

2,600 Words

The Graduate Diaries (An Excerpt)

Chapter 21

The call came in like a sucker punch.

I never heard such savage sounds before. They were wild, guttural sounds, the howl of a man in the midst of a great fall.

“Aaaooohhhhh! Aaaooohhhhh!”

My brother’s words were breathlessly jammed together. It sounded as though someone had his thumbs in a vice. A hundred miles away from the scene I felt so helpless. All I could do was listen.

“Oh God! I found him! Oh God! I found him on the floor and they took him away! Aaaooohhhhh! Aaaooohhhhh!”

That was the gist of it, at least. I couldn’t make out the rest. Most of what was coming through my end of the receiver was just a jangle of broken sentences punctuated by sharp bleats.

There were a lot of questions I might’ve asked my brother just then, like *when* or *where* or *how*, but I didn’t want to make the call any more painful than it had to be. The only question I did ask was of myself: *why didn’t I answer my phone sooner?*

My brother had been calling every few minutes for the better part of an hour. I saw the calls coming through, my phone vibrating a wandering path across my desk. But I insisted on not picking up. *Never take personal calls on company time.* Looking back on it now, I felt like scum for letting him twist in the wind for so long.

It wasn’t until I punched out for the day that I finally answered. He was crying into the phone before I even said hello. It stopped me dead in my tracks just outside my office building, all around me a rising tide of business suits and power ties.

In just the few short minutes that I stood there frozen in place, the evening swell of pedestrian traffic quickly breached the plaza's intended capacity. The friction of too many human beings grinding against one another prompted the more intemperate types to begin their daily routine of trying to shove their way home, to Brooklyn, or New Jersey, or even all the way to Connecticut.

My immobility made me an easy target for anyone looking to unwind after a hard day of work. Plenty used the opportunity to throw a cathartic elbow into my side or deliver a potshot into one of my kidneys as they scraped on by. In city terms this was known as a Bystander's Tax, and it was the first time I could recall being on the debtor's end of the transaction.

Far away on the other end of the line my brother was still in pieces and I knew the tragic wave that hit him was bearing down on me to do the same. High and fast, about to break, there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I was just waiting for it to hit me.

Finally, after so many distant screams and so many minutes taking a beating in the plaza, my brother managed to string together the two words that made it all official: "*Dad's dead.*"

In any city as large as New York the uglier moments of life often play out in front of a crowd. I've been in that bar when a guy first learns his wife wants a divorce, or on that sidewalk in front of St. Vincent's when a mother is told her only child hadn't survived the hit-and-run. Each time the look on their face is always the same. Their eyes go distant and their lips melt into a kind of frown that never seems to go away. Taken as a whole, the scene feels like a scaled-down version of the Hindenburg disaster, frighteningly close with just as many horrified witnesses. Any time I experience anything like it my stomach turns like sour milk and I spend the rest of the day in a rotten funk.

A vast majority of passers-by who witness such a thing quickly flee the scene out of deference for the poor soul who just got curb-stomped by the happenstance of fate. It's a common fragment of decency to not want to play audience to someone else's tragedy. But not everyone knows the rules. There are always a few gaping fools who have few things to do and even fewer scruples, so they hang around to watch the drama unfold as though it was just another summer production of Shakespeare in the Park.

I never expected to see my own name at the top of that awful call sheet, though I wasn't about to give the rubbernecking lot their show. I didn't want to be anyone's cheap dinnertime conversation and I sure as hell didn't want any of my co-workers to see me dissolve into a puddle right in front of my own office building. Instead, I did my best to strangle any kind of immediate emotional reaction I might've had and dashed across the plaza, quickly disappearing down the yawning entrance of the South Ferry subway station.

Right as I hit the main platform a train came screaming its way around the station's signature horseshoe bend. Its brakes engaged with a sourpuss hiss and the doors of the front five cars opened to the crowd. I was the last one to step aboard the middle carriage. The doors closed tightly behind me and I slumped against them, limp and lifeless like a marionette puppet with idle strings.

