

## Submerged

The film Annie wanted to see was called Submerged, about marine life, produced by a less-famous Cousteau. The face she had made in anticipation of the film was one of radiant hope, a face Emil used to be able to elicit daily with a nod re: the ice cream truck, and so of course he had to buy tickets.

Emil brought Annie to the Natural History museum in New York because for one, she was showing an interest in science and two, like most teenagers, she was retreating from him. And he was worried about her. He wanted to connect with her. Make sure she was coping. Louise had agreed.

"What time?" the attendant said, hitting keys. They decided to see the last show, and then go across the street for burgers.

Tickets in hand, father and daughter ducked into the Hall of Biodiversity. Annie walked ahead, flanked by dioramas of plants, which Emil gathered were recreations of specific places and times. White Keds elongated Annie's feet. The big feet and her exaggerated slouching made Annie look like a Dr. Seuss character.

She was a serious girl. Certainly, of his two daughters, the more serious. "Sensitive" her mother said. Emil had known girls like her in high school, but

had shied away from them. Hadn't understood them or didn't imagine he had what it took to draw them out. He hadn't kept track of these heavies to see how they ended up. But if he could imagine, say, the demure MaryAnn Velacci, or whipsmart Sarah Polanco, he'd imagine that they had good careers, nice husbands, nice homes. Personally, at the time, he'd felt there were so many girls who liked to have fun. Louise had been shy up front, but a few sips into a beer, she effervesced.

They emerged from the dark hallway of leaves and dirt and mice and birds he couldn't see. (He had recently lost his glasses and so had brought his backup pair--the ones he'd wore through his thirties, which had the double bridge and the wood paneling along the sides. But he felt pretty self-conscious in them, like he'd just teleported in from the past, so he kept them folded onto his shirt). There were sharks suspended from the ceiling. He could make out, after a moment of study, that the hall was organized by kingdom. There's a word from ninth grade. Thanks Mr. Hatfield. Wait, kingdom or phylum? Invertebrates: protozoa, molluscs, crustaceans, spiders, insects, on the left side of the Hall of Ocean Life. Vertebrates: fish, amphibians, birds, mammals, primates, on the right.

He glanced down, patted the patinaed head of a frog, tongue mid-flick, and

read that amphibians are particularly susceptible to environmental change because their skin and eggs are porous. In his mind flashed news footage from the oil spills in '79: Ixtoc 1 in Mexico, and the Atlantic Empress in Trinidad and Tobago. Annie was eight. Ellie would have been six. He and Louise were living on Pine Needle Lane, renting still. Louise had cried. All those animals covered in oil. Oil is a natural substance, he'd argued. You have no idea how big the oceans are, and besides, how else can we make the car go? Or the economy?

These days, though, the oceans were feeling smaller to him.

Behind him, tigers, vultures, and pandas were stuffed and in glass display cases, looking like relics of an earlier time. He had seen Green Peace propaganda, heard the stats on the right whale population. Was it 400 now? He started to feel overwhelmed by the feeling that he was looking at the past. He put an arm around his daughter. "Interesting?"

She pointed up at a curlicue connecting the stuffed birds. "This shows the hereditary line, how these species developed over time." She launched into a discussion of genealogy and the traits that each successive generation retained from the previous generation, for example pointing out the hip bones of the primates, and the vertebrae of the fish. His mind was on her. She had his dark hair and her mother's fair skin. And sometimes he saw glimpses of his own

Nanna--a statuesque lady, who dyed her beehive black to the end. A woman whose house you had to take your shoes off in. The fondest memory he has about visiting Nanna's house was that he and his kid brother Georgey used to lock themselves in the bathroom so they could make silent faces at each other in peace.

