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Notes from a Last Man

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IT WAS A BELATED wedding present. Early last January my wife and I were offered the chance to spend three months in Fort Lauderdale, a touristic city on Florida's southeastern edge, one that in the 1950s served as the nativity scene for the American Spring Break. Around that time, her grandfather bought an apartment four blocks from the ocean, and her family has been vacationing there ever since. The building is a squat midcentury complex with a stucco-white exterior, and in the shared courtyard out back there is a kidney-shaped pool cordoned off from onlookers with a hem of clacking palm trees. Most of the amenities inside the apartment haven't been updated since the Kennedy administration. There are turquoise couches and sun-faded curtains, terrazzo floors and senile kitchen appliances.

My wife's grandfather would let us stay there in balmy reprieve from the bleak winter months of Wisconsin, where we'd been living for the past five years. Since both of us were teaching online that semester and thus had no fixed geographical commitments, we decided the trip might have a salutary effect and embarked on the cross-country trek at dawn on New Year's Day. I suppose the date carried some symbolic importance, a version of that old chestnut: *a new year, a new you.* Perhaps the tropical climate would render us porous to sunny influences and slacken our sense of self. Over the next forty-eight hours, we watched the tundra of the Midwest gradually defrost into the profligate greenery of Kentucky, noting the steady accretion of drawl among gas station attendants anytime we stopped to fuel up. Doing our best to scrimp, we spent

our nights in budget motels with glowing marquees that whirred electrically near the roadside, advertising their amenities with an oddly poetic phrase:

KING BEDS OPEN
VACANT HBO

After two days, we finally crossed the Florida state line, entering a corridor of sugarcane and everglades where we were made to endure an endless parade of weather-battered billboards, signs that spoke of surf shops and alligator wrestling, but the promises seemed dubious with their bubbled fluorescent fonts. Somewhere south of Gainesville, we came across a billboard that offered a mortal riddle: TEXTING WHILE DRIVING KILLS. FOR MORE DRIVING TIPS TEXT "SAFETY" TO 79171.

We reached the ocean by nightfall. The sky was rinsed with sherbet colors, the edges of distant clouds rimmed with a vulgar pink. I suppose I thought I'd feel relieved, that confronting the edge of the country might offer a bolt of fresh enlightenment, some timely mitigation of mood. But I was worried because we had just crossed the entire continent and I didn't feel a thing. We parked along the boardwalk and piled out of the car, with chip wrappers and empty soda cans spilling from the open doors, to which we pretended to give chase. The shoreline was dimpled and forlorn, and as we watched the silver mulch of crashing waves, the moment soon acquired the breathy impressionism of a Terrence Malick film. For a few minutes, I gazed contemplatively at the horizon and felt my wife turn to me, her expression bright with anticipation. "How do you feel?" she said. "Good," I said. She raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Really good."

We needed a break from the Midwest. That was our public reason. Whenever friends or family members asked about our abrupt change of plans, we responded with stock answers, a litany of complaints—Wisconsin was too cold; we felt too isolated in our insular college town; plus, we hadn't taken a vacation in years. You have to understand that this kind of preemptive apology is necessary in the Midwest, where the dominant aesthetic is utilitarian, where suffering often takes on a Schopenhauerian inevitability. There, even the slightest indulgence will be interrogated if it's left unexplained.

We were, in fact, due for a holiday. For the last five years I had been teaching English at a small Midwestern college, grading stacks of student papers riddled with bad logic and woeful syntax. On campus, I taught five sections of freshman composition, and while I was only an adjunct instructor, I let my students call me "professor," even though it was precisely this misnomer that obscured the gross pay differentials that existed between my colleagues and me. Still, by dint of coupons and self-restraint, my wife and I managed to evade the coercions of debt collectors, and my measly income made us eligible for food stamps and Medicaid. Our apartment was a thrifty university recommendation, in a complex of brick buildings with a scrubby garden and a windswept piazza, where in late summer grad students would smoke clove cigarettes while frowning at Camus novels. Each year, by October, there was snow on the ground, and the confected hills of our courtyard made the walk to the mailbox seem like a chore of Benny-Hill pratfalls, a lethal prank. But for a few years there, I managed to keep up appearances to the best of my abilities. I woke at dawn to tinker with a novel. I held office hours. I wore tortoiseshell glasses and kept my beard at an urban length. Cigarettes were permitted on special occasions, and I eschewed one classic novel after another, spending my nights, instead, in front of the latest HBO series, which was better at depicting structural injustice anyway. As the months flickered past, I snuggled with my wife on a comfy IKEA couch, in a rent-controlled building, in the middle of the country, in one of the safest cities in the world. And this was enough, if only for a little while, to make me feel as though I had somehow managed to escape that unnamable turbulence of mind that seemed always to be nipping at my heels.

