. They called it kindergarten. Terrifying.

By the second week of school, I still hadn't spoken a word in class. I was silent as a stone. Then one day during nap time I was lying down on a blanket on the cold linoleum floor. A blond-haired girl with bangs and kind, saucer eyes looked at me. I found out later her name was Donna.

³ Philip Zimbardo, "The Cost of Shyness," *Psychology Today*, Nov. 1995.

"Aren't you gonna talk? You gotta talk sometime," she whispered.

I did not reply to the girl's question and instead looked back at her with curiosity. Was she just being friendly or was she making fun of me? That was unclear so I said nothing. Was my quietness so obvious that she felt she had to say something? What if she was wrong? What if I never spoke for the rest of my life? Would that be okay? Maybe I was a child stunned into silence by the beauty and horror of the world. If only I could go back in time and ask Donna, but that would be more than a little difficult.

Some parts of my childhood are a blur while other parts are crystal clear like this one. I've replayed this memory loop with Donna countless times. How did my memory banks know how important the moment would be? The moment was imprinted as if to say, "We will save this moment for you forever. You may not understand now, but later you will be glad we did, later it may be a key piece of the puzzle of how you came to be you. It will be part of your Origin Story."⁴

I think the moment was important because it was my first memory of someone calling me out for being shy and different. I felt I was being asked to explain myself to a stranger when I couldn't yet explain myself to myself. And I made assumptions about Donna's motives that probably had less to do with her than with me. It was only in my older, wiser years that I concluded I owed sweet Donna an apology.

CHILDHOOD MEMORY WITH MRS. SULLIVAN

⁴ Looking back, I could attribute my shyness or voicelessness to a couple things: My father was a quiet man, shy in his way, though he was also a schoolteacher. I suspect I inherited some introversion from him. Secondly, I'm Japanese American. Asians have a higher incidence of shyness. For the Asian-born, there is a cultural bias against confrontation, and for Asian Americans there is also the added impulse to assimilate and not stand out. Thirdly, my brain could be simply hard-wired for social phobia. It could also be part of my karmic inheritance.

First grade was different than kindergarten. There were fewer toys, no nap time. It was time to get down to the serious business of growing up. We started each morning with a mission -- and that was to write a composition. Composition was just a fancy word for story. I hated this part of the day. For some reason I had trouble with coming up with a beginning, middle and end. My mind didn't think in such straight lines.

"Okay, class," said Mrs. Sullivan. "Now I want you to put on your thinking caps and write a composition on what you would do on a rainy day. Tell me what happened first and what happened last. And what did you learn? Eyes on your own papers please."

I stared at the ruled paper but nothing came. I raised my hand and the teacher came to my desk. I whispered, "Could you repeat the instructions again please?"

"It's very simple. Write a story about what you would do on a rainy day."

"I see," I said. "Should it be something I *really* did on a rainy day -- or something I'd *like* to do on a rainy day?"

"Oh, which ever you like, Dwight. That's up to you."

"One more question," I said though I knew the teacher was getting impatient. "Would you like us to write about staying INSIDE and watching the storm -- or going OUTSIDE and playing in the storm?"

"Well, it can be whatever you want as long as there's rain in there somewhere," she said. "This is YOUR story. Now, no more questions. It'll be time to turn in your paper soon."

I felt nervous. Some people were already handing in their compositions. I wished Mrs. Sullivan was more specific about what she wanted. There were so many rain stories that flooded into my mind. I couldn't pick just one.

"Five more minutes, class, and then put your pencils down," she said.

The pressure was too much. I had scribbled the poem at the bottom of the page almost as an apology.

*When rain comes people close their windows.
Rain ruins most people's plans.
When it rains at our house, windows open
And we catch the raindrops in our hands.*

Mrs. Sullivan's response surprised me. Instead of telling me that my poem was not part of the assignment – she gave my poem a grade! An "A". She encouraged me to submit the poem to the school paper, The Luella Log. I was thrilled when my poem, "When It Rains At Our House," was in print. What did it mean to my young self to get printed in the school paper? It proved that even though I was shy in class discussions, on the page I was anything but shy. On the page, my words could fly. Writing allowed me to take my colorful inner world and put it out there where everyone could see it which was a kind of superpower, one that would only get stronger over the years. People liked me better after they read my poems...because I made them laugh or cry or think. I got invited to lunch more often, to birthday parties. Whether or not Mrs. Sullivan knew it, she was steering me in a direction I would move in for the rest of my life.





3. Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are (1976)

WHEN I WAS 17, MY FRIEND RAVI ASKED ME A VERY PERSONAL QUESTION. It was a question that had been percolating in my own mind for a while. We were seniors at Bremen High School. The year was 1976 and there was a new killer grabbing the headlines. Son of Sam began a series of attacks in New York City. Technically Richard Speck was a mass murderer while Son of Sam was a serial killer. A mass murderer kills all their victims at once, while a serial killer kills their victims one by one over a period of time. By 1976, Speck had been in jail for ten years. Nurse Nine moved back to the Philippines and indeed became a full-fledged nurse as she had planned. For my part, I was trying to decide where I might go to college. My brother Clyde was already attending University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) for photography.

Ravi and I had become fast friends. We bonded because we were both creative people, minorities (he was from India, I was Japanese American), and struggling to develop self-confidence. He was energetic, philosophical and very clever. He had dreams of one day moving to California and opening his own uniquely Indian restaurant. He had even sketched a logo for his eatery. That was all plausible to me as he had a talent for talking to people. When he wanted something badly, Ravi was not shy at all. He knew how to open doors that would normally be closed to him. That was his superpower.

So there we were one day walking home from school when Ravi asked me point blank if I was gay. I had been wondering about that myself for a few years. What was it about some guys that filled me with longing? Like the fellow who was on our high school's wrestling team. For a little guy, he had shoulders like boulders. Once in gym class, he was my wrestling partner. We were in the starting position. I was on top and I put my hand on his stomach, feeling him inhale and exhale through his T-shirt. Why did this make me feel so light-headed? And it's not just that I wanted to wrestle him. I wanted to wash dishes with him. Wanted to bring him chicken soup when he was sick.

Who was I kidding? Of course I was gay.

I looked at Ravi as he searched my face for answers. "You know, now that you mention it...I think there is a good chance I might be gay," I said.

He paused a moment. Then he said, "Well...I have asthma."

His answer puzzled me a bit, then amused me. Did he think being gay was an ailment? I knew that Ravi was a good-hearted person. I think he was just trying to share something to show he understood what I was going through.

In high school I found myself struggling with shyness again as I had as a child. The shyness was complicated by my new-found attraction to other guys. I desperately wanted to feel close to them. But what if they were straight? Or didn't like me? ⁵

After I came out with Ravi, I knew I wanted to come out to my family next. I came out to my family through art. I drew a colorful, exuberant crayon abstract on posterboard. There was a

⁵ As a young boy, people called me quiet, shy, well-behaved. On the back of many report cards, one recurring comment that teachers wrote: "Dwight does not participate in class discussions."

Peter Max vibe to it: shooting stars, eye-popping colors. Woven into the poster were phrases like: GAY IS GOOD and GAY PRIDE. I was finally finished and decided I would unveil it one night after my parents had come back from fishing at Wolf Lake. I told my mother the abstract was done and that she could take a peek. I remember her ascending the stairs and walking to my room. I stayed on the first floor, peering into the fridge but not really looking for anything. I don't know what I expected to hear, but I knew she'd have some kind of reaction.

"Why did you write *gay* love?" she called out to me. She thought it was because I was expressing my support for gay people. I climbed the stairs.

"No, I wrote gay love because I *am* gay."

She searched my eyes. "Did I do something wrong?" she asked. "Did I love you too much?"

"Of course not. How can you love a person too much?" I said.

Later I asked her what Dad thought of my poster she said, "He liked the graphics."

Some time later I wanted to know more clearly how Dad felt about my being gay.

"You're my son," he said simply and absolutely as if to say that he accepts me unconditionally. I was touched. Dad then proceeded to tell me that many one of his favorite philosophers, existentialist Soren Kierkegaard, was a homosexual.⁶ My father even told me that once when he was in the army he was attracted to another soldier in the shower. How many fathers were secure enough to share that with their sons?

⁶ I recently looked up what existentialist Kierkegaard believed. It said he believed that each person -- rather than society or religion -- is responsible to give their life meaning and live it authentically. Though my father never became Buddhist, that worldview dovetails well with SGI Nichiren Buddhism. We don't believe that a god or buddha gives our lives meaning. We tap into our buddha nature, our enlightenment, to create heaven on earth with our own hands.

It would be years later that I'd come across a surprising passage in my journal I'd completely forgotten about. I think it was something my mother had told me.

9-19-1980

Mom told me today this. "When your dad went for his check-up he mentioned to Dr. Axelrod that you were gay. Dr. Axelrod said, "Fred, whatever you do -- don't lose him."

I was moved to read that journal passage. How could I have forgotten it?

But not all my family was so embracing. My brother upon learning I was gay simply said: "It figures." Those two words spoke volumes, but it didn't surprise me. Clyde always liked busting my chops. One of my aunts never openly said she didn't like gay people, but when Mom asked for me if I could bring a guest to Thanksgiving dinner at her place, my aunt said there wasn't enough food, that it was just for the immediate family. But in fact there was always plenty of food and my male cousins often brought their girlfriends. This was a microaggression, even before there was a word for it.

When I came out to one of my favorite teachers at school, I was disappointed when the ordinarily sensitive man said: "Why are you telling me this? I don't tell you I like to go down on women." I explained I wasn't telling him about sex positions. I was telling him about who I loved. I knew in his own awkward way he was saying: It doesn't matter that you're gay. But the truth was I *wanted* my being gay to matter to him. Compared to other gay friends, my coming out was not traumatic. I easily accepted myself as gay, so it probably was easier for others too. My parents were cool. Japanese Americans (JAs) tended to be more accepting of gay people because they had seen their own civil rights trampled by the internment experience. The Japanese American Citizens League tended to be supportive of the civil rights of gay people, Muslims and others even before it was fashionable to do so.

For Ravi, being a gay Indian man was problematic. He feared his family would not accept him, might disown him. He was in such denial that a decade would pass before he finally confessed that he was gay too.

"I thought you had asthma," I said to Ravi with a big smile on my face.

He laughed. "Well, I'm gay AND I have asthma."

CHILDHOOD MEMORY WITH MANNEQUIN

As a child, my family would often go to shopping malls. One Saturday afternoon stands out to me. The stores were bustling with shoppers. I was walking with my family when I saw a mannequin who looked handsome in a dark gray business suit. He stood frozen in place as was the habit of mannequins. I was young and wondered how mannequins were made. Did they have private parts like I did? I asked myself. I didn't know many Japanese words but I knew the word for penis was *chin-chin*. I was curious if dummies had *chin-chins*.

I walked up to the well-suited mannequin and gently reached and touched that secret place between his legs. To my shock, the mannequin came alive, stepped away from me! It was a living man! Boy, did he look surprised. I bolted away from the poor man, trying to catch up with my family in the crowd.

I never told my family or friends what happened that day. I was embarrassed. Years later I wonder what that mannequin/man thought was going on. That I was always a curious child. How did I bring a plastic mannequin to life with the touch of my hand? Did part of the younger me know that it was a real man all along?

When repeating this story as a grownup, my story comes across as both funny and shocking. Interestingly when I've written about mannequins in poems, they are objects of mystery -- part plastic and part alive. They represent the silent me, but they also represent the eventual me...My Gay Self.

ADVENTURES IN BOYSTOWN

One Friday after I got a check from my tax return, I packed an overnight bag and left my parent's house in the suburbs. I was off for a weekend in search of gay life. Someone told me to go to trisection where Clark, Broadway and Diversey came together because that was the heart of the gay community and surely I would find gay life there.

When I made my way to that very spot, it was an impressive intersection but didn't seem any more gay than any other intersection. I saw cars and joggers and shoppers. Did gay life even exist at all? I wondered.

I walked into the first bar that looked like it might be gay. It was 6pm. Surely if there were gay people they'd be at the bar by now. The place was empty except for a bartender washing glasses. I made my way back to my hotel defeated. When I entered my room, a single cockroach made a mad dash across the bedspread. Maybe this weekend wasn't such a great idea after all. I turned on the TV and opened a can of Coke. I climbed into bed, clutching my pillow, caressing my pillow, wishing I could transform it into a man. Maybe I would cut my adventure short. What kind of loser was I?

What monsters crossed my path at this time? There was the monster of alienation -- looking for my tribe and not finding it. The monster of homophobia in all its manifestations. But

instead of giving up, I pulled out my phone book and called the gay organization at University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Well, if meeting the gay community is your goal," said the gay leader, "show up at the Aragon Ballroom tonight at 8pm. You'll get to meet 5,000 gay men! It's called *Cruising the Nile*."

I wore black jeans, my metallic blue shirt with a few buttons undone to appear friendly. The line to get into the Aragon did not snake down the block so much as it undulated with energy and not in a single file either, dance music in the club pouring out into the street.⁷ I felt nervous but excited too. I paid my fee at the window and a bare-chested man stamped the back of my hand with the image of an Egyptian pharaoh. To go to a big dance extravaganza by myself took some nerve. I was on a mission. Besides I had told Ravi I was off in search of adventure and I wanted to have a good story to tell.

The first floor looked like an Egyptian marketplace. There were live chickens in wicker cages, a kissing booth with handsome slaves, lots of men drinking brightly colored drinks. I followed the music upstairs. The second and third floors were devoted to heart-thumping disco dancing and smoke machines. I stood surveying the landscape when a muscular man in a white T-shirt walked up to me.

"Hi, there. Would you like to dance?" he said. How could I say no?

"Oh, thanks! Actually I would very much like to dance. My name's Dwight."

⁷ Years later in 1992, I was writing a play about the resettlement of JAs in Chicago after the camps were closed. I would learn that Harry James and his Orchestra played the Aragon Ballroom and many JAs lined up for tickets to the show. Authorities disbursed the crowds saying that it was not allowed for Japanese Americans to gather on a public street. How ironic that the Aragon would be a place of discrimination for my parent's generation and yet function for me as a place where I found **community decades later.**

"I'm Dave" he said taking me by the hand and leading onto the crowded dance floor. I liked how friendly and flirty he was. Not shy at all. "You're awfully cute," he said.

"I was thinking the very same thing about you," I said. His face came close to mine. He kissed me. Long. And. Slow. I had dreamed of a moment like this for some time and there it was. We danced tirelessly for five straight songs. When we were done, we were sweating.

"Can I get you a drink?" Dave asked. We chatted about this gay extravaganza, about ourselves. He told me he taught gymnastics to Olympic hopefuls in the far suburbs. I told him I was a budding writer about to start college.

Suddenly I felt emboldened. "I don't suppose..." I said, "you'd like to come home with me? I'm staying at a hotel nearby. But I warn you, Dave, it's not a fancy hotel by any means --"

"I'd love to," he said. "And believe me, I won't be coming to inspect the hotel amenities."

He followed me to my little hotel. I couldn't believe it. I had a man in my bed, in my arms. I had magically transformed an ordinary pillow into a living, breathing man. I made that happen. Life was magical, yes, but it was up to me to make it more magical.

And on that day I learned that sometimes you stand at a busy intersection looking for signs of life and you come up empty-handed, and sometimes you go alone to a party attended by 5,000 men and dance with a man who doesn't care how about the cockroach under your bed. Because he only cares about you, wants to hold you so tight you almost become one person. I could have given up after the first dismal day, but I didn't. I stayed because I was in search for signs of gay life in the universe. And I found them.

*

When I returned home from my gay adventure that Sunday afternoon, I couldn't wait to meet Ravi to share my experiences with him.

"Tell me everything that happened," he said. "For as you know: I live through you!" The two of us laughed, then placed our orders for cheeseburger deluxe platters.⁸

THE PLAGUE YEARS

Consider that was 1976, a kinder, gentler time. By 1981, just five years later, the AIDS crisis would break out eventually killing 35 million people, more than 70 million people becoming infected with HIV. A generation gone in the blink of an eye.⁹

By 1990 my gay friends felt the virus closing in on us. Lucky for myself, I practiced safe sex before the term was ever coined. But everyone knew someone who had tested positive or someone who had died of AIDS. That year the virus took one of my own. Jimmi Brown was a close friend, a nurse, a budding writer.

The days after Jimmi tested HIV positive, I saw his life force gradually drain away. I was worried. I'd invite him to go out to dinner but he feared his energy level would crash mid-meal. He had bought a Brother word-processing typewriter, but the treasure remained in its box unopened. I offered to set up his machine but he declined. I was losing my good friend and I didn't know what to do about it. And then there was that awful day I called for Jimmi at the

⁸ Ravi and I were friends during the high school years and some college years. But he moved to California to pursue his dream. He hit some serious detours out there that included family clashes, drugs, and a difficulty finding his niche. Still through the decades we stayed in touch. And then there were the lost years when no one knew where he'd gone, but he'd resurface eventually. As I started writing this memoir, both of us were in our sixties and still talking by phone. Ravi has faced some health challenges, but I continue to root for him. I hope he finds his happy ending. Through the years he has dangled the possibility that he might move back to Chicago, but I have finally accepted that he won't.

⁹ Decades later there is still no vaccine for AIDS. Though when Covid-19 will hit four decades later, multiple vaccines will be created by multiple companies in record time. At that point four million will have died of Covid as opposed to thirty-seven million who have died of AIDS, according to a post by Medical News Today in August 2021. Could homophobia be a factor why science will move faster to find vaccines for Covid? It wouldn't be the first time questionable decisions had been made in pharmaceutical company boardrooms.

hospital where he worked as a nurse. They put me on hold for a long time. Finally, a man came to the phone and announced simply: "Jimmi Brown has expired."

And so it goes. As so it went. And that was that.¹⁰

And because Jimmi's family blamed gay folks for the death of their loved one, because I was not invited to attend a funeral, because my friend and I never said our proper goodbyes -- it was hard to believe that he was really gone. There was no closure for deaths like this. There was only absence. *Now you see him, now you don't.* A vanishing act of tragic proportions, but there was no magic.

I knew everyone processed death differently. When Jimmi died, I didn't cry. When my father died, I didn't cry (that was partly because I was in the midst of my own depression and I felt numb). I didn't cry when a friendship ended or when I broke up with a boyfriend. But sit me down in a dark theater to watch a sad movie and the flood gates opened. Let the right song sneak onto the radio and it could bring me to tears. I had my own way of grieving that was different from others. The meaning of death would change for me over the years.

A few weeks after Jimmi's death, his apartment was freshened up with a new coat of paint and put back up for rent. I toyed with the idea of moving in there. It was a little bigger than my own place. Did I want to move as a way to remember Jimmi, as a way to mourn him? More importantly, would Jimmi be all right with it? The landlord often left doors unlocked of apartments that were available so one night I took a pillow and bed sheet and slept on the floor of

¹⁰ In one of my favorite speculative novels, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, every time someone dies in the book, the narrator utters: "So it goes." Sometimes I do also. When I first read the book as a young person, I took it as a straightforward time travel story. When I read the book as a mature person, it seemed more likely a Post Traumatic Stress story, that hero Billy Pilgrim was reeling from the firebombing of Dresden and when life got uncomfortable, it triggered his "time traveling." This made the book more poignant to me, especially after I later experienced my own mental health episodes.

this apartment. I wanted to feel for any ghosts, any vibrations. Would staying overnight there make me sad? The night went by uneventfully and the next day I signed the lease.

I was pretty sure of one thing. If Jimmi did not want me moving in, he would surely have given me a sign -- a window shade crashing to the floor, a lamp switching itself on and off in the dark of the night. That's the kind of friendship we had. We held nothing back, our communication was complete. I expected nothing less of him in death. But that night there were no omens. A week later, I moved in.

For myself, I would spend the next several years as an out, Japanese American writer in Chicago doing poetry performances and getting some plays produced. In 2013, Chicago's public TV station WTTW invited me to be part of a documentary on the early days of LGBT life in Chicago called "Out n Proud in Chicago" (the program would air every June in Chicago for pride month and someone always would exclaim: "I saw you on TV!"). WTTW wanted to focus on the pioneers of Chicago's gay community. Was I a pioneer? Maybe so. I was both a survivor and a witness. My resourcefulness was one of my magical superpowers. In time I would come to appreciate Mom's superpower: her unshakeable optimism. Dad's superpower: his philosophically inquiring mind. Clyde's superpower: his creative eye and good taste.

I still have photographs that my brother Clyde took of Jimmi and I leaping into the air in an empty parking lot. The backdrop is a brick wall spraypainted with the words: DREAM/FAST. In some photos we are clearly leaping for joy and we never come down. But in one, we are just seated staring pensively off-screen. What we were looking at, I couldn't begin to tell you.





4. Corn Flakes Cover Boy (1980)

WHEN I WAS 22, I AUDITIONED TO BE ON THE COVER of a major corn flakes box. The year was 1980 and Robert Redford made his directorial debut with an unforgettable movie, "Ordinary People." Actor Timothy Hutton moved me as a young man struggling to free himself from the chains of his past. America's sweetheart, Mary Tyler Moore, playing Hutton's ice-cold mother, showed a darker side of herself than her sitcom ever hinted at. As for myself, I had switched by major from Theater to English. I first studied theater because who doesn't want to be a great actor and reveal the secrets of the human soul but I had laid down on the floor till that feeling went away and when it did the overwhelming desire to write great books rose up in its place.

I had been mostly focused on developing my poetry and doing open mics. I was attending college at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and still living with my family in the burbs. My big brother Clyde was majoring in photography and drove us to campus each morning, smoking cigarettes all the way. Gradually I could feel my world expanding through the swirl of college life. As a young gay man, I started dating. Whenever I stayed out late and lacked the energy to take the train back to home to the burbs, I crashed happily on a lot of friend's couches. I'm proud to say that at one point I had keys to the apartments of no less than three friends.

Though I had switched my major to English, my Bohemian inner circle still included an array of actors, students, artists, writers, activists, people of color. Everyone was aspiring to be something. One night a Filipino actor buddy Danilo called me on the phone.

"So there's this big audition you don't want to miss. A big sponsor's seeking an Asian man for the cover of a cereal box. How often does that happen? Never. Everyone's talking about it, everyone's gonna be there. It's a print job so no lines to fuck up. Just bring a headshot and resume."

"But my headshot sucks and I've got nada for the --"

"Get creative. Fake it till you make it," he said.

I had done a few auditions for community theater and hated them. A director sitting in a darkened auditorium, me pinned under a spotlight like a bug. Schmooze. Do monologue. Schmooze again. Not my idea of a good time. I figured an audition for a print ad should be much easier, right? Either you have the look they're seeking or you don't. What did I have to lose but a few hours and my dignity? Years later a therapist would give me a new mantra: "Feel the fear and do it anyway." I tweaked my resume, added some faux credits and off I went to my date with destiny.

LUNAR NEW YEAR

When I got downtown, I took a breath. I looked at my reflection in a store window and finger-combed my hair. Time to show up. I got off the elevator. The photo studio was cool with a floating glass staircase that led from the lobby to the loft where the shooting occurred. The place was packed with Asian dudes. The last time I saw so many Asians in one place it was Asian Lunar New Year and everyone was drunk or on their way to getting drunk. As soon as I walked

in I sensed people were sizing me up. After all, we were competing for the same golden ticket so we were all potential threats. One by one our names were called. We sat in a folding chair, made conversation, they took a Polaroid. The auditioner said they'd decide on casting soon and call the chosen talent that night.

When my phone didn't ring, I called the studio the next morning. "Hi, I was wondering if you know who got the part to be the Asian chef." The woman paused to look at her notes.

"Hmm, the gentleman's name is... Okita."

"That's me!!" I said.

"Oh, it's good you called," she said. "We're shooting tomorrow."

I was surprised that they'd forgotten to call me. But mostly I was shocked to find out I was chosen. Did I have that magical quality they were seeking? "Beginner's luck!" another actor later scoffed. But how could I be so lucky?

The next day I climbed the glass staircase to the photographer's loft where the shoot was about to take place. High up in the rafters floated backdrops for photo shoots -- the facade of a small house, a barn, a storefront. I felt more excited than nervous to be there. I saw a Calico cat wandering throughout the loft who clearly lived there. In a kitchen a man was heating a large pot of water on a stove, then adding in orange dye to make my chef's hat match the corn flakes logo. Next to him, a food stylist leaned over a cookie sheet filled with corn flakes. She was picking the most perfect flakes for the shoot. I was introduced to a man in a suit and a shiny bald head who was a vice president representing the sponsor. "You know, you can become famous from this," he said to me.

The photographer was a funny guy. He took some test shots. I could tell I wasn't giving him what he wanted. "We chose you because you smiled easily," he said. "So, Dwight, I want you to loosen up and have a good time. Okay?"

I tried to loosen up and smile naturally. Which was hard to do. The VP was checking his watch. The stylists were staring at me. I felt all eyes were on me and didn't want to let folks down. The more I tried to relax the more nervous I became the less I smiled naturally.

"That looks like you're in pain. Don't overthink this, Dwight," said the photographer. He made funny faces. He talked in a British accent. Then he pretended to pull down the zipper to his pants. Nothing.

"This isn't working, my friend. Let's take a break for a minute."

"I'm sorry. Maybe I'm just nervous," I said.

I had a cold can of soda and returned to the shooting area. This was my big moment and I was blowing it. I knew they had lots of other cereal box covers to shoot after me.

"Let's try this," the photographer said. "Just keep pouring the milk into the bowl until I tell you to stop. Just keep pouring and I'll keep shooting."

So I started pouring the milk into the bowl and the bowl started to fill with milk and I'm thinking omigod this is gonna spill all over me and the nice floor and for some reason it struck me as funny and bingo. I broke into a real smile.

He clicked his camera and got the shot!

"That's the money shot!" he said. "Now that's a million-dollar smile." He took a few more to be safe. We were done. I was free to go.

What a life I lead, I thought to myself exiting the photo studio. I just spent the day in a room filled with people who wanted nothing more than to make me smile!

A WHOLE SHELF OF ME

Periodically I would go into a small grocery store down the street to see if my Corn Flakes box had arrived. I walked past frozen foods, the soda aisle. Finally, I came to breakfast cereals. My eyes scanned the shelves. So many brands -- Sugar Smacks, Rice Crispies, Cap'n Crunch.

And then I saw it. It was me. A whole shelf of me.

I was dressed as an Asian chef pouring a pitcher of milk over a bowl. How surreal. But what was wrong with the photo? On some boxes my skin looked pink, on others gray, on others almost orange. I looked terrible. Elation turned to disappointment. I grabbed three boxes and placed them in a shopping tote. I wondered if the cashier would make the connection. As I put my boxes on the conveyor belt, I watched her face as she punched in the prices.

Finally I said, "Did you notice something about this cereal box?"

She stopped ringing up. "Excuse me?"

"This picture on the box. It's me." I held up the box beside my face. "I'm on the cover of the corn flakes box!"

She looked closer at the box, then at me, then back at the box. "It *is* you! How'd that happen?"

"It's a long story," I said.