In truth, he had want to come to New York to get away from Louise. Or from who he'd grown into living with Louise. He had too much weight around his middle, felt tired all the time. Every morning, the alarm honking at him. Feet on the cold floor. Stumbling into the hot shower. Lather, rinse, repeat. Pants, one leg at a time. He always buttoned his shirt in the same order: top down, then the wrists. Why did he do it like this? Driving through for his coffee and donut. Arriving on the dot. Looking at spreadsheets. Accounting for cost overruns, and executing on a budget to save the company money. Maximizing and making efficient. Lunch was one of three options at the cafeteria: grilled cheese and tomato; chicken noodle bread bowl, minestrone and salad. Sometimes with colleagues. Often, alone, with the paper, which he preferred. Then four more hours of optimizing and streamlining, and then the commute home. Sports Radio, and knuckleheads calling in to rag on impugned members of, depending on the season, the Sox, the Celts, or the Pats.

Last month he turned 49, so he started to make changes. And the first of these was to take up smoking. He'd wake up 30 minutes earlier than usual and use his extra time to smoke a cigarette on this quiet place he'd found across from the financial district. It was right near the Crab Shack, before you get to the Aquarium. There's a set of stairs that leads down to the back side of the Intercontinental. Just a small, dark walkway and then Boston Harbor, and all the yachts on your right. And at 7:30 a.m., very few people are around, especially in winter. He went, every day, and just smoked and watched the boats, and the sun come up, and the gulls dive for fish. There were jellyfish, too, if he peeked over the edge of the stonewall, pulsing their slow pulse.

The air was not fresh, but it was cold and quiet. He would rub his eyes, and feel his feet on the brick, in his leather shoes. He'd hear the gulls, and the occasional whir of cars passing far away. And he'd feel his eyes moving around in their sockets, and put the cigarette to his mouth and breathe in, breathe out. The smoke helped him feel each breath. He liked to see it coming out, taking a shape in the air as it drifted away. Smoking also reminded him of himself. The self that was seventeen, smoking on the ballfields with Stick O'Malley.

So the truth of it is, it was Stick O'Malley, and remembering their late-night, high-school smokes in the dugout, sometimes on top of it, sometimes in the

outfield if there were meteor showers, that made Emil decide to take Annie to New York.

Because Stick was younger than Emil, and because he didn't go to college, his number came up early in the draft. And he had showed up at Emil's dorm, during Emil's senior year at Boston University, crying about all the things he (Stick) had never done and all the place he'd never been, and New York showed up on the list, between two girls at one time and playing pro ball, and so Emil had brought his friend that night to South Station and booked them bus tickets to New York City. It was 1962.

Emil and Annie turned the corner into the Hall of Ocean Life, where they were confronted by the blue whale. The thing was big. Perhaps a bit stiff-looking though. Annie was unimpressed or else hiding her enthusiasm. They descended so they were under the whale, and they could hear the piped-in whale song. Parents and toddlers lay on their backs under the thing, and Emil kind of wished Annie were that young again, so they could lay on their backs, too, and look up.

Instead, they cruised underneath, diagonally, to a diorama of a polar bear eating a bloodied baby seal. There was one time Annie had seen their dog Bandit

eat a bird and she had cried--she must have been like four--for nearly an hour, into his sleeve. "Where is the bird now?" And "What does dead mean?" And Annie had always been smart so she had asked those other questions too, like "Will you die?" and "Will I die?" and "What happens when we die?" and though he had tried not to, he had made oblique gestures toward Heaven, because it was just a lot more pleasant than nothing, zilch, caputzo.

Though now that she was a teenager, she shrugged, like Bad day to be a baby harp seal. In the next scene, turtles were eating a squid's tentacles. In another, a giant squid was wrestling a Sperm whale. Turning the next corner, dolphins and tuna and birds competed for smaller fish. "These animals are all eating each other," Emil joked.

"Way of the world," said Annie. Did she have to be so blasé about it?

Emil was a meat eater, as Louise's weekly shopping list would attest. Burgers, beef, steak on the grill, roasted chicken, fried fish. If there wasn't meat, it wasn't a meal. And her cooking. She joked that he always came in the door when dinner was ready and he joked that his stomach drove him home. Lately though, he'd found himself resenting the ritual. The expectation he would be there on the dot. The pressure to show up. And worst of all, that he would actually get hungry, crave her food, and then show up, despite whatever other thing he had

planned for himself. His stomach betrayed him.