Apart from my online teaching, I was supposed to be finishing a novel, but for various reasons, I no longer had a mind for narrative, neither fictional nor memoiristic, and could not seem to plot the events of my life on some sturdy narrative trajectory. Every Freytag Triangle seemed to swell into a circle where the climax was the beginning and the beginning was the denouement. Perhaps it could be attributed to living in the Midwest, yet through the scrim of our bunkered isolation it was hard not to think that greater forces were at play, that the stitching had unraveled, that what had appeared to be the grand sweep of history was actually a patchwork job in which answers were furnished in loose, ad hoc

fashion. Meaning was historical, I had been told, but we were said to be living at the end of history. A few years earlier, when I'd been in grad school, amid the sweetly fragranced wood of the lecture hall, I could dispassionately accept the way in which the Omega circled back toward the Alpha, which is why those acts of critical deconstruction had felt so rejuvenating and alive, why it was with no small amount of relish that I proceeded to unpack and dismantle every last story I'd ever told myself, armored with the theories of trendy midcentury thinkers, toting dog-eared copies of *Signature Event Context* and the work of Paul de Man. Nothing was sacred. No one was spared. One weekend, my wife and I were invited to a service at a local Unitarian church, which we attended with the heartless curiosity of anthropologists, and on the ride home, we mauled its á la carte theology for sport, lampooning the handholding of the parishioners as they swayed to effulgent major-chord hymns. Within the gates of the university, among like-minded colleagues, this had felt purposeful and important, as if we could peel back the hard rind of the Edenic apple to reveal its hollow core.

I could spout French names at you, could speak knowledgeably about Lyotard, Derrida, or even Gilles Deleuze. But a survey of postmodern thinking wouldn't go very far in expressing the sadness I felt during those years, that eerie twilight hour of history. That I bumbled through each day, attendant to its requirements, ever mindful of its issues, but that I did so passively, without an inkling as to its real meaning, was an agitation from which I could no longer find a viable distraction. To admit these feelings at dinner parties or departmental mixers was to be met with baffled incomprehension. It seemed never to have occurred to my colleagues that the hermeneutics of suspicion which they so reliably brought to bear on literary texts could be just as easily applied to the events of their own lives. Somehow they seemed able to maintain an impervious distance between ideas and affect, between ideology and state of mind. Theirs was a happy nihilism, and whatever spiritual desolation they felt could be readily assuaged with a menu of epicurean comforts. Of course, I too tried to laugh off the world's disappointments. I too devoted myself to "the myriad small needs of the body." I too wrote for the little magazines and invented droll theories about what Trump's ascendancy might mean for America. But such conjectures necessitated a belief in the old stories, a quix-

otic faith in the system itself, and the truth was that I no longer had the heart to keep the game going. When it came to the Mayberry fantasies of the Right or the technocratic utopia of the Left, I could no longer suspend my disbelief.

When you are trained in this manner of thinking, long periods of isolation are to be avoided. And yet the previous fall, as these preoccupations seemed to gain new urgency, I began turning down invitations and failing to return calls. Everything began to seem beside the point, untethered from telos or impact. There were no more faces in the clouds, no more symbols to chart and decode, no more sermons to be found in the debacle, as Joan Didion once put it. Occasionally, my wife and I would take weekends away, and we would traipse along the shoreline of Lake Michigan, watching ducks paddle through kelpy surf, but the water did not promise the absolution of Noah's flood nor evoke Hegel's grand historical flux. Educated to possess a literary worldview, to believe reality was endowed with meaning, I finally reached a point in my life where the skin of allusion had been peeled away from everything, where the world was nothing more than a brittle husk. It was during those long autumnal months that the water was only water and the world was always the case. As the days wore on, I grew quiet and abstracted. I was losing weight. And in the glacial blue twilight of those late November evenings, it became difficult to ignore the concern in my wife's face.

So it was in this spirit of recuperation that we headed south that New Year's Day. Maybe the coastal air would alleviate the lethargies of winter and offer us a galvanic dose of Vitamin D. Perhaps we'd channel our best selves by lying sun-struck on the beach, basking alongside the college students with their beery pledges and the millionaires with their cut-loose, notional workdays. In some sense, we were partaking in that age-old American custom first started by the colonial elite. In the early nineteenth century they would escape the brutal winters of the North and sojourn to mineral springs and watering holes for several months at a time. Of course, these aristocrats were merely imitating the gentry of the Old World, who'd been marinating in spas since the Middle Ages, even sipping from the briny pool in which they soaked as if to confirm their faith in that old Latin maxim, *Sanitas Per Aquam*—or "health through water." Still, it seemed strange

to head to the sea when I was feeling rudderless and unmoored, but we decided that a few months in the tropics might lend us some perspective.

