

HE WAS A man shaped by money. He'd made an early reputation by analyzing the profit impact of natural disasters. He liked to talk to me about money. My mother said, What about sex? That's what he needs to know. The language of money was complicated. He defined terms, drew diagrams, seemed to be living in a state of emergency, planted in the office most days for ten to twelve hours, or rushing to airports, or preparing for conferences. At home, he stood before a full-length mirror reciting from memory speeches he was working on about risk appetites and offshore jurisdictions, refining his gestures and facial expressions. He had an affair with an office temp. He ran in the Boston Marathon.

What did I do? I mumbled, I shuffled, I shaved a strip of hair along the middle of my head, front to back—I was his personal Antichrist.

He left when I was thirteen. I was doing my trigonometry homework when he told me. He sat across the small desk, where my ever-sharpened pencils jutted from an old marmalade jar. I kept doing my homework while he spoke. I examined the formulas on the page and wrote in my notebook, over and over, "sine cosine tangent."

Why did my father leave my mother? Neither ever said.

Years later, I lived in a room-and-a-half rental in Upper Manhattan. One evening, there was my father on TV, an obscure channel, poor reception, Ross Lockhart in Geneva, sort of double-imaged, speaking French. Did I know that my father spoke French? Was I sure that this man was my father? There was a reference, in the subtitles, to the ecology of unemployment. I watched standing up.

ASH WEDNESDAY, ONCE, I went to church and stood in line. I looked around at the statues, plaques, and pillars, the stained-glass windows, and then I went to the altar rail and knelt. The priest approached and made his mark, a splotch of holy ash thumb-printed to my forehead. *Dust thou art.* I was not Catholic. My parents were not Catholic. I didn't know what we were. We were Eat and Sleep. We were Take Daddy's Suit to the Dry Cleaner.

When he left, I decided to embrace the idea of being abandoned, or semi-

abandoned. My mother and I understood and trusted each other. We went to live in Queens, in a garden apartment that had no garden. This suited us both. I let the hair grow back on my aboriginal shaved head. We went for walks together. Who does this, mother and teen-age son, in the United States of America? She did not lecture me, or rarely did, on my swerves away from observable normality. We ate bland food and batted a tennis ball back and forth on a public court.

But the robed priest and the small grinding action of his thumb implanting the ash. *And unto dust thou shalt return.* I walked the streets looking for people who might look at me. I stood in front of store windows studying my reflection. I didn't know what this was. Was it some freakified gesture of reverence? Was I playing a trick on Holy Mother Church? Or was I simply attempting to thrust myself into meaningful sight? I wanted the stain to last for days and weeks. When I got home, my mother leaned back away from me as if to gain perspective. It was the briefest of appraisals. I made it a point not to grin—I had a gravedigger's grin. She said something about the boring state of Wednesdays throughout the world. A little ash, at minimum expense, and a Wednesday, here and there, she said, becomes something to remember.

Eventually, my father and I began to jostle our way through some of the tensions that had kept us at a distance, and I accepted certain arrangements he made concerning my education but went nowhere near the businesses he owned.

ONCE, WHEN THEY were still married, my father called my mother a fishwife. This may have been a joke, but it sent me to the dictionary to look up the word. "Coarse woman, a shrew." I had to look up "shrew." "A scold, a nag, from Old English for shrewmouse." I had to look up "shrewmouse." The book sent me back to "shrew, sense 1." A small insectivorous mammal. I had to look up "insectivorous." The book said that it meant feeding on insects, from the Latin *insectum*, for "insect," plus the Latin *vorus*, for "vorous." I had to look up "vorous."

Three or four years later, I was try-

ing to read a lengthy and intense European novel, written in the nineteen-thirties, and translated from the German, and I came across the word "fishwife." It swept me back into the marriage. But when I tried to imagine their life together, mother and father minus me, I came up with nothing. I knew nothing. Ross and Madeline alone, what did they say, what were they like, who were they? All I felt was a shattered space where my father used to be. And here was my mother, sitting across a room, a thin woman in trousers and a gray shirt. When she asked me about the book, I made a gesture of helplessness. The book was a challenge, a secondhand paperback crammed with huge and violent emotions in small, crowded type on waterlogged pages. She told me to put it down and pick it up again in three years. But I wanted to read it now, I needed it now, even if I knew I'd never finish. I liked reading books that nearly killed me, books that helped tell me who I was, the son who spites his father by reading such books. I liked sitting on our tiny concrete balcony, reading, with a fractional view of the ring of glass and steel where my father worked, amid Lower Manhattan's bridges and towers.

