Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 8 | Issue 2 Article 7

January 2009

Cousin

Matthew Goldberg

Cousin

Matthew Goldberg

When I first opened the door to my aunt and uncle's bathroom, I thought it was Bobby there in the tub. I even called his name before I realized it was Anne, her head in a pool of blood. After bandaging her wrists, the paramedics asked me if she was my sister. *No.* Girlfriend? *No.* Then what? I was confused. I felt like a rapist or an abuser, because what I couldn't tell them was that, for a second or two, the sight of her opened veins had thrilled me.

Nine months earlier I had moved to Boston, primarily for the temperature. D.C. had its bitter days, including five or six school closures a year, but Boston suffered seven dark, glorious months from October through April. The early-afternoon sunsets and single-digit wind chills offered strange comfort—the entire city knew depression. Not to mention local sports teams tragic enough to drive a whole city to alcoholism. Huddled in pubs, nursing warm lagers, lonely men watched weather forecasts with raised collars and dull hearts.

At first I crashed on a friend's futon. We had grown up next door to each other in Maryland, and since we'd kept in touch through college, he knew about my breakdown. Some nights, out at local sub shops, he would wipe mustard from his chin, lean in and ask, "Was it like *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Was there a Nurse Ratchet?" No, I told him. "What about," and here he paused to look for electrode marks on my forehead. "You know," he said, miming a small seizure, "bzz, bzz?" I shook my head and pushed a straw through the ice in my drink.

The hospital had not been altogether different than my first year at college. We had workshops where strangers called us by our first names. We bunked in adjoining rooms with long twin beds, ate regular meals in a standard cafeteria, and counted our paces along the manicured grounds. The legs were constantly breaking off the foosball players in the game room, but someone always had a deck of cards. I never felt anxious about being there.

It was hard to feel much of anything; the whitewashed walls and baggy taupe smocks made myself and the other patients indistinguishable. Watching the sun travel across the day room's freshly buffed tile, I enjoyed the solace of anonymity.

The last day of college I had jumped from my dorm's third-story window. I don't know exactly why I did it, maybe because the structure of my engineering coursework had come to an end, maybe because neither graduate school nor programming jobs interested me, or maybe I was just a coward. What I *was* sure about was that I could not feel things deeply and didn't know what to do next. The television broadcasted plane crashes and men with bombs attached to their chests, and I looked on with imperfect grief. I had survived the fall with only a few broken bones, and though everyone said I was lucky, it felt like they were lying to me.

After three months of recuperation and psychological evaluation, I left the hospital and moved to Boston. Not long after my move, my uncle called and insisted I come to their house in Needham for dinner. "I promised your father I'd check in on you," he said. I ended up passing the house twice before recognizing the tree in the front yard. It still clutched Bobby's frisbee in its topmost branches. Instead of yelling at me for tossing it up there, he had patted my shoulder and said, "Death be not proud, kiddo."

Anne answered the door. She looked the same as I remembered: thin, short hair, and sad eyes. Her face was angular, her nose sloped and scalene. I had forgotten how pretty she was.

"You look shorter," I said.

"Because you're taller," she replied.

She led me into the family room where my uncle gave me a bear hug and my aunt imprinted lipstick on both my cheeks.

"So what kind of work are you looking for?" my uncle asked me once we were positioned on the sofa, sipping Italian wine.

I shrugged.

"We could use a paralegal at the practice. Your dad said you might be interested in law."

"I remember you being so good with math," my aunt offered.

"Law is kind of like math," my uncle said.

I downed my wine. Anne sat with her glass in her lap, looking at the family portrait above the fireplace. Bobby had died almost eleven years ago in a car accident. Anne would have been fifteen, me ten. I remembered sleeping in Anne's room after the funeral. A big REM poster stood over her bed promoting one of the band's earlier albums. Michael Stipe had long hair. He leaned down over the headboard as if to say something profound. Anne sat below the poster, listening. She wore a large, navy t-shirt and a pair of men's boxers. Short black hair hung over quiet brown eyes. She didn't cry. Her face soaked up the long bars of moonlight and she looked like a black-eyed angel. I lay at the foot of her bed in my sleeping bag, staring up to the ceiling, holding my breath as if any move could set off an explosion. Then Anne leaned down. The sleeping bag unzipped and I held still, listening as each pair of teeth split apart. Anne eased inside and clung to me, her slight breasts against my back. And she squeezed, hard. At the time, I could not understand that kind of desperation.

Anne helped me discover an attic apartment in Somerville. It was a functional studio with its own bathroom and kitchen. I liked the small, closed-in feel of the place. A circular window allowed in the only light. The rafters hung low in some places; I had to be careful not to bump my head. The owner lived downstairs where the walls were decorated with black-and-white photographs of foreign churches and bridges.