Four blocks from our apartment, along the strip of oceanfront hotels, there is a hollow building stretching twenty-four stories into the sky. The construction signage identifies the development as the Conrad Hotel, but it is more widely known by the unofficial designation the locals have given it: Trump Tower. In a disastrous licensing scheme a few years ago, Trump lent his brand to the venture, which motivated buyers to shell out a half-million dollars per condo. But when wind of bad prospects eventually ruffled the elaborate comb-over of the real estate mogul, he quickly dropped his name from the project, and almost immediately the hotel tanked. Now, the Tower looms on the horizon like a totem, begging to be read as a portent of something, an emblem of the culture itself. Not only is the edifice wholly untenanted, it's also unfinished, its interior carpeted with the sawdust of renovation. We've only been here two days, but already my wife and I have taken turns coming up with inane interpretations.

"It's a symbol of ineffectual patriarchy—empty but erect," I say. "A symbol of the Viagra generation."

"No, no," my wife says. "It's aesthetics over essence. Name recognition trumps—ahem—everything."

As we meander down the boardwalk, we do our best to make each other laugh, but in truth I can't help but feel a needling unease every time we come upon the specter of the empty building. It is a terrain without telos. It could mean anything.

"But you're right," she says, "it really does look like an erection."

My wife has been coming here with her family since she was a girl and reinhabits this space seamlessly. When we return to the apartment, she changes into a flowing daisy-print muumuu and a pair of jelly sandals that are the color of vodka-cream sauce. Fleetwood Mac booms through the stereo, and she twirls around the kitchen, drinking diet root beers and seeming visibly unclenched from the doldrums of regular life. There is a strange House-of-the-Rising-Sun quality to her dancing—languid gestures, lots of swaying.

"Shall I throw a chiffon over the lamp?" I say.

"This is my homage to Stevie Nicks," she says.
She continues to boogie, unfazed.
I myself am having a harder go of it.

Our apartment complex is a corridor of gossip. Voices ricochet up the concrete patio steps, and owing to the tropical climate, the walls of the building are uninsulated, providing a barrier that is merely ornamental. Our neighbors' daily habits resound with alarming clarity, making us inadvertent eavesdroppers of their private dramas. Through the bubble-thin walls we discern belches and bowel movements, tiffs and endearments, confronting, in other words, alternative ways of life.

Next door is an octogenarian married couple from Kentucky, and all morning long we can hear their preferred daytime talk shows blaring in the living room—the pep-squad ebullience of Kathy Lee Gifford, the nasally homiletics of Dr. Phil. Our apartment has a view of the pool in the courtyard, and in the afternoon I sometimes watch the two of them lounging on deck chairs in distressing casket-ready postures. Most of the other residents here are retired senior citizens, affluent snowbirds from New York and southern Québec, many of whom congregate in the open-air atrium around 4:30 p.m. for group trips to Cracker Barrel. My wife and I are in our early thirties, and our relative youth makes us a magnet for their attention. One morning, after returning from a jog, I amble out to the courtyard for a brisk round of pushups, and when I flip over for crunches, bronzed and shellacked in sweat, I notice several gray-haired ladies watching me from their apartment windows, like a panopticon run by AARP. Without quite noticing it, we have gradually become the apartment building's de facto form of tech support. Last week, I created a Facebook account for an unregenerate codger named Harold, whose profile picture I snapped by the swimming pool, for which he posed in a crimson leisure suit whose stench of mothballs was vainly undercut by a cloud of Brut cologne. My wife and I muse about a potential racket, a Geek Squad for geriatrics.

There's one younger permanent resident in the complex, a lanky English guy in his late forties who's rumored to be the scion of a London-based department store. He spends most of his days sunning by the pool and reading dog-eared paperbacks by Alain de Botton. Currently, he's ripping through *Religion for Atheists*.

Though twice I've told him my name, he persists in calling me "chap," which feels somehow both credibly British and deliberately impersonal. Still, his charm seems battery-powered, and because he's the youngest permanent resident in the complex, he is the source of fervent gossip among the old ladies. Apparently, he spends the entire winter down here, summoning a revolving door of women from Canada, Europe, and other parts of the US, some of whom tote children who are, presumably, his. Whenever we hang around the pool, the old biddies report his dalliances in scandalized tones, grasping our forearms and confiding their theories. "My theory is that he's got a whole harem of these broads," one says. "My theory is that he's trying to make it work with the one from Bulgaria." One Sunday evening a few weeks ago, one of the residents found him "porking" a brunette in the laundry hutch, his trousers puddled around his ankles. "They even had the dryer going!" I suspect their intrigue stems from the fact that the man lives in a blatant state of flux, trading old lovers for new ones, eschewing the standard midlife trajectory of settling down.