Last week, in fact, he had called to say he had a flat tire in order to smoke cigarettes on the Zakim bridge and watch the jellyfish down below. He leaned over to see them and his glasses slid off his nose. He was helpless as they fell, an interminably long fall, into the water below. He imagined a nearsighted jellyfish wearing them around. But without them, he couldn't see the jellyfish, not to mention the boats or even the sunset. And without sight, there was not much more to do on the Zakim bridge and besides he was getting hungry and Louise had said pork chops. The path home was so well worn, he didn't need glasses to drive it. Maybe his stomach really did do the driving.

Stick O'Malley was called Stick because he was skinny and good with the bat. But there was also the undeniable truth that Stick's penis was something to behold. Emil had seen it, at a glance, in the shower, and felt glad for the guy. Stick would have parties in his parents' basement and he always ended up taking a girl up to his room for a quarter of an hour, bringing her back flushed and untucked. One time Stick brought Katie Velacci (MaryAnn's hot kid sister) upstairs, and one guy, maybe Disanza, had joked that she couldn't resist Stick's stick. Emil had joked back that Stick's cock had actually started the conversation. That Stick had just been sitting on the other side of the room,



talking geopolitics, or, like, the poetry of Whitman--and without Stick's knowing it, his penis crossed the room and tapped Katie Velacci on the shoulder.

That's when Louise sprayed beer onto his shirt.

He was engaged to Louise by the time of the New York trip. But this was a man thing, a life and death thing. He and Stick got off the bus in Chinatown and hailed a cab, and after some subtle, not-so-subtle suggestions ("What kind of girl you want? Black, White, Asian, Puerto Rican, mixed?" "Mixed," Stick had said with surety, to Emil's surprise). They got off at an apartment in Murray Hill, asked for "Samantha," and got in. The room smelled like cinnamon and vanilla and lilacs waging an offensive blitz against cigarettes and sweat and vaginas. From somewhere the Shirelles sang Baby, It's You. A yellowed, cracked lamp shade in the corner of the room threw dim light. Draped on pieces of furniture, a menagerie of women in bouffants and brassieres. A man poured cocktails for an obscene price. They negotiated Stick two girls, a Black one and a Blonde one. Both were taller than Stick. Older too.

Emil was just going to have a drink and wait for his friend, he said loudly. Strictly not interested. In fact, he was taken. But this one girl came and sat next to him on the barstool, asked if he were in college, what he was studying. He loosened up. Like this is a girl I can talk to. She had freckles and wore a purple

silk bathrobe, and straddled the padded barstool, and her bare legs kept showing from underneath the robe. He discoursed on management strategies and accounting principles and started to feel excited by the bad thing he was doing, which he could easily, if he had to, justify to Louise--talking to this woman in her underthings--but then he also started to feel this other feeling, which was that this woman might actually want to sleep with him. Like not for money. And he started to develop this intense compassion for her, like it must be so hard to have men treat you like a sex object all the time. So he leaned toward her, asked her questions, complimented her, let his forearm brush her naked thigh. Tried to be nice. Was nice.

Annie seemed to come alive in the Hall of Human Origins, where she stopped to read all the signage. So Emil read along side her. Lucy, the 40 bones of a female early hominid, more ape than human, was named after the Beatles' song which the paleoarcheologists were listening to as they exhumed her.