I WAS AFRAID OF other people's houses. After school, sometimes a friend might talk me into going to his house or apartment to do our homework together. It was a shock, the way people lived, other people, those who weren't me. I didn't know how to respond to the clinging intimacy of it, kitchen slop, pan handles sticking out of the sink. Did I want to be curious, amused, indifferent, superior? Just walking past a bathroom, a woman's stocking draped over the towel rack, pill bottles on the windowsill, some open, some capsized, a child's slipper in the bathtub—it made me want to run and hide, partly from my own fastidiousness. The bedrooms with unmade beds, somebody's socks on the floor, the old woman in nightclothes, barefoot, an entire life gathered up in a chair by the bed, hunched frame and muttering face. Who were these people, minute to minute and year after year? It made

me want to go home and stay there.

The smell of other people's houses. There was the kid who posed for me in his mother's hat and gloves, although it could have been worse. The kid who said that he and his sister had to take turns swabbing lotion on their father's toenails to control some hideous creeping fungus. He thought this was funny. Why didn't I laugh? He kept repeating the word "fungus" while we sat at the kitchen table to do our homework together. A half slice of withered toast slumped in a saucer still damp with spilled coffee. *Sine cosine tangent. Fungus fungus fungus.*

I THOUGHT THAT I would eventually build a life in opposition to my father's career in global finance. We talked about this, Madeline and I, half seriously. Would I write poetry, live in a basement room, study philosophy, become a professor of transfinite mathematics at an obscure college in west-central somewhere?

Then, there was Ross, buying the work of young artists, encouraging them to use the studio he'd built on his property in Maine. Figurative, abstract, conceptual, post-minimal, these were unheralded men and women needing space, time, and funding. I tried to convince myself that Ross was using them to smother my response to his bloated portfolio. In the end, I followed the course that suited me. Cross-stream pricing consultant. Implementation analyst—clustered and non-clustered environments. These jobs were swallowed up by the words that described them. The job title was the job. The job looked back at me from the monitors on the desk where I absorbed my situation, in full command of the fact that this was where I belonged.

Systems administrator at a networking site. Human-resource planner—global mobility. The drift, job to job, sometimes city to city, was integral to the man I was. I was outside the subject, almost always, whatever the subject was. The idea was to test myself, tentatively. These were mind challenges without a negative subtext. Nothing at stake. Solutions research manager—simulation models.

Madeline, in a rare instance of judgment, leaned across the table in the mu-

seum cafeteria where we'd met for lunch.

The vivid boy, she whispered. The shapeless man.

MY MOTHER HAD a roller that picked up lint. I don't know why this fascinated me. I used to watch her guide the device over the back of her cloth coat. I tried to define the word "roller" without sneaking a look in the dictionary. I sat and thought, forgot to keep thinking, then started over, scribbling words on a pad, feeling dumber, on and off, into the night and the following day.

A rotating cylindrical device that collects bits of fibre sticking to the surface of a garment.

There was something satisfying and hard-won about this, even if I made it a point not to check the dictionary definition. The roller itself seemed like an eighteenth-century tool, something to wash horses with. I'd been doing this for a while, attempting to define a word for an object or even a concept. Define "loyalty," define "truth." I had to stop before it killed me.

The ecology of unemployment, Ross said on TV, in French, with subtitles. I tried to think about this. But I was afraid of the conclusion I might draw, that the expression was not pretentious jargon, that the expression made sense, opening out into a cogent argument concerning important issues.

When I found an apartment in Manhattan, and got a job, and then looked



for another job, I spent whole weekends walking, sometimes with a girlfriend. There was one so tall and thin she was foldable. She lived on First Avenue and First Street, and I didn't know whether her name was spelled Gale or Gail and I decided to wait a while before asking, thinking of her as one spelling one day, the other spelling the next day, and trying to determine whether it made a difference in the way I thought of her, looked at her, talked to her, and touched her.