But sooner or later the ladies chide themselves for talking out of school, for spreading unwholesome impressions. Gossip, they tell us, is not a Christian habit of mind. Almost every week one of them will invite us to their church, and though we smile and make idle promises, my wife and I have no intention of joining them. Wasteful, we think, to have a sermon fall on deaf ears. But sometimes in the morning I watch these women assemble near the pool for prayer and morning devotions, their leather-bound Bibles thrown open to Leviticus or Ephesians or John 3:16, and I'm struck by the rigor they bring to these studies, the neatly inscribed jottings they make in small Mead notebooks. Much has been said about the erosion of literacy in this country, our customs of skim and glance, but one need only look at a Bible study conducted by Midwestern ladies to find a paragon of close-reading. Perhaps I shouldn't be shocked, exactly, especially when this particular act of interpretation can mean the difference between providence and perdition, when the arc of that story imbues every moment of their lives with the glimmer of cosmic meaning. Occasionally, when the wind isn't too rough and stray bits of their conversation float up to our apartment unimpeded, I am struck by the elegance of the scripture they recite, the lilt and rhythm of delivered praise. "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet," they

say, in doddering unison. "For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible." I watch them from the window, a circle of tinsel-haired women sitting at a patio table made of frosted glass, their heads bowed in the auspicious Florida sun, the pool flickering chimerically beside them, a loop of blue and gold. Max Weber once called himself "religiously unmusical," and while I can appreciate the kernel of his sentiment, I fall into a different strain of unbeliever, for I can still hear the melody in the parable, can still feel my neck kindle at the timbre of grace, even though it's a song I cannot bring myself to sing. "In a moment," the ladies say. "In the twinkling of an eye. We shall be changed."

Our rebirth, however, is of a more intemperate sort. We fall prey to other stories, place our faith in different beliefs. During the first couple weeks of our stay, my wife and I eschew work and become dedicated practitioners of sloth, letting emails and texts go unanswered, watching as every day stretches out before us like an open pasture, rambling with possibility. We buy cheap sunglasses with fluorescent rims and stroll aimlessly down the boardwalk, sipping beverages of deliquesced fruit from a calligraphy of neon straws. On mornings like this, with a boulevard of sunlight coruscating on the Atlantic, it's difficult to summon those old political enthusiasms, to pretend that this climate hasn't loosened the stiff joint of our convictions.

Something inside of us is becoming unhinged. Or rather I feel as though the whole notion of selfhood is becoming unhinged. In the words of our Midwestern grandmothers, we start "acting out of character." At night, we skinny-dip in the courtyard pool, our voices echoey and resonant, the underwater halogens turning the water the rinsed blue of Barbicide. And even though we've been vegetarians for years, we soon find ourselves ordering quarter-pounders with cheese, our napkins blotted translucently with the grease of contradiction. Even our professions are open to reform. One night, we watch a documentary about heroin addicts, one of whom admits to her substance-abuse counselor that she's been turning tricks, allegedly earning three hundred dollars per john.

"That's what I should do," my wife says.

My eyebrows shoot up. "Go on dates?" I ask.

"Become an addiction counselor," she says.

One could argue we've been penned in for too long, that we're

simply recuperating from a long cabin fever. But it becomes hard not to sense a certain questing spirit in our activities, as if the happiness we were chasing were an American rite of passage, a national pastime.

There's a television ad here on heavy rotation. Since our arrival, scarcely a day has passed that it hasn't aired at least a dozen times. The commercial opens with a montage of tropical motifs—sweeping aerial shots of wan coastlines and schooners marring cobalt horizons. The screen flashes with a row of deck chairs occupied by comely blondes in bikinis who toast one another with mimosas. The theme music is clubby and has a vaguely sexual backbeat, and after a short instrumental prelude, we are soon addressed by the lecherous voice of Pitbull—patron saint of Miami pop—who admonishes us in a series of gravel-voiced blandishments: "Feel free / to do whatever you want / whenever you want / with whoever you want." As the song rollicks on, the images of lotus eating come to us in torrents. Butter-glazed lobsters on silver trays. Rowdy men playing pickup basketball. A gang of half-nude twenty-somethings jumping exuberantly from a littoral cliff. But halfway through the ad something strange happens: the vocals cut out, and short gnomic messages colonize the screen, which somehow gives the impression that the viewer is supposed to sing along, like a congregant during the praise chorus at church.

Rules are for land.
Out here you're free.
Free to indulge.
Free to explore.
Free to laugh.
Free to love.
Free to feast.
Free to dance.
Free to relax.
Free to enjoy life's best moments.
See a horizon.
Change your view.