I liked the attic and the sleepy neighborhood. I took walks through the early evening, listening to the *cush* of boots on snow. Soft, promising light seeped out from family room windows

onto the ice-patched streets. The simple act of exhalation was pleasurable. Seeing your breath proved you were still alive.

On one of these walks I found a small Davis Square bookstore that needed someone for bookkeeping. The owner didn't really care if he made money or not. He owned some fancy restaurants downtown and kept the bookstore as a write-off. "I need good records come doomsday," he explained during our first and only meeting. He wore dress shoes with blue jeans. We shook hands on a modest wage, and he handed me a set of keys to the store.

The other employees had pierced eyebrows and chains hanging from their pants. An English student at Tufts liked to stretch out his arms, crack his back and say, "I can't wait 'til Salinger dies."

Anne started coming by after work. She and I stopped at the market, then made dinner in the attic. She didn't get along with her roommate, her roommate's boyfriend, or her roommate's cat. Neither Anne nor I were good cooks, but we tried our best. I brought cookbooks home from work, and we proceeded to fill the attic with the smell of fried vegetables. Most nights we drank cheap red wine and ate on the floor.

"The eggplant is kind of stringy," Anne would say.

"How's the sauce?"

"Kind of bad."

"I'm sure there's some rich lawyer dying to take you out to the North End."

"I don't do dates," she said, stabbing at her plate.

Anne worked as a paralegal at her father's office. She attracted attention in pool halls because she was thin and had her own stick. Men with thick New England accents would compliment her after a shot and maybe place a hand on her shoulder. Anne would cringe and back away. I didn't ask her about this, and she didn't ask me about the hospital. We ate brunch on Sunday mornings and played pool on Wednesday nights. I felt relaxed with her; I didn't have to smile. Anne and I didn't talk about feelings. She communicated with the way she jolted the balls

apart and the tender way she touched them into pockets.

Her friends teased us about spending so much time together. We sat with them at a Chinese restaurant off the Red Line. There were four of us: Anne, me, and a lesbian couple she knew from college.

"Are you two cousins like West Virginia cousins?" The girl with the crew cut joked. Her partner slapped her arm.

"I can see the resemblance," the partner said. "It's around the eyes."

They stared, and I felt like a patient again. "Yes, yes," Crew-Cut agreed. "And a little in the nose."

"You could be brother and sister," the partner offered.

Anne turned her head down to the table. Her hair covered her face so only her nose stuck out. The walls closed in. Outside the restaurant, a black man played "The Halls of Montezuma" on a tuba. No one else thought this was odd. The lesbian couple examined the splotch of soy sauce on Crew-Cut's shirt. I wanted to hoist Anne up by the waist and swing across the room on a chandelier. Instead, I cracked the spine of my fortune cookie, only to find nothing inside.

At 3 a.m. the phone shook me awake on its first ring. "You need to come over," Anne said. "Fast."

I drove the landlord's Volvo. She kept the keys on the table by the door. I unlocked the bar from the steering wheel and set it on my lap. I ground gears. Windshield wipers flailed. Snow tumbled from a dark sky.

With The Club in hand, I banged twice on the door to Anne's apartment. Because I lacked the muscle of a homerun hitter, Bobby had taught me how to choke up on the bat to strike an infield scorcher. I readied my stance, expecting a large man with the shoulders of a rugby player, alcohol blasting from his throat, red marks trailing down his neck.

Instead, a lanky boy not much older than myself opened

the door. "Whoa," he said, seeing the bar in my hand. "Take it easy."

"You better let me in," I said.

"He's killing her!" Anne shouted from her room.

I pushed my way past the boyfriend and found Anne on the floor. Her face was pale, the cat squirming in her arms. She let go of the cat, stood up, and hugged me. "It was horrible," she said.

"Nothing happened," her roommate said. She stood in the doorway, and though her cheeks were red, I saw no signs of injury.

"I heard it," Anne insisted. "It's happened before."

"I don't know what she means," the roommate said. She took her boyfriend's hand. "It's nothing. We're fine."

Anne lifted her head. "You have to believe me," she said.

"I do," I told her. "I do."

Anne was still shaking when I opened the car door. She pressed her forehead against the window, her arms clinging to her stomach as if to hold back her insides. We treaded carefully up the stairs to the attic, not wanting to rouse the landlord. I stripped off my shirt and hung it over the window. Anne slid on a pair of my flannel pajamas. I made the bed for her and then collapsed to the floor. Everything was very still. I must have drifted off, because at some point I felt a touch on my shoulder and found Anne leaning down from the foot of the bed. I could not see her face in the darkness, but I felt the need in her eyes. I climbed into bed with her, our bodies forming a 'V' as we touched cold feet. I wiped the hair from her face and kissed the nape of her neck.