Many of my friends and family were thrilled about the cereal box. And each time I visited the grocery store, I checked to see if I was still on the shelf. But eventually all good things come to an end and soon my face on the shelf was replaced by other shining faces eager to be discovered. As time passed, I was surprised by how little my life had changed after my cereal debut. I didn't become rich and famous like the cereal VP hinted. At least I was famous for the shelf life of the cereal boxes. Sometimes I'd meet someone for the first time and they'd say they remember that box, the one with the Asian chef on it. I'd kept a journal since high school at the urging of my creative writing teacher Diane Korhonen from high school who later became a lifelong friend. The journal entry said:

April 14, 1982

My cousin in California sent a proud note in a family letter: "I saw Dwight's picture on the corn flakes box. His picture is all over Los Angeles!"

If I had a decade to live over again, I could do worse than to relive my twenties. I got my first poem published in a Chicago arts magazine. I appeared on the cover of the corn flakes box. I became a Buddhist. My twenties were a time of yearning. I was yearning to be discovered in at least two ways. Firstly, I wanted to be discovered artistically as a creative writer, to be taken seriously. Secondly, I wanted to find a life partner, to be discovered romantically.

When I met sweet Marshall, I thought I had met my match. He was Latino, cute, artistic, funny, child-like. He was kind of a goofball like me.

I stayed over at his place one night and in the morning we ate bowls of Lucky Charms. Marshall dug his spoon into his cereal and shoveled the crunchy marshmallows into his mouth. Then he started humming. He was humming some unrecognizable song, the kind of song a kid might hum.

"Have you ever noticed," he said, "that when people eat something and it makes them happy -- they hum? I love that!" And I knew exactly what Marshall meant.

There were nights I'd help him learn lines for a show he was in on campus, nights he and I made passionate love in his bedroom where the walls were illuminated by strings of old Christmas lights. When I thought of Marshall I thought of his many charming facial expressions. It made it easy to picture him as a boy. We had been dating a while and thought we'd officially become boyfriends when he told me he was going to be leaving for Spain. There was some great opportunity with a theater troupe and he couldn't pass it up.

March 18, 1980

Marshall B's last words to me before getting on a plane to live in Spain: "If you get a letter from me, it means I stayed in Europe. If you get a phone call, it means I'm back."¹¹

Though my corn flakes cover boy status did not lead to a career in show biz, some years later I was able to get more mileage out of the experience. An editor at WBEZ, Chicago's public radio station, inquired if I happened to have a good story for their series of personal essays on immigration. I explained that technically I wasn't an immigrant as I was born in Chicago, but I might have a story about my appearance on a cereal box cover in my twenties as an Asian American chef. He was intrigued and asked me to submit.

My stint as the Asian chef was part of a larger advertising campaign which seemed to boast the theme: *Everyone Loves to Eat Corn Flakes*. Some of the other faces that graced the cereal box covers included: a teen punker girl, a Black fashion model, a Latino dude with a skateboard and so on. In my radio essay, I put a little ironic spin on the moment:

¹¹ Marshall stayed in Spain for a few years. When he finally returned to Chicago, we hung out again, but something had changed. "I can't date you, Dwight. I feel like we've become more like brothers than boyfriends."

"What the good folks at Brand X didn't know about me was that in real life I wasn't even a good cook. That my parents were interned by the U.S. government during WWII. That I was a proud gay man, and a Buddhist to boot! In my heart of hearts, I celebrated the notion that Brand X's vision of American-hood was so...inclusive." ¹²

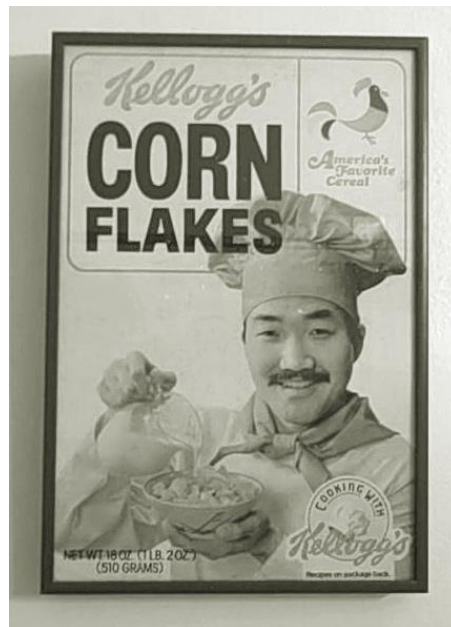
Maybe one of the more significant outcomes of my Cover Boy experience was the effect it had on my father who was a schoolteacher. He went out and bought twenty corn flakes boxes and asked me to autograph them for his fellow teachers. He was proud. It bothered me that he seemed more excited by my cereal debut than by the fact that I got my first poem published that year. Why didn't he buy twenty copies of the magazine and have me autograph *them*? No matter. I was grateful. Whenever a parent takes pride in a child's accomplishment -- that is noteworthy. That is not nothing.

According to family lore, my father studied to be an anthropologist at University of Chicago and once was offered a chance to go on an expedition to Antarctica. But my mother, being a practical woman, thought it would be too cold. "Fred, how can we raise a family on a block of ice?" she asked. "Our children would be always catching cold!" My father decided he'd rather become a schoolteacher in Chicago and live with my mom -- than go exploring cold, new worlds without her. I'm not sure if the world at large would agree with his life choice, but I was glad he made that decision.

As for corn flakes, maybe my father saw a brighter future in the stamp of approval from a big corporation like Brand X's than he did from a small literary magazine. And who's to say he wasn't right? Or maybe in a strange way I was fulfilling his own chilly Antarctic dreams via my brush with fame, but instead of an anthropologist discovering a forgotten tribe it was the world

¹² Around 1998, I wrote and performed the personal essay, "Cover Boy," on the radio about my corn flake experience for the show "Chicago Matters." It was for WBEZ, the Chicago affiliate of NPR.

discovering his second-born son. Any way I looked at it, my appearance as a cover boy has always seemed unlikely, seemed magical. And any time a son can make his father proud, for whatever reason, is truly a miraculous thing.





5. Reparations for a Japanese American Son (1983)

I'm Japanese American, born and raised in Chicago. I've been called a chink, a gook, even a spic. I figure if you're going to insult me, at least get the ethnic slur right. I've been blamed for Pearl Harbor, the Covid Pandemic, and being a rice eater. As for the first two I say: Not my fault, man. As for the last, okay, I do admit to eating rice now and then.

-- Dwight Okita

WHEN I WAS 25, I WROTE A POEM THAT MADE PEOPLE CRY. It was very magical in that regard. The year was 1983. The final episode of M*A*S*H aired on TV before 125 million viewers, myself included. For a short poem, it had a long title: "In Response to Executive Order 9066: All Americans of Japanese Descent Must Report to Relocation Centers." When it was first published in *Breaking Silence*, an Asian American anthology, I didn't know this 25-line poem would be the goose that laid golden eggs for me, but it was. "9066" appeared at the right place at the right time: multiculturalism had come to the American classroom.

By this time, I had gotten my BA in English. I had no interest in grad school because I wanted to be an author rather than a teacher (sorry, Dad!). I copied my other artist friends and worked as an office temp for a few years. At night and on weekends, I'd take off my temp hat for my emerging author hat and strategize how I would take the literary world by storm.

A coincidence occurred in 1983 that would only strike me as a big coincidence years later. This was the year my poem "In Response to Executive Order 9066" would be published.

This was also the year the Commission on Wartime Relocation declared that the Internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War was unjust and recommended that the detainees receive \$20,000 compensation, along with a national apology. What was the likelihood that my internment camp poem would be published in the same year?¹³

But an even bigger question would haunt me -- why did my mother receive a reparations check, but not my father?

"9066" originally was part of a larger poetry sequence called "Letters I Never Wrote." The concept here was I'd write a series of letters that either couldn't be written or should've been written. In one letter I wrote to my bullying big brother to confess how I sometimes envied his adventurous life. In another letter was a note to myself from the depressed person I was five years prior to the happier person I hoped I would be five years later. Another letter was written to a woman who hired a hitman to shoot her while sitting on a park bench. True story. And of course, one of the letters was "9066."

One day at a cafe, I shared "Letters I Never Wrote" with my inner circle.

"I love the collision of all these letters you never wrote, Dwight. So trippy. The one at the subway sandwich shop got to me," said Cesar, a Filipino actor buddy/flight attendant who would go on to be an amazing painter years later.

"For me the letter that put me through the windshield by far was the girl going to the internment camp," said Keith. Keith and I had been best friends in sixth grade. We lost touch for a decade and when our paths crossed again in a record store on the north side -- we discovered we were both gay. Years later he'd move to the Netherlands and marry his husband.

¹³ I find the very notion of internment camps barbaric, racist and wrong-headed. Executive Order 9066 imprisoned 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent for over three years. JAs were torn from their homes, jobs, friends, businesses, were traumatized. My parents -- who had yet to meet -- were among them.

"That letter is so frigging moving," said Keith, "I almost hate you for writing it. It also kind of makes the rest of the poetry sequence...I don't know...*lopsided*." He raised an eyebrow at me goofily.

"Keith is on to something," said Cesar.

"Hmm," I said. "Wouldn't want to make it lopsided, I guess."

"That letter has a life of its own. It's like it's its own thing, you know," Keith continued.

"It's yearning to be set free. Let my people go, I say!"

I decided they were right. I made it a freestanding poem, "In Response to Executive Order 9066." When I saw a notice that Greenfield Review Press was seeking submissions for a new Asian American poetry anthology, I decided to submit the "9066." The idea of a book of Asian American poets from around the country all gathered into one collection. I wanted to be part of that moment. One thing I have always been good at is evaluating and maximizing an opportunity when it presented itself. I confirmed with the editor, Joseph Bruchac, that if he published my poem that I'd still hold the copyright. He said that would be the case. He sent me an acceptance letter asking to publish "9066." I was thrilled.

A few years after publication, I started to get letters from textbook editors seeking reprint rights for my internment camp poem, asking my permission fee. I didn't know what a reprint right was. Let alone how much was a poem worth. At first, I shyly requested \$250 and they approved the fee. As more requests flooded in, I raised my fee, especially for large publishers. They started asking for more diverse reprint rights -- for large-print and Braille versions, teacher's editions, audio versions, e-book versions, workbooks, anthologies. Some were asking for usage for five years, some up to ten years. In time I realized the value of my poem. The highest fee I requested and received was \$2000.

My "9066" poem went on to be reprinted in books for grade school, high school and college students. The publishers were small presses and major presses. Milkweed. Kaya Production. Holt Rinehart Winston. McDougal Littell. Penguin. Minnesota Humanities Commission. Houghton Mifflin. The Smithsonian. Hyperion. Bedford/St. Martin. EMC Publishing. Pearson. McGraw Hill. MacMillan. At times my poem would appear in textbooks beside Sandra Cisneros' poem "Mericans." That made me smile because Sandra and I knew each other back in the day when she lived in Chicago.

At one point I remember I started to get messages from students who were reading my poem in school. They googled me and found my website -- www.dwightokita.com -- and wrote notes in the guestbook to say how the poem touched them. Or that they were Japanese American too. Or my poem was part of their homework. "Mr. Okita, what does the poem mean?" they'd ask and I'd say, "I think it's more important what the poem means to you."

But back to the question of why my mother got reparations check and not my father.

I started googling for answers. If the Commission decided to issue reparations checks to living internees in 1983 and both my parents were alive then -- shouldn't they both have gotten checks? I considered the fact that my father died in 1986. Could there have been a delay between the Commission's recommendation and the disbursing of the money? This is what I learned. The first reparations checks weren't issued until 1990, seven years later. So my father was cheated out of his much-deserved reparations check by a technicality. He fought in the highly decorated 442nd Battalion made up entirely of JA men from the camps, a battalion sent to fight the most dangerous battles. And while it didn't seem fair my father didn't live to receive compensation, I also knew that few American groups mistreated by the U.S. government had ever gotten their due. At least Dad lived long enough to know that the U.S. government apologized.

Recently I got curious and wondered exactly how much "9066" earned in reprint fee. I went through my assorted records I was surprised to find the amount came to over \$20,000. In my mind, the reprint checks for my internment camp poem were the universe's way of compensating my family for the \$20,000 that my father never received. I called it: *Reparations for a Japanese American son.*

And on that day, I learned that sometimes your father is cheated out of a government check that he richly deserves and sometimes that money finds its way to you anyway, comes from another direction, bit by bit, until that debt is paid. Each check is received and deposited. Each check is an apology that earns interest and is spent in your father's memory.

One last takeaway from the internment camps is this. My father was born in Seattle, Washington. My mother in Fresno, California. Upon the closing of the camps, many JA's moved to Chicago because they believed there were more jobs and less prejudice there. My mother and father first met at a church picnic in Chicago. Had the war not happened, had the camps not been created -- my parents would likely have never met and I would have never been born.

So there's that piece of magic to ponder over. Below is my poem that kept giving.

IN RESPONSE TO EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066:
All Americans of Japanese Descent Must Report to Relocation Centers

Dear Sirs:

Of course I'll come. I've packed my galoshes
and three packets of tomato seeds. Denise calls them
love apples. My father says where we're going
they won't grow.

I am a fourteen-year-old girl with bad spelling
and a messy room. If it helps any, I will tell you
I have always felt funny using chopsticks
and my favorite food is hot dogs.
My best friend is a white girl named Denise --

we look at boys together. She sat in front of me
all through grade school because of our names:
O'Connor, Ozawa. I know the back of Denise's head very well.

I tell her she's going bald. She tells me I copy on tests.
We're best friends.

I saw Denise today in Geography class.
She was sitting on the other side of the room.
"You're trying to start a war," she said, "giving secrets away
to the Enemy. Why can't you keep your big mouth shut?"

I didn't know what to say.
I gave her a packet of tomato seeds
and asked her to plant them for me, told her
when the first tomato ripened
she'd miss me.

CHILDHOOD MEMORY WITH PATROL BOY

As a child, I had a pretty normal, decent life. But every once in a while another child
would say something that reminded me I was different, that I didn't quite belong. One day
crossing the street, I encountered a patrol boy on duty. He had an orange safety belt across his
chest.

"Hey ching chong chinaman." He pulled his eyes back into slits.

I thought to myself: What a total jerk. And he's supposed to be a patrol boy. It hurt my
feelings.

"No speakee dee Englishee?" he said.

I hated him, wanted to punch him in the stomach. Instead I took a deep breath and looked
him square in the eye. "Actually I can speak exceptionally well. Unlike you who speak with the
most infantile of vocabularies." (Sometimes I slept with a dictionary under my pillow. I liked
learning new words.)

His mouth widened into an O of surprise. "Wow!"

"Seriously, if you ever hope to be more than a patrol boy in life -- I suggest you start by learning to be polite and offer good customer service!" I said.

He called to his fellow patrol boy thugs across the street. "Hey Marty, Stuart -- check this out. You won't believe what I just heard!"

I stood my ground and planned my response. The three boys circled around me and stared at me. "Go ahead, say it again," said the original kid.

I said nothing, just looked blankly back at him.

"Tell 'em what you just told me. About how you speak exceptionally well and stuff!" he said.

I stared at him with a smile on my face. And then I calmly walked away making the kid look like the fool that he was.

Patrol boy Mike couldn't see me as a real boy. To him I was a non-person, an alien from another galaxy. At moments like that I felt more sorry for him because I figured he'd grow up to be a mean old man who hated his life and kicked his dog. He'd grow up to be a monster. I experienced racism through grade school, then high school. And then when I went to college -- a place where everyone was from some distant land or another, where people spoke in so many different tongues, where everyone was different and nobody quite belonged -- the prejudice subsided. For a while anyway. Because while college looked like the real world, it wasn't really the real world, was it?

THE POETRY VIDEO DEBUT

It was great to earn money from my poems. And over the years I pretty much did everything I ever wanted to do in poetry. I performed poems at a storefront in Rogers Park with a friend who was a cellist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. One of my poems wound up on a bronze plaque with other esteemed writers along the Embarcadero train platform in San Francisco. When people dialed a certain phone number, they heard me recite to them on Dial-A-Poem. But ever since the explosion of music videos on MTV, I had the burning desire to create poetry videos to reach a wider audience. Other poets around the country started wondering the same thing. In 1988, I reached out to Marsha V. Morgan through a bulletin board at the offices of Chicago Access Network (CAN). I pitched her my concept of a poetry video and she was interested. Marsha had trained in video production at CAN so we had access to their equipment and planned to screen the video on their program "Arts on Access."

The shooting location for the poetry video took place on hot summer night at the tri-section of Clark, Broadway and Diversey. Some considered that the heart of New Town's gay community. I thought it was also cinematically appealing as it involved the crisscrossing of five lanes of traffic and numerous pedestrian cross walks. Marsha and cameraman had to shoot guerilla style since we had no city permission to alter the flow of traffic. One critical shot for Marsha was a slow, circular pan of the intersection. It required the timing of my crossing the busy street -- with extras leaning against a storefront window --with the flow of cars and their blinding headlights -- and returning to me arriving at the curb on the other side. The video footage was shot in color while the striking still photos (Jennifer Girard Studios) were black-and-white, grainy, appropriately poetic.

I had a friend who lived in an apartment at that intersection who let us shoot some footage from this third-floor unit. It afforded us an overhead view of the intersection and pensive

shots of me staring out the window at the scene below. Finally, the shooting was complete.

Marsha and I retired to the 24-hour Golden Nugget for nocturnal pancakes. There was the regular assortment of clientele -- cops, twenty-somethings, insomniacs. We sipped our coffees and sighed.

The director leaned across the table as if confiding in me. "There may come a time in the future...when you may want to...*re-shoot* the video. With better camera equipment, a bigger budget, better everything," she said.

I didn't exactly know what she was trying to say. "Why? Why would I do that?"

"I just mean...we're going to make the best poetry video that we can. That's not the question," she said. "But if there comes a time when you have the chance to do it even better with someone else -- well, that would be okay with me. That's all."

"I see," I said. "I really like the way the shoot is going, Marsha," I said. "Let's just do it great the first time." I knew she was being gracious. Our pancakes arrived and they were the comfort food we had earned.

"As a director I can tell you that sometimes you catch lightning in a jar. And sometimes you don't."

I figured she was just trying to manage my expectations. Marsha and I didn't see eye-to-eye on everything, but we didn't have to. We just had to make it through the weekend without crashing and burning.

Once the poetry video was done, I was happy. It might not have been perfect but it was beautiful in its way. I wrote a press release to try to get media coverage. The form of the poetry video was still unknown to most, so pitching them as like "music videos but with a focus on a poem spoken words in voiceover with music underneath" seemed to intrigue people. I was

excited when both the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Reader wanted to run a story about the project in their papers the same weekend. Sweet! The responses to the press release kept coming. Fox TV Evening News wanted to do a segment as Marsha and I sat before the video editing suite. Next National Public Radio recorded a radio segment with a college professor playing devil's advocate who said that combining poetry, video and music was a big mistake. But the cherry on top was discovering that WTTW's cool TV show "Image Union" wanted to include the video in their broadcast.

If this whole experience taught me nothing else, it was about the magic of marketing. I started with a lone press release -- one good idea and a fresh take that made people want to pick up the phone. I had that going for me and a lot of luck, synchronicity and karmic brownie points. A slow news cycle never hurts either. I know it might sound like bragging to list my accolades. To be honest, I am a bit conceited. But I'm also incredibly proud. As someone who was once shy and voiceless, I'm thrilled that I can now throw my voice out into the world and have it come back amplified one-hundred-fold.

THE POETS HOTEL

When I started out as a young poet, there were many poets I loved. I was drawn to Phillip Levine's blue-collar laments set in garages and gas stations. Carolyn Forché's poems of love and atrocity in El Salvador. Chicagoan Li-Young Lee's graceful, moving poems with language that was almost biblical, reverential.

As one of my last official poetry projects, I assembled a book manuscript. I sent the book out and got several gracious rejections. Many poetry publishers were often already committed five years in advance. In time, I let go of that dream. After hanging out with some of my actor

buddies, I started writing plays. I liked the idea of collaboration with actors and working with a director. Though later I missed the direct connection a poet has with their audience, the immediate gratification of hearing listeners respond, laugh, gasp, sigh in real time.

Of all the places poetry has taken me, probably the most unusual was to what I called "The Poets Hotel" in 1994. Penguin Publishing was debuting a new multicultural poetry anthology called *Unsettling America*. For the book launch, they were flying in twenty-five poets including myself to stay at a hotel in New Jersey for the weekend. Something about that idea tickled me deeply: To spend the weekend with a hotel filled with poets from around the country seemed paradisaical, surreal. I pictured impromptu poetry readings in the halls late at night by the ice machines, found poems created in the swimming pool. When I arrived at the hotel, it felt like a reunion. We donned lanyards holding our nametags. In the lunch line, I spied a handsome man of Indian descent. I kept trying to catch his eye.

"Any idea what they're serving for breakfast?" I asked him.

"No. But it smells good. My name is Samuel Patel," he said in a gently foreign accent.

"Oh, I'm Dwight Okita. Hey, do you want to sit together for breakfast?"

"I'd like that!" He gave me a peek at his new book over breakfast. I told him I liked it. I also gave him a copy of my book which he said he'd read later. My new friend made sure I was aware he'd won some impressive literary awards. Translation: He orbited in higher literary circles than I did. I admired that, was maybe a tad jealous, though I do admit that I began to tire of my new friend's Song of Himself.

Samuel and I hung out that Saturday and if truth be told -- he spent the night in my room and we fooled around. After all, we were poets staying at The Poets Hotel. What else could we

do? The weekend proceeded, the gala poetry event, the endless networking and business card swapping. Yes, poets have business cards. And then it was Sunday, and it would all be over soon. We sat at a restaurant booth in the hotel drinking our lattes. The place was crummy with poets and poetry aficionados alike. I wondered if there was a Samuel Patel in my future or was this just one of a one-off. Would we keep in touch? After coffee, we decided to pack up and made our way back to our rooms which were on the same floor.

My new friend and I walked into the elevator. The doors closed.

"Did you get to read some of my poems?" I asked him.

"Oh! Not yet. Sorry," he said.

I was a bit miffed. "The weekend's almost over, Samuel. C'mon. I read your poem as soon as you gave it to me."

"It's definitely on my list of things to do," he said shrugging it off.

"Wow. And I thought I was self-absorbed," I uttered in a stage whisper.

"Excuse me?" he said.

The door opened to our floor. I paused, regrouped.

"Heck, we're writers," I said. "We're self-absorbed by nature. No one fascinates us more than ourselves. But learning to take interest in others? That's the hard part, isn't it?"

"What are you trying to say?" he asked.

"I'm going to give you a chance to redeem yourself, Sammy, cuz I like you," I said.

He stopped walking and stood still. "I promise to read your poem on the plane."

"Come to my room for a minute," I said. I was telling him, not asking him. Reluctantly he obeyed.

Once in the room, I closed the door. "I'll give you a poem, but I want you to go to my bathroom and right now and read it. How's that?" I had a huge smile on my face. I handed him the poem. Reluctantly he accepted and walked into the bathroom. I closed the door and stood guard so he couldn't escape. Moments later, Samuel emerged sheepishly from the bathroom.

"I loved it," he said. "It's wonderful. You're wonderful. I'm sorry I didn't read it sooner," he said. How could I be mad at him?

"Thank you for taking an interest in my work, Mr. award-winning Patel," I said.

Was I a jerk for demanding that he read my poem? All I can say is that I was being honest. I was trying to be proactive in getting my needs met. My need to be seen and heard as one creative spirit to another. It was less about needing him to like the poem, it was not about awards or accolades, it was more about wanting him to engage with me as I had engaged with him. And I got what I wanted. We parted on friendly terms, each of us flying back to the cities we came from, our day jobs, our social circles -- and life went on.

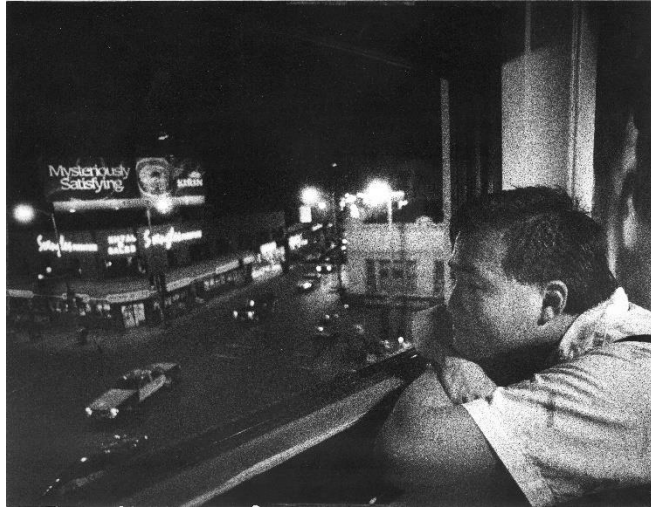
*

I had done everything I wanted to do as a poet, but the most important thing and it was killing me. I wanted to have my poetry book published. But I felt a transition coming on. I was switching from the poetry world to the theater world. I gave up the dream of seeing my poetry book published and was moving on. Sometimes you chant for something...and sometimes the answer is no.

One day I was invited to be part of a panel discussion with various Chicago literati. I was especially pleased to meet Luis J. Rodriguez who was not only a well-known writer who had written poetry books and the hit memoir, *Always Running: Gang Days in LA*, but he was also the publisher of Tia Chucha Press. As we waited for the event to start, Luis and I began chatting. I mentioned I'd finished a manuscript.

"You should submit your book to us," he said. "I like your work." I thought he probably said that to everyone, so I didn't submit. Then a week later I read an interview with Luis and was impressed with his vision. I submitted my book to him. He asked to publish it. And that's how *Crossing with the Light* finally came to be in print.

Over the course of my life, I've noticed sometimes when I stopped pursuing a dream, the universe opened a new door to me. I was thrilled that my poetry book was being published. But by this time, I was already making inroads into the theater world. My focus was shifting. Instead of seeing the world as a series of powerful images...as a poet would, I started to hear the world in snippets of conversation, the shockingly beautiful/profoundly hurtful things people say to each other...as a playwright would. Ultimately my book was published not by the publishers to whom I'd submitted -- but by the publisher who had the greatest appreciation for it.



*Still from poetry video, "Crossing with the Light."
By Jennifer Girard Studios.*



6. The Beehive of Buddhism (1985)

*Because shy people repeatedly fail to express themselves,
they are less effective in shaping their world.*

-- Philip G. Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is and What To Do About It*

WHEN I WAS 26, THE RING OF A DOORBELL SENT ME RUNNING for my life. It signaled the unexpected relapse of my debilitating social phobia. The year was 1985 and Coca-Cola was changing its formula, launching New Coke. I would soon be in desperate need of a reinvention myself.

I was staying overnight with a friend and jumped into the shower when the doorbell rang. My friend opened the door and conversation and laughter ensued. I was terrified to meet this new person. What if they didn't like me? What if I had nothing interesting to say? It was clear that I had to avoid this encounter at all costs. These were old questions from my younger years of The Socially Anxious Dwight. Why were they flooding my mind now? I wound up staying in the shower under the spray of hot water for an hour and a half! That's when I knew I needed to talk to someone professional. I made a note to make an appointment to see a therapist for the first time.