The captions here give prestige to an older American ethos, the freedom-lust of the frontier cowboy and the backwoods pioneer, both of whom roamed and rutted as they pleased. Like these national icons, the cruiser—it is an ad for Norwegian Cruise Lines—

should not feel beholden to any ideological commitments. Instead, unfettered from the strictures of the continent, he can change course at the slightest whim and set out for new horizons, all while engaging in a derby of carnal pursuits.

In light of the last couple weeks the commercial serves as a cruel looking glass for our behavior, and I throw a sheepish glance in my wife's direction only to find that she's fallen asleep, head tipped back in a flutey snore, which means I have no one to chide me for this halfhearted anthropology. Instead, I'm left alone to contemplate a Nietzsche reference.

> And this is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself, and at the same time too self-centered to enclose its own view within that of another, it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end.

Nietzsche was responding to a cast of mind that had become prevalent in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War, which suggested that history was nothing more than a welter of pointless battles waged over grim, untenable ideologies. That morality was relative to the tenor of a given historical moment. The result of such a worldview, Nietzsche believed, was that individuals would commit their lives to petty agendas: the crass gratification of bodily urges, the bloodless quest of idle pastimes. There'd be no more grand causes, no more systems of belief. "We [would] desire the happiness of animals," he wrote. "But not on their terms." Instead, we'd float through life with the mutability of grocery bags drifting insouciantly in the wind, seeking only lavish foods, luminous vistas, and titillating incidents. Nietzsche had several terms for these individuals. He called them "men without chests" or "beasts with red cheeks." He called them "last men."

I can't explain it, but the commercial makes me sad. It makes me sad in the way certain dusking hours on a Sunday afternoon often can—a despondency immune to consolation. I suppose you could say that over the past few years I'd been approaching the end of something, that I was running up against the frontier of a certain manner of thinking. For so long, I had fallen under the misapprehension that the point of life was to chase down a succession of exotic experiences, to accumulate anecdotes, to construct a lurid diary, to toggle indiscriminately between the apparel of possible selves. Rather like Nietzsche's gutless milquetoast, my chest had grown hollow, and I had come begrudgingly to believe that no cause was better than any other, that I could place my faith in the indeterminacy of meaning and thus feel free to believe in anything at all. If all ways of living were considered equal and no true consequences stemmed from my ideological decisions, what difference did it make if I became a banker, a lawyer, a ballroom dancer? A Buddhist, an atheist, a Jew?

Of course, we forgot about the children. They start appearing in trickles and drips toward the end of February, but by the first week of March, scads of college students pour into the city, their rusted low-slung cars clogging every inlet and roadway. One morning, I go for a jog along the boardwalk only to discover that they've colonized the beach. Shirtless boys in straight-brimmed ballcaps migrate down the shoreline in groups as large as ten, jostling one another and razzing other beachgoers like some great cloud of hubris. Leggy females in fluorescent bikinis quaff openly from Solo cups, shouting vulgarities that would make their parents blanch.

In the middle of this bedlam, I pull out my phone and text my wife—*Nooooooo,* I type. *They're here*—and after a volley of commiserative messages, we agree to meet near Trump Tower, where she arrives a few minutes later in what has become her standard outfit of muumuu, shades, and sunhat.

I flourish my arms like a game show assistant, as if showcasing the beach.

"Oh, God," she says. "It's an infestation."

Whiffs of coconut sun-oil and Axe body spray, of watery pilsners and dried vomit assault us as we veer toward the encampment. Thousands of collegians are here, loitering under wind-tossed flags that bear their school's name: OHIO STATE, one says. INDIANA UNIVERSITY, says another.

As my wife escapes to a more serene vector of the coastline on the thin premise of getting some midday exercise, I turn around and begin swerving through the mayhem. The beach teems with incident, and the reigning mood is comparable to *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. There are beer bongs and quarters and rounds of beachside shots. Dozens of students are cavorting through the turquoise surf in a way that reminds me of a T-Mobile commercial.

I walk so far. When I finally turn around to measure the distance I've traveled, Trump Tower is merely a smudge on the horizon, and the Boschian chaos of spring break stretches into the distance as far as the eye can see—a blur of flesh and indulgence.

Heading back toward the boardwalk, I somehow find myself dragooned into a conversation with a quartet of bros from Indiana University, all of whom have corn-blond hair, impeccable orthodontia, and apostolic names: Matthew, Paul, Luke, and John. The boys are all wearing FitBits, and when I inquire about their devices, they become ecstatically animated, maundering on and on about their features and apps. To ask about this technology is to send them into reveries of self-improvement. They tell me about optimizing their workouts. They tell me about saving time. They tell me about sleep schedules and REM cycles and the Superman diet. For a minute, I toy with the idea of bringing up the idioms of Zarathustra, of mentioning offhandedly something about the perils of the Übermensch, but the fervor with which they speak about these self-bettering regimes makes it seem like they'd be impregnable to my concerns. They've fallen hard for the gospel of self-determination, of Dataism and enhancement, and I know better than to contend with hardcore zealots and challenge foundational beliefs.