Motionless except for my eyes, I scanned the faces around me hoping to latch my attention onto someone else's interaction. I needed a distraction, anything that would help me ignore all the awful thoughts running through my head. Yet there wasn't any interaction of any kind. No couples cuddled, no friends chatted about where they should go for drinks. Nobody bickered over a stolen seat and no one pulled out a bible to evangelize to the canned crowd. There were just a bunch of shell-shocked faces trying their damndest to be strangers amongst a

strange crowd. The only noise to be heard was the sullen whisper of the train conductor robotically announcing our coordinates over the intercom. *This station is South Ferry. This is a Bronx-bound one train. The next stop is denial.*

I turned my head to the left, inspecting the back half of the carriage. Nothing. I craned my head forward and to the right, examining the front half. Still, nothing. The train was filled with lifeless automatons waiting in standby mode, slowly nodding their heads to the silent rhythm of the uneven rails. *This station is Rector Street. This is a Bronx-bound one train. The next stop is anger.*

I wanted to scream. But even if I did nobody would hear me. No one had any reason to listen, much less care. My father just died and the world continued to spin on its axis.

With my father dying so suddenly and at such an unripe age everything I intended to achieve as a son turned to vine, a fibrous entanglement of remorse and regret. My parents divorced when I was in middle school. Awkward years made more awkward. In high school the only homework I ever really applied myself to was the teenage assignment of trying to drive my parents away. Still, my father was always there, at every athletic practice and every game, even on Sundays cooking us kids a proper Sunday meal. Then college came and I went. I went to school, to friends' houses, to bars. I went all over the place to visit everyone I could ... except for my own father, it seems, and he lived right down the street.

Everything changed once I got a job and moved out on my own. All of a sudden I understood a lot about things like dedication, stress, love, family, and success—domesticated notions that were never quite evident to me before. It was as though life waited until I showed all the signs of being an adult before it wrote me the prescription to cure my case of juvenile nearsightedness. I no longer saw my dad as merely a father. He was a son, a scholar, an athlete,

a professional, and a friend. He was many things to many people and just when I started to love him for everything that he was, he was taken away from me.

I suppose that's what really had me slumped against those train doors, blinking away tears and holding back the yips trying to leap out of my throat like hiccups. It was the regret of knowing that for the rest of my days I'd be writing him love letters that would never have any postage. I just wished I had another chance to make things right. I would give a year of my life for just one more day of his, if only to be able to tell him all those little things I should've been telling him all along. *This station is Chambers Street. This is a Bronx-bound one train. The next stop is bargaining.*

Back in the privacy of my apartment the full hideousness of bereavement reverberated through me like rolling thunder. Moments of calm gave way to a low-frequency sobbing. The sobbing rose in pitch and ferocity until it peaked in mezzo-soprano howls and uncontrollable tears. Over time all that raw burning emotion turned inward and suffocated itself like a covered flame, causing the sequence to cycle back down again before settling into a stasis of sadness trapped between violent fronts.

I rode that terrible carousel, rising up, plunging down, circling round and round for many hours until my tear ducts eventually ran dry. I cried myself into sedation and it was within this state of emotional paralysis that I first questioned what color whale I'd been chasing for the past year. Most of what I once wanted had now changed. Most of what I once treasured was now gone.

I sat at my desk in silence for a while. As soon as I regained the strength to speak I made the only call I knew how to make. I called my drug dealer.

“Blake? It's Seth.”

My raw throat had turned my voice into an unrecognizable growl.

“Yeah, it’s me, downtown Seth ... Listen, I need some stuff ... Both, white and green ... Well, how much you got ... Good, have your guy bring it over ... Yeah, all of it.”

I took solace in the routines of my addictions. I disassembled buds of pot into their individual components. I rolled a dozen joints. Some I smoked, others I emptied just for the sake of starting over again.