In the meantime, life marched on. I was doing the rounds, trying to break into advertising as a newbie copywriter. I'd put together a portfolio and started going on interviews. The recurrence of my shyness couldn't have come at a worse time. The Chicago ad world was a world of

fearless extroverts. I had to create a facade of bravado to hide my insecurity. I would see if any of the acting classes I took in college had paid off.

I like to say that I found Buddhism at a bus stop. Or to be more exact, I found my sponsor Corey at that bus stop. Appropriately I was wearing a T-shirt that said: "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers." He smiled and commented on my shirt. Then he asked if I'd ever heard of *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* and would I like to visit the Buddhist center.

I smiled back at him and said, "Really...I'm just looking for a quick hamburger."

He laughed. "You can get that later. But if you like, I can walk you over to the Buddhist center and you can see what chanting is like." Now it's not like I walk off with total strangers to parts unknown, but I thought Corey was cute and maybe flirting and heck -- I had nothing better to do. The hamburger could wait.

The Buddhist center was on Wrightwood just a few blocks away. As I walked into the building, he said it used to be a Swedish dinner club. I wondered if chanting could help me overcome my social anxiety. The first thing I noticed was a sound I hadn't heard before. It sounded like I was entering an enormous beehive. We came to a room where a few dozen people were chanting together. Now I was inside, in the very heart of the beehive. Where the honey was made! The chanting brought together people of diverse backgrounds praying over diverse goals/problems...in the same way a real beehive brought together a variety of bees with one common goal.

Corey liked my beehive analogy. He said, "You should definitely come to a discussion meeting next week."¹⁴

¹⁴ This is the same branch of Buddhism practiced by Tina Turner, Orlando Bloom, Suzanne Vega, Chow Yun-fat and others. Some key concepts include: "Turning poison into medicine," "Tapping into one's Buddha Nature," and "Working for world peace by helping others move toward enlightenment." See Buddhability.org or sgi-usa.org.

I hesitated because that was also the week I was to have my first psychotherapy session. If I did Buddhism and therapy simultaneously and became happy -- I wouldn't know which one had helped me. Then I decided if I became happy, it didn't matter. So I did both.

When I went to my first therapy session, I noticed how drab the waiting room was, how few magazines there were in the rack to choose from. The evening went downhill from there. The walls of my therapist's office were bare, a plastic flower in her bud vase. Dr. K herself seemed reserved and asked me questions in a monotone voice: "And how do you feel about that... And what is it then that you are really seeking..." But mostly she was silent and waited for me to speak. Note to therapists: Shy people *hate* to be forced to talk.

Finally she said, "So while I can't promise to cure you of your shyness, I can help you learn to live with it." Huh? Didn't she get the memo? I didn't come to her to help me learn to *live* with it. I was already living with shyness. I went on to tell her her about one of my most brutal moments as a shy person. Out of school I was doing Cobol programming at an insurance company. The corporate world was like a foreign country to me. As an artist, its values did not resonate with mine. As I walked down the hallway, I heard a voice say, "Oh that Dwight kid...he's socially retarded!" and then several people burst out laughing. It hurt my feelings, but I wasn't totally shocked by the comment. I *was* socially retarded. Still, the guy was a dick for saying so.

I didn't think this therapist was a good fit for me. In fact Dr. K seemed more shy than I was. I left her office discouraged, plotting my exit strategy.

When I went to my first Buddhist discussion meeting, on the other hand, the experience couldn't have been more different. The meeting held at someone's apartment was bright with lamps and laughter and I could smell fresh coffee brewing in the kitchen. The members were welcoming. One Buddhist quote that struck me from the meeting: "A mind now clouded by the illusions of

the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror." ¹⁵

A more experienced member at the meeting told me that when you start chanting sometimes you get benefits (proof that chanting works) and sometimes you get obstacles (obstacles arise when you make strides to move forward). "And often you get both...so don't freak out," she said.

It's The Water Glass Theory of Buddhism. "Picture your life as a glass of water," she said.

"When you start chanting it's like stirring the water in the glass. Sometimes the water turns cloudy. That cloudiness is not directly created by stirring the glass. The sediment of your karma was already present, resting on the bottom. Your stirring just made the sediment visible. You're chanting to purify your karma. The cloudiness is proof that the process is working."

Most importantly, I found chanting with other humans energized me. I left that night feeling happier than when I arrived. The feeling was, in a word, magical.

FALL-DOWN FUNNY

Finally in February 1985 I was hired by my first ad agency. Hallelujah. That was my first tangible benefit from chanting. One of their clients made high quality power tools, another was a big transit agency in Chicago. The doors to the castle parted for me and I walked in. I befriended Mark and Lucy, two art directors, who happened to be dating. They were quirky but genuinely good people. I could tell they were loved as children.¹⁶

¹⁵ From Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Volume 1. The book contains letters written by Nichiren to encourage his followers in their practice.

¹⁶ Decades later, I will be happy to discover that Mark and Lucy have married and raised a family. Lucy will attend my book signing for my second novel, *The Hope Store*, at Women & Children First. We won't have seen each other for thirty years. Sadly Mark will have passed away a few years earlier.

First day on the job, I was so nervous. I spilled my coffee during a staff meeting for starters. Still, the creative director came by at the end of the day and said I was a great addition to the team. That night my Buddhist sponsor Corey tried to encourage me.

"That's so great you got the job you chanted for. I know it's scary to get what you want," he said. "In dreams begin responsibilities. So while you're trying to change your life, you're also stirring up your karma. That's living proof that you're moving forward." That was one of the best Buddhist speeches Corey ever gave me -- and he gave me a lot of them. I asked if he could spend the night with me. He did. I needed to be held. He gave me nurturing embraces of which I was in great need. He crashed on the futon; I in my bed.¹⁷

To combat my stress at the new job, I added a new goal to my chanting list: "Please give me back my sense of humor, my aliveness." It was a less concrete goal than say chanting for a job. Buddhists called it an inconspicuous benefit. I wanted the return of my self-confidence, the return of the old me.

At my first brainstorming session at the ad agency, all creatives were summoned to the conference room. I made up my mind to push myself to contribute to the discussion. We were given the task of coming up with a brilliant new name for a new kind of power tool that propelled nails into wood through pneumatic pressure. The creative director stood at the easel holding a large flip chart, a black marker in hand. "Okay, guys. Hit me with your best shots. Don't censor yourselves. Go!"

¹⁷ What my friend Corey provided me that night was comforting touch in the form of cuddling. In three decades, there would be businesses like Cuddlist.com that give the public access to touch practitioners who provide healing platonic touch. Such services address "skin hunger," workplace stress, depression, trauma, isolation, etc. But no such luck in 1985.

People started shouting out names. The brainstorming went like this: "The Nail Spitter." "The Jack Hammer." "The Terminator." "Nail Flow." "Electra-Hammer?" "Death Trap."

"Hammer Plus?" I said.

The creative director smiled at me. "Hmm. Hammer Plus. Nice one, Dwight," he said. By the end of the session, a name was chosen for the power tool. It wasn't mine but I had fun brainstorming. I liked working at a job where I was paid for my words.

One afternoon, Lucy and I were hanging out in Mark's office. We were between assignments so we were just socializing, not even pretending to work. Mark told us about being on the bus and this guy wearing sandals started clipping his toenails, and clippings were shooting all over the bus! Hysterical. Then Lucy tried to top that by telling how she once found a band-aid in her salad under a couple of croutons. I found myself laughing out loud which I hadn't done in a long time. I laughed so hard at their stories I found myself down on all fours trying to catch my breath. It had been a long time since I'd lost control. It felt amazing. I made a note in my calendar of it. *I had chanted for my sense of humor. Could this be the result?* All three of us were cracking up so badly tears were in our eyes. Finally the two art directors gained their composure but I was still laughing on the floor.

Mark looked at me with a big smile. "Are you okay, Dwight?" he asked. "That really tickled your funny bone."

"Oh my god, Mark, I haven't laughed that hard in years!" I said. I secretly hoped I would laugh that hard again soon. The second laughter episode did occur, but it was with another colleague. This confirmed it wasn't a fluke. My sense of humor was returning.

Over time I became a shyness expert. I knew that 40% of Americans identified as shy. I knew that Asian Americans had the highest levels of shyness (hello!) and Jewish Americans had the

lowest (I'chaim!). I loved Philip Zimbardo's book *Shyness* which became my bible. That's how I learned about "Shyness Clinics." I was thrilled to discover there was a shyness clinic in Chicago but what shy person in their right mind would show up to such a socially confronting endeavor? I was dying to find out.

THE SHYNESS CLINIC

My first impression upon walking into the Shyness Clinic was how attractive and together everyone looked. Not like the shy stereotype in my mind -- librarian types with mismatched clothes, nerdy dudes with pocket protectors. These people looked attractive and happy and high-functioning. That is until they started to tell their shyness stories.

There was a pretty flight attendant with a bandage over her nose. I wondered if she was undergoing plastic surgery. She shared with the group that she had been on a date where a man started screaming at her: "Say something! Talk goddamit!" Wow. I totally empathized with her. I felt like I was finding my tribe.

Another person said, "I see someone like Dwight and he's so talkative here and yet he said he was so nervous at work he couldn't leave his desk."

"I think it's because I feel I'm an expert at shyness," I said. "But in a less structured social situation, I'm lost." The Shyness Clinic would run for eight weeks. I was looking forward to attending.

My life was starting to have a certain rhythm to it. On Tuesday nights I'd go to the Buddhist new members meeting at the center where I liked talking with my new friend Juanita. She worked at the bookstore often chanting behind the counter that she could gain control of her sense of humor. "I'm a grown woman," she said. "I shouldn't be laughing like a schoolgirl."

I found that fascinating. "God, if anything I'm chanting for my sense of humor to *return*," I said. "I've chanted for my sense of humor too!" said Juanita. "But I went too far and now I'm trying to get it under control." She winked at me. I liked Juanita. It felt like we'd known each other longer than we had.

On Friday nights you could find me at The Shyness Clinic roleplaying with others that we were at a cocktail party and trying desperately to keep the conversation going, to find the words where once there were no words. I was happy to be doing something constructive to address my problems. I chanted to feel more outgoing and that was gradually starting to happen. I chanted to win a contest but didn't win. Chanting is not an ATM machine. One part is chanting for the wisdom and courage, the other part is taking action.

That Monday I went to my job at the ad agency and found out over the weekend the agency lost a major client. There would be cutbacks. Or to be more precise, there would be one cutback: me. Last to be hired, first to be fired. It wasn't personal. It was business. I'd miss my new pals Mark and Lucy but at least I wasn't an advertising virgin anymore. On the way home, I treated myself to a Frappuccino.

I refused to be defeated. My Buddhist sponsor Corey said, "Congratulations! Obstacles arise when you move forward." I appreciated his congrats but I wasn't feeling it. I was unemployed again. Two steps forward, one step back. The Cha-Cha of Diminishing Returns. Corey encouraged me to join the Buddhist brass band playing the bass drum of all things to make a cause to change my karma. My days of laughing on the floor appeared to be over, but I was happy that my sense of humor remained.

I was by no means a perfect Buddhist. I was more a situational Buddhist. Though I aspired to chant an hour each day, I tended to chant most when situations arose. The monsters du jour

included: social anxiety, my awkward fit into corporate culture. The magic included: the return of my sense of humor, easy access to the beehive of Buddhism, my friendships with Corey, Lucy and Mark. Some mornings I went with Corey to Super Morning Gongyo which was the morning prayer session at the Buddhist center. I would place the chanting beads around my hands with their 108 wooden spheres, representing the human desires. (I was sure I had more than 108 desires.) I put my hands together to chant. I opened my mouth uttering the words *Nam myoho renge kyo*, each of us were praying about our own unique goals and challenges but using the same four words, the sound of my voice reverberating with the sound of other voices in the large room. It felt like we were singing.

As the months passed, I managed to encourage my brother to start chanting. Then together, he and I encouraged my mother to start chanting also. Mom's conversion to SGI Buddhism was particularly surprising. She had been one of those Christians who watched Kathryn Kuhlman on UHF. Kuhlman was an evangelical Christian, a faith healer with big wavy hair and a luminous smile. My mother would send her \$20 to purchase a single mustard seed in the mail. Why a mustard seed? I found out later that the mustard seed was considered the smallest thing one could imagine. Jesus' point was that entry to the kingdom of heaven was as tiny as a mustard seed. My father, for his part, though he didn't object to our embracing Buddhism, preferred to remain with his Methodist faith. The fact that Dad was okay with becoming outnumbered in his family as a Methodist 3-to-1 said a lot about my father.

KISS YOUR FATHER

One year after I became Buddhist, my schoolteacher father finished his work week and walked to the teacher's parking lot. There in his car, he suffered a heart attack -- a stabbing chest pain, a tingling throughout his body.

In the hospital waiting room, a doctor spoke to us -- my mother, brother and I. He said, "Fred has actually had several silent heart attacks in his life. Each heart attack left a small hole in his heart. Today Fred's heart is like Swiss cheese. It's a miracle he's lived this long. We will try to operate but..."

Just before they wheeled him into surgery, my mother said, "Kiss your father! You might not see him alive again." Dad, barely awake, opened and closes his eyes. I kissed him. It would be the last time. The surgery could not save him. In the days following his death, my mother did not fall apart. She was sad to lose her husband, but she chanted for him to be born into good circumstances in his next life. She carried on.

A few weeks later, we received in the mail a large brown envelope containing many greeting cards that Dad's young students colored by hand in crayon. They were addressed to us, the family. They were adorned with child-like images, the words on the cards had misspellings. The one that struck me most was this one. On the front of the card was a drawing of a man in a hat, driving a car. It clearly resembled my father with his hat and glasses. The words said: "This is Mr. Okita driving his car." On the inside of the card was a similar drawing of the man in a car but a large paper hand had been scotch-taped inside with the paper hand reaching out the window. The words said: "This is Mr. Okita waving goodbye." ¹⁸

¹⁸ As I work on this book, I am now 64. My father died at 62. I have outlived my father by two years.

DAD AS A SOLDIER!!!!



Dad in his soldier days.
A member of the 442 Batalion. ???



7. My Six-Month Soulmate (1991)

WHEN I WAS 33, I RECONNECTED WITH AN OLD CRUSH from college. But like all things that seem too good to be true, there was a catch...which could turn into a dealbreaker. The year was 1991 and singer Freddie Mercury of the group Queen had just died of AIDS.

Frank was driving in his convertible on I-95 when suddenly I popped into his head and he felt compelled to pull over. He dialed what he hoped was still my number. I, for my part, was at a coffeehouse in the trendy north side flirting with a waiter. My cell rang and I looked to see who it might be. It was not someone in my phone book. I decided to be spontaneous and pick it up.

"Hello, if this is United Way -- I gave at the office," I said. "In fact, come to think of it, I *work* at United Way."

"Dwight? Is that really you?" said the voice. His voice was filled with emotion. He sounded too sincere to be a telemarketer. He said my name like he meant it, like he knew the person it stood for.

*

Frank and I first met at the weight room in college. I discovered that he was also gay but in a long-term relationship. He reminded me of Paul Bunyan with his reddish-brown hair and mustache, his broad chest. I found his gentle nature paired with his lumberjack physique positively swoon-worthy. We spotted each other at the gym and studied together. The good news

was that he was gay. The bad news was that he had a serious boyfriend. Our friendship blossomed. When we graduated, we promised to keep in touch. We didn't.

*

The deep voice on the phone said: "Is this the Dwight Okita I went to college with ten years ago and met in the weight room of UIC?"

"Depends on who's asking," I said. I took a sip of my iced Americano.

"Fair enough. Does the name Frank O'Brien mean anything to you?"

The name Frank O'Brien meant everything to me. I'd been trying to track him down for years.

"Frank??" I heard my voice tremble. I set my coffee on the tabletop.

"Dwight?"

Once I processed the moment I spoke: "What inspired you to call me now, pray tell? And where are you living these days?" I asked.

"My mom's been sick so I try to help her out in the south suburbs," he said. "So let me tell you why I'm calling. I've started to write poetry and I remembered you were an excellent poet. I wondered if you would mind taking a look at what I'm writing. Secondly I wanted to tell you that I'm HIV positive." It was the latter announcement that might have been the dealbreaker.

"Wow, I'm so sorry to hear you're positive, Frank." But it was not a total surprise since his lover was positive too. "Are you still with your boyfriend from back in college?"

Another pause. "Oh...unfortunately he passed away three years ago."

Out loud I said, "I'm so sorry to hear that." But inside I was doing cartwheels. Very inappropriate, I knew. But this meant Frank was potentially on the market again. "Oh, and I'd love to take a look at your poems."

Our routine went like this. On weekends, Frank would take the Rock Island train into the city from the south suburbs. He'd stay at a small motel near my apartment on Surf Street. First thing, we'd head over to the big Borders bookstore and lose ourselves in the poetry section. Frank would grab a shopping tote and he'd let me toss poetry books I thought he should read into the tote. It was fun. Invariably by then we'd have worked up an appetite and we'd head to a restaurant in New Town, usually a place that served pancakes and/or great cheeseburgers. Then we'd hightail it back to his hotel. He'd read some of his new poems aloud to me and I'd give input.

On one particular weekend, we sat on the bed conversating. He looked at me with a mysterious smile that rivaled Mona Lisa.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Sometimes...I imagine what it'd be like...to kiss the back of your neck," he uttered.

"Ah. Is that a line from your new poem?" I asked.

He looked into my eyes for a long time: "No. It's something I really think about."

Needless to say, I was over the moon. "Well, what are we going to do about that?" I said innocently.

"We should do something, shouldn't we?"

On the one hand, I was thrilled at the prospect of finally dating Frank after a decade of not seeing him. But I had never dated an HIV positive guy. Was I ready for that? How did I ever feel about that? I desperately needed to consult my inner circle. I called up Joey and Nancy for a pow wow.

GROUP HUDDLE

We assembled at Nookies for comfort food and consultation. Joey was one of my more conservative friends who always erred on the side of caution. What Nancy brought to the table was her bohemian heart and reckless spirit. Between the two of them, I figured I'd get a good range of opinions. We had barely devoured the complimentary basket of sourdough bread and butter when things started getting testy.

"Wait, are you serious, Joey?" said Nancy. "You think Dwight shouldn't date a guy just because he's HIV positive?"

"Well, I can't speak for Dwight, but I wouldn't," said Joey. "Would you?"

Nancy was flustered. "It's never come up for me. But if it did, I sure would look at *all* my options."

"This is great," I said. "The pros and cons."

"But what do I know? I'm not the coolest tool in the shed," said Joey. "I came out at thirty after all." He laughed and looked at me. "But let's say you date the guy, and I'm sure he's a great guy. That's not the question. Every night you lie down together there's this real chance you could slip up and, well, get infected. Is it worth endangering your life?"

Nancy was chomping at the bit. "But Dwight, you always have safe sex, right?" She searched my face for answers. "I mean you're not into...*penetration*. Didn't you tell me that? Or am I mixing up my gay men?"

"Say it louder, Nancy, and we can all get up and dance to it!" I said. I scanned the room to see if anyone was listening. Joey was blushing worse than me.

"And there *are* other ways you can transmit the virus than that," he said.

Nancy wasn't done. "Are you actually saying that HIV positive people don't deserve to experience love? Please tell me you're not saying that."

"Who said anything like that? I think you're conflating being loved with having unsafe sex." said Joey. And on the night went. By the time dessert and coffee arrived, I'd made up my mind. I weighed all options and in the end chose to move forward with dating the lumberjack poet. He deserved to be loved. Hell, I deserved to be loved. And who knew? Maybe this was my last shot at love.

I WANTED MORE

Frank and I were two poets in love with words, first and foremost. One night I staged a poetry performance for an audience of one -- Frank -- in which I read the poems that changed my life, that made me want to be a poet. Some weekends we drove down Ashland Avenue in his convertible singing along with tunes on the radio. And things were going great, absolutely great - - until they weren't. What happened? I wasn't sure. But the trouble started when I learned my first play would be produced. I was at nightly rehearsals and Frank felt neglected big time.

"I don't get it," he said. We were at the Why Not Cafe getting dessert. "The play's already written. Why do you have to be at every rehearsal?"

"I don't have to but it's my baby," I said. "I want to be there. Playwrights spend most of their lives waiting to get produced. Rehearsal time is precious."

"So what's the point of having a boyfriend if I never see you? What's the point of having a Dwight?" he said.

I thought that was pretty cute.

He got quiet for a moment. "It's always going to be about you, isn't it?" he said.

Frank's words caught me off guard. "What does that mean?" I asked.

"Because Dwight is Mr. Big Shot Writer and I'm chopped liver. When is it ever going to be about *us*?" He got up and left the cafe. Frank had never walked out on me before.

For the next month, Frank didn't answer his phone live once. And he stopped returning my calls, we stopped hanging out. I could feel the anger building between us. In a moment of rage and stupidity, I left a nasty message on his machine that I instantly regretted:

"Hey, Frank. Thanks for not returning any of my calls. You're kind of acting like a dick right now," I said. "And by the way, I RISKED MY LIFE to date you in case you hadn't noticed. Oh well."

He responded by leaving an equally nasty message for me.

Then one day the unimaginable happened: Frank called me and I was there to pick up the phone.

"Hi, Dwight. My friends tell me that I owe you an explanation. Could we meet for coffee at Why Not?"

We met at the café. It was great to see Frank. It was the sweet Frank I remembered. We ordered coffee. He proceeded to tell me that the reason he got mad and disappeared wasn't really about rehearsals. He said that when he cared about some very deeply -- he shut down emotionally. He said that's what was happening with us. He said it wasn't my fault, but that he didn't know how to fix things. He wished me well.

This was the crucial moment. Though of course I didn't know it at the time.

I was so shocked that Frank wasn't mad at me, that I hadn't screwed things up -- that I totally forgot to try to salvage the relationship. Why didn't I say our relationship was worth fighting for?

I probably thought that we would talk again, that there would be time for salvation. I didn't know Frank would disappear again, this time without a trace.

We only dated for six months. I wanted more.

AUDIO CASSETTES

Years later when I think of Frank it strikes me as funny how small a problem his HIV status was in our relationship. Our undoing came down to simple, everyday emotional management. There was no reason we had to part that day. We should have tried to figure it out together and found a way forward. Whether we would've succeeded or not is hard to say. But I thought I would see him again. Never assume.

As I was doing research for this memoir -- I drew upon a range of resources. I had in my possession eight spiral notebook journals from decades past which were invaluable. They contained bits of conversations, the names of friends and lovers of the day, to do lists. I also had saved about twenty Month-at-a-Glance calendars containing the scribbled appointments of each year. Friends have said my calendars should be donated to a museum as the chaos of my social life has been rendered in hieroglyphic scribbles. Like most of us, I had boxes of miscellaneous photographs in storage depicting key moments of my life. But most uniquely, I saved about ten audio cassettes containing old phone messages I recorded from my answering machine when people had answering machines. These were messages that struck me as necessary and unforgettable for some reason. They contained the voices of the dead: my mother, my brother, departed friends Jimmi Brown, Gene, Karen, Susan T. And voices of the lost like Frank O'Brien. Inside one box was a cassette labeled "FRANK'S MANY MESSAGES" dated April 1991. It contained one particular message that took my breath away. I popped the tape in a tape player and pressed play. How magical to hear Frank's deep, tender voice address me from these ancient spinning wheels of tape. The voice came from the past but still contained all the urgency and love from the moment of its recording:

"I talked to Tom tonight and I asked about kissing, that wonderful thing. He didn't think it was something to be concerned with unless there was a sore on either person's mouth. He said the chance was one in a thousand, even at that. And I don't know, my dear. I. Don't. Know. If there's such a thing as negative karma, that's what I'd get. And I would come back as an antelope. I don't know. I-I-I. But I would like to kiss you. Very deeply and very hard. And relentlessly. Until you can't breathe."

Wow. Just wow.

How did I ever let a man who left phone messages like this walk out of my life? His passion must've almost melted the phone. Here was Frank speaking to me from another time and place, speaking to me from an altogether parallel universe. And what he was saying needed to be heard by everyone. That there was love this big.

At the end of the day, I was glad I put my money on the lumberjack poet. Had I turned away from risk, I would have missed out on so much. I remember how Frank didn't like to use the walking cane that doctor had recommended. "It makes me look sicker than I am," he said, and I'd help him climb the two flights of stairs to his apartment. There was the all-vegetarian dinner he once prepared for me which was almost devoid of flavor but enriched by the love with which he made it. There were the short phone messages he'd leave to surprise me when he knew I was at work like this: "I'm so looking forward to my night with Dwight -- I can't even tell you."

Frank and I made our lives magical because that was the way we wanted to live. Because that was the way we found was most fun and most powerful.

Years passed. I tried to look him up in phone books and later through Facebook and Google, but his name was too common for the digital age. At some point I resigned myself to never finding him and wrote this letter. It was a letter I could not send.

Because I had no address.

Because his name was too common.

Because I didn't know if he was alive.

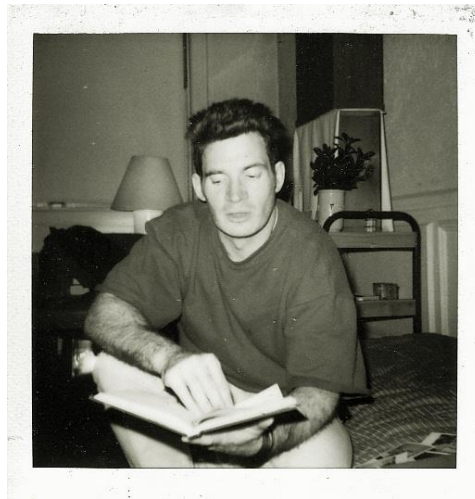
Because sometimes a letter is more for the sender than the recipient.

Dear Frank,

If you're out there somewhere, if maybe karma has transformed you into an antelope as you suspected, or you have returned reluctantly to the Black Lagoon from whence you came -- there's something I want to say. I'm sorry for being a monster, for letting anger get the best of me, for trying to hurt you through language. I want you to know that I remember you. Knowing you, loving you, fighting with you has enriched my life in ways I can't put into words. And if you are alive in some form and you come across this book -- please find me.

It would be decades since we had our last words at the Why Not Cafe on Belmont. At the end, did we shake hands, did we embrace? I don't remember. But there's something I've been wanting to tell you and this is it. When we see each other again, if we see each other again -- I would like very much to kiss you. Very deeply and very hard. And relentlessly. Until you can't breathe.

Dwight





8. Serotonin City (1995)

She said the Prozac had let her personality emerge at last -- she had not been alive before taking an antidepressant.

-- Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac*

WHEN I WAS 37, I CONCLUDED THAT SOME MONSTERS CANNOT BE DEFEATED, but maybe they can be managed. The year was 1995. This was the year that Amazon was born and sold its first book online. It's easy to forget that Amazon was once *only* a bookstore. On a much less ambitious note, this was the year I realized that the many-tentacled monster of social anxiety had returned. It was not yet done with me.