It was the most interesting idea of my life up to then, Gale or Gail, even if it yielded nothing in the way of insight into the spelling of a woman's name and its effect on the glide of a man's hand over her body.

ROSS DRAGGING ME along to the Morgan Library to read the spines of fifteenth-century books. He stood gazing at the jewelled cover of the Lindau Gospels in a display case. He arranged access to the second and third tiers, the balconies, after hours, up the hidden staircase, the two of us crouching and whispering along the inlaid walnut bookshelves. A Gutenberg Bible, then another, century after century, elegant grillwork crisscrossing the shelves.

That was my father. Who was my mother?

She was Madeline Siebert, originally from a small town in southern Arizona. A cactus on a postage stamp, she called it. She drapes her coat on a hanger whose hooked upper part she twists so that it fits over the top of the open closet door. Then she runs the roller over the back of the coat. It's satisfying for me to watch this, maybe because I can imagine Madeline taking commonplace pleasure in the simple act of draping her coat on a hanger, strategically arranging the coat on a closet door, and then removing the accumulated lint with a roller.

Define "lint," I tell myself. Define "hanger." Then I try to do it. These occasions stick and hold, among other bent relics of adolescence.

I returned to the library a few times, regular hours, main floor, tapestry over the mantelpiece, but did not tell my father.

WHEN I WAS fourteen, I developed a limp. I didn't care if it looked fake. I practiced at home, walking haltingly room to room, tried not to revert to normal stride after I rose from a chair or got out of bed. It was a limp set between quotation marks, and I wasn't sure whether it was intended to make me visible to others or just to myself.

I used to look at an old photograph of my mother, Madeline in a pleated dress, age fifteen, and I'd feel sad. But she wasn't ill, she hadn't died.

When she was at work, I'd take a phone message for her and write down the information, making certain to tell

DIRTY SNOW

Three weeks ago
They plowed it to the curb—
This continental shelf of ice and snow,
Undisturbed

Until a thaw's
Revealed the sparrow corpse,
The butts and coffee lids and bloodied gauze,
How salting warps

The flow of freeze
A confetti of plastic scraps
Is buoyed on, and how the neighbor's Maltese
Has charted maps

Of piss on treads
The garbage trucks had made.
And still atop each drift a pinhead
Serenade—

An oily mange,
Sewage smuts and pocks—
Of notes almost delicately arranged,
A paradox

To which clings,
Read rightly—what? A
Tattered score of Beethoven's melting
"Spring Sonata."

—J. D. McClatchy

her when she came home. Then I waited for her to return the call. Actively watched and waited. I reminded her once and then again that the lady from the dry cleaner had called, and she looked at me with a certain expression, the one that said, I am looking at you this way because there is no point wasting words when you can recognize the look and know that it says what should not need to be said. It made me nervous, not the look but the phone call waiting to be returned. Why isn't she calling back? What is she doing that's so important that she can't call back? Time is passing, the sun is setting, the person is waiting, I am waiting.

I wanted to be bookish and failed. I wanted to steep myself in European literature. There I was, in our modest garden apartment in a nondescript part of Queens, steeping myself in European literature. The word "steep" was the whole

point. Once I had decided to steep myself, there was no need to read the work. I tried at times, made an effort, but failed. I was technically unsteeped but also ever-intentioned, seeing myself in the chair reading a book even as I sat in the chair watching a movie on TV with French or German subtitles. Later, living elsewhere, I visited Madeline fairly often and began to notice that when we ate a meal together she used paper napkins instead of cloth, because, understandably, it was only her, just another solitary meal, or only her and me, which came to the same thing, except that after she set out a plate, a fork, and a knife next to the paper napkin she avoided using the napkin, paper or not, using a facial tissue sticking out of a nearby box, Kleenex Ultra Soft, *ultra doux*, to wipe her mouth or fingers, or walking over to the roll of paper towels in the rack above the kitchen sink and tear-

ing off a segment of a single towel and wiping her mouth on it and then folding the segment over the smudged part and bringing it to the table to use again, leaving the paper napkin untouched.