Scarcely are the boys alone in their fervor. It seems to infect every last visitor to this cloudless swath of South Florida. It hovers over the poses of the sunrise yoga club, a group of hotel guests who contort themselves on the beach every morning, and pervades the temple of the South Florida Dharma Punx, a posse of young people with mohawks and narrative tattoos who aim for mindfulness without dulling their countercultural edge. More often than not, these promises depend upon a faith in materialism. Exercise becomes a conduit for self-invention, which suggests that a sculpted torso can be an emblem for a sturdy identity.

In hindsight, the injunction to optimize our selves has been hounding us since we arrived. Earlier this month, while spending a day in Miami, my wife and I came across something called "The Self-Mastery Gym," where a horde of true believers inside a banquet hall clutched flutes of prosecco and watched a bald man in Jeff Goldblum glasses stand behind a lectern and wax capably about Eckhart Tolle. And in the cereal aisle of a Whole Foods last week, a redheaded woman in a leotard and show-horse braids

handed my wife a flyer for something called "The Real You" retreat. The glossy brochure boasted "four days of fun & fitness," including workouts with celebrity instructors, makeovers and fashion shows, and an "All White Beach Party," which sounded like a soiree hosted by the KKK.

My wife responded with a polite half-smile, equal parts derision and amusement. "I'm not sure I'm ready, spiritually, for this kind of commitment."

"I get that," the woman said, "but sometimes we have to go beyond our abilities." Our willowy spirit guide then flashed a runic smile and retreated down the aisle in soundless ballet flats, which were coated in ruby-colored glitter.

Not since the Sophists have there been so many spiritual consultants—chakra experts, biorhythm specialists, and Vision Quest advocates—all of whom are willing to sell you a certain version of your life. We used to have counternarratives to defend against these chimeras, to curb the tendency to see ourselves as omnipotent—as gods. But today, tech prophets in headsets forecast the arrival of our digital bodies, which in due time will no longer suffer from canker and decay. Instead, we will "hack" our lives, programming new efficiencies, our defects coded away. In a moment. In the twinkling of an eye. We shall be changed.

The boys invite me to join them for a "boot-camp workout" on the beach tomorrow morning, and I feign interest and give them my number. "It was a pleasure to meet you," Luke says. "Yeah, drop us a line," says Paul, "and hopefully we'll touch base tomorrow."

Dusk settles over the shoreline, a hallucinogenic wash of infant blue and lewd pink, and the students gyrate to a song that blares from someone's speaker. Darkness is upon them, but the students are a thousand strong. They lift their hands exuberantly, a roil of limbs and exaltation, and they bellow a faithful mimesis of the lyrics, a great communal roar that sounds somehow both jubilant and desperately pained. "And we can't stop," they cry. "And we won't stop."

Of course, there is a point at which self-determination veers unavoidably into self-delusion. In March, the news breaks about an eighteen-year-old boy named Malachi Love-Robinson who apparently has been posing as a doctor at an outpatient clinic in West Palm Beach. For nearly a year now, the boy has been running

something called the "New Birth New Life Medical Center," which offers a gamut of dubious services, including air and water treatments, phototherapy, and many other "natural remedies." On the walls of his New Life office, Dr. Love exhibits a fraudulent diploma from Arizona State, along with a doctorate of theology that is, apparently, authentic. While still in high school, the boy completed a PhD from the Universal Life Church Seminary, an online degree that can be purchased for $29.99.

One evening the pool in the courtyard is humming with gossip. The old ladies play judge and jury while fanning themselves with sunhats, wearing long sheer robes over one-piece swimsuits.

"Did you hear he's a Christian?" one says.

"It says here," says another, her face tented by the *Sun Sentinel*, "that he treated an elderly woman for severe stomach pain and charged nearly $3,500. Imagine if that had been one of us!"

Later that night we gather in a neighbor's apartment to watch an interview with Dr. Love on the nightly news, and I'm struck by the manner in which he conducts himself, a veritable theme park of bluster and prevarication. "The situation I face now is accusations . . . I'm not portraying as an MD. I've never said that I've gone to school to be an MD . . . . Accusations are merely accusations."

"Don't you just think that's awful?" one of the ladies asks. "Him pretending like that?"

Except I don't. The air down here is too polluted with mythologies, too humid with tales about freedom and reinvention.