A mentally unwell person wakes up in the morning and takes one step forward, two steps back. It's a sad, fragile little dance I wouldn't wish on anyone -- and one from which, try as I might, I couldn't seem to escape. Every day in every way my life got smaller and smaller. Fewer messages on the answering machine, fewer places in the world I felt comfortable, fewer reasons to get up in the morning. It's the Cha-Cha of Diminishing Returns and it's the dance I did every day of my life during my three years of living darkly.¹⁹

I thought I'd conquered shyness ten years earlier when I encountered Buddhism. After all, I was still chanting. Where did my magic superpowers go? I found myself cocooning in my apartment

¹⁹ Years later I performed a version of this for WBEZ Radio's series "Chicago Matters: Examining Health."

on Surf Street, barricading myself against all social intrusions. At work I took lunch solo, heartbreakingly so. I turned down movie and party invitations. I watched so many episodes of *ER*, I could almost perform the delicate surgeries myself. Every surgery, of course, but the one that mattered: How to remove the monster that was eating me alive.

The one thing more heartbreaking than learning one has an illness is learning that said illness has returned. I swung open the door to see it gaze back at me, an unwanted distant relative showing up on my doorstep in the middle of the night. "I'm having a relapse!" I scribbled in my journal, and there was nothing more to say. I turned off the light and chanted myself to sleep.

As I hunkered down for doing battle with social anxiety, I turned to other friends with battle scars of their own. Most interesting to me were the stories of my Buddhist friend Juanita and her depression. She explained it as follows and she explains it beautifully, frighteningly:

"My depression is like a huge gyroscope spinning real, real slow. I am inside the thing and the gyroscope is hard and cold and made of metal. When I walk, it is like a cool liquid moving inside me. The only time I don't feel it is when I lay down at night to go to bed. Because that is what the gyroscope wants me to do: to lay down. At night when I lay in bed, the depression rests lightly on top of my chest. But in the morning, I am back inside the gyroscope again."

Juanita and I were fast friends because we understood each other so well. When one of us went off on a trippy tangent like that, the other listened, letting it wash over them like a perfect wave. Some nights when my neighbor Sandra and I happened to be watching the same sitcom, I'd hear the peal of her laughter through the white stucco wall while I sat in silence. I marveled at the generosity of her sense of humor. Could I even remember the sound of my own laugh? A year later when I came out of my depression I told her: "I heard you laughing through the wall. I envied you." She was surprised, probably twice. Firstly, that I could hear her laughter through

the stucco wall. Secondly, that I envied her. I continued chanting and attending discussion meetings. I had yet to explore the world of psychopharmacology.

One night while I was in my customary place in front of the TV, a promotional blurb came on for the show Dateline that would change my life. "Born to be Mild?" the promo asked. "New breakthroughs in medicine have come up with a pill that may cure shyness in young people. Tune in at 9:00." It struck me as a shining example of synchronicity, being at the right place at the right time. I had been chanting for a solution to my painful shyness. This felt like an answer to a prayer.²⁰

On the show a little girl was shown making snow angels in her back yard. Then the same girl was shown at school, her mouth frozen in a straight line. She was paralyzed with shyness, unable to interact with others. Her parents agonized over their child's future. Cut to a new scene where the girl is shown taking Prozac. The reporter said that since taking the pill the child had spoken aloud at school for the very first time.

In another segment a man in his twenties was asked by the reporter if he thought people understood the pain he went through as a shy person. A shudder went through his body and then he broke down, covering his face to hide tears. I was deeply moved. Someone had cried on national television over the plight of shy people in America. The next day I called to make an appointment to see my doctor. But would he be open to letting me try Prozac in this experimental way? To my surprise, he was.

COUNTDOWN TO ECSTASY

²⁰ "Dateline" NBC news show, "Born To Be Mild?" circa 1995.

In one chapter of *Listening to Prozac*, I met a woman named Sally. She was paralyzed all her life by shyness, grew up without the comfort of friendships, went to bed at night with thoughts of darkness and death. Romantic entanglements eluded her. At the age of 41, Sally wrote a note to her therapist Peter Kramer: "I keep thinking something very, very bad is going to happen to me...I don't know who I am, because that person stopped growing at the age of four..."²¹ I empathized with this woman's plight. Almost as old as her, at least I was lucky to have experienced periods of extroversion which alternated with periods of debilitating shyness. For myself, I hungered for social engagement, but I avoided social situations because I was terrified of being found out as the lost boy I feared I was. I felt as if all the lessons I'd learned up to that point of "How To Be Dwight" had been erased. I forgot how to have fun, how to love, how to be myself. I lost my ability to write, to read. Even if I overcame my phobia, I worried it would take years to reassemble the fragments into a recognizably whole personality.

When Sally started taking Prozac, the world looked more welcoming to her and her confidence increased. She started dating men and eventually got engaged. She felt Prozac allowed her true personality to finally emerge. I read this chapter crossing my fingers that I could achieve results that were even half as transforming.

I kept detailed journal entries from this time. I wanted to document how long it took for Prozac to kick in, if there were any side effects, what were the signs that I was improving. My doctor said it might take three months of so for the medication to have therapeutic effect.

<i>MONTH 1:</i>

²¹ Peter Kramer, *Listening to Prozac*.

April 10, 1996

My doctor writes my first prescription for fluoxetine, or Prozac. I am filled with hope. While I know pharmacology is not magic, holding the piece of paper in my hand feels magical. As magical as any potion or elixir. In the first week, I cannot discern any change in myself. These first weeks are the longest weeks of my life.

In the second week, on impulse I take myself to see the Kids in the Hall movie "Brain Candy." It's their spoof of Prozac. I am so eager to see the benefits of the pill, even seeing a fictionalized transformation appeals to me.

In the third week, my doctor calls to say my thyroid test is normal. He asks if I've had any side effects from the meds. I say no, but no improvements either. He will consider doubling my dose -- from 20mg to 40mg -- if we don't see changes.

SIDE EFFECT?

This morning I feel a little sharp pain in my chest on the left side. Is it Prozac-related? Also had some chest pains at work.

I volunteered at Chicago Dramatists and had fun hanging out with actors and playwrights. I didn't feel shy or nervous. I felt a definite lift today at work, a positiveness. A glimmer that life can be good. Is the double dose of Prozac kicking in?

MONTH 2:

May 10, 1996

I haven't noticed any big shift in my moods yet. At Chicago Dramatists I am helping to send out a big mailing. Happy to be around people. I'm curious if there is a Prozac support group I can join. In the middle of one night, I wake up. Could it be a sign that I'm excited by my life -- or a new side effect of insomnia?

SIDE EFFECT?

This morning I notice some blood in my stool. Bright red. Ask doc about it. Prozac-related or no? Might be hemorrhoid related. At one point I feel faint, my hands are tingly, my vision gets spotty. Will I pass out? I go to Mom's place to be with her. The doctor says to eat more fruit. I buy prunes.

Sebastian stays overnight at my place and we watch "And the Band Played On." Nice to have company. A sense of normalcy in life that I don't always feel.

MONTH 3:

June 10, 1996

I should have Prozac kick-in by end June/early July. I'm getting impatient. What if it doesn't work for me? The doc said it should kick in in about three months. I don't want to give up hope, but I'm scared I've set myself up for disappointment.

My current place on Surf Street is cozy but a garden unit. I make a vow that my next apartment will have sunlight. I make my To Do list for June. I want to transform my apartment into a great writing space. Complete a new play. Tonight I went to a dance bar for a nightcap and met TR, a cute guy in a skeleton T-shirt. I had an adventure. Maybe Prozac is working. Things don't seem as heavy as they used to be. Our collaborative play, "The Radiance of a Thousand Suns" won the Jeff Citation for outstanding new play and I managed to give my speech in front of the masses! Not bad for a shy guy.

Tonight I hung two white balloons from the ceiling as a reminder to clean house in prep for my August birthday party!! I'M HAPPIER THESE DAYS. SO MUCH MORE TO TALK ABOUT. At my office job, I let my bosses know about my vacation week and I said: "If you need *anything* at all while I'm on vacation -- please do not call me at home! I'll be screening my calls!" And then I laughed. Unlike me to be making a joke. My writer pal Rosie who deals with shyness remarked how happy I sounded on the phone. I called twenty people I had lost touch with today! Most importantly today for the first time, I TOLD MOM THAT I WAS TAKING PROZAC. She was cool about it. Could Prozac be working?

Based on my journal entries above, Prozac seemed to kick in for me right about the three-month mark. I took my first pill April 10, 1996. By early July, I was having what I can only call My Breakthrough Week. Turns out I'm a good responder to pharmacology after all.

And gradually, magically, my black-and-white world started to fill with color. Music started to sound beautiful again. And when I sat down to try to read a book, the words did not die there on the page as they had for the past year. Instead, the words came alive. The words bloomed in my head as pictures and emotions as they used to. Best of all my sense of humor returned. For me taking Prozac was not just about taking a pill. It was about going to a place where my neurotransmitters were brought back to life. A place where confidence and passion were birth rights of its citizens. I had finally arrived in Serotonin City and it did not disappoint. It became about more than just overcoming shyness, which it did. It was about a kind of blossoming. After my week's vacation, I returned to my day job and had an amazing day. I actually bought white carnations and gave them to my bosses. That night I stayed up late moving the furniture underneath the two balloons. I made a floor plan of how I want my furniture in the new arrangement. I was cleaning for my birthday party. By 6 a.m. my place looked amazing. I went to sleep. Francesca made a comment that bothered me. She said, "It's nice to meet the chemically-enhanced Dwight." I explained that it wasn't a fair comment, that I felt that Prozac allowed the truly authentic Dwight to emerge. One coworker on noticing my new extroversion wisecracked, "I think I like the old you better." What really mattered was that I felt happier, more engaged in life.

With my dread of social interactions gone, I felt hungry for human connection. It was as if a powerful magnet inside me had reversed and all the forces that drove me away from people were now pulling me toward them. And that was where my neurodiverse story should have ended -- had I been able to leave well enough alone. But I wasn't.

CURIOSITY AND THE CAT

I started to wonder if my brain had re-hardwired itself. Could the new flow of serotonin have etched a new pathway in my brain? Did I even need Prozac at all anymore? After a year of living as the New Me, the Authentic Me -- I visited my shrink. "Doc, I've been wondering if I should try to stop using the Prozac," I said.

She looked stunned. "Why would you do that? It's working so well for you."

I nodded. "I'm curious, with the new serotonin moving through my system...maybe my brain has fixed itself."

I could tell by the look on her face she was not crazy about this idea. But I assured her if my shyness came back -- I would surely return to Prozac. My shrink wasn't wild about this idea. She said when some people stop their meds, the side effects were worse than the illness itself. But she couldn't say I wouldn't be the exception either. We started to decrease my dosage very gradually. I kept notes on my calendar for any behavior shifts.

The reactions of my peers to my getting off Prozac struck me as curious. They ranged from: "Congratulations, I'm so glad you're off that stuff" to "Praise the lord. You're healed!" The comments suggested that Prozac itself was somehow the culprit -- not the depression.

"What are you congratulating me for?" I finally asked.

"That you don't need to depend on a pill," one friend said. "That you're cured."

"I didn't say I was cured. I said I was stopping my meds." He clearly didn't get the difference and I didn't feel like explaining.

I had to take this next step or I'd wonder for the rest of my life. So I boarded the train that took me away from Serotonin City and didn't look back. For one magical year, this had been my home. City of Light. City of Wonder. Farewell.

CHILDHOOD MEMORY WITH TOOTHPICK ROLLER-COASTER

After each school year ended when I was a child, I looked forward to summer vacation. One summer I got the idea in my head that I could somehow build a rollercoaster! I made a vow that I would build one over my summer vacation. I thought long and hard and figured I could build a rollercoaster out of nothing more than a box of toothpicks, a bottle of Elmer's Glue, and a ping pong ball. I'd use the ball to roll around the track in place of a coaster car.

But something wasn't working. The angle of the track had to be adjusted because the ping-pong ball kept falling off when it hit the curve. The outer toothpick track was too low. I needed to raise it which meant I'd have to break apart the glued toothpicks and add height to the outer edge. I was trying to figure out where I should make the break when the doorbell rang.

"Dwight, can you answer the door?" my mother called from the kitchen.

"I'm kind of busy, Mom! Can Clyde get the door?"

"Oh come on now. Don't be that way. Just see who it is," she said.

I was annoyed. I grudgingly moved to the front door. I peeked through the window. It was our neighbor, Mr. Jacobsen. I opened the door.

"Hey there, young man," he said. "Sorry to interrupt but I need to see your mother for a second."

"Mom, Mr. Jacobsen needs you. He's in a hurry!"

"Oh, no hurry, Patsy," he shouted.

There was no reply. Then, "I'll be there in a minute."

Oh great, I thought to myself. Now I have to entertain Mr. J. What did a kid like me have to talk about with a neighbor who had to be at least, what, a hundred years old?

Mr. Jacobsen smiled at me and took a sweeping glance at my rollercoaster. "Say, that's quite a project you've got going there. What is it?"

"I'm trying to build a rollercoaster," I said.

He nodded as if impressed. "That's very ambitious of you. I wish I could get my boy to stop reading comic books all day."

"It can't be that hard. I've got toothpicks, glue and a Ping pong ball. I'm just having a little trouble with the turn --"

Just then my mother appeared. She had flour on the front of her apron. "I was trying out a new recipe, Ira. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"No no, sorry to interrupt. I just came by to return the serving bowl we borrowed." He handed it to Mom. "Dwight and I have been having a fascinating conversation about his rollercoaster project. Your son is quite resourceful," he said. He watched as I let the ball roll down the track.

When it hit the curve, I caught the ball in the palm of my hand. "I don't think Dwight will ever be bored!" My mother beamed. Thanks to my neighbor, I became aware of the magic of my resourcefulness.

When Mr. Jacobsen said those words, it felt like he was looking down a long stretch of train tracks at the rest of my life and making a prediction. I liked what he saw in my future. I liked it a lot.

I liked thinking about that amazing toy roller-coaster. It reminded me that resourcefulness was part of my destiny. It was in my wheelhouse, and I had only to reach for it to access its powers. I needed to be resourceful as I made my way through the maze that was Serotonin City.

What happened as I tapered off Prozac? Things were fine at first. But I started seeing something out of the corner of my eye...a dimming. In time I started to feel unwell. Something was not quite right. And my fate became clear one afternoon when I was eating lunch with a friend and

suddenly I froze. The words stopped flowing out of my mouth. I found myself in the middle of sentences I couldn't finish. I was horrified to realize: *I felt shy again!*

I started making poor decisions, saying out loud the things that were usually kept safely in my mind. "You think you can talk to me like that because you're a white man? Guess again." Or, "You look like you've aged twenty years in twenty days. I really can't see you living another year." In my mind, I was speaking truths that people desperately needed to hear. In everyone else's mind, I was having a manic episode.

A SINKING FEELING

Life without Prozac didn't seem all that different. Not at first anyway. One day I started feel tired all the time. I found myself waking up in the middle of the night feeling lost. My doctor suggested I look into St. John's Wort. I sensed a kind of dimming out of the corner of my eye. My social confidence was flickering. I'd find myself in the middle of sentences I didn't know how to finish. I was in trouble.

In November 1997, I decided that leaving Prozac was a mistake. My brain had apparently not re-hardwired itself at all. My doctor helped me gradually restart my meds. Oddly the more Prozac I took -- the more anxious I became. It felt like a cruel joke. I called up my writer friend Francesca to see if she wanted to go to the movies. Two friends who are highly sensitive people, who are going through mood swings, should probably not go to see a movie like "Titanic" where hundreds of people drown with a *glub, glub, glub* as their bodies drift down into the sea. But that's exactly what she and I did one Sunday night mid-winter. We went because "Titanic" was the #1 movie in America and we wanted to be like everyone else -- not so different for a change.

It was, I later realized, a great mistake. The film proceeded to trigger enormous anxiety and sadness in both Francesca and me.

But as we sat through the three-hour movie, we kept open minds, our eyes riveted to the screen. And there was always the comfort of buttered popcorn and super-sized Diet Cokes. By the film's last chorus of Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" – my friend and I could *not* go on, could barely speak as the credits rolled. We were adults and we were sobbing. I couldn't imagine us going home to our empty apartments just yet. I needed to eat dinner in a brightly lit restaurant with my friend of many years. I needed to burn out all the darkness that this movie had conjured up in me.

"Do you want to get a bite to eat?" I asked.

"I would *love* to get a bite to eat," she replied.

Like the poor folks on the Titanic, I was going down with the ship. All the lifeboats were full. No doctors or healers could spare me from the terrible drowning.

*

In one of my manic moments, I called my friend Sebastian in the middle of the night. I got his machine and left a rambling message about how I had a miraculous breakthrough and that he could have one too. No matter how broken his brain was. I was trying to be helpful. I clearly failed. The next day I listened to his phone message in reply:

To my mentally ill friend: How presumptuous of you to think that just because you——are suffering——that everyone else is too. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am thriving. Do you realize what a fool you make of yourself by carrying on in this 'Poor me' fashion?

I was surprised by the anger of my friend's message, though later I saw why he was ticked off at me. Sebastian and I had falling-outs in the past. Sometimes we wouldn't speak to each other for a

whole year but eventually we would reconnect. We would wordlessly forgive each other over slices of blueberry pie ala mode and move on. But not this time. For Sebastian, this was even beyond the reach of blueberry pie. I never saw him again.

My psychiatrist considered that perhaps the original diagnosis of depression was not accurate.

My mania suggested that I might actually be manic-depressive, specifically Bipolar II. He put me on a combination of Prozac (to address my depression) and Lithium (to address my mania).

Happily over the course of the year -- my moodswings evened out; my shyness did not resurface.

I felt transformed. My voice, my true joyful voice, returned. My prayers had been answered. My

story reminded me of the fables of personality transformation from *Listening to Prozac*. Like

Sally, the woman in the pages of that book, I felt as if I had not been alive before taking an

antidepressant. I felt better than well. I also realized that I was one of the lucky ones, one of the

good responders whose body and soul respond dramatically and affirmatively to pharmacology.

Sadly that was not the case for many of my friends who either didn't respond at all, or who experienced side effects.

BOOK COVER

LISTENING TO PROZAC??



9. THE ROOMMATE EXPERIMENT (1997)

Cool writer seeks responsible roomie interested in finding a place in Andersonville. I'm often up late pondering the universe...or watching Oprah. Looking to move by summer's end.

WHEN I WAS 39, I MADE THE SURPRISING DECISION TO LIVE WITH ROOMMATES. It wasn't a financial decision but a philosophical one. I realized I had lived the last thirteen years of life on my own and I feared it was making me odd, that I'd never be capable of cohabitating with a beloved. I launched "The Roommate Experiment" and it altered the direction of my life for the next three years. The year was 1997. In that year the memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom was published. Albom recounted his visits in the last days of a dear, dying college professor. Years later it would strike me that I was searching for the various ways I might one day live with someone -- while Mitch Albom was searching for how he might one day live *without* someone. Different sides of a similar coin.

The parameters on my experiment went like this: 1. Move from my studio apartment in Lakeview to a two-bedroom in Andersonville and find a compatible roommate. Cohabitate for about three years and see how it goes. 2. Monitor how well I can navigate sharing an apartment with a roommate, sharing household chores, possibly sharing some social activities. 3. At the end

of three years, evaluate what I've learned. Do I love or hate cohabitating? Should I continue with roomies, return to living solo, or start searching in earnest for a life partner?

I placed my roomie ad in the Chicago Reader and waited. Looked forward to the vetting process. There was the woman who left a message on my answering machine. "Hi Dwight, the music on your answering machine is too loud! I can help you fix that. I'm calling about your roommate ad," she said. There was the handsome, young gay man I had to turn down because I found him too attractive. It's true. There was the straight guy who came with his girlfriend. He didn't say a single word and his girlfriend did all the talking. That didn't allow to me get to know him. Next! Then there was the guy who was a touch OCD who rang me up and said: "Sorry to bother you, but can you remind me how many windows my bedroom would have? You see every place I've lived in I've had exactly two windows."

It struck me as an odd question. "I don't follow you. Are you hoping for more windows or less?" I said.

"I was hoping for exactly two. Because that's what I'm used to," he said with utter sincerity.

"But isn't life about change and new adventures?" I said.

"Not for me. Give me two windows and I'm a happy camper."

This made me think that the guy was even more eccentric than I was. I knew the other bedroom had two windows but what I said aloud was: "Oh, I'm sorry. That room has just one window. Hey, good luck on your search."

THE ROOMMATE WITH CURLY HAIR

My chosen roommate for the first year was a Latino gay young man in grad school. On the surface we had things in common and had some coffeehouse chats. Tall and thin with curly black hair, his most striking feature was the curly lock of hair that fell perfectly over one eye. A friend of mine who took a shine to him insisted the lock must be attached with Velcro. I did have some concerns about our compatibility. We easily got into disagreements. We met once more at his request.

"If we decide not to be roommates today," he said, "is there any part of you that would regret it?" Wow, he played me like a fiddle, a goddam Stradivarius. "Well...I mean, we have our differences, but we could have commonalities we don't even know about." I said the words not even knowing what I meant. "How about you?"

"I think I'd have regrets," he said. "We're both gay men of color. We're both involved with writing. And it's a great apartment." In spite of my reluctance, we signed the lease.

Six months into our lease – Roomie #1 stopped talking to me.

"Are you mad at me about something?" I'd often ask. But he would shake his head and say he was just tired. But then I'd hear him yakking on the phone with friends laughing giddily. I got the sense that he was tolerating me. After a while, I stopped trying to figure out how to improve our relationship. At the end of the year when he moved out. He finally came clean what he was mad about. The specifics of the issue do not matter so much as the fact that he held a grudge for half a year.

I don't claim to be beyond reproach, and I was by no means the perfect roommate, but I was always willing to reach across the aisle. The conclusions I drew from the first year of my social experiment? For one thing, I should always trust my instincts. Secondly I learned that if either person stops talking, stops trying -- we are doomed to fail.

It may take two to tango, but it only takes one to end the dance.

THE PERFECT ROOMMATE

My second roommate was a young white woman who was studying comedy improv and a lovely lesbian in her own right. We were a terrific fit. If we had an argument, she'd make sure we resolved it before going to bed. I also took interest in her work as a website designer. We did social outings where we freely mingled our friends. She would sometime write notes to me and slip them under my door, about how glad she was we were roomies, that she liked living with an author. (She also made me promise to never put her into one of my books. Oops.)

A few months after she'd moved in, I remember she came home from a long night at her comedy improv class. She put her book bag in her room. She came out to meet me in the kitchen where I was making coffee, even though it was Friday night.

"How was class today? Did you kill it?" I said.

"I wasn't bad," she said. She looked at me smiling.

"What?"

"You know, as I walked into the house I looked around. At the sun porch. At the cozy sofa. At the hardwood floors. You know what I said to myself?"

"What?"

"I said: This is such a pretty house. I wonder who lives in this house."

"Aww," I said.

I thought she'd surely renew for a second year, but she had found a girlfriend and chose to give that a go. After she moved out, we both promised to stay in touch but as often happens -- we lost

touch. Touch was lost. Still I was glad to have known her. She was living proof that I could cohabitate successfully with another human being and for that I was grateful.

What conclusion did I draw from the second year of my social experiment? I learned that with a compatible, willing, empathetic roommate – I could shine, I could rise to the occasion. This gave me hope that if I was to find a man one day I wanted to live with, we'd have a fighting chance. I could have quit my social experiment right then and there. I should have. But instead I went for a third roommate year. A tie breaker year.

THE NIGHTMARE ROOMMATE

The biggest surprise awaited me behind Door #3. If Bruno was typecast in a movie, he'd surely be the tormenting bully. A tall, white dude around fifty, he aspired to be a fitness trainer. When he walked, he lumbered in a Frankenstein-like way. But he was able to exude a boyish charm when the mood struck him. Ultimately I chose him because, more than anyone else, Bruno really seemed to want to be my roommate. He got extra points for enthusiasm. We signed the lease.

The first thing on my To Do list after Bruno moved in was to plan my birthday party. It would give him a chance to meet my friends. I decided I wanted to get those pre-printed nametags that say: HELLO, I'M _____. But for fun, I'd fill in the blank with quirky identifiers.

HELLO, I'M A SHADOW OF MY FORMER SELF.

HELLO, I'M IN THE WITNESS PROTECTION PROGRAM.

HELLO, I'M LOST IN TRANSLATION.

Bruno wondered if this defeated the point of having a nametag. "Didn't you want to include the person's name somewhere?" he asked.

That was a red flag right there. Clearly Bruno was a much more literal thinker than I. The day of the party, the nametags were a hit. People even swapped identities mid-party just to keep things interesting.

The red flags of my year with Roomie #3 continued to present themselves. There was the time we had pizza delivered to our third-floor apartment. Bruno went to the door and I heard some whispering in the stairway. Next thing I knew Bruno saw chasing the delivery guy down the stairs, calling him a “lousy towelhead.”

“What was that all about?” I asked?

“Oh, that Arab complained because I gave him a \$1 tip.”

"Did you have to call him a towelhead?"

"That's what he was."

I took a moment. “Well, the bill was \$40. I would’ve probably given him \$8.”

On the plus side, sometimes when an old disco song came on, Bruno would dance endearingly in the mirror. He told me he came from money. He told me he had friends in high places. He told me many things and I didn't know what was true. Sometimes I felt like I had no idea who I was living with. Like there was a whole secret other life he led. Like he could be in the witness protection program and I’d never know.

As time went on, I noticed there was often a parade of attractive men going in and out of Bruno’s room. Who was I too judge? But one afternoon, I knocked on his door and found a naked man in bed.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “Do you know where Bruno is?”

“He said he went to get a six-pack of beer down the street,” said the guy, pulling a towel around his waist.

When Bruno returned, I was pissed. I took him aside. “Please don’t ever leave me with a strange man in the house again, Bruno. That is not okay with me.”

“All right, Miss Manners! But he’s not all that strange,” he said.

By the end of the year, my roommate was going through seismic mood swings. Since I was Bipolar II myself, I tried to be empathetic. He had never put a finger on me, but I sensed a rage in him that made me wonder if he was capable of violence. He and I were different in so many ways. We definitely had a different sense of home decor.

One Saturday, I found a wire rack in the alley. It was the kind of rack that might hold brochures in a dentist’s office, with each level spinning on its own. I thought it’d be perfect for holding magazines.

“What’s that piece of junk in the living room?” he asked.

“I’m repurposing a store fixture to display cool magazines,” I said.

“Oh, is that what you call it?”

The worst night of cohabitation was when Bruno went on a shouting rampage about everything he was mad about.

“Oh, and tell your mother she should *not* make sushi for Thanksgiving. This is America goddammit. And take this trashy greeting card rack out of the living room. I’m embarrassed to have friends over. It makes me feel like I live in a goddam Walgreens!”

He began stomping the hardwood floors like Frankenstein.

“What are you so upset about?! You’re going to give yourself a heart attack.”

For the next twenty minutes, he carried on like a crazy man. I went to my room and shut my door, turned up my music. I could still hear him shouting. Next thing I knew I heard a ferocious

banging at the front door. It was the police. This was the first time I ever recalled feeling unsafe in my own home.