The limp was my faith, my version of flexing muscles or jumping hurdles. After the early days of its development, the limp began to feel natural. At school, the kids mainly smirked or mimicked. A girl threw a snowball at me, but I interpreted this as a playful gesture and responded accordingly, clutching my groin and wagging my tongue. The limp was something to cling to, a circular way to recognize myself, step by step, as the person who was doing this. Define "person," I told myself. Define "human," define "animal."

Madeline went to the theatre occasionally with a man named Rick Linville, who was short, friendly, and beefy. It was clear to me that there was no romance between them. Aisle seats, that's what there were. My mother did not like to be hemmed in and required a seat on the aisle. She did not dress for the theatre. She stayed plain, always, face, hands, hair, while I tried to find a name for her friend that was suited to his height, weight, and personality. Rick Linville was a skinny name. She listened to my alternatives. First names first. Lester, Chester, Karl-Heinz, Toby, Moby. I was reading from a list I'd made at school. Morton, Norton, Rory, Roland. She looked at me and listened.

I didn't think of the untouched paper napkin as a marginal matter. This was the unseeable texture of a life, except that I was seeing it. This was who she was. And as I came to know who she was, seeing it with each visit, my sense of attentiveness deepened. I tended to over-interpret what I saw, yes, but I saw it often and could not help thinking that these small moments were far more telling than they might appear to be, although I wasn't sure what they told, the paper napkin, the utensils in the cabinet drawer, the way she removed the clean spoon from the drain basket and made a point of placing it in the cabinet drawer not on top of all the other clean spoons of the same size but beneath the others, in order to maintain a chronology, a proper sequence. Most recently used spoons, forks, and knives at the bottom, next to be used at the top. Utensils in the middle would work their way to the top as those

at the top were used and then washed and dried and placed at the bottom.

I wanted to read Gombrowicz in Polish. I didn't know a word of Polish. I knew only the writer's name, and kept repeating it, silently and otherwise. Witold Gombrowicz. I wanted to read him in the original. The phrase appealed to me. Read him "in the original." Madeline and I at dinner, there we are, some kind of muggy stew in cereal bowls. I'm fourteen or fifteen and keep repeating the name softly, Gombrowicz, Witold Gombrowicz, seeing it spelled out in my head and saying it, first name and last—how could you not love it—until my mother elevates her gaze from the bowl and delivers a steely whisper: Enough.

She was adept at knowing what time it was. No wristwatch, no clock in view. I might test her, without warning, when we were taking a walk, she and I, block

by block, and she was always able to report the time within a three- or four-minute margin of error. This was Madeline. She watched the traffic channel with accompanying weather reports. She stared at the newspaper but not necessarily at the news. She watched a bird land on the rail of the small balcony that jutted from the living room and she kept watching, motionless, the bird also watching whatever it was watching, still, sunlit, alert, prepared to flee. She hated the small orange Day-Glo price stickers on grocery cartons, medicine bottles, and tubes of body lotion, a sticker on a peach, unforgivably, and I'd watch her dig her thumbnail under the sticker to remove it, get it out of her sight, but, more than that, to adhere to a principle, and sometimes it took minutes before she was able to pry the thing loose, calmly, in fragments, and then roll it between her