It is difficult to say precisely when things begin to worsen for me. One morning in the atrium, I run into the debonair Englishman, who proceeds to say one of the most thoroughly British things I've ever heard: "Dreadfully sorry to interrupt you, friend, but I wonder if you're sharing my same trouble this morning. Though I can't say for sure, there appears to be, in my bathtub here, the presence of human waste." Dutifully I follow him into his apartment, where the stench of excrement hangs roguishly in the stagnant air. His bathroom has Kohler fixtures and monogrammed towels, but these luxuries do little to offset the scene of horror inside his bathtub. In it, there is a stew of shit, an ankle-deep gumbo of fecal matter that appears to burble nightmarishly near the drain. A plumber arrives a few hours later and tells us that the septic tank has ruptured beneath the complex. "You overburdened the

system," he says. "So now you've got shit coming up through the pipes." It's difficult not to read his statement as metaphorical, as though the stern expression he gives us were inflected with darker meaning.

Eventually, my anxieties become Victorian—gothic, even. All morning long I sit at the jalousie windows, lost in doleful contemplation, and from this elevated vantage everything takes on a mortal tinge. The octogenarian man who wakes at dawn to sit by himself near the pool, accompanied only by the jargon of morning birds, now possesses a drastic sadness, his torpor bewildering to me. I wonder how he can manage to sit there blinking at the blue nothing, as one hour slips irrevocably into the next. Soon, it occurs to me that our respective postures are shared, that I'm wasting just as much time as he is.

We make a point to get out more. At night, my wife and I walk along the boardwalk in the accretive dark, watching the spangled hulls of cruise ships retreat into the distance—tiered illuminated edifices that, to my wife's estimation, look like wedding cakes. The black water is varnished with the boat's emerald lights, and I think of Gatsby, think of Fitzgerald, think of Zelda going bats. My wife and I sit near the surf, debating the merits of antidepressants and professional therapy. Coins of moonlight flicker on the dark waves, and I tell her that coming down here hasn't helped. She knows, she says, and points out that I've been running twice a day. Reaching over to bracelet the girth of my wrist with her index finger and thumb, she says, you're getting twiggy. Marriage, Samuel Johnson once said, is "a continuity of being," and never before have I felt that sentiment with such ardor as when we sat along the lunar shoreline. It occurs to me that the vows we swapped three years ago in that little church in Michigan functioned as the lone instance in my life when I traded the freedom of choice for the burdens of commitment. So I tell her not to worry, that everything will be okay, but there's something in her expression that makes it easy to see she's not entirely convinced.

Near the beginning of March, my wife's sisters visit us from Michigan. We pick them up at the airport, and they come stumbling out of the terminal doors with an air of pallid exhaustion, a sluggish Midwestern ennui. Pushing flight-addled toddlers in strollers, they tote diaper bags and Samsonite luggage, which I race out of

the car to relieve them of. Our greetings are bright and lilting, everything in falsetto, and on our way to the coast, they bring tidings from back home. They tell us about an acquaintance who has died, a friend who's getting married, and as these facts of life begin to sink in, the illusions of our life here in Florida begin to scatter and dissolve. Such is the way of family. Their mere presence calls into question your entire manner of being and points out the extent to which you'd been living under a mistake. I glance in the rearview mirror, and my sister-in-law puts her arm up to my wife's shoulder, comparing pigments, and the gesture almost seems like an accusation.

My three-year-old niece is strapped into a car seat. Around her mouth is a continent of juice-stain. She keeps saying, "This doesn't feel like Florida, Mom."

They ask us how we've been. My wife mentions nothing of my insomnia or my two-a-day jogs in the deadening heat. We don't tell them that I've stopped writing, that we've paged through the Yellow Pages in search of out-patient clinics, that on certain mornings I lock myself in the bathroom, sequestered with dire urges.

Over the next couple days, my wife's sisters fall under the spell of the tropics. They unwind with pineapple daiquiris and spend whole days beside the pool, abjuring sunscreen because, of course, the scarlet burn will give way to a handsome sienna tan. Absent other guardians, the children fall under our care, and my wife and I ply them with colossal stuffed animals and gadgets that we think are age-inappropriate.

One day, I spend a listless afternoon reading to my nieces by the pool—illustrated books with spare plotlines that are told in faithful terza rima. A young black bear with anthropomorphic eyes hunts for salmon in an overfished river before eventually losing track of his den. It's a smart book, I think, about greed and the perils of a debt economy. We lie on a deck chair, and the girls, who are two and three, have cuddled their heads into my armpits while I hold the book over my chest. It is an old volume, a battered hardcover with a torn dust jacket, its edges curling like birch skin. My wife sits along the lip of the pool with her feet in the deep end, making little dawdles and splashes, the water cerulean and twinkling behind her. Chewing the limb of her sunglasses, she watches me read to the girls with an attitude of evaluation, as if, despite

her aversion to having children, she were measuring my fitness as a father.