I called Nancy. She drove over and rescued me.

NANCY TO THE RESCUE

She drove us to the 24-hour Cozy Corner to debrief over comfort food. A brilliant move. “I don’t like your roommate,” she said. “I never have, I never will. I don’t know how you’ve lived with him this long.”

“I can’t go back there again, Nancy,” I said, “What should I do? I’ve got four months left on the lease.”

“Well, you’re definitely staying at my place tonight. And you’re welcome to stay as long as you like.”

I stuck my fork in a stack of blueberry pancakes. I sipped my coffee very slowly. “I find myself in an impossible situation, Nancy. And I absolutely have to figure out a way out.”

At Nancy’s place, her gray-and-white cat Mochi greeted us. She led me to a cozy back room and handed me a sheet and pillow. Nancy gave me a supportive good night embrace which I needed, traumatized as I was. I could always count on her in a crisis. I closed the door and laid down on the bed. I started chanting softly for wisdom and courage.

Just then, I heard a gentle pawing at the door. Of course it was Mochi. I opened the door and the feline meowed hello and strolled in. I was glad to share the bed with Mochi...since I was her guest after all.

Over the next few days, my urgent hope for a solution came to fruition. It dawned on me the money I had been putting away for a condo was just enough to buy my way out of the last four

months of rent! I was overjoyed. But would my landlord agree to let me out of the lease? What if he refused? I talked with my landlord about the situation and he completely understood. A week later I had moved into a new apartment and was living solo again.

I was thrilled to be in my own apartment again. And it was my first residence in a high-rise building. The high-rise had 800 units, 24-hour front desk security, a swimming pool, a restaurant, and a grocery store. Not bad for an emergency relocation.

I had attributed Bruno's mood swings to undiagnosed bipolarity, similar to what I had experienced. And that's the downside of empathy. It can be misplaced. A few weeks after I moved out, Bruno called to make a big confession: For the last four months, he had been doing crystal meth. Yikes. So much for my intuition.²²

Roommate One had black hair that curled,
was going to grad school to change the world.
But the spinning world was beyond our control
and a half a year in, he stopped saying hello.

Roommate Two was gay and pretty.
She was taking improv classes at Second City.
We agreed to never go to sleep mad.
This cohabitation thing wasn't really so bad.

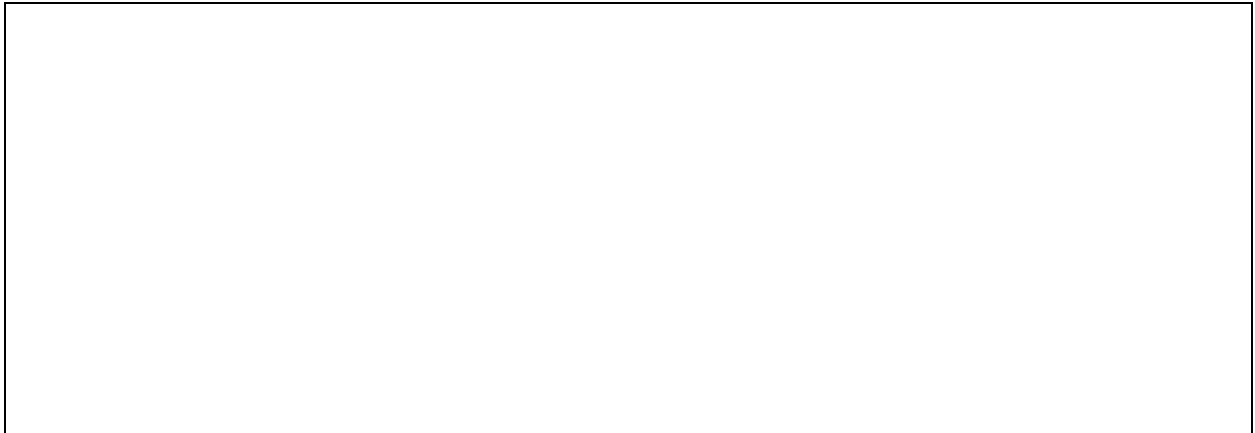
Roommate Three was another story.
He loved to paint delusions of glory.
Like an iceberg that showed only a tip of itself,
by the time I left, he was someone else.

Upon hearing about the drugs, many of my friends saw Bruno as some kind of monster. But in the end, I felt sorry for him. I wondered what kind of life had led him to make such bad choices.

²² Of the three roommates, Bruno was the one I continued to bump into over the next several years. When I saw him we didn't avoid each other. We were cordial. I didn't feel angry at him anymore. More sorry for him. It was complicated.

In spite of everything, I considered The Roommate Experiment a success. I cohabitated with three very different roomies.

On the positive side -- Bruno's bad behavior led me to come up with a brilliant exit strategy which in turn led me to a happier life in a high-rise.²³ And the social experiment was a success. I learned that I wasn't bad at companioning, and that I liked it. I didn't know that before I embarked on the experiment.



²³Years later, I'd make a bid to buy my first home in this very high-rise. Ironically, had it not been for my roommate's bad behavior – I probably would have never found this building as I had never pictured myself living in a high-rise.



10. The Man Who Loved Contests (2007)

What is a life anyhow? Prospect asked a million people that question and they gave him a million different answers. Each and every answer was true, though he didn't know it at the time.

-- Prospect Boulanget from *The Prospect of My Arrival* by Dwight Okita

WHEN I WAS 48, I ENTERED AN INTERNATIONAL NOVEL CONTEST along with 4,999 other novelists. It was called the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards, or ABNA for short. It was Amazon's endeavor to discover new voices in fiction and I found it irresistible. Kind of like America's Got Talent, but for authors. What was not to like? Authors from around the world entered their novels. I was well aware why my entry would probably not win. For one thing, *The Prospect of My Arrival* was my first novel, my stab at science fiction for people who didn't necessarily like science fiction. Secondly, I later discovered my manuscript had a boatload of typos. Lastly, I'd be competing against authors with several books under their belts, some who had already won big contests. And there I was wet behind the ears, trying to figure out what a novel was. On the other hand, I also knew it couldn't hurt to enter. The year was 2007. An up-

and-coming senator, Barack Obama, declared his candidacy for President of the United States of America. That was a long shot too. It would turn out to be a good year for both of us.²⁴

I talked to my writer friends to see if they'd be entering and was surprised by the responses.

"If you get a book deal, who owns the rights to the book? Do you retain them or do you sell your soul to Amazon?" asked one friend who had self-published a novel.

"Penguin would be the publisher," I said. "The rights would still be yours I'm sure. Besides, what's so great about having the rights if you can't leverage them into something bigger? You feel me?"

My close author friend Francesca who totally hated marketing herself as a writer had a different concern altogether: "They're probably looking for super commercial fiction. I'd guess my book is too quiet for them. I think I'll pass."

"You'll never know until you try," I said.

"You're so good at networking and marketing yourself. No one could ever accuse you of hiding your light under a bushel basket," she said.

"Thanks. I *think*."

How could people eliminate themselves from an opportunity even before they'd explored it? The more I tried to persuade them to enter, the more they sensed it wasn't for them. The magic deniers used the power of their imagination to envision worst-case scenarios. The magic encouragers used their imaginations to envision the miraculous.

THE FIVE STAGES OF ABNA

²⁴ Just a year prior, the extraordinary gay love story, "Brokeback Mountain," would be nominated for Best Picture. In an unexpected upset for me, the movie, "Crash," would take that honor. Did homophobia play a role? Was Hollywood not ready to embrace a gay film as Best Picture? It would not be until 2017 -- eleven years later -- that such a breakthrough would occur with "Moonlight," which was the first Best Picture winner to have a LGBT protagonist. And a Black, gay one at that.

I first became aware of ABNA through the Poets & Writers website. The contest was more elaborate than most. Amazon would be partnering with Penguin Books and Publishers Weekly. There would be some celebrity guest judges. Five thousand authors would enter. Fifty authors would get their novels evaluated by reviewers for Publishers Weekly. Three finalists would win a trip to New York for the awards ceremony. One lucky devil would nab a book deal.

I raced to finish writing and editing my book, *The Prospect of My Arrival*. I eagerly read through the rules of ABNA as if reading a holy scripture. Our books needed to be between 50,000 and 150,000 words. There would be about five stages to the contest over a four-month period. It made me think of Kubler Ross' five stages of grief. The mixture of this high-stakes competition and 24/7 discussion boards would be a potentially dangerous combination. But surely it would never be boring.

I uploaded my novel to the contest site and stepped away from the vehicle. I whispered a few Buddhist chants -- *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* -- into my illuminated screen. I envisioned my little book traveling along the information highway, arriving at the servers of Amazon in Seattle. I pictured the contest judges reading each page, devouring my book, unable to stop until they ran out of pages. Then I imagined how they would put my book in the contender pile.

I pushed the ENTER button. My book was on its way.

The contest stages went like this:

STAGE 1 -- One thousand books would be chosen from the 5000 entries based on the authors' one-paragraph elevator pitch for their novel. This first cut was the deepest. This stage separated 4,000 authors from their dream of glory. When the list of titles/authors advancing in ABNA was posted on the site -- each author logged on holding her or his breath, hoping to see their novel in the list.

I was over the moon to see these words on the screen for it meant I had made the first cut to the Top 1000 books.

The Prospect of My Arrival by Dwight Okita.

Chance of advancement: 1000 out of 5000. That put my book in the top 20% of entries. I went out to celebrate over dinner with friends.

STAGE 2 --Two hundred fifty books would be chosen from the 1000 based on an excerpt of a few chapters from each novel. Excerpts could be up to 5,000 words and had to be from the opening pages of the book. At this point, these excerpts were posted on the website for all to read and review. Chance of advancement: 250 out of 5000. Or the top 5%. My head spun when I realized I had advanced again.

STAGE 3 -- Fifty books would be chosen from the 250 based on the full manuscripts. These lucky authors would have the honor of having their whole book reviewed by Publishers Weekly reviewers. These reviews could later be used by the author for promotion. For many of us, it was the first time our books were read by an industry professional and critically reviewed. Those advancing were pretty nervous/excited to read their reviews -- some raves, some pans, some in the middle. Chance of advancement: 50 out of 5000. Or 1%. I had to pinch myself when I saw my little book in the list.

STAGE 4 -- Ten books would be chosen out of the 50 by Penguin editors. This stage was key because this was the chance for Penguin editors to have their say and champion the books they

avored. The editors would also create short video reviews explaining why they chose each book.
Chance of advancement: 10 out of 5000. Or .02%.

When I saw *The Prospect of My Arrival* on this short list, I broke out into my happy dance. Time for another celebratory dinner.

STAGE 5 -- Three books would be chosen by Penguin editors out of the ten. They would release a video in which the editors spoke about what made these books worthy.

A STRANGER CALLS

Throughout the duration of ABNA, I witnessed the breathtaking magic of how my novel kept rising in the contest against all odds. Each time I beat another elimination round, I went out for dinner with friends to celebrate. On the flip side of the magic coin were the monsters. The contest discussion boards were becoming rowdy. I started to become rowdy too. Jealousies abounded; gangs of cyber bullies preyed on the unaffiliated. As authors/books were eliminated from the running, the tone of the boards changed from "We're all in this together" to the "My book is so much better than the crap that's advancing."

On March 3, 2008, the top ten finalists were announced. I turned on my laptop with excitement and terror. The new message was up on the ABNA site of the books moving forward. I was beyond thrilled to see my book had made the list.

- *The Hellraiser of Hollywood Hills* by Jennifer Colt
- *Casting Off* by Nicole R. Dickson
- *Bad Things Happen* by Harry Dolan
- *The Wet Nurse's Tale* by Erica Eisdorfer
- *The Butterflies of Grand Canyon* by Margaret Erhart
- *Ring of Lies* by Karen Laugel

- *Fresh Kills* by Bill Loehfelm
- *Motherless Children* by Randall Luce
- *The Prospect of My Arrival* by Dwight Okita
- *Wrecking Civilization Before Lunch* by John Ring

My friends and I gathered at Taste of Heaven for a celebratory dinner. In the next week, the finalists received prize packages which included a huge flatscreen TV, a deluxe HP laptop and a color printer, along with a self-publishing package from CreateSpace.

The next stage of the contest was the height of suspense. I knew that Amazon would personally call by phone whichever three authors were lucky enough to make the Top Three. At work, my colleagues were rooting for me. I told the vice president of the small nonprofit in the West Loop about the contest. I knew she was a book lover. I asked if it was possible that -- in the unlikely case that Amazon called me -- that she would let me use her office to take the call. She was happy to support.

And then one morning the phone rang. I picked up.

"Community Resource Network, can I help you?" I said.

"Yes, good morning. This is John Bright with Amazon," said the cheerful voice. "I wondered if I could speak to Dwight Okita."

"Omigod!" I said. "You can absolutely speak to Dwight Okita. I mean, you're speaking to him now -- as we speak! Could I put you on hold for a minute?"

I pressed the button. I ran the short distance to Susan's office.

"Susan! It's Amazon calling. Can I use your office?"

"Oh for heaven's sake!" she said, gathering her notebook and some papers. "This is so exciting!"

I walked into her office and took a seat. She pulled the door closed behind her.

I retrieved the call. "Hi, this is Dwight. Thanks so much for waiting."

"Good morning, Dwight," said the voice. "Do you know why we're calling?"

"I have a pretty good idea, but I never like to assume."

"Understandable," he said. "I have you on speaker. Also on the call is Flora Gonzalez from Penguin Publishing."

"Oh, great to meet both of you, Flora and John!"

"Dwight, it is my great honor to tell you that your book, *The Prospect of My Arrival*, has been chosen to advance as a Top Three Finalist in ABNA!"

I said nothing. Words failed me. Was I dreaming or was this real? Elated is too weak a word. I was levitating. I was rising heavenward.

If ever there was a call that I'd consider life-changing, it was this one. They went on to tell me what they loved about my book, how they would be overnighting plane tickets for me and a friend to come to New York for the awards ceremony, that there would be reservations waiting at Gramercy Park Hotel where the awards ceremony would also take place.

"This next part is very important," explained John. "For the rest of the week, you cannot tell a soul you're a Top Three Finalist. If you do, you risk disqualification."

I'd never been a good secret keeper. "I understand completely. I'm not to tell a soul for a week." I went home that day and started packing my suitcase. I gathered my friends for a celebratory dinner though I explained I couldn't tell them what we were celebrating. Would I be able to keep a secret this big?

At my obligatory dinner celebration, I looked into the expectant faces of my friends. "You're probably wondering why I've gathered you here today," I said. My friends nodded excitedly.

"Well, I'm sorry to say that I am not at liberty to share my news. I've been told I must keep my lips sealed for a full week."

"Give us a hint! Give us a hint!" Nancy cried.

"I think I can guess," said Francesca.

I was bursting to tell them. "But if anyone would like to try to guess my news....well, that might be all right."

"Did you make it to the Top Three?" Nancy asked.

"Ah..." I said. "Let me just say...I can neither confirm nor deny." And a huge grin crossed my face. The crowd at the table, needless to say, went wild.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

When I first considered the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Contest, I didn't think of the 4,999 books I was competing against. I looked at how exciting it would be to make the Top Ten. When I butted heads with other contestants on the discussion boards, I thought less about the perils of cyberbullying and more about what karmic lesson the universe was trying to teach me. And yes, I chanted my Buddhist chant with one goal: to win. In this way I was paving the way for magic to manifest, to magnetize good fortune in my direction.

I asked Francesca if she wanted to join me on my on my adventure to New York. She could not resist. We arrived at Gramercy Park Hotel where I learned John F. Kennedy used to reside. The hotel was so swanky, the doors of the hotel rooms did not have numbers. Instead the room numbers were woven into the hallway carpeting as part of its pattern. Then the morning of the awards, we took the elevator to the penthouse floor. The press was there, the room was buzzing, a fine assortment of brunch items awaited us. I saw Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat Pray Love*, hovering by the baby quiches and fresh fruit. Even though as one of the celebrity judges, she didn't care for my book -- I wanted to be friendly and introduce myself. I was thrilled that she was so warm and gracious. A true professional.

Moments before the big announcement, the lead Amazon staff pulled the three finalists -- Harry, Bill and I -- aside backstage. He looked at us compassionately.

"All three of you guys have written amazing books and should be so proud of your accomplishment." We all nodded. "But of course, only one of you will win the contest and land the book deal with Penguin." Again, we nodded. I could feel my heart racing. Insert drum roll. "Bill is the winner!" he said to us.

My heart sank. A hole opened up in the floor beneath me and swallowed me. What had been a five-month roller-coaster ride...was over in five seconds. I was sad. No, I was grieving.

1. Denial (Oh shit. This didn't just happen.)
2. Anger (This isn't fair. It was my turn to shine.)
3. Bargaining (Universe, if you let me win -- I promise I'll never ask for another favor again.)
4. Depression (Fuck. I lost. How can I face my friends?)
5. Acceptance (Okay, deep breath. Resilience is king. You got this.)

Of course, Harry and I congratulated Bill. We made our way back to the ceremony and took our seats. I wanted to tell Francesca, but I had to wait for the official announcement just moments away. I was disappointed, but I also knew that my novel -- my first novel at that -- was chosen by Penguin editors as a Top Three finalist out of 5,000 books. That could never be taken away from me.

The flight from New York back to Chicago was a blur to me. Knowing Francesca, I'm sure she tried to offer consolation. Or she mentioned how exciting it was to have dinner with people from Amazon and Penguin. Or she changed the subject entirely to talk about how vibrant New York still was.

Anything but: "So how are you feeling, Dwight? How are you *really* feeling?" It was too soon for such questions. After all, Francesca was a private person and she didn't want to intrude on my privacy. If our situations were reversed, she wouldn't have wanted me to intrude on hers.

Back in Chicago I remained active on the ABNA discussion boards for a few weeks. Most congratulated me, some consoled me. Santiago -- a dude from the Caribbean Islands who wrote sci-fi novels -- on the other hand, did none of the above. He wrote the following on the discussion boards.

"Isn't it funny," he wrote, "Penguin offered a book deal to Bill obviously because he won. But they later picked up Harry's book too. You were the only Top 3 finalist *not* to get a book deal." I failed to find that funny in the least. Why bring that point up at all except to be mean?

"I guess their karma was a bit better than mine. Maybe their books were a better fit for the Penguin catalog," I wrote back. "I'm just thrilled the Penguin editors chose my book as a finalist."

"Yeah," Santiago continued. "You'd have every reason to feel disappointed. Who knows? Maybe the Penguin folks peeked in on the discussion boards and thought you'd be a hard author to work with."

Huh??? What an ice-cold thing to say. What was the universe trying to teach me here?

"What's that supposed to mean?" I couldn't resist writing back.

"Not that they should hold...*personality quirks* against anyone," Santiago wrote.

He was clearly throwing shade. So what if I lost my temper a few times on the boards. And, okay, so some people didn't like the Constant Contact newsletters I sent during the contest encouraging them to vote for my book. But if I didn't advocate for my book, who would?

Santiago finally wrote, "Yeah, who knows how these decisions are made. But what do I know? You made it to the top three. I didn't even make it to the top 250. I would've given my left kidney to get as far as you did."

"All you can do is write the best book you can, and try to find a home for it," I wrote back. "I trust that's what you're doing as well, Santiago. Am I right or am I right?"

The discussion boards were teeming with monsters. There was the monster of competitiveness, the monster of jealousy, the monster of cyber bullying. Contests brought out the best and worst in all of us. In me too.

REDEFINING SUCCESS

After a few months the contest gradually faded in the rear-view mirror. I felt deflated. The contest brought my life to a crescendo. Now I felt like I was back at square one. It reminded me of getting my face on the corn flakes box, but not being discovered in any tangible way. ABNA was an even more defining moment as it was based on my novel rather my appearance.

That's when I received a phone call on my land line. It was from a talent manager in LA. He had followed the contest and loved my novel. He thought it would make an amazing movie! He wanted to represent me. His name was Nicholas Bogner and he was with Affirmative Entertainment. This would be my first long-term relationship with an agent. I'd have a few others but they didn't last long. Over time he pitched my book to major studios and indie ones, took lunches on my behalf, even arranged for two screenwriters to adapt my novel to screenplay format. We talked about *Prospect* as a feature film, but also as a cable show. It was awesome to have an industry pro in my corner.²⁵

²⁵ Over a decade later, Nicholas will continue to be in my corner. He will call me by phone to say that he's working with a new screenwriter who loves *Prospect* and wants to adapt it. This will be the third writer to adapt my book.

Over the next few months, I was approached by a few others, mostly notable by a book-to-film agent from Disney. We talked by phone.

"I read Prospect of My Arrival and loved it," she said. "I think it'd make a great film."

"Wow, thank you for saying that and for taking the time to read it," I said.

There was a pause.

"Has anyone optioned it yet?"

"Hm, how would I know if it's been optioned?"

"Has anyone given you a lot of money?"

I laughed. "No, I would've remembered that, so I guess it hasn't been optioned."

"Great. I will share it with some of my colleagues at Disney and see what they say," she said. "Is that okay with you, Dwight?"

"Of course. Can I tell my agent?" I gushed. She said yes.

When I heard from the woman a week later, she said her colleagues had passed on it, said the book was a bit too adult for Disney. I tried to explain how I could easily tone down the sex and violence but a pass was a pass. Still, I kept hold of the woman's email address for the future.

Through my experience with the contest, I learned that sometimes good work rises to the top as cream often does, and sometimes another author's work shines just a little brighter. I can't control how my books are received by readers. I can only control how my books are birthed, shaped, and passed on to readers. The rest is magic.

Hopefully the third time will be the charm. For the first two adaptations, I was very hands-off. But for this one, I will wonder if Nicholas can put me in touch with the screenwriter. I want to be available to her as she drafts the script. I'm hoping that the new script will capture the quirky voice of the book -- the same voice that got the attention of Penguin editors in the contest. To my surprise, he sends an introductory email putting the two of us in touch.

My deepest wish is that a book I write speaks to a reader as the book has spoken to me and demanded to be written. I write them to the best of my ability and of that I am proud. Just as, in a parallel world, you can't control whether people love you. Likewise I can't control whether folks love my books. I can only control how much love and magic I put into them.

I didn't know this at the time, but the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Awards would be one of the high points of my life, the most thrilling, and yes disappointing too. I didn't know that in the coming years I would redefine what success meant to me. It had once meant getting my books on best seller lists, having a book turned into a major motion picture. But years later success would mean waking up in the morning with a simple eagerness to get back to the latest project burning a hole in my imagination. Everything beyond that would be icing on the cake. I came to have a deeper appreciation for the magic of cake baking itself. The wonder of making something rise in spite of all laws of gravity.

PHOTO IN NEW YORK?
OR LIST FROM SCREEN WEBSITE?

11. The Fall of the Family (2009)

WHEN I WAS 50, MY FAMILY TREE STARTED TO LOSE SOME BRANCHES. It was a small tree to begin with, since I'd already lost my father when I was 27. My brother Clyde and I were pretty estranged by now due to irreconcilable spiritual differences.

It was January 2009. Mom and I went window shopping for post-holiday sales. Afterwards, we stopped off at Renaldi's for some Italian comfort food. I recommended the spinach and feta calzones with French fries and yummy red creme soda. Mom wasn't familiar with red creme soda and when she tasted it her eyes widened in delight.

"Wow, that's delicious! You really know how to live!" she said. I loved her comment.

Two weeks later, Mom was having coffee with her friend at Borders Cafe. Her pal Rhonda was telling Mom about the latest gossip she'd heard through the grapevine. Rhonda was a big talker so it wasn't uncommon for her to go on for a while. At one point she noticed Mom's head tilt to one side as if she was bored or sleepy.

But Mom was neither bored nor sleepy. She was having a stroke.

To be precise, she was suffering a cerebral hemorrhage which meant a blood vessel in her brain had burst and was starting to bleed uncontrollably. Symptoms can include: sudden tingling, numbness of the face, headache, nausea, confusion, dizziness. When someone suffers a cerebral hemorrhage, time is critical. Blood is leaking within the brain and wherever the blood touches -- brain tissue dies.

The story of what happened that day in the cafe was ultimately told to me by three different people.

MOM'S FRIEND RHONDA: *Okay, so it was kinda weird. We were just talking at the cafe, you know, and at one point Patsy kind of checked out. She got real quiet. Unusually quiet. I asked if she was okay, but she didn't say anything. That's when I started to get worried.*

THE BARISTA: *I was working the late shift that day. I remember a woman came up to me and told me she thought her friend might have fainted. I recognized the ill woman because earlier she had asked me to top her coffee with whipped cream. I brought over a wet paper towel to cool her forehead.*

MY BROTHER CLYDE: *It was a good thing I was at the condo. Rhonda called me and I came right over. It looked like Mom had a stroke to me. I rode in the ambulance with her. She couldn't talk. Her fingers were ice cold. I remember at one point she squeezed my hand.*

Each storyline fed into the bigger story, but it was Clyde's storyline that most caught my attention.

"Really?" I said. "She squeezed your hand?" I was a bit jealous. I wished that Mom had squeezed my hand. Clyde had not mentioned this detail in earlier versions. That irked me.

He nodded. "It was like she was letting me know she was glad I was there, that she knew something bad was happening. I squeezed her hand back."

From that day on, my mother was in a comatose state. If she happened to open her eyes, it was an involuntary act. She did not recognize me.

One ironic outcome of Mom's stroke was it caused me and my estranged brother to become closer. We had to interact again after a ten-year hiatus. By this time my brother, mother and I had been all practicing SGI Nichiren Buddhism together for some years. But at one point, Clyde became part of a different Buddhist sect which was in conflict with the SGI. But my brother and I needed to navigate Mom's health crisis and we put aside our differences. Clyde and I began

dining out together. We also encouraged each other to watch our health. We joked that we should call each other each morning for a wellness check to make sure the other hadn't had a stroke.

Early one Sunday my cell rang in my apartment at 5 am. I didn't recognize the number but decided to pick up just in case.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, is this Dwight Okita?" said a woman's voice.

"Yes, who is this?"

"I'm a nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital. Your brother has had a stroke. Can you come to the hospital?"

That didn't make sense. "Oh, actually it was my *mother* who had the stroke," I said.

"No, your brother Clyde has definitely had a stroke. He's able to talk a little. He asked for you by name."

"Oh man," I said. "I'll jump in a cab."

FAMILY ADJUSTMENTS

After my brother's stroke, Clyde's speech was severely slurred and he walked with the kind of limp that results from a stroke. Truth is my brother's health had always been a mess. He smoked long after the Surgeon General warnings appeared on cigarette boxes. And he had a litany of health problems: congestive heart failure and sarcoidosis among them. In later years, he needed to be tethered to an oxygen machine 24/7. But at least he wasn't in a coma like Mom. After leaving the hospital, he was moved to a rehabilitation center (really a nursing home) for an indefinite period of time.

About eight months after Mom's stroke, I was aware that I was the new head of the family. I wondered what would become of the family condo. The doctor was talking about Mom moving to hospice care. With my brother's decline from his stroke and his other health issues, it seemed unlikely Clyde could live on his own back at the condo. He was starting to use a walker to get around. His speech was not improving. I decided to visit him.