I drew a razorblade against the cue ball-sized chunk of cocaine to shear off a congregation of flaky white scales. I draped a dollar bill over the shards, dragging my lighter over top of it, back and forth, up and down, until what lay underneath had the consistency of talcum powder. Exchanging the lighter for the razor blade I carved out five evenly stacked lines that resembled an empty musical staff. I traded the razor blade for the dollar bill one last time to imbibe in the noteless measures of my fevered opus. *Cocaine flame in my eyes let’s dream, ‘tween the river and road there’s a path less seen.*

I called the clerk at my local liquor store.

“Murray? It’s Seth.”

In New York City you can get nearly anything you want delivered right to your front door making the slope of addiction just a little bit steeper than in most other places.

“Can you have a liter of Jack sent over straight away ... No, just the whiskey for now ... Oh, a minimum ... Alright then, send three.”

It took me a while to find the perfect set of lowball glasses for my whiskey—not too heavy, not too thin. I had my set laser-etched with my initials. It made everything taste better. When I drink whiskey every glassful must have two ice cubes. No more, no less.

In-between puffs of weed and toots of coke I filled my glass to just above my initials, about three-quarters of the way. The ice cubes sizzled and popped under duress. I gave them a fatal swirl and drank it all down before going about fixing another round. *Blood in my spit with eighty-proofed veins, I'll run through the night and catch the outbound train.*

I called my favorite bodega.

“Ali? It’s Seth.”

I still remember my very first cigarette. It was after a middle school dance, behind a pizzeria. The girl I bummed it from made fun of me for not inhaling.

“Can you run me over a pack of smokes ... Yeah, my apartment ... No, I understand there’s a minimum ... A carton is fine.”

I always packed my cigarettes more than most. Four lines to be exact. That must be more of a rural thing because a lot of people in the city don’t pack their cigarettes at all. Even though everyone back home said I was a city person now I never stopped packing my cigarettes, flipping the unopened box of cigarettes upside down and striking it against the meaty part of my palm until the tobacco inside each cigarette was sufficiently compressed.

Half a pack a day was my usual habit, though I always had one after a joint, a drink, or a snort, so on certain days it was more. Tonight the puffing, drinking, and snorting didn’t stop so neither did my smoking. *Fire in my lips lighting the way, the man I miss will be me someday.*

Deep into the night my binge drummed on as the ambient noise of the city withdrew from the streets. Since I had killed my darling wall clock, its faithful *tick-tock* was replaced by the steady *whurrr-thump* of my heartbeat throbbing against my temples. The more I stared at the blank space on the wall where the clock used to hang the more I saw the city in its place. Hands spinning round and round like so many manic New Yorkers chasing the zeitgeist of the Aughts.

The tightly interlocking springs, levers, and gears casting off life with every pivot and introspection with every pause, matching the tempo of surges and stagnations found in the city's churning sprockets of food, fashion, and finance ceaselessly thrusting the metropolis forward at the brink of its structural limits.

I saw the city in all its grand design yet something was missing. I no longer saw myself as part of its schematic. I felt like the leftover screw after the rest of the shelving was neatly assembled. In my father's last days I presume he felt the same, so much to offer and so little to give. When pride and promise go unremitted they decay into pity.

Pity is a sad emotion, saddest of all when you have it for yourself. My father knew that better than most. Hiding behind the sparse words my brother and I spoke on the phone was the concession that he may have taken his own life. Only toxicology reports would know for sure.

I never admitted to my brother why I had waited so long to answer his frantic calls. I told him it was because I was in a meeting. Really it was because I knew what he was going to say and as long as he didn't say them to me my father would still be alive. I held out to embrace an extra hour of his life, or at least an extra hour of my own life as I had known it. But that hour slipped by me just as time and the lives of others tend to do, and all that remained was the lingering toll of my father's last words ringing in my ears.