Somehow, despite my best efforts, I have returned to the realm of stories, have settled unwittingly into the arcs of conflict, climax, and denouement. As I'm reading about the bear's tribulations, some dormant critical reflex is activated in me, and I'm soon interpreting his adventure not merely as a lesson about the virtues of communal life but also as an Iliad of self-delusion, knowing full well that the beasts who haunt our hero are not real threats but figments of his own making. Tragedy, Adam Phillips writes, doesn't show us "the horror of life" as we know it. Instead, the genre aims to dramatize "the horror of life under the aegis of a certain kind of conscience."

But when I turn the page to bring the story to a close, we find ourselves up against the inside back cover, a hard blank surface—empty, inscrutable, showing nothing—at which point I realize the last couple pages have been torn out—it's an ancient and poorly kept storybook, after all, its original owner probably my wife's grandmother. So the story will end here, cantilevered over empty space, uncertain the outcome awaiting our skittish woodland hero. When I try to explain the missing pages to my nieces, they are not simply flummoxed, they are tearfully indignant. They want to know—what's the story? How does it end? Their expressions are wounded with earnestness, their eyes tear-glinted and full of anticipation. I glance at my wife, who can sense my distress, and who tries to assuage the girls with palliative phrases, with the promise of TV and ice cream, but their unhappiness cannot be contained. I am thirty-one years old, a husband with a lettered disposition, someone who attended grad school to learn the art of telling stories, who knows all about the conventions of storybook endings, a person who can chart character development the way doctors read EKGs. But for some reason, I cannot lend this story an ending, cannot give it some final meaning.

Without explanation, I get up and run. Because I am stuck in this lousy failing body, I run. Much to the confusion of our nieces, I dash up to our apartment, change into my sneakers, and I'm out of the door within minutes, bolting down the side streets, flying past the condos, the resorts, the garish retail developments. The

sky above the shoreline looks hazy and provisional, something that will surely darken before it comes to an end. Pageants of tourists maneuver down the boardwalk, families and couples and loutish spring breakers, everyone fleeing the approaching storm, and I am the lone person running among them, my breath audible and gruff. I've grown so tired of stitching this into some orderly narration, when the truth is that I have no more stories to relate, no more anecdotes to decode. The only thing left is the dumb lurch of my body and the vans of this buffeting wind.

I make it as far as Trump Tower, where I stop, hunched over and gasping for breath. The sky over the ocean is forked with lightning and the sidewalk is pocked with rain, and I veer under the hotel's porte cochère where there are, inexplicably, squadrons of men—workers, presumably—who are barking orders through static-glitzed walkie-talkies, running pallets of boxes into the frenzied atrium. From outside the glass of the doors reflects the drab, rain-muddled street, but when I cup my hands around my eyes, I'm astonished to find the hotel's interior humming with life. Inside there are sweeping marble floors and trios of low-backed chairs, accented with autumn-colored pillows. It looks nearly finished. How long have they been at work, invisibly but diligently, without ever once drawing notice? Months later, in the middle of that fateful November, it would become impossible not to see this moment as a harbinger of how wrong we had been. Down here, in these balmy climates, one can easily come to think that the world boils down to the whims of the body, that ideology is nothing more than a thing of the past. But these men had been summoned to another calling, driven by some unseen master, and together in these months of vague disquiet, they had erected this formidable structure. We had presumed it was empty, but their work was nearly done.

ANYA VON BREMZEN

Counter Revolution

FROM *AFAR*

"STAND STILL. GLASSES OFF!" barks the blonde at passport control in Moscow's Domodedovo Airport. She fingers my visa, peers at my face, then scowls back at my visa for a long, long minute, clearly relishing my mounting anxiety. "Anything wrong?" I squeak in a small voice, fighting a Soviet instinct to address her as "Comrade." "Nah," she finally sneers. "Just wondering why you look even worse in person than you do on your visa."

I snatch my stamped papers and tramp off toward the airport train past gaggles of guys flogging overpriced taxi rides into Moscow. "Come with me," one of them tugs at my sleeve. "Why ruin your not-so-young health, lady, with your not-so-beautiful luggage?"

Home. Or, more grandly, *Rodina,* Russian for homeland. An ideologically loaded and often overbearingly patriotic noun back in the Soviet days. With this Rodina my relationship has been extremely complicated, ever since the rainy day in September of 1974 when my mother and my ten-year-old self stood at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, stateless refugees stripped of our citizenship and the right of return after my mother decided to flee the despotic Soviet regime. We bade our existential farewells to the family we never expected to see again. But in the late '80s, after Gorbachev opened the border, we did return, a miraculous rising from the dead. I remember our relatives' tearful eyes as we reentered the same Sheremetyevo Airport; how they kept touching our American coats to assure themselves we weren't a mirage.

I was in the Soviet Union again on December 26, 1991, when its scarlet empire ceased to exist and the entire nation became ef-