"How's Mom doing?" he asked in a slow-motion voice.

"Still in a coma. Though she opened her eyes a bit. I videotaped her. Take a peek." I showed him the video on my phone.

He looked at the video. "She looks but she doesn't see."

"Seems that way," I said. Then I changed the subject. "So I wanted to talk to you about something. Nobody's living in the family condo now since both of you are in different rehab centers. Sooner or later, I might have to do something about that."

"Do something like what?" he asked.

"Like... find a tenant to rent the place. Not right away. But I am kind of in charge of things now, whether I like it or not," I said.

"Hold on. What if I want to move back. What if Mom recovers?" he asked.

"Well, the doctors say it's unlikely Mom will recover. The doctor's been talking about starting her on hospice care," I said. "And after your stroke, and all your complications, it's probably not safe to live by yourself. You could fall and hurt yourself. You could have another stroke."

My brother just stared at me as if shooting daggers into me with his eyes. "Who died and made you god?" he said. There was brother's rage bubbling up. I hadn't seen it in a while. I had started to miss it. He continued. "How 'bout let's give big brother a chance to get better before you sell him down the river?"

"I'm not saying I'll rent out the place next month," I said. "I'm just saying realistically it's something to consider. I'm paying assessments and insurance and no one's living there."

Well, at least his stroke did not affect his laser-sharp tongue. So much for our Kumbaya moment.

I knew it was my karma to be born into a family with this man as my brother. He was there to teach me something though I had no idea what the lesson was. It's tempting to see Clyde as a monster in this chapter of my life. He surely had his moments. But I knew that at any time, he could choose to tap into his magical side or his monstrous side. My brother was somewhere on the continuum.

Eventually I decided to start looking for tenants. Soon the condo was occupied. I would visit my brother and mother as they moved through their separate medical journeys. When I stopped by to see Mom, her inability to speak did not keep me from speaking to her. Even though when she looked at me, there was no sign she knew who the strange man standing before her was.

"Hi Mom, how are you feeling? It's Dwight. Can you see me? I can see you. I miss you. Clyde and I are doing fine. We go out to dinner now. We even saw a scary movie together. We're trying to figure out how we can help you recover."

On this day, her eyes remained closed. I sang a few bars of a song to her.

As the months went on, Mom continued in a comatose state. As her medical power of attorney, I considered that this was exactly the kind of state my mother did not want to be kept alive in. "I don't want to be a vegetable," she often told me. Still, I wanted to give her a chance to recover.

And I wanted her many friends to be able to visit her, pay their respects. I created a folder filled with pictures from Mom's life so that the nurses who tended to her would know the great life she had lived. I bought a guestbook, and the pages were soon filled with handwritten comments, humorous recollections, heartfelt memories. One guest left a red lipstick print on the page with

her name. Another simply wrote: "Patsy, this is not goodbye." Each time I read the guestbook I cried. It was not the thought of losing her that made me cry. It was knowing how many lives Mom had already touched.

Hard to believe that now both my mother and brother had suffered strokes. What if tomorrow it was my turn to suffer a stroke? I took tests. My doctor evaluated my chance of a stroke and said it was low. I read books, I googled. If I suffered a stroke next, who in their right mind would oversee the medical futures of the three of us? I had to be strong. I chanted for the health of my family, to make the best decisions for all of us.

My mother's condition pretty much stayed the same or declined. The doctor held out little hope for her. "With brain injuries we have a saying: The damage is done," he said, not one to sugar-coat things. As Mom's power of attorney, I realized I had a job to do. I had provided time for prayer, recovery, the visitation of loved ones. I could no longer justify keeping Mom alive artificially as that was not her wish. Hospice care staff began the hard conversation with me about End of Life.

And then the day came, Mom was to be removed from life support. My brother could not attend as he was still recuperating. In fact, he told me he wouldn't want to be present as it would be too sad. Though he did say his goodbyes to Mom during the final days when I managed to have them both residing at the same care facility.

"I'm glad you had...to make the decision...to remove her from life support," he said in his halting, post-stroke voice. "Instead of me."

The day they unplugged Mom from the machines, I had some friends on hand for moral support. My friend Michael, who I had once dated and was now great friends with, was there along with a few others. We sat in chairs around Mom's bed. She was still connected to breathing tubes,

feeding tubes and such. When the staff entered to remove life support, their movements were perfectly choreographed, economical. Two people removed the breathing tube, disconnected her from the ventilator. One removed the IVs from her arms. One turned off the life support console of blinking lights and rolled it out of the room followed by the others. I appreciated how quick and seamless they made this moment.

Surely sickness and death are two monsters that will visit most of us. I sensed in these final days my mother was teaching me what death was, teaching me not to be afraid of it. My last words when she was transitioning were: "Thank you for being my mother."

Some fifteen years earlier in 1984, Mom and Dad had driven cross-country to have an adventure, and to visit some relatives on the West Coast. My mother kept a handwritten journal of her trip. Here is one of my favorite passages that perfectly captures her voice and spirit.

All my life I never wrote things down, but sometimes I like to watercolor. It wasn't until later in life that my two boys asked me to write memoirs. About how I met their father and my experiences in the Japanese American relocation camps and things like that. So I'm writing them down now.

Three people told me something that will happen to me.

1. When I was volunteering for Four Seasons hospice, one lady comes right up to me and tells me how nice my future looks. That I will always have money. I don't let the grass grow under my foot.

2. Bill worked with me at Fields Afar at Marshall Fields. He said that I will make something with my hands. I wonder what that can be?

3. Another person Buckie who is a fellow from Nigeria told me how successful I will be. It is in my eyes. I told him, What do I have in my eye?

How come I was told these things? It is a mystery to me. How lucky can I be? No one talks like that. I must have a good vibration.²⁶

²⁶ My mother's stab at writing a memoir pre-dated my own.

Over the next ten years, Clyde's journey took him from hospital to nursing home to assisted living. It was the first time he'd ever lived on his own. Mom would've been thrilled. Clyde never held a steady job for long because he didn't believe in bosses. He mostly lived with Mom in his adult life, except for a short stint at marriage. As the years passed, I was eager to sell the family condo in hopes that I could buy a condo of my own to retire in. Technically, my brother and I were the inheritors of the place. I would need Clyde's blessing to sell. But year after year he vehemently refused.

He once said, "I hope you never sell the condo. I hope you suffer...like I've suffered." This was the same dude who once whispered in my ear, "I want to drink the blood of virgins and live forever!"

As his health declined, Clyde always refused any offer for my assistance. But one day, unexpectedly, he called me to see if I could pick up groceries for him. He had trouble getting groceries online and his card wasn't going through. I took his shopping list and brought him his groceries. After that I sat him in his kitchen. He'd never had me over before. As one might expect, things were in disarray. There was an unsealed bag of cookies and a lidless jar of blueberry jam on the table, some envelopes scattered on the kitchen floor. Big brother brewed a pot of coffee and served us. We actually had a good conversation and seemed to enjoy each other's company. I got up to find a spoon for the coffee and saw clusters of cockroaches in the silverware drawer. I wasn't sure what to say.

Finally I said, "Clyde, there are cockroaches in your drawer."

He looked at me calmly and said, "That's where they're supposed to be." And he sipped his coffee. I knew better than to argue with him. Later when I'd retell this story, I would laugh. I'd like to think I was not laughing at him but with him. Though I couldn't swear to it.

My phone rang early one Sunday morning. I had come to fear early morning calls. They are often made out of an urgency that defies polite calling hours. Caller ID indicated it was someone from a hospital in Evanston. He had something to tell me.

"So your brother is Clyde Okita. Is that right?" said the voice.

"That's right. Is he okay?" I asked.

A pause. "I'm sorry to say he passed away early this morning."

I took a moment to catch my breath. "What happened? Was it Covid?"

"No, it wasn't Covid. It was a combination of things -- fibrosis of the lungs and kidney failure."

I didn't feel sad. I felt relief for Clyde. And maybe a little bit sad.

"Do I need to identify the body?"

"Not necessary. We have his information. You'll want to make arrangements," he said.

At least Clyde wasn't suffering, wasn't tethered to an oxygen tank 24/7. I was painfully aware that with the death of my brother, I was the soul survivor of my family. I wished my brother a joyful transition to his next life and tried to remember the good times. I was also aware that with his passing, the ownership of my mother's condo finally fully reverted to me. I felt a bit guilty the thought had crossed my mind but there it was. I could finally put the unit on the market and hope to sell it.

As we were now in the second year of Covid-19, I knew I could not organize an in-person memorial for my brother. And I'm not sure he would even want me to. I reached out to as many

of his Facebook friends as I could locate to notify them. I created an online webpage on my site. I populated it with some of Clyde's photographic work, some of his social media postings, his philosophical musings, a poem I'd once written called, "To My Brother in the Basement." I made a guestbook so that visitors could share memories if they wished. If I didn't feel like an orphan after my mother died, I surely felt it after my brother died. One branch left on the Fred Okita family tree.

To convey what it is like to live in the world without one's given family, to be the surviving leaf of a family tree -- it is helpful to remember what it was like to be part of a family in the first place.

I give you this memory.

It is a hot summer night in Chicago. I don't know what year it is, but I am a little boy. If our house has air conditioning, it is not powerful enough to keep us cool in our rooms. So Mom and Dad spread a striped sheet over the living room floor. They turn on the fan. My father wears a tank top and shorts, my mother wears a nightgown with flowers on it. One by one my parents turn off the lamps in the living room. We see each other by the faint light of stars. We become silhouettes, voices in the dark. It makes me think of being on a camping trip or a slumber party. I like this feeling. My brother and I keep getting up to retrieve iced water from the kitchen. My parents are the first to fall asleep, snoring as they often do. Eventually my brother stops reading comic books by flashlight and falls asleep. And then there is just me. Is one person enough to make a family? Sometimes it has to be. Tonight, we sleep together in one place as a family in the closest of proximity. We lie so close, we can almost dream each other's dreams.

It would be easy to freeze the frame of this picture and slowly erase family members from this night -- the father, the mother, the brother. It would be easy to see just one man illuminated by

stars as I am now illuminated in my cozy penthouse condo lying in bed. Maybe it's summer and the moon slides slowly through my six windows from left to right. And before I know it, I am asleep.

PIC OF CLYDE, MOM AND ME...HOSPITAL??





12: Magical Friends

AS I HAVE GROWN OLDER, I HAVE SOUGHT OUT DEEP FRIENDSHIPS, even more than romantic partners. What can I say? In my life my friendships not only last much longer than my romantic relationships (which average about six months) -- they have also been endlessly more satisfying.²⁷

So it didn't surprise me when I was drawn to an article in *The Atlantic* titled, "What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was At the Center of Life?"²⁸ The article suggested not only that friendship *might* be at the center of our lives -- but that it *should* be. It went on to say that the societal mandate toward marriage as the be-all end-all maybe be wrongheaded and lead people to unhappiness. Not everyone would agree with this assessment or even understand it.

²⁷ When I look at my diverse array of friends, I see that several of them are co-workers from previous jobs or members from meetup groups. Some are people I knew in high school and some are from various affinity groups -- Asian Americans, the healing community, people of color, LGBT, Buddhists, creative artists, etc. I am most surprised by how deep my connections to former coworkers from decades ago continue to be. I am still friends with Ravi from high school. And every once in a while, I see my friend Keith from Luella's sixth grade class on Facebook though he now resides in the Netherlands.

²⁸ Rhaina Cohen, "What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?" *The Atlantic*, October 2020.

During a turbulent time in my fifties, I experienced a terrifying encounter with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. It would lead me to an anxiety clinic and a resourceful young student/therapist. One afternoon she laid out strips of blank white paper on a table and asked me to write down the things that gave my life meaning. This was my first taste of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. (More on this in the next chapter.) The bottom line, I learned that of the many things I devoted myself to that friendship was most important. And the most overlooked by me.

There are a few dozen people I consider friends. I have collected them over the years from jobs I worked, from various schools, from artistic circles, from dating them and so on. Within this outer circle there is a subset, a smaller circle of people I consider *magical friends*. When you are part of a magical friendship, you know it. But what you may ask makes a friendship magical? That question can be answered in many different ways. Allow me to introduce three of my magical friends -- Nancy, Matteo, and Francesca.

NANCY: THE FUN WE HAVE

Back in the days of The Roommate Experiment, Nancy was the friend who rescued me when my roommate was having a meltdown and the police came a-knocking. Who let me stay overnight in her cat's personal bedroom. Nancy who I always have fun. Who moves halfway across the country, and yet we talk on the phone more often than when she lived one bus ride away from me. Who I am completely comfortable and myself with.

We first met in 1996 while working on a performance for Guild Complex. I think her part of the show involved dance movement and I was reading poems. She was of Cuban and Lebanese descent with sparkling dark eyes and wavy black hair. She had a bohemian air about her. The

image that lingers in my mind from that meeting twenty-five years ago is this one: Nancy and I sitting cross-legged in a hallway before show time as I read poems to her. She was attentive, thoughtful. I could feel her openness and vulnerability as a creative person. It resonated with me. I recall I asked her what she liked most after I'd read each poem but she did not like being put on the spot in that way. (She still doesn't.)

After the show, I found myself shamelessly flirting with a cute young male theater-goer. When I asked him rather boldly if he was gay and he told me he was bisexual -- I asked if I could kiss him. And we kissed! Was life ever really that simple? Maybe being with Nancy emboldened me. She enabled me in all the ways I liked to be enabled. With Nancy we were forever having fun, planning slumber parties, diving into the deep end of the swimming pool. And she has been there for the hard times too.

After my mother's stroke and her eventual move to hospice care, it was Nancy who went with me to visit Mom in hospice. We surrounded her bed and sang the Stevie Nicks song "Landslide" with the help of a small boombox. Nancy began to cry at one point.

"Nancy, why are you crying?" I asked.

She couldn't speak for a moment. "When I look at your mother, I see my mother. I don't know how long my Mom's going to be around either. I should be doing more."

I put my arm around her. "You're an awesome daughter," I said though I knew she didn't agree.

There came a day that Nancy would be leaving Chicago to take a job with the family business in Virginia. Was this the end of our friendship? That didn't seem conceivable. Still she moved away and I found myself Nancy-less. But we did continue to talk more on the phone than when she lived in town. For five years Nancy invited me, urged me, pleaded with me to visit her in her

new home on the east coast but I resisted. I rationalized I was not a traveler by nature, that traveling could be expensive, that plane flights were plagued by unruly passengers.

Everything changed the day I realized Nancy was one of my *magical friends*. I told her so. Once those words were uttered aloud, how could I not visit a magical friend? A few weeks later, I booked my AmTrak train. That is the power of words to a writer. At least to me.

Another memory: there was the time I persuaded Nancy, against her better instincts, to go to a theater to watch a scary movie with me. In one scene, the heroine carefully opened the mirrored bathroom cabinet door and even before the door was fully opened -- Nancy let out a scream. Everyone in the theater laughed. And we laughed too. Especially when it was revealed that nothing very demonic was lurking in the cabinet, just some bottles of aspirin and a tube of Bengay. This is a moment I've replayed before and each time I do, I laugh out loud.

Which is not to say we haven't had conflicts. Each of us has hung up on the other at different times because we couldn't bear to keep hurting each other. When I lose my temper, I can hurt people with a surgical precision. The viciousness of my monsters can be breathtaking. The superpower of my friendship with Nancy is how much fun we have together, and how comfortable we are together as friends. As if there has never been a time when we weren't friends.

I'm thankful to Nancy for the small moments too. I can call her no matter where she resides, no matter what time, and she will pick up the phone and we will find ourselves in the middle of a conversation that seems to have never ended. Some of my more complicated friends, I need to prepare for our phone chats. Not so with Nancy.

MATTEO: EVERYDAY MUCHNESS

When I first met Matteo (pronounced *muh TAY oh*) we were attending a Meetup group for gay men who were lepidopterists, or bug collectors. Indeed, in Meetup, there is a group for everything you can imagine and I enjoyed being around others who shared my passion. But I entered the group with a secret: I didn't actually *collect* insects. The last bug I collected was when I was eight. These days I'd detain a critter for a few moments, then let it go. I was afraid that if the group discovered my secret, I'd be expelled. Or judged. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Matteo had the same secret!

A white guy of Euro roots, he came across as a cuddly teddy bear with a goatee and spearmint green glasses. I loved when we talked, he would often use my name. "*Dwight*, thank you so much for sharing your secret with me. Now that we have that in common, I can't tell you how much more comfortable I feel in the group. I owe that to you, *Dwight*," he'd say. After that Meetup I went home and looked him up on Facebook. I was surprised to see that every single picture of him showed him laughing, grinning from ear to ear. No one is that happy, are they? I wondered.

That week, I called to see if he'd like to get coffee.

"That would be spectacular," he said, ever-effusively.

When we got together for coffee, I asked him about the photos.

"So....I looked you up on Facebook," I confessed. "I noticed in all your pictures you look blissed out as if you inhaled laughing gas. Did you do that for fun or are you just always that happy?"

He laughed. "Great question. Actually, those are real photos, *Dwight*. I guess I am kind of a happy-go-lucky fellow." I proceeded to learn Matteo and I had many more things in common.

Like me, Matteo loved getting lost in celluloid stories at the movies. Like me, he was a foodie.

Eating was like breathing to him. (I discovered we both had several favorite food items -- anchovies, Ikura sushi, pear liqueur.) And like me, he also loved going to cuddle parties now and then. I had attended one but felt out of place as an openly gay man. But what really stunned me was finding out he was a Buddhist like me. It's seemed mystical, magical.

If there were any red flags along the way, it was that we never argued. I found it odd how we rarely disagreed. Was he hiding something? Was there another side of Matteo I had yet to meet? Surely there were things in the world that made him angry. In time as he talked about working with clients in an international market, I started to see things that ticked him off. I was relieved to discover he was human after all.

One day he invited me to something called, "Mesmerica," a fully immersive music and cinematic projection show for planetariums. We lay back in our reclining seats under a dome as imaginary worlds passed over us. It was thrilling. "This show put me over the moon!" he exclaimed. "It was abundant with muchness." I liked how excited he got about things. Our mutual excitations commingled. We often were amazed by people, delicious meals, offbeat adventures. At such moments when things exceeded his expectations and left him reeling, Matteo referred to this as "muchness."

And things were going so well, of course I couldn't leave well enough alone.

I decided to ask him the big question one day at Klein's Cafe, my favorite Venezuelan hangout. "So...we have a lot of fun hanging out and have so much in common," I said. "Did you ever, I don't know, want to *date* or something, Matteo?" There. I'd said it out loud. I could not take the words back.

He put his hand on my knee affectionately. "Dwight, we have awesome times together," he said. "I'm so glad we've met. But I'm at a funny place. My last few boyfriend traumatized me. I won't

go into all the gory details, but I will say a restraining order was involved. I'm not sure if I'll ever date again."

"Oh, wow," I said. "I had no idea." I felt embarrassed for asking. I felt a little rejected too. But I was happy that he was able to share his truth with me. Even if it meant me not getting what I wanted.

"Do you think that's a temporary thing?" I asked.

"That is the million-dollar question, isn't it? I wish I knew." He looked away and I was afraid I was making him feel uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm thoroughly enjoying getting to know you," I said.

"The feeling is mutual. The feeling is muchly, *Dwight*."

Time marched on and the two of us grew ever closer and more comfy in our skins. When we were together, we were never bored. Each time he drove me home, he always got out of his car and gave me a good-bye hug. But sometimes he gave mixed signals too. There was the time Matteo and I got together with some of my other friends and binge-watched a new TV series together. A moment came up when I was sitting on a barstool at the kitchen island and Matteo suddenly appeared behind me and enclosed me in a Standing Big Spoon Cuddle. It was such a boyfriend thing to do, especially in front of folks he didn't know. (I sometimes tell Nancy he is my *pretend boyfriend*.)

The superpower of our friendship is that just when we think things cannot get any more delightful -- they do. That's muchness for you.

FRANCESCA: STARFISH LESSONS

Francesca and I first crossed paths at a cooking class which promised to teach us how to create Greek baklava out of thin air. At one point during the class, she noticed me struggling to butter the infinite layers of phyllo dough and mercifully gave me a hand. I learned she was born in Italy which explained her lovely accent. After the class upon learning we practically lived next door to each other, she offered to give me a ride home. We learned we were both aspiring writers.

We've been inseparable ever since. A willowy young woman with a passion for movies, books, and left-leaning politics -- we were a good fit. Francesca and I were often mistaken to be a couple. But we had our differences too. Where I was an over-sharer on Facebook, she was a super-private person who dared not even open an account on Amazon. While I had a large and diverse circle of friends, Francesca's soul selected its own smaller society.

I recall one daytrip in which Francesca and I gabbed on and on about the latest arthouse film. My mother, our backseat companion and commentator, interjected: "Wow, you guys never run out of things to talk about!" No doubt Mom was fantasizing that Francesca and I were headed toward some kind of heterosexual union down the road.

"We're just good friends, Ma," I'd say to clarify.

Along with the good times, there have been scary moments from which I thought our relationship might not recover. Like the time we got into a nasty argument enroute to a spare rib festival. Francesca, the designated driver, sat behind the wheel of her car. Her all-beige ensemble included a pith helmet, gloves, and a jumpsuit constructed of material that was created by NASA to withstand climate changes on the moon.

"It's impermeable to ultraviolet rays, bacteria and biohazards," she boasted. "Most importantly it helps me protect my super-sensitive skin during long road trips." To someone peeking at Francesca from another vehicle, she might have resembled a beekeeper, but to me she was just

Francesca. We were on an interstate road I'd never heard of, watching amber waves of grain undulating in the distance. I sat there on the passenger side with a map spread out in my lap. "Rib-o-Palzoosa was awarded five stars by the Chicago Tribune!" I said to Francesco after googling on my phone.

"For the third year in a row, no less," she added.

I continued googling then stopped. "Oh no!"

"What?"

"Eugene Polley died!" I said.

"Who?"

"Oh, many people wouldn't know him by name. He was the guy who invented the TV remote-control."

"How the heck do you even *know* that?" asked Francesca.

"I wrote a paper about him once in school."

She shook her head. "I can't imagine many folks would be at his funeral. Though inventing the TV remote-control is nothing to sneeze at. Maybe they could hire some professional mourners," Francesca said and she laughed aloud.

I looked at her. "Don't you love that there are professional mourners in the world?"

"You've heard of them?"

"They've always fascinated me," I said.

"Me too!" Francesca exclaimed. "In fact, between you and me, I hope to write a novel about a professional mourner one day."

"I've researched them a bit," I said. "At first I thought like how mercenary can you be to cry for cash, right? And how pitiful that someone doesn't have real friends to mourn them. But I read in

ancient times people believed the more that people cried for you at your funeral -- the faster you transition into your next life."

Francesca turned on the air conditioning in the car and pushed a button to close our windows.

"Well, I don't know about all that. What I do know is that I've always wanted to write a novel about a professional mourner."

"Me too. Writing a novel about a professional mourner is on my bucket list."

My friend slowed the car down a bit. We were on a desolate road in the middle of nowhere. If we were in a thriller movie, this would be the perfect moment for her to kill me and dump my body behind a cluster of cacti. Francesca stared at me horrified, almost like she was going to cry.

"You can't do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"You can't write a book about a professional mourner. " Now I wondered if she was indeed going to cry.

"Why not?"

"Because I just told you I'm going to write a book about a professional mourner," she said.

"But it's not like you *invented* the concept, Francesca. They've been around for centuries." I paused. "Besides, we can both write novels about them and they'd be totally different books."

"But it was my idea. I forbid you!" she said.

"You forbid me? What are you, my mother? Not only can you NOT stop me -- this whole conversation could appear in a book one day!"

"Not without my written permission it can't," she insisted.

"Francesca, dear girl, we're both writers. Anything that happens in my life *belongs* to me. That's just the way it works," I said.

"But you're not hearing me --"

It was getting ugly and I was worried we were heading into dangerous territory. I didn't want to risk our friendship, but dammit I was pissed.

"I'm getting kind of frustrated," I said. "I'd like to chant for a while if that's okay with you." I closed my eyes and chanted for Francesca's enlightenment. At one point I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I remembered -- Francesca was nudging my shoulder.

"We're here, Sleeping Beauty," she said. I was surprised she didn't seem to be angry at me.

I was afraid to ask but I felt compelled to do so. "Are we still fighting?"

She looked at me and smiled. "Hmm, good question. I'd say we're beyond the fighting stage.

Neither of us will get exactly what we wanted. I'd say we're at the agree-to-disagree stage."

That was one of the scariest moments of our friendship. As far as I know, neither of us ever did write that novel about professional mourners.

Francesca and I were forever connected because I knew this person who was telling me what I could and could not write a book about -- was also the same person who came to my workplace the day I was unexpectedly fired and provided needed moral support, helping me pack my things into her car. Was the same person who went out of her way to throw a surprise birthday party for me, rallying the troops and coordinating food. And though we had hurt each other's feelings over the years and would likely do so again, we also continued to choose each other over and over as friends.

The superpower of our friendship is how resilient we are, like a starfish that can lose one of its limbs and magically grow a new one in its place.

*

There are other lovely people in my life too such as friends who are there for just a season. (No shame in seasonal friends. I measure the depth of relationships by quality rather than quantity.)

There are friends I enjoy very much on one level, but who I fundamentally do not know well.

There are friendships that have crashed and burned due to irreconcilable differences. Toxic relationships that are birthed out of unhealthy needs and fundamental darkness from both myself and the friend. These relationships are often rich in both opportunity and danger. (I endure them, try to transform them, but when all fails, I walk away.)

There are friends who have walls around them I cannot scale, cannot peer over, cannot penetrate. Friends who have many secrets, who when they tell you a life anecdote you secretly sense they are leaving out the really interesting parts. They could be living a double life and you'd never know it, but when that double life is revealed on the ten o'clock news, the first thing you'd say to yourself is: "Well, son of a gun! It figures."

But it is the magical friends I am uniquely grateful for. Those late-night rescuers and hospice crooners. Those butterfly catchers and make-believe Romeos. Those self-repairing starfish with their many arms.





13. Anxiety as a House on Fire (2014)

WHEN I WAS 55, I ENCOUNTERED A MONSTER WITHIN AND A MONSTER WITHOUT. The year was 2014 and due to overwhelming voter apathy -- Republicans took control of the Senate in the [midterm](#) elections. Only 36.3 percent of voters showed up to vote. For myself, it was the year I felt the safe spaces of both my home and heart were under siege. Far from apathetic -- I rallied the troops to confront this monstrous invasion.

I lay in bed looking at the pattern of light on the ceiling. It was a night like any other. I asked Alexa to play my sleep music. Then I felt something tickle my neck. I swatted at it. I turned on the light.

There was a smear of bright red blood on my hand. *What was that?* I wondered. On my neck I saw the crushed body of a bug that looked like an apple seed. I rushed to my laptop and my worst suspicion was confirmed: I had bedbugs. Yikes. I sealed the creature's body in a fold of Scotch tape and attached it to my bathroom mirror. I wrote the date on the tape. This would be my system for tracking the bug sightings in my apartment.