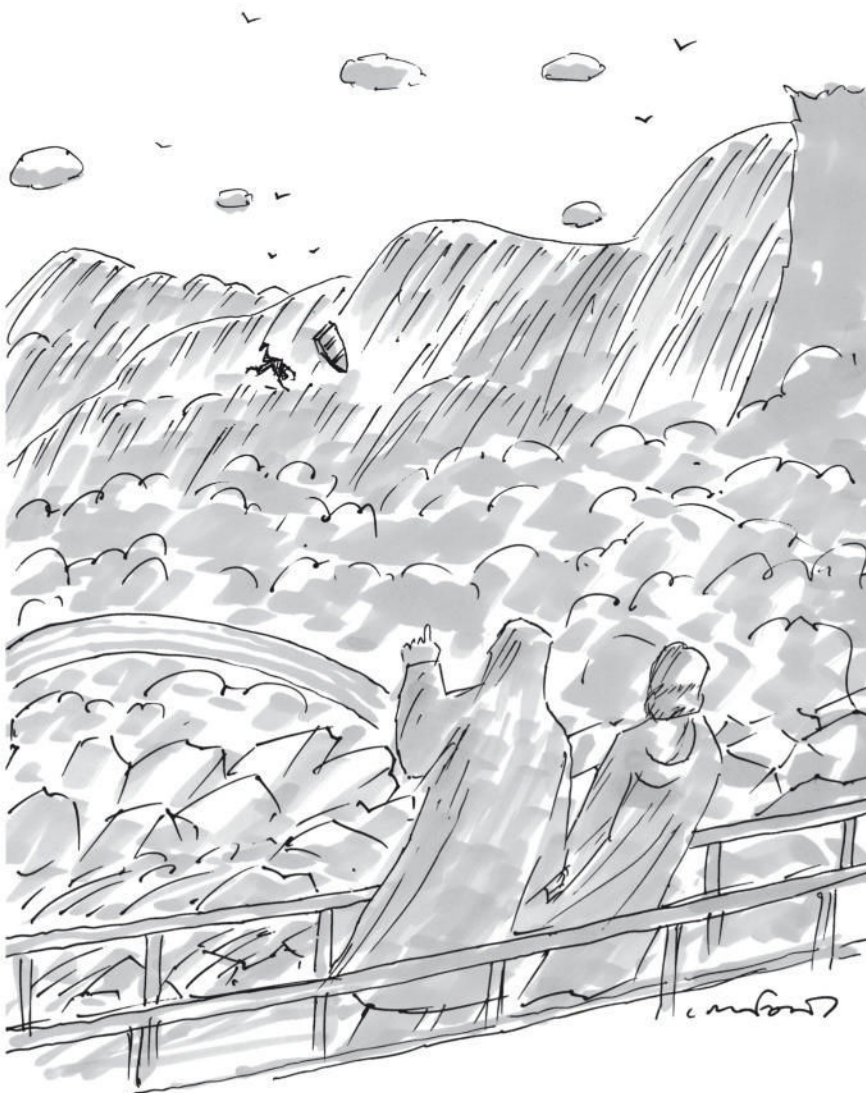
fingers and toss it in the trash can under the kitchen sink. She and the bird and the way I stood and watched, a sparrow, sometimes a goldfinch, knowing that if I moved my hand the bird would fly off the rail and the fact of knowing this, the possibility of my intercession, made me wonder if my mother would even notice that the bird was gone, but all I did was stiffen my posture, invisibly, and wait for something to happen.

I'd take a phone message from her friend Rick Linville and tell her he'd called and then wait for her to call back. Your theatre friend Rick, I'd say, and then recite his phone number, once, twice, three times, out of spite, watching her put the groceries away, methodically, as if forensically preserving someone's war-torn remains.

She cooked sparse meals for us and drank wine rarely—and never, to my knowledge, hard liquor. Sometimes she let me prepare a meal while she issued casual instructions from the kitchen table, where she sat doing work she'd brought home from the office. These were the simple timelines that shaped the day and deepened her presence. I wanted to believe that she was my mother far more compellingly than my father was my father. But he was gone, so there was no point matching them up.

She wanted the paper napkin untouched. She was substituting paper for cloth and then judging the paper to be indistinguishable from the cloth. I told myself that there would eventually be a lineage, a scheme of direct descent—cloth napkins, paper napkins, paper towels, facial tissues, toilet tissues, then down into the garbage for scraps of reusable plastic packaging minus the Day-Glo price stickers, which she'd already removed and crumpled.

There was another man, whose name she would not tell me. She saw him on Fridays only, twice a month maybe, or just once, and never in my presence, and I imagined a married man, a wanted man, a man with a past, a foreigner in a belted raincoat with straps on the shoulders. This was a coverup for the uneasiness I felt. I stopped asking questions about the man and then the Fridays ended and I felt better and started asking questions again. I asked whether he wore a belted raincoat with straps on the shoulders. It's called a trenchcoat, she said, and there



"I can't believe Eric just went and helped himself to our dinghy!"

was something final in her voice, so I decided to terminate the man in the crash of a small plane off the coast of Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, body unrecovered.

Certain words seemed to be situated in the air ahead of me, within arm's reach. *Bessarabian, penetrabilia, pellucid, falafel.* I saw myself in these words. I saw myself in the limp, in the way I refined and nurtured it. But I killed the limp whenever my father showed up to take me to the Museum of Natural History. This was the native terrain of estranged husbands, and there we were, fathers and sons, wandering among the dinosaurs and the bones of human predecessors.