When Emil had first heard Sergeant Pepper, it was at Stick's apartment in the North End after Stick got back from 'Nam. Stick's place was a five-story walkup, tenement style, and the hall had a stained blue carpet and there were crucifixes and statues of armor on every landing. Coincidentally, the statues of

armor were about the size of Lucy, like  $\frac{2}{3}$  the size of a contemporary human. Stick's place had virtually no furniture, just a mattress in the bedroom, and a coffee table in the living room and he gestured for Emil to sit on the floor around the coffee table. "That's how they do it in the East," he'd said. He was shirtless--just denim shorts and combat boots and a trucker hat. And he was somehow skinnier than he'd been in high school. Stick put on Sergeant Pepper, and cracked two Heinekens, and brought out his hash stash, which he kept in a pipe book on the bookshelf, and they smoked, and Stick kept saying, "How you been, man?" and Emil talked about his CPA exams, the wedding, the pregnancy, trying to save for their first house. It all sounded very vanilla as it came out of his mouth. Like his life was so good it seemed bad.

Maybe that's what it was. With Louise. When Emil read that nearly 60% of an ape's blood supply is used in digestion, impeding the ability for brain development, he thought again of her dinners and resolved himself (again) to take up a sport. Or else some more serious reading. His dad was a serious reader. His dad had had a library in their house, with an E-Z Boy recliner and a record player that seemed only to play concertos, and the room was floor to ceiling lined with books. His dad would disappear into this room after dinner to avoid the after-dinner chaos, and certainly the cleanup. And during dinner, when

there would be contention about some point of fact (e.g. Is there a word for when your stomach grumbles?) and he'd go into his library and emerge with documentary evidence (e.g. Borborygmus, related to the 16th-century French borborygme, ultimately from Ancient Greek, probably onomatopoeic). And then they would all imagine ancient wordsmiths trying to sound out bowel disruption, which would then prompt etymological curiosity about FART, POOP, etc.

Time had moved forward so militantly then, with the war, his own coming of age, sex, television, movies. To the young Emil, histories, etymologies, even books, seemed kind of old fashioned, so he called Dad's library his 'way back machine,' ala Rocky and Bullwinkle.

Rocky and Bullwinkle! Every Tuesday and Thursday at 5:30, he and Georgey and their older sister Columba--even Ma!--would crowd around the television to watch. Those times, it felt everything was restored to its natural order. Like his rightful place was there on the baby blue carpet, which had long since been exhumed from the house his parents had long since vacated. Remembering this, he felt gypped, somehow. Like he could never get back to his rightful place.

Annie read the entire plaque about Lucy, whom Emil felt was literally what

he was trying not to be--a bag of bones (and Lucy not even a whole bag). Why was his child was so interested in the first place in these old artifacts? Maybe he should encourage her to smoke some weed.

When he had smoked up with Stick O'Malley that day in the North End apartment, he had felt his body numb, balloon, float around. He had giggled. He hadn't smoked since high school: There wasn't space in his life, with Louise, his job and his responsibilities, a kid on the way. Stick hadn't been fishing for Emil to bitch. "I'm getting fat," was all Emil had said. "Good," said Stick. "Fat is good." Stick cocked his head and seemed to hold back some part of himself. And Emil wondered if that reserved part was a horrific memory of war, or the hyper attentiveness of a soldier who had to know what was in the bush, or the knowledge of the darkness inside of him (Stick). Emil wondered at the darkness inside himself too, and remembered that girl in New York. "You look skinny, man," he said. "How've you been?" Stick toked and exhaled: "Fucked the fuck up." He smiled and his eyes lingered on Emil's. "What can you do? Life only goes in one direction." And Emil nodded, moved by Stick's profundity. "Remember that time, in New York?" Stick said, then. "With the guy? And you were like?" he doubled over and grabbed his gut, "I'll bring the rest tomorrow!" Emil toked. "Worth every penny," he said, blowing smoke, and they burst into

laughing/crying hysteria.

The last exhibit on Annie's list, before the film on marine life, was the Dinosaur Wing. They got off the elevator on the fourth floor and stepped into the Hall of Saurischian Dinosaurs. Annie explained, when he asked, that Saurischians were characterized by grasping hands that have a thumb-like appendage, and he remembered her tiny hand holding his finger when she was still in the hospital. He kept an eye out for dino-thumbs as he walked in, and came to the lunging skull of the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

It was big. Not as big as he'd imagined. He'd imagined it like the size of a house. "Let me take your picture," he said, and pulled out the point-and-shoot. Annie stood in front of the beast and did a peace sign. "Now be a T-Rex," said Emil, and she put up her long bony fingers and silent-roared, letting her eyes crinkle, her white teeth gleam. He would find these later in a desk drawer, when Annie would be a forty-something woman--spectacled, serious, living alone--and he'd think of her as a kid.