All the same over the next few weeks, my bathroom mirror began to resemble a crime scene. I called Ravi, my old buddy from high school. My lost boy living in California. "Ravi, if I tell you something -- do you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Tell me, tell me!" he exclaimed. "I love secrets."

I had no faith in his ability to be discreet, but I also figured he was living half a country away.

"I think I have bedbugs!" I said.

He gasped. "You do? We have them in San Francisco too. Oh, my poor Dwighty is being eaten alive by tiny creatures."

"It's not funny! This whole situation is making me very...depressed."

"Well, I've had bedbugs. They're a pain, but I'm here to tell you that there IS life after bedbugs."

I felt some relief in telling Ravi of my secret. Why did this remind me of coming out of the closet? And how many closets were there to come out of in a life anyway?

"So are you going to call an exterminator?" he asked.

"I'm going to do better than that. I'm going to say a prayer for the bedbugs."

Ravi laughed derisively.

"Here," I said. "I wrote it down. It goes:

Dear bedbugs,

This is Dwight. You are currently in my apartment. I know like every other creature on earth you have a right to be here, but I pay the rent and you do not. So I'm going to have to ask you to leave ASAP or I'm going to have to kill you. Amen."

"Now I've heard everything!" He continued laughing.

"Instead of being afraid of my monsters, I make friends with them. I joke with them. That way they have no power over me."

"Is that what Buddhists say?"

"That's what I say."

"I see. Well, good luck with that," he said and chuckled some more. "But if the prayer doesn't work, you are going to call Orkin, aren't you?"

I just smiled at him as any bodhisattva would.

Google taught me more about bedbugs than I should have known. I learned that bedbugs mostly come out to feed at night. That they are not drawn by scent but by body heat. That you could buy an encasement for your mattress to trap the critters. That they could reside inside the encasement up to a whole year without feeding on you -- and then they'd finally starve to death. I found that fascinating. Impressive even.

As awful as my findings on the creatures were, it was nothing compared to the tedious preparations one had to do for the exterminator's visit. All clothes/beddings/ towels in my apartment needed to be bagged, laundered, dried at high heat to kill bugs. Then all clothes needed to be rebagged and hung in closets. All furniture (bed, futon, bookcases, tables) needed to be moved two feet away from the walls. All walls, floors and countertops needed to be cleared of posters, paintings, rugs, boxes, books, papers, appliances, foods, etc. When I was done, everything was in twist-tied plastic bags or stacked in cardboard boxes. It basically took about the same effort to prepare for Orkin as it took to move to a new apartment.

The Orkin men came and performed their ceremonies. They came in red and white jumpsuits. They wore hardhats. They brought spraying devices filled with poisonous elixirs. I left the premises and returned four hours later.

It felt good to take the decisive step to exterminate. Then there was the endless process of unpacking. I felt traumatized. I kept looking for any return of the bugs. In the morning I'd inspect the clothes in my closet. At night I'd look along the edges of the mattress encasement for a sign of bedbugs. When I finally lay down in bed, any itch was cause to turn on the lights and do a full-blown investigation. It was exhausting.

And one day I was sure the bugs were gone. I breathed a sigh of relief. I put pictures and movie posters back on my walls. When I lay down in my bed, I felt comfortable. I started to feel safe again in my home. I went out with Nancy and Michael for a celebratory dinner.

And everything went back to normal -- until it wasn't.

THE CATASTROPHIST

The bedbugs did not return. But my mind. What was going on with my mind?

At first, I noticed I'd worry about some little thing and not be able to let it go. Like I'd leave my house to go to work, wait for the bus and board it. Then this thought sat down in the seat next to me and said:

THOUGHT: Did you turn off the stove?

ME: Of course, I turned off the stove.

THOUGHT: That's good. Because you wouldn't want to come home to a burnt-out house, would you?

ME: Well, if I go home now, I'll be late for work. And if I'm late for work, I might lose my job.

THOUGHT: But you don't even *like* your job.

ME: That's not the point! The point is -- Who will take care of me if I'm jobless, or later when I'm old? Will I die alone and unloved? Is that what you're asking me to do?

This is called "catastrophizing." To catastrophize is to imagine the very worst possible outcome of any and every situation far beyond the realm of likely expectations. Now imagine your brain is stuck in that groove of catastrophizing for, oh, about eight months straight, 24/7. GAD was the convenient store that never closed. Which really made it an *inconvenient* store, didn't it?²⁹

²⁹ Though the duration of my GAD felt endless, I came to learn that I was lucky. During this time, I participated in mental health online discussion boards for GAD sufferers. It scared me when I learned many had struggled with the

Before I knew it I was at my destination downtown. And that Thought, the one that sat down next to me on the bus? It kept the conversation rolling, whispering into my ear with its seashell voice. I couldn't start up my computer, I couldn't answer the phone, I couldn't pour myself a cup of coffee without those high-maintenance Thoughts buzzing in my ear.

Dreading going to work was not an entirely new experience for me. What was completely new to me was that I began to dread coming home as well. I actually stressed about how to spend my free time. Would I squander my leisure while my friends luxuriated in theirs? How did I forget how to enjoy my own company, how to chillax? If I worried all day at work and I worried all night at home -- where could I take a break from anxiety?

My mind was like a pinball machine. Each ball released bounced from one bumper to the next. Each ball of anxiety would roll back and forth in my head. BING! BING! BING! I started chanting for relief, a solution. I needed to talk to someone. I googled to find professional help. I was hopeful when I came across a clinic that specialized in anxiety. I made an appointment.³⁰

THE ANXIETY CLINIC

My first visit to the clinic took me to a less trendy part of Lakeview. The neighborhood had clearly seen better days and was distinguished by its array of abandoned storefronts. As I approached the clinic's address, the building seemed more like an entrance to an off-track betting

illness their whole lives -- for 50 or 60 years. Folks that surely had access to meds, therapy, etc. I wondered if that would that be my fate as well.

³⁰ A funny coincidence will occur eight years later. I will receive a call from a woman whose father-in-law needs a caregiver. While being interviewed by her, I will learn that she works as a psychotherapist, and that she specializes in anxiety. I will discover that she works at exactly the same clinic that helped me through my long episode of GAD.

parlor than a place of spiritual renewal. I saw an entry system and punched the code. After a few moments I was buzzed in. The elevator whisked me up to my floor and the doors opened on an inviting office with tall bedroom lamps. The words "Anxiety Clinic" were imprinted on the main window in a font that was friendly and unapologetic. I was introduced to Lorna who explained she was a therapist in training and that she was also completing her degree in psychotherapy. She said she'd be honored to work with me. I liked her candor. She guided me to her office.

"I didn't know there were clinics just for anxiety," I said.

She smiled. "We've found anxiety is such a widespread issue that we wanted to focus in on that as our specialty. What brings you here, Dwight?" she said brightly.

A fine, open-ended question. I told her about my non-stop anxiety, my trouble sleeping, my discomfort during both work time and free time. Lorna started to talk about CBT, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, but I stopped her.

"I've used CBT before and I like it. But is there something else we can try?" I said.

This is how I learned of the world of ACT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. It would become my therapy of choice. The therapy encouraged me to accept the challenges in my life, but also to recommit to the things that gave my life most meaning.

When I entered Lorna's office on my second visit, I saw three different unwrapped candy bars on the coffee table. I was intrigued.

"Today I want you to fully immerse yourself in the experience of tasting these different candies," she said. "Tell me what ingredients you taste, which flavors stand out, and compare and contrast the candies. How does the candy make you *feel*, does the candy trigger a memory and such."

Two of the candy bars are easily recognized. But the third one is something special. It is filled with ingredients that are surprising to find in one place. In time I learned what Lorna was up to.

By having me focus on the taste of the candy -- I was brought squarely into the present moment. It allowed me to break away from my infinite loop of worrying about the future or regretting the past. Clever.

In time I also started seeing a psychiatrist for possible anxiety meds to combine with my ACT therapy. We first tried Buspar which was a tiny pill about the size of a piece of Chiclet Gum. Sadly it worked for me about as well as Chiclet Gum. Next we tried Klonopin. Once while working a stressful job I took the med and found that twenty minutes later, I felt calmer. I could set my watch to it. My day would go smoother and I handle stress with greater calm. It was the Klonopin that restored sanity and mindfulness to my broken brain -- along with my Buddhist chanting and morning yoga. The pinball game in my head slowly receded.³¹

When I stepped into Lorna's office for my third visit, there were little white slips of paper on the coffee table...along with a felt-tipped pen. I love that she had prepared for my arrival each time. "Today's activity, if you really take it to heart, can be life-changing." She smiled. "There are fifteen slips of paper on the table before you. I want you to write down what are the fifteen things that give the most meaning to Dwight's life. Are you up for the challenge?"

"I think so," I said. "I hope so." I picked up the pen and held it in the air over a slip of paper. The first thing I wrote down was: CREATIVITY.

I kept writing till all the paper slips were filled: LOVE. WORLD PEACE. FAME. FORTUNE. HAPPINESS. FRIENDSHIP. HEALTH. And so on. She looked down at my word cloud, nodding her approval.

³¹ I continued to take Klonopin but after a few years, I talked to my shrink and I went off of it. My dosage was so low by then, there was no withdrawal concern. I decided to google: "Is there a connection between bedbugs and GAD?" I found stories of others who had the same experience. Of course, bedbugs are traumatizing so it's not a big leap to see how they could lead lead to a GAD episode.

"Well done," she said. "Now I'd like you to choose your top three."

This was much harder. I pushed both FAME, FORTUNE and LOVE to the reject pile. As long as I still held onto CREATIVITY there was a chance I could achieve FAME on my own. I felt guilty pushing WORLD PEACE into the reject pile. Tough love. My top three included: CREATIVITY, FRIENDSHIP, and KINDNESS.

"Fantastic. Now choose the one thing that gives your life the most meaning."

I pushed the slips of paper back and forth across the table as if it was a Ouija board. When I was done only the single word was left: FRIENDSHIP. Oddly she did not ask me about my reasons. This exercise was not about reasons.

"That's fantastic, Dwight," she said. "You've identified friendship as the one thing that most gives your life meaning. Now -- how much time in the past week have you devoted to your friendships?"

I felt I'd just walked into a trap. Like most self-absorbed folks with GAD, all I could think about was my anxiety. It was top of mind mind day and night. And the urgency of her question couldn't be clearer. I was neglecting FRIENDSHIP, the one thing I'd identified as giving my life most meaning.

One of my therapist's question haunted me: "How would you spend your day if you didn't have anxiety at all?" She was tricking me into using my imagination for good instead of evil. Damn her. She encouraged me to rethink the pie chart of my time. "To try spending 50% of next week on friendship and just 50% on GAD cures."

I noticed a poster on the wall of Lorna's office. It showed a dazzling bouquet of flowers in vase, a storm cloud releasing its gentle drizzle. The caption read: *No rain. No flowers.*

Buddhist leader Daisaku Ikeda once wrote: "There are all sorts of revolutions: political revolutions, economic revolutions, industrial revolutions, scientific revolutions, artistic revolutions . . . but no matter what one changes, *human revolution* is the most fundamental of all revolutions." What I was navigating these days was surely nothing less than my own human revolution.

Between bedbugs and Generalized Anxiety Disorder, I'd take the bedbugs any day. For one thing the bug invasion lasted only about two months, while the GAD episode was eight months. For another thing, a monster outside yourself is easier to fight than a monster within. I could see the bedbugs with my own eyes, could crush them between my fingers, could witness their departure. With GAD it was more intangible. I certainly couldn't see GAD in an x-ray or pulverize it with a hammer.

Central to Buddhism is the image of the lotus flower which is unique because it is a flower that can only bloom in a muddy swamp rather than in pure water. Human life is the lotus and the realities of daily life are the muddy water. The flowering only occurs *because* of the dirty water it emerges from. Daisaku Ikeda once said: "Those who have suffered the most have a right to become the happiest of all."

A TALE OF TWO MONSTERS

Nancy and I made a beeline to Taste of Heaven. It was time to celebrate my good response to the new med. She wanted me to tell her everything -- how Klonopin affected me, how long I expected to stay on it, how safe was it really, any side effects?

I explained to her it was thankfully not an opioid but rather a benzodiazepine. "Benzos" are a kind of psychoactive drugs whose core chemical structure affects brain activity. They are

commonly prescribed to treat seizures, insomnia, and yes anxiety. To be precise, they work by decreasing abnormal electrical activity in the brain. Wow, that explained a lot to me. I had been exhausted by the inner chatter of worry and catastrophizing for months.

I noticed that twenty minutes after I took Klonopin, a wave of calm passed over me. Vitamin K no doubt slowed down the activity of my inner pinball machine. And the calming down did not result in a sense of numbness or detachment. Rather the sounds of the world simply got a little gentler, the places I visited got a little cozier.

On the downside, Klonopin sometimes was prescribed "as needed." For some, it was not hard to overmedicate and become addicted. Getting off the med had to be done with supervision to avoid crashing or withdrawal. Luckily, I took my meds seriously, always of a certain dose and frequency. As for side effects, what I noticed most was a need to nap more often than usual. But I could deal with some napping now and then. I was utterly thrilled to be rid of the catastrophizing. I continued my chanting and morning yoga.

When confronted by two monsters that year I chose to fight twice as hard. Which is not to say I wasn't scared. I was scared. But I knew I wasn't giving up without a fight.

At different times I'd struggled with both depression and anxiety. To me, depression was like slowly freezing to death. It was gradual, snuck up on me and ultimately surrounded me. It drained my life of all color and vitality. Anxiety, on the other hand, was like a house on fire. It was much more urgent. It was a high-maintenance monster that demanded my immediate attention. It was a thousand bolts of lightning shooting through my brain, short-circuiting my ability to be present, to taste the delicious candy bar I was biting into...which was milk chocolate...studded with pieces of butter toffee...infused with notes of cinnamon and cardamom.





14. A Dangerous Leap of Faith (2018)

WHEN I WAS 60, I TOOK A LEAP OF FAITH INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN from a job I hated to a job I could love. I've never been a huge risk-taker by nature, but I knew there are times we all needed to take calculated risks.³² The job I hated was at Renovation Station, always an unlikely fit for me. I never liked to exercise much. So what was I doing at a place that looked a lot like a gym with an array of exercise machines? Well, it wasn't a regular gym. This was a place of healing specifically for people recovering from major surgeries or illnesses, or people with disabilities and who wanted to strengthen their bodies. Some had suffered strokes, some had spinal cord issues, some were car accident survivors. It was 2018. Health services company Cigna revealed in a study that American adults were experiencing a "loneliness epidemic." As much as half of all Americans reported they sometimes or always felt alone. I came into work one Monday morning and Annabelle, my boss, was already in the staff room pouring herself a cup of coffee. Instead of saying good morning, or hello fellow human being -- the first words from her mouth were work-related.

"Did you buy the paper towels?" she said.

³² A risk-taker is a person who is willing to do things that involve risk to achieve a goal or for the thrill of it. My brother once enjoyed skydiving, jumping out of planes, something I would never do. As a writer I've enjoyed leaping genres --from poetry to plays to novels. People take risks in different ways. Now I wanted to move from a regular part-time job I didn't like to a freelance job as a caretaker I might love.

I hated when people started the day without a friendly greeting. I told her I was going to buy them on my lunch hour. I added that I hoped she had a nice weekend.

Then in her most withering voice she said: "Thanks to you -- because you didn't buy the paper towels when I thought you would -- I had to use FOUR NAPKINS to clean up a spill this morning!" I was stunned. On this morning it truly rubbed me the wrong way.

"You know, Annabelle, it's really NOT that big a deal!" I pushed back. I surprised myself. I'd never stood up to her so fearlessly. She didn't say a word. She was probably shocked. I realized in that moment: *I didn't care anymore*. I was done trying to make nice. I had chanted for her happiness, but it was a losing battle.

But the turning point for me came during a staff meeting where Annabelle said that budget cutbacks were on the horizon, that she was not ruling out reducing staff.

"And if I need to let someone go, Dwight, you're at the top of the list," she said glancing at me. I couldn't believe the bluntness of her words. Granted I was the last to be hired, but did she have to make this declaration in front of my peers? I clearly felt unvalued. I started sending out resumes that night to explore a new life as a caregiver for seniors. It was something I had been itching to look into. Here was my chance.

GIVING NOTICE

That week I met with my good friend Julie to brainstorm over my predicament. She and I had worked together at Volunteer Here for some years. She was Filipina. I considered her my Asian American sister. Julie and I found a nice private booth at Wilde's, a cozy restaurant named after Oscar Wilde. There was even a seating area called The Library which had shelves filled with books by Wilde.

"Do you think Annabelle suspects you're planning to quit?" Julie sipped her ginger ale with real ginger in it.

"That's a great question," I said. "I've been wondering that myself."

"Have you told anyone?"

"A coworker or two," I said. "But all she has to do is read my body language to know I checked out of the place months ago."

The waiter brought our entrees. "I know you've told me she micro-manages and yells at staff in front of clients."

I bit into my bleu burger. It was the perfect comfort food. "It's like I'm in this abusive relationship and I keep getting punched in the face. Bam bam bam. Day in, day out. Then one day I ask myself, Why are you staying? Why don't you go where you'll be valued?"

"And you should," she said. "Dwight, I think you'd make an awesome caregiver. With your understanding of human nature, your creativity, your Buddha wisdom..."

"Oh stop, you're making blush!" I dipped a French fry into the garlic mayo.

"Tell me about this new dream gig," she said.

"Okay, well since technically I don't have any caregiving experience, it's been really hard to get hired. As I see it there are three levels in caregiving -- The highest level is where you provide body care for people who have physical challenges. They need help showering, getting dressed, etc. I don't have enough experience for that. The middle level is where people are dealing with dementia and such. I haven't interacted with dementia folks before so that's out. The mostly likely level where I can start working is with people who need basic companionship."

"It's like a hierarchy of needs," said Julie. She took a bite of her chicken pot pie.

"Exactly. So this new gig. The man who contacted me lives out of state. His father lives not far from me and loves to read. I would be hired to order books for him and read them aloud. I'd help him build his library."

"What a perfect job for you!" she said.

"Wait, it gets better." I proceeded to tell her the perks of the gig. She asked me if the gig would pay me enough to cover my rent and expenses. I admitted it wouldn't, but I planned to hustle and get more clients. There's risk behind every benefit. I had to take a leap of faith. By the time we left the restaurant I felt Julie's support of my decision.

Tomorrow morning, I would give Annabelle my two-week's notice. I couldn't sleep that night. It was like the excitement I felt as a child the night before Christmas.

That night I thought about Monroe, one of my favorite clients at Renovation. It would be people like him that I'd miss most from the old job. He was a double-amputee and loved to make awful puns. When he came to work out, he liked doing chest pulls and working his arms. Here's an example of his puns: "Did you hear about the guy who had a stroke on his left side? He's all right now!"

One morning he came into Renovation. When I saw Monroe coming I knew I was going to have a good day. His trainer was still working with someone so he hovered by me at the front desk. After I signed him in, I said, "Hey, Monroe, here's my \$10,000 question for the day. Are you ready for it?"

"My session doesn't start for five minutes. You've got a captive audience."

I smiled. "Okay, let's say I have a magic wand that really works, okay? If you could have absolutely anything in the world, Monroe, what would you wish for?" I thought this would be a no-brainer. Surely, he'd wish to have his legs back.

He thought for a moment. And then he thought for another moment.

And then he said: "I wish I could love people better."

I was floored. His answer was so...honest, so vulnerable.³³ I love when people surprise me.

Moments like that made me question my decision to leave. But I knew what I had to do.

The next day was business as usual. I waited till the end of my shift to make my move. At 5pm I made my way to Annabelle's office. I peeked in, glad to see she was off the phone. I knocked gently. "Hey Annabelle, do you have a minute?"

She looked up from her computer and nodded. I carefully closed the door behind. This was a universal sign in workplaces that a significant conversation was imminent. I sat in the chair opposite her.

I looked into her eyes and smiled. "Annabelle, I just wanted to let you know that I was hired for a new job. I'm giving my two-week notice."

She peered at me over her glasses. She looked genuinely surprised.

"May I ask why you're leaving?" she said, taking a sip from her probably cold mug of coffee.

She seemed honestly curious about my reasons.

"Of course. Thanks for asking," I said. Time to share my truth. I spoke with deliberation.

"I work best at a place... where the focus is on *finding solutions*...rather than *finding blame*," I said.

³³ Monroe died a few years later from Covid-19. Though he aspired to love people better, I thought he did a pretty good job. And he made a lot of people laugh. At the zoom memorial at Renovation Station, the largest number of humorous recollections were devoted to Monroe.

The bullet of my words was sailing in slow motion toward Annabelle, but would it hit its intended target? Her face neither confirmed nor denied my statement. But I had finally said those words out loud and that's what mattered.

I continued, "I think that's why there's so much turnover here." I knew I was treading into dangerous territory.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, you're not going to blame me for that," she said. "People leave because this job is a steppingstone, they leave because another job can pay them more. Period. End of story."

I said nothing.

"I'm going to try my hand at caregiving for seniors," I said. "I think it might be a good fit." ³⁴

"Caregiving," she repeated. "Well, you'll never run out of clients. No one's getting any younger.

Well, congratulations," Annabelle finally said.

"I love the mission of this place," I added. I got up to make my exit.

"You can leave the door open," she said having to have the last word. The talk was over in her mind.

I returned to the front desk. I looked for personal items I wanted to take home that night -- my small desk fan, some books. Each item I placed in a shopping bag made my spirit feel that much lighter. There was something magical about this feeling, how when you start to move in the direction of your true happiness -- each step you take lifts you higher and higher.

³⁴ Caregiving appealed to me because I liked working one-on-one, liked being my own boss, suspected my calm nature would be an asset. It was only years later that I connected some dots. During the eight months Mom was in a comatose state, I got to meet and interact with her caregivers. They impressed me. That likely intrigued me to explore the field further.

To be fair, Annabelle had her good moments too. There was the time I was stationed at the front desk and I heard someone coughing horribly. When I looked down the hall, I saw Monroe down on his hands and knees, choking. I got him on his feet and tried to apply the Heimlich Maneuver, but he was too wide at the waist and I couldn't reach around him! I ran down the hall to get Annabelle. She calmly sat him down at a lunch table and talked with him.

"How can I help, Monroe?" she asked.

He could only point frantically to his throat.

She glanced at the kitchen counter and looked at the opened box of Dunkin Donuts. "Looks like you swallowed your donut too fast. What's the hurry? Try to spit it out. Can you talk?"

Monroe tried to cough. "A little," he managed to say.

"Good. If you can talk, your windpipe is open and you can breathe. Just take small breaths, Monroe. You'll be fine." And he was. Grace under pressure. That was one of Annabelle's good qualities.

My last day on the job was short and sweet. Annabelle threw a small farewell lunch for me which I appreciated. I walked out of the place for the last time and caught the bus. At my apartment I got into my comfy clothes and got ready to head out to a coffeehouse when I felt a powerful pain in the center of my heart. It was like a small horse was standing on my chest. At the emergency room the doctor couldn't find any likely issues. Then I mentioned I had quit my job that day. He said the pain was very likely the result of job stress. That I should take it easy for the next few days.

I remembered reading that in Japan they coined a name for death by overwork -- *karoshi*. Such worker fatalities often manifested as heart failure, suicide or stroke. In fact, in Japan there was a whole forest where businessmen regularly went to die, where they hung themselves from trees.

Aokigahara forest, the suicide forest. It's not hard to imagine a menagerie of monsters that dwell in workplaces.

ADVENTURES IN CAREGIVING

I had been researching caregiving, learning as much as I could. I'd posted my caregiver profile on Care.com and been applying for positions. Granted I had zero professional caregiving experience on paper, but I had decent transferrable life skills.

When the new business prospect Malcolm and I talked, it was always by email. He said he received client calls 24/7 and had to remain available to them. He said my first task was to purchase a Mac for this father. He would overnight a check for \$3,000 to me. I was to deposit the check and then make the purchase. I was touched that he would trust me with the money. We hadn't even met. I took this plum job as a sign from the universe that the stars were aligning for me.

Every time I asked if we could chat briefly by phone, he insisted that wasn't an option. That it was important we continued in this fashion.

On a whim, I googled "how to tell if a caregiving job is a scam." What I found took my breath away:

Beware of a potential employer who is not willing to speak to you by phone, can only talk through email. A caregiving job that sounds too good to be true probably is! Beware of a potential employer who wants to overnight you a large check in the mail. They want your account number. The check may initially clear but will likely bounce later.

I was concerned. This sounded exactly like my new gig. I went to my laptop and dashed off an email:

"Hi Malcolm, I know you prefer not to talk by phone but it is essential that I speak to you tonight. It will be less than one minute. If I can't speak to you, I won't be able to work with you." I watched the screen. There was no reply. Usually Malcolm replied instantly. One hour later -- nothing.

Then I wrote: MALCOLM, ARE YOU TRYING TO SCAM ME?"

Radio silence.

The next day came and went. Nothing.

It became painfully clear to me that Malcolm was a scammer. The good news was I dodged a bullet. The bad news was my dream job had evaporated and I didn't have a Plan B. The worse news was I couldn't file for unemployment because I left my previous job willingly. How was I going to pay my rent? I was screwed.

I sat down in front of my altar. I started chanting for a solution for now I faced a problem I had no idea how to solve.

I sat down before my Buddhist altar and began to chant. My eyes were focused on the *Gohonzon* scroll, specifically on the character *Myo* which mean to open or to revive. As I prayed for answers, I thought of other crises I'd faced in my life.

Was this crisis as bad as my bedbugs/GAD crisis? No, those were inner and outer monsters. This one was just external. In this case I'd taken a leap of faith from a job I hated to a job I wanted -- but that job turned out to be a scam and now I was jobless, with rent due, ineligible for unemployment as I'd left my job willingly. I was scared. I had never been in a vulnerable position like this before. I heard my father's voice: "Always have something to fall back on." How long would it take me to find a new job, let alone a job I loved? Would I be forced to take a new job I dreaded even more than the last one?

Was it as bad as the time my mother and brother had strokes one month apart? No, that event was life-changing, family-changing. By comparison, this event was a medium-sized catastrophe.

As I thought about it, chanted about it, I could see I'd overcome larger catastrophes before.

I decided the crisis closest in scope to this one was the time I lived with my crazy roommate Bruno who I later learned had been doing crystal meth. If I could imagine my way out of that monstrous situation -- I had reason to believe I could do it again.

There I was facing the crisis of my own story. Confronted by no less than two monsters -- a scammer who preyed on the good hearts of caregivers and a boss too set in her ways. Or maybe the true villain here was neither of these. Maybe the real monster was the unpredictability of life, the uncontrollability of one's circumstances. That no matter how carefully one planned out their life, no matter how one tried to weigh the risks and benefits of a predicament -- in the end we live in a universe of terrifyingly unknown quantities.

What I feared most was that I'd run out of money and lose my wonderful high-rise apartment.