She gave me a wristwatch and on my way home from school I kept checking the minute hand, regarding it as a geographical marker, a sort of circumnavigation device indicating certain places I might be approaching somewhere in the Northern or Southern Hemisphere, depending on where the minute hand was when I started walking, possibly Cape Town to Tierra del Fuego to Easter Island and then maybe to Tonga. I wasn't sure whether Tonga was on the semicircular route, but the name of the place qualified it for inclusion, along with the name Captain Cook, who sighted Tonga or visited Tonga or sailed back to Britain with a Tongan on board.

When the marriage died, my mother began working full-time. Same office, same boss, a lawyer who specialized in real estate. She'd studied Portuguese in her two years of college, and this was useful, because a number of the firm's clients were Brazilians interested in buying apartments in Manhattan, often for investment purposes. Eventually, she began to handle the details of transactions among the seller's attorney, the mortgage firm, and the managing agent. People buying, selling, investing. Father, mother, money.

I understood years later that the strands of attachment could be put into words. My mother was the loving source, the reliable presence, a firm balance between me and my little felonies of self-perception. She did not press me to be more social or to spend more time on homework. She did not forbid me to watch the sex channel. She said that it was time for me to resume a normal stride. She said that the limp was a heartless perversion of true infirmity. She told

me that the pale crescent at the base of the fingernail was called the lunula, the *loom-ya-la*. She told me that the indentation in the skin between the nose and the upper lip was called the philtrum. In the ancient Chinese art of face reading, the philtrum represented such-and-such. She could not remember exactly what.

I decided that the man she saw on Fridays was probably Brazilian. He was more interesting to me than Rick Linville, who had a name and a shape, but there was always the implicit subject of how the Friday evenings ended, what they said and did together, in English and Portuguese, which I needed to keep nameless and shapeless, and then there was her silence concerning the man himself, and maybe it wasn't even a man. That was the other thing I found myself confronting. Maybe it wasn't even a man. Things that come to mind, out of nowhere or everywhere, who knows, who cares, so what. I took a walk around the corner and watched the senior citizens play tennis on the asphalt court.

Then came the day and the year when I glanced at a magazine on a newsstand in an airport somewhere and there was Ross Lockhart on the cover of *Newsweek*, with two other godheads of world finance. He wore a pin-striped suit and restyled hair, and I called Madeline so I could refer to his serial-killer's sideburns. Her neighbor picked up the phone, the woman with the metal cane, the quad cane, and she told me that my mother had suffered a stroke and that I must come home at once.

In memory, the actors are locked in position, unlikable. Me in a chair with a book or a magazine, my mother watching TV without the sound.

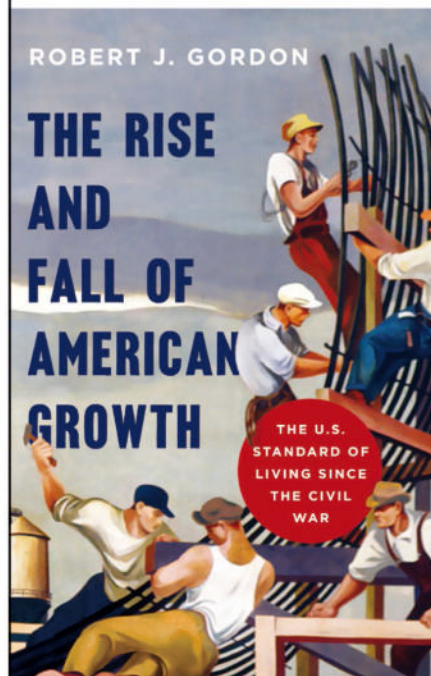
Ordinary moments make the life. This was what she knew to be trustworthy, and this was what I learned, eventually, from those years we spent together. No leaps or falls. I inhale the little drizzly details of the past, and know who I am. What I failed to know before is clearer now, filtered up through time, an experience belonging to no one else, not remotely, no one, anyone, ever. I watch her use the roller to remove lint from her cloth coat. Define "lint," I tell myself. Define "time," define "space." ♦

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