"He was my friend," she said.

"The guy from the apartment?"

"No, one from years ago. In college. At first I thought he was playing."

They were in her freshman dorm drinking vodka and cranberry juice, listening to music. Then he was peeling off her pants. She tried to push him away, but he held her arms

over her head. And then he was inside her. *It's O.K. It's O.K.*, he insisted. *It's me.* When he finished, he zipped up and said, *That was nice.*

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"It's okay," Anne said.

She clung to me, and then we pressed into each other. She was very tight. It hurt both of us. We stared at each other's shoulders and bucked our hips like creaking oars, the two of us urging a weathered boat out to sea.

Her parents had asked her to housesit for the weekend. The REM poster was gone from her wall, leaving a bare white space. A treadmill now occupied much of the room. I wandered into Bobby's old room. Baseball trophies lined the bookshelves and science awards decorated the walls. The bed was dressed in *Star Wars* sheets, old action figures positioned along the desk. On the nightstand lay a glossy picture of Bobby and Anne. They both held wide smiles, like Han Solo and Princess Leia blasting into space.

I never received a description of Bobby's accident. He went off the road for some reason and hit a tree. Maybe he swerved to avoid a deer. Were there tire marks? I'd been too young to ask these questions. Now I wanted to see his body excavated from glass and metal, to see some physical proof of hurt.

When Anne sat down next to me, her hands gathered on my back. "He was better than me," she said. As she untucked my shirt, I looked down to bars of sunlight escaping across the floor.

Afterwards, we drove to the grocery store. Anne supported herself on the shopping cart and squinted against the harsh light. She ran her free hand along the shelves and dropped items into the cart. The width of the aisles and the height of the ceiling made me feel small. I tried to touch Anne, but she shook me off. I looked the other shoppers straight in the eye, trying to gauge

what they saw. They gripped their carts and glared back. In the checkout line, the woman in front of us slapped down a rubber divider. She held her back to us imperiously and punched in the combination for her debit card. I fought the impulse to push her aside and make her look me in the face. Perhaps the day I jumped from my dorm room window I didn't really jump, but stepped forward. I wasn't trying to kill myself, only feel something. There were no reasons. Maybe the lack of reasons was the reason. Anne tossed our groceries onto the conveyor, and I saw her there on the ledge with me, the wind wringing tears from her eyes, and I wanted to fill myself with her grief.

On the drive home we sat at a red light a few blocks from the house, staring out the front windshield of her car. In a flash, the driver in front of us whipped his hand across the passenger seat and struck the woman beside him. Had I imagined it? I blinked very deliberately. "Wow," I said. "Wow." Anne squeezed her eyes shut, her knuckles white against the steering wheel. I was considering what to do when the light changed and the car sped off.

There was nothing left to do but prepare dinner. Anne wanted a bath first. She asked me to take care of things, so I unloaded the groceries and folded the paper bags. After setting some water to boil, I cut apart the chicken breasts, dropping the fatty parts down the disposal, leaving the breasts pink and shiny. I tore the spinach leaves along their veins, and they yielded without protest. As the water boiled over, I broke apart the linguine, ignoring the small pieces that scattered to the floor, and, emptying the sauce into a pot on the other burner, I watched the coils turn red.

&

My aunt and uncle stood with me in the lobby waiting for visitor badges. Anne had needed thirty-eight stitches and a liter of blood. I was afraid to see her again; unlike her parents, I'd never been on this end of things.

"It's my fault," I said, the words echoing off the lobby's high

ceiling.

My aunt and uncle shook their heads.

"She never got over Bobby," my uncle said.

"It's hard letting go," said my aunt.

My uncle planted a strong hand on my shoulder. "Life is attention," he said. "The end of attention is the end of life."

I nodded. For my penance, I had agreed to take over Anne's job at my uncle's practice. I also promised to apply to law school. Three years of structure and attention didn't seem so bad, though I dreaded what came next.

Anne wore a teal smock, unwashed hair hanging over her face. In the day room's lemony light, the four of us played Scrabble. Then her parents excused themselves to the cafeteria, leaving Anne and me alone.

"Did you see it?" she asked. Both forearms were bandaged from wrist to elbow. "Wasn't it something?" She smiled at me, not the pharmaceutical smile I'd seen on the patients in D.C., but a bright, childlike grin.

"It was something," I said. "I saw it. I was there."