Now, truth is, if I lost the apartment I could've conceivably moved into my mother's condo. But I currently had tenants living there and that provided a good source of income. After living in a high-rise with many amenities including a swimming pool -- the idea of moving into the garden-floor condo, as nice as it was -- was not my first choice.

I chanted for a breakthrough. I ramped up to become the best caregiver I could be. I begged my friends to vouch for me in testimonials on my caregiver profile. I applied to countless care gigs, even if they were beyond my skills or comfort zone.

Finally, I got my first response to an application.

The daughter of the potential client said her mother had early dementia and lived in assisted living. She had no physical disabilities. Mostly she loved putting together jigsaw puzzles for

hours at a time. Mainly she needed a friend and someone to keep her calm. I could start right away. Would I be interested?

Would I? That sounded perfect for a newbie like me.

"I love jigsaw puzzles!" I said which was a white lie. While I didn't mind doing puzzles, it was hardly a passion. But I was desperate.

Working with the Puzzle Lady would come to be one of my favorite assignments. And as I took on more clients, I got glowing testimonials. Over the course of a year I worked with the Puzzle Lady, I grew to care about her and love putting jigsaw puzzles together. Sadly, I also measured the progress of her dementia by the way her puzzling skills declined over time. Finally, she stopped trying and just sat and watched me.

"Don't you want to do the puzzle?" I asked.

"You got all the easy pieces!" she'd say accusingly. "I could do a lot better if I had easy pieces like you, that's for darned sure." I offered to switch but she no longer felt like puzzling. Besides, soon it would be time for her to watch her favorite show, "Law & Order: Special Victim's Unit." One day her daughter called to tell me that in the middle of the night her mother walked out of the assisted living center and no one could find her. Turns out was was asleep on a bench behind the center. Because she was at risk for wandering, the staff said she'd have to move to a memory care center. And that was the end of that caregiving assignment.³⁵ Her daughter gave me a great testimonial for my profile. And I already had a few steady clients.

The reviews on Care.com led to people reaching out directly to me. My hourly rate was twice what I earned at Renovation and it allowed me to work half the hours. Best of all, I got to be my own boss! I was appreciated by client families. Being a caregiver, I got to use more of my life

³⁵ A year later I called The Puzzle Lady's daughter just to see how she was doing. I learned she had passed away that summer.

skills than I'd ever used in a job before. As conversationalist. Personal assistant. Armchair therapist. Tech support geek. Art project coordinator.

My friend Charles called. He wanted to celebrate my leaving the old job and finding a new one. Charles had helped me launch a Meetup group called Men Cuddling Men. He was Black, gay, a healer, and former roller derby player.

"I have to hand it to you," Charles said. "You had the rug pulled out from under you by that scammer -- but you didn't crumble. You totally reinvented yourself as a caregiver and never looked back. I find that... inspiring."

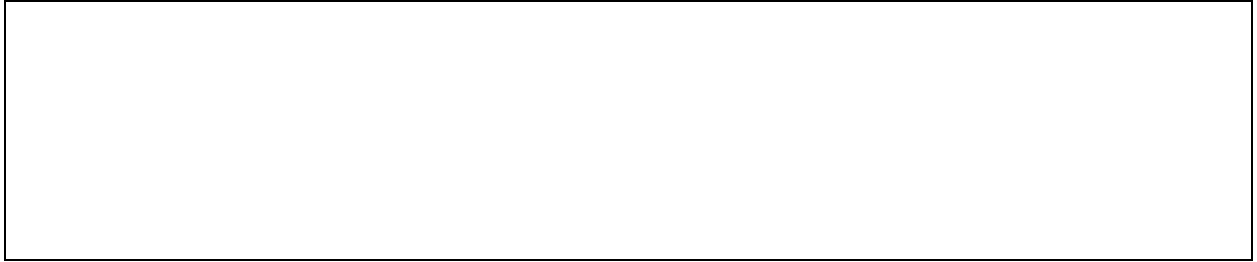
"Damn, Charles, that is the nicest thing you've ever said to me," I replied.

I learned that dangerous leaps of faith are not only necessary and but often survivable. As a wise person once said: *Feel the fear and do it anyway*. You might not always land on your feet, but real life begins outside of one's comfort zone. I was just at the beginning of a new phase in life. Caregiving was a surprisingly good fit. At this time I'd also started attending cuddle parties. To me cuddling was better than sex. I was toying with becoming a certified cuddler myself. There were some creative writing projects on the back burner. Semi-retirement was just two years away. If these were my sunset years, I was digging the view muchly. Bring on the sunset!

I knew that some people stayed at jobs they hated out of fear of not finding something better, terrified to change their status quo. They retired as shadows of their former selves with gold pocket watches to show for it. Such workers were controlled by a monster that climbed into their heads and forced them to do only what was comfortable for them. The creature killed the part of them that was brave.

Meanwhile some other luckier workers found it within themselves to take leaps of faith into the great unknown. Some of these workers landed happily on their feet in a world where they were

loved and valued and their skills were fully used. I was one of these lucky ones. Or should I say, I had enough good fortune stored up for just such a rainy day when I would need it most.





15. Caregivers & Cuddlers (2019)

There are those who will be caregivers, and those who will *need* caregivers.
-- Rosalyn Carter, former First Lady of the United States

Cuddling is so important, it may be worth paying for.
-- Psychology Today, December 2012, an article on cuddle cafes in Japan

WHEN I WAS 61, I FOUND MYSELF MOVING IN NEW DIRECTIONS. I felt more carefree than in my youth. As a boy, I was an old soul in a young body. Now I felt like a young child in a mature man's body. It is 2019 when the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution calling the NRA a "domestic terrorist organization." Walmart announced they would stop selling handgun ammunition and certain types of ammo for **short-barreled rifles**.

For my part, I continued to work as a caregiver for seniors, but I had been exploring the world of therapeutic cuddling too for a while. Both callings involved nurturing people. Both services put me in touch with of clients with a fascinating and enlightening array of needs. The year was 2019 and Donald Trump was deep into his term as the first person without government or military experience ever to be elected president of the United States. What could go wrong? His time in office exposed how enormously divided our country had become, or perhaps had always been. For my part, I was headed in another direction...trying to bring diverse people together though physical touch and mindful care.

When I did caregiving, I learned that different clients needed different levels of care -- companionship, dementia care, or body care. Sometimes a client needed all three. When I professionally cuddled, I aimed to create a safe space to allow my clients to get their touch needs met, needs that they could not satisfy on their own. I set boundaries, being clear what kinds of touch we would and would not explore.³⁶

CALLED TO BE A CAREGIVER

After the Puzzle Lady, other caregiving clients followed. One client that stood out was a middle-aged woman stricken with a rare kind of dementia that hit people in their fifties and left her with the mind of a five-year-old. Though she was once a gifted scientist, she now was left to play with test tubes filled with colored water, a shadow of her former self. My task was to come up with science experiments we could do together. The first time we played at science in the living room, I noticed artfully framed documents on the walls. On closer examination I saw her science degrees, various accolades, glossy magazine articles about her work. She would point to them one at a time and say in a childlike voice, "I did that and I did that and I did that also. That's me too!" It was hard for me to reconcile the woman she had been and the woman who stood before me.

One day as we worked on a science project she surprised me. Out of the blue she said, "Are you gay?"

³⁶ In addition to private cuddling, I would also go on to launch a Meetup group called *Men Cuddling Men*. That's where I first met a member named Charles who would become my friend. We shared a very similar vision of cuddling so I asked him to help me lead the group. He did so in the early years. At MCM's first event, we called it a hugging group because the room was too small, and we hadn't figured out the logistics of cuddling lying down yet. *Men Cuddling Men* has grown to have over 500 members, many who cuddle regularly. <https://www.meetup.com/men-cuddling-men/>

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"Because you're gay. My husband told me. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Oh, no one steady. Maybe I'm too picky."

She was silent. Then she said, "It isn't normal to be alone." I actually liked that she asked me that question. It seemed to come from the long-lost voice of her inner adult. And it was a moment of her trying to take care of me.

Probably my most rewarding care client was Lou. He was one of those clients who, over time, required all three levels of care. I visited him at his deluxe senior center on Chicago's northside. His large Italian family instantly adopted me at a time when my own immediate family was vanishing.

Lou was lucky enough to still be surrounded by his family. His wife Kay lived on another floor above him and she often brought him the New York Times. His daughters and their families visited when they could. Lou had been an engineer for a big computer company in Italy. At eight-six, however, he now dealt with dementia, severe mobility issues, and hallucinations. With time we became comfortable with each other. I'd be his TV companion, assist with transfers from recliner to wheelchair, assist with showering and dressing.

Over the two years I worked with him, I helped Lou as he moved from Assisted Living to Skilled Nursing, as he transitioned from using a walker to using a wheelchair to being recliner-ridden to being bed-ridden. I was there when Covid hit. I was there when his hallucinations started.

At one point the senior center and family decided it was time for Lou to move to hospice care.

This was usually done when it was estimated the client had six months to live. One day he turned to me and said, "I have a project for you. I need you to build me a portal through my apartment

wall to give me access to Italy. You'll need to hire an architect." It wasn't the first time he made an impossible request.

"Hmm," I said. "A portal to Italy? We might need to hire a scientist for a job like that."

"No," he said. "Just a good architect." He smiled though I knew he was dead serious. It wasn't a totally illogical request. He had after all lived and worked in Italy for half his life. I told him I would do some research and get back to him. Lou's dementia could make him forgetful, but it didn't prevent him from asking me repeatedly how the portal project was going. I stalled, said I was talking to a few architects. Eventually he stopped inquiring.

As I envisioned the portal that my client yearned for, that led from his senior apartment to a country half a world away, that belonged as much to his present as to his past -- it wasn't hard for me to see it as something both real and unreal. Something you conjure out of thin air and then, just as simply, walk through it as you'd walk through any other door. Maybe this was his way of coming to terms with things, his way of managing his own death.

As my client's dementia advanced, our conversations became more loopy, more touching. Some of his utterances were total non sequiturs. Lou's voice was dwindling to a rasp. I had to lean close to hear him.

"Could you make... the lake... a little smaller?" he asked.

I loved his poetic requests. "I don't know. The lake seems about the right size to me."

On another evening shift, I was helping feed Lou dinner. Lately he ate less and less which I knew was a sign he was coming to an end. At one point, he put up his hand to indicate he didn't want more food. He paused.

"I'm crying," he said. He sounded surprised.

I looked at him as some tears rolled down his face.

"How come?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Are you sad, Lou? It's okay if you're sad," I said.

"I don't know," he said.

That was the only time I ever saw Lou cry. I'd like to think it was part of his grieving process, though I couldn't say for sure.

Later as he found himself spending more of his day sleeping than awake, as his once-booming voice faded to a death rattle he said, "Thank you... for taking care of me." I told him it was my pleasure because it was. "I don't mean just today. I mean always. Thank you for all the things... you've done for me." I noticed he was starting to talk of life in the past tense.

I stopped by Lou's room one day. I knew he was getting close to passing. "Good luck on your journey, Lou. Wherever that takes you," I said.

I got a text that night that he had passed.

So it goes.

IN MEMORIAM

After Lou died, one of his daughters asked if I would come to his memorial service and read an email I had sent them. I told her it would be my pleasure. This is it.

Dear Family of Lou,

Tonight as I was getting ready to leave the senior center for the night, for the weekend. I thought you'd be interested in what he said. His first statement took my breath away.

ME: So, Lou, it's Friday. What would you like to dream about tonight?

LOU: I'd like to dream...I returned to my Normal Life.

ME: Oh. Well. That's pretty cool. What would a return to your normal life look like? Would you be in Chicago or Italy?

LOU: I'd be here. If I could. I'd be in Chicago.

ME: Nice. Would you like to live with Kay again?

LOU: Yes.

ME: Do you miss her?

LOU: Yes.

ME: She's probably a good companion. You can always talk to her on the phone.

LOU: Sure.

ME: And in this dream, what would you and Kay do?

LOU: We go out to eat at a restaurant.

ME: Ah. Which one would you like to go to?

LOU: The one we ate at for Christmas...with the lobster.

ME: Oh, that's a pretty clear dream. I'm glad I asked because now you have something wonderful and specific to dream about. And on Monday, let's work on that letter to send to Kay.

LOU: Yes, that would be very good. To send a letter to Kay.

ME: Well. Have a great dream. See you Monday.

CALLED TO BE A CUDDLER

As a male cuddler, I probably only got 10% as many clients as my female counterparts. That's due to the fact that the vast majority of cuddle clients were straight, upper-middle-class, white men over fifty. Coincidentally that was a similar demographic to my care clients. One of the most important things I've learned is this. How long do you have to hug someone before the therapeutic effects of touch kick in (the oxytocin is released making you feel cared for, pain and

stress and blood pressure can be reduced)? The answer is twenty seconds. So next time you hug someone, time it to make sure you do it for at least one minute or more. Cuddle sessions can go one to two hours! And if you've gone a while without a hug/cuddle/caress, your skin (which is the largest organ of your body) will start to crave touch. We call that *skin hunger*. Babies that are not touched can die of it. Adults can become depressed and anxious. One therapist, Virginia Satir, has said that "We need four hugs a day for survival. We need eight hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth".

On the popular site Cuddlist.com, there were about six pro cuddlers in Chicago. We male cuddlers were usually in the minority and had fewer clients. I liked that I attracted folks were diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, occupation, gender, orientation. There was the young Indian man who identified as straight who wanted to experience touch with a man because in his country homosexuality was forbidden. There was a young woman in college who felt she had totally neglected her touch needs as she pursued her academic ones said to me during our session, "Hug me like you mean it." Her moaning made me wonder if I was up to the task. There was an older gay man who'd lost his life partner of many years who said he simply missed being held.

An important skill in therapeutic cuddling is knowing how to screen potential clients. Was a prospective client really looking for sex? Were the person's emotional challenges beyond my capacity? I usually asked what kind of work they did. Or asked them about their circle of friends. I encountered some problematic potential clients.

There was the guy who called in the wee hours while on duty as a private investigator. He'd be in his car doing surveillance of an individual. He said he felt disconnected from people in two ways. One was because of the strange hours he worked. The other was because he had intimacy

issues and something was amiss with his penis. The man contacted me often but never booked, and I wondered if he was just wanted someone to talk with. A cuddle session might have been good for him, but he never booked with me, and I didn't want to provide free counseling. There was the guy who asked if he could come to the cuddle session wearing diapers under his clothes.. It was an unusual request and I said I'd have to think about it. Before I could respond, he asked if I could wear diapers too. It sounded like a sexual fetish. I told him that his needs and my services were not a good match. I didn't want to shame him.

Every once in a while, I had a bad feeling about a potential client -- something in their voice, their breathing, their urgency. Maybe they sounded nervous on the phone, combative, or controlling. If so, I'd tell the person I didn't think we were a good fit. Vetting is an inexact science. In the back of my mind, I worried about a gay basher trying to book with me, to harm me. After all, once a bad man knocked on the door of student nurses and killed them for no reason. I've always tried to keep my eyes peeled for red flags. And I know there is some risk involved.

On the upside there were two kinds of awesome clients -- those that felt restored to normalcy by cuddling, and those that felt transformed. The first group were people who felt cuddling returned them to the sense of connection that they used to feel. Maybe they wanted to increase their oxytocin levels. The second group were people who not only felt restored to normalcy by cuddling, but who felt greatly improved. These clients verged on the magical to me.

Roman stands out in my mind as a transformational client. But I'll let him speak for himself. This was a testimonial he posted for my cuddle services:

"Being in my early twenties and dealing with a mental health challenge, I was a bit nervous about interacting other gay men. But after cuddling with Dwight, I realized how much physical touch and intimacy were missing from my life. My first session with him was transformative and empowering. Because of this experience, I finally gained the

confidence to put myself out there and start dating. I'm grateful for the comforting and calming atmosphere that Dwight provides and just booked my next session!"

-- Roman, Graduate Student & Cuddle Client / Testimonial on Cuddlist.com

When I've told people I was a therapeutic cuddler, some would be intrigued and curious, some would look at me sideways as if I'd told them I was a male escort. However when I told people I was a caregiver for seniors, there was no ambiguity. Many people would say that professional caregiving was a noble profession. It surely was something. It required a lot of patience and a sense of humor. I did what I could to care for my clients but not to the point where I'd be devastated when they passed away. I knew how much of myself I could give away and how much I needed to keep for myself. Having empathy was a big plus for both types of clients, as well as a natural curiosity about people.

I sometimes thought of an episode of "Star Trek" I saw as a child.³⁷ In the show there was an alien woman who had empathic powers. She could place her hands on a person in physical or emotional pain and heal them. She absorbed the person's pain, their wounds, till they manifested in her own body. Then like magic, she healed herself. Such is the superpower of an empath.

At one point Capt. Kirk was severely wounded in battle. The alien empath woman was called upon to help. She placed her hands over his bleeding chest wounds. Slowly the the captain's wounds healed up good as new. They manifested on her own body. But the wound was too deep, even for her. I think she died at the end of the show.

And that's the lesson of The Empath. Do what you can to help people in need. But don't kill yourself in the process.

³⁷ Star Trek: Season 3: Episode 12 -- "The Empath."

Caregiving and cuddling have often been linked in my mind. I started exploring both fields about the same time. They both involve nurturing clients with a dizzying array of needs and predicaments. They are both magical superpowers. But there are differences too. With caregiving, I know that my clients' bodies and minds are in transition. It is more likely they will get worse than they will get better. They are headed toward an end-of-life scenario and I hope to be there with them. It's made me think of my own End of Life wishes. In the course of caregiving, one encounters the monsters of sickness, dementia, death. With cuddling, I know that my clients are touch-starved for a variety of reasons. The extent of their skin hunger can run the gamut. But there is hope that with time they will learn to get their touch needs met -- either through me or through their inner circle.

One of my most memorable sessions involved a man who was a psychotherapist who was dealing with a breakup. Unlike other cuddle clients, he knew exactly how he wanted to be touched. "I'd like you to place the palm of your hand in the center of my back and hold it there till I ask you to take it away," he said.

I was intrigued as that was not a cuddle position I'd ever heard of before. I placed one hand in the center of his back. I was surprised how much warmth my hand generated there. The heat radiated from me to the client. And then I heard my client gasp, or maybe he was coughing? His body convulsed. That's when I realized he was weeping. I felt privileged to be part of that moment. It was a moment we collaborated on. And it was a moment he could not create by himself. That was when I understood that while cuddling could be fun and nurturing, it could be transforming. In a word: magical.

WHERE IS B/W PIC OF THREEWAY CUDDLE????
REDO?



16. A House I Can Point To (2021)

One day you will tell the story of how you overcame what you went through and it will be someone else's survival guide.

-- Brene Brown

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to.

-- Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*³⁸

I AM 63 AND THIS AFTERNOON I'M THROWING A HOUSEWARMING PARTY to celebrate the purchase of my first home. If ever there was a sign that I'm not a kid anymore, that I have truly grown up, it's this. I have morphed into a homeowner. I'm also celebrating my early retirement from the world of day jobs. Oh yeah, and it's my birthday too. It's a multi-prong affair. It is 2021 and Covid is a concern. Scientists look forward to a time when we can co-exist with the virus. A heavily armed, Trump-incited mob attacks the U.S. Capitol building, but worse they attack democracy itself. It has been over one year since my big brother's passing, since I

³⁸ It's fitting that I quote from Sandra Cisneros. She and I knew each other from the Chicago poetry circuit back in the day when we were baby poets. I have memories of dance parties at her brother Quique's loft. And a few times our poems have been printed side by side for discussion in textbooks. I was always a fan of her book *The House on Mango Street*. Though it's considered a Young Adult Novel, it always felt to me like a poetical memoir.

scattered his ashes in Clarendon Park. I am finally able to sell the family rental property in hopes of buying a place of my own. I take out a bridge loan to purchase the new condo, crossing my fingers that I will be able to sell the family condo before that loan comes due. My worst fear is that the family condo won't sell, and I'll wind up paying two mortgages at once and this possibility weighs heavily on me. It is a race against the clock; some days the clock is winning. Thankfully the condo does sell.

I had not planned on buying a unit on the penthouse floor, but once I see the view -- I am in love. The building has eight hundred residents and boasts an entrance with a large circular driveway lined with trees. During the winter the trees are bedazzled with white holiday lights. I can be forgiven if I say it resembles a wonderland lit up by fireflies.

WHY MAGIC IS NECESSARY

Gabriel Garcia Marquez who wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* inspired many with his vision of magic realism, a worldview in which the ordinary and the miraculous live side-by-side. "What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it," he once said. One could not find more fitting advice for memoirists, especially those that believe in magic.

I won't try to convince anyone to believe in magic. I only want to share with you why magic is necessary to me. It gives me permission to imagine and attract the impossible. The opposite of living in a magical world is living in a world limited to what you can see and touch and prove: also known as the literal, mundane world. I have chosen to live a magical life because that is what I've learned is most fun and most powerful.

The first time a realtor showed me the condo building I would wind up living in -- I was in awe. I thought surely only the very rich lived there and I'd be out of my element. But I soon learned that the building's residents are more diverse than I give them credit -- people of various incomes and passions, people with stories and wishes. I fit right in. Living in my forever home now makes me wish my mother, father and brother were alive to see the place. It suddenly makes me think of all the homes I grew up in.

At some point I become unstuck in time, like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*. My life unspools. I am a time traveler, *hopscotching* through the decades.

I'm a senior in high school when I come out as a gay man to my father and ask him how he feels about that. "You're my son," he says and that is all he needs to say.

It is one month before my mother's stroke. We are dining at Renaldi's when she looks at me over our meal of calzones and red creme soda and says: "You really know how to live."

I am in kindergarten napping on blankets spread on the floor when saucer-eyed Donna looks at me and asks, "Aren't you going to talk? You got to talk sometime."

But this time I answer Donna. I look her in the eye and say: *I'm talking now Donna, can't you hear me? So many words pouring out of me you could almost drown in them. That's how much I have to say these days.*

Her eyes widen in the half dark. Her smile is so big! I've never seen a smile like that on her before.

And here's the kicker, Donna. I became a writer. How about that for a man of few words? A goddam writer. Isn't life funny sometimes? Those words you said to me so many years ago haunted me, Donna. "Aren't you gonna talk"... like there was something broken inside me. But

maybe you meant it like, "Aren't you gonna talk... because I bet you'd have something really interesting to say. And if you said it out loud maybe I wouldn't feel so lonely."

Maybe I read you wrong. Maybe you just wanted to be friends.

I'm sorry I didn't answer you. I'm sorry it wasn't the start of a beautiful relationship as it should have been. I hope you found the antidote for loneliness and won the Nobel Prize. I hope you grew up and had a magical life like I did. Like I do.

I think of the magic I have encountered in my life -- more than any one person deserves. I summon all my monsters and lure them in a bestiary from which they cannot escape...where I will drink coffee with them, tame them.

DREAM HOUSE

For my housewarming party today, I've invited fifteen special guests to celebrate with me. Some I've known more than half my life, some I just met this week. One friend, my magical friend Nancy, is flying in from Virginia and will be my first overnight guest. We will have a slumber party for two. Ravi, my old friend from high school cannot attend as he is dealing with health issues and still lives in California. Juanita is bringing her actress friend and is looking forward to meeting the others. Francesca won't attend as she has been laying low during Covid. Matteo would have loved to attend but as an engaged, successful businessman, he is in transit. Michael and Charles, ever-dependable, are arriving early to help with some party set-up. Thanks to Facebook I have reconnected with Colleen, another friend from the high school era and she is bringing dessert. She, Ravi and I went to the same high school. James, who I introduced to Buddhist chanting decades ago, is planning to come late after teaching a music lesson. I'm thrilled he's still practicing after all this time. Even my new next-door neighbor, who I met just

this week, will join us. And my realtor buddy, the ever-handsome Kyle, who helped both sell my family condo and purchase the new condo, is due to make an appearance. Others are slated to drop by. Sadly, my friend Susan T. will attend but will pass away unexpectedly a few months later. So it goes.

I remember once the Field Museum in Chicago had an exhibition of The Maori House from New Zealand. The house was carved of wood from surrounding forests. As you entered, the huge wooden face of an ancestor -- as tall as you -- would greet you. For one night the museum invited the public, including families with children, to bring their sleeping bags and stay overnight in the house to bless the place. It was a unique mingling of modern folks with ancestors from afar.

I didn't go but I wanted to.

Tonight I think of The Maori House as I wait for guests to arrive. A tray of tofu pad thai from Thai Pastry is on its way. I feel a kinship to the Maori with their awareness of the magical and the monstrous. I contemplate my past incarnations. Whenever I've watched these New Zealand men perform the *Haka*, their warrior dance, it's always moved me. The energy strikes me as invigorating and oh so manly. According to scholars, the Maori believe they are surrounded and confronted in life with omens, unlucky actions, signs of import. Thus they keep their eyes open to guard against any evils which might at any moment steal away their life essences.

On a more ordinary, though parallel level, the term "housewarming" is said to have originated from days gone by when people didn't have central heating in their homes and a fire would be lit in the hearth to literally 'warm' the house. The warmth and friendship which is created during a housewarming is also said to remove any evil spirits from the home.

Writing a memoir. There's something liberating about telling the truth instead of inventing it.

That doesn't mean I think that nonfiction is easier to write. Nonfiction involves digging for the

deeper truth behind life events. It's an excavation project not for the faint of heart. As project manager, I alone know where the bodies are buried, but I also know in which cupboards the blessings are kept.

After my housewarming, Nancy and I transition to slumber party mode. We do a quick-change into sleepwear. I ask Alexa to play my chill music. Nancy makes herself cozy on the futon beneath a comforter; I am on the bed spooning my body pillow. We are talking in the dark by the light of stars.

"I still can't believe you flew into Chicago for my housewarming," I say.

"Are you kidding? How could I miss it?" She laughs her gypsy laugh.

"I've never told you this, Nan...but I consider you one of my Magical Friends."

"Aww! Really?"

"You rescued me from the roommate from hell. You helped me serenade Mom when she was in hospice. And you are one of my friends I feel most comfortable with. I call you day or night and I don't have to plan what I'm going to say. I consider you a soulmate."

She laughs. "I think you've made your mom very happy tonight!" I can't see Nancy's face, but I imagine her glancing heavenward at Mom.

"So you know what this means, don't you?" I say.

"What?"

"I'm going to have to finally visit you in Virginia."

"Would you do that?"

"By the laws of Magical Friends, I don't think I have a choice," I say. There is a pause and we seem to be headed to the REM stage until one of us starts talking again about this thing or that. And it goes on like this for the next few hours until we are asleep.

I go to sleep considering that this is the year I wrote my memoir. It's a book that starts in kindergarten and ends with a housewarming. What is a memoir but a story that brings together the person you used to be once upon a time...with the person you have become?

And so I give you this fable, imperfect as it is, of how I flourished some days and how I floundered others, how I invented fireflies even in the absence of fireflies, even in the presence of firefly deniers. May this small book be a blessing. May it go on to be someone else's guide to making magic.

###



*Nancy and I making funny faces
the night after our slumber party.*

LAST IMAGE?????????

MORE gravitas in tone?? But with friends?
Birthday dinner?

Cool pic of me and nan? Face making.

10-20-23