So, actually, to be totally honest, the real reason they were in New York was because last month Emil got a call from Mrs. O'Malley, Stick's mom. Stick had had a rough go of it. Sometime last year or the year before Stick had lost his

apartment, lost his license, started living in Mrs. O'Malley's basement. Emil had driven by the guy a few morning walking toward HoneyDew Donuts. Anyway, Mrs. O'Malley had called Emil around suppertime, and he'd excused himself to the living room because she'd been crying. She said she couldn't wake Stick up, and could Emil please come over? He didn't want to go. He said, "Have you called 9-1-1?"

"Please!" she'd said. "Please. You have to come."

So he excused himself from dinner, which was lamb shanks and new potatoes, and got in his Honda Accord and drove to Mrs. O'Malley's house, where he hadn't been since he was a kid. He stood on the brick patio in front of the door and knocked like he did when he was a kid, and he remembered saying, when he was a kid, Can Dougie come out to play? 'Cause Doug was Stick's real name. And he stood there feeling sick, and smelling the lilacs in Mrs. O'Malley's front yard, and she opened the door red-eyed and white-haired and with a walker. And he remembered her answering the door forty years earlier and her hair was still white, but her skin fuller somehow, and now it was all desiccated.

"Thank God," she said. "You don't know what this means," and she held his hand in her two hands, which felt something akin to dinosaur skin.

He flipped the lights on to the basement, and went down and saw a couch

and the same coffee table they'd smoked hash at years before in Stick's Boston apartment, and there was a television that was still on and it was playing Danger Mouse, and there was a doorway leading to a dark bedroom that smelled sweet and sour, like old bowls of cereal and Michelob residue. And he flicked on the bedroom light, but it didn't work, so he brought the alarm clock over Stick's face. The guy's eyes were opened. His mouth was opened. He skin was dark red (or was that the alarm clock?). The guy was dead like he had died inhaling, or trying to.

Emil touched Stick's hand, which felt like a prop piece, or a Halloween gag. He said, "Bye, my friend." Stick had been a tall, muscular kid, and when he stood at the plate, he looked real relaxed. He had control like no other. He could sac fly, bunt, drive it at the pitcher's head, plop one into left field. Whatever the game needed him to do, he did it.

Life was a one-way street, he'd said.

Emil climbed up the basement stairs to Mrs. O'Malley's kitchen and sat with her at the yellow laminate table, held her hand, and explained that Stick was gone. "Gone where?" she asked. He knew then that she knew. That she was doing mental jiu-jitsu to avoid knowing. Hell, she must have known when she tried to wake him. Who could see those shocked eyes, that gaping mouth, and



think a guy is sleeping? "Gone with Mr. O'Malley, Ma'am. Gone with God." He thought that's how she'd want to hear it put. He moved his chair closer to hers, put an arm around her while she cried. He called 9-1-1, and the Bristol County Medical Examiner, who would pronounce the cause of death pancreatitis, (Mrs. O'Malley would call during dinner a few weeks later to say).

Moving through the Hall of Dinosaurs, Emil stood next to Annie while they read a plaque that suggested the planet is in the middle of another mass extinction. This was news to him, but it didn't hurt as much as he would have expected it to hurt. He was already on his way out. He watched with some curiosity as news settled onto his daughter's face, though, into her being. Would she cry, like she had when the baby bird died? He thought of the oil spills, the penetrable skins of amphibians. How thick would her skin would be? Would she'd look to him for explanation? How could he explain? People are always predicting the end of the world, kiddo. Or maybe, don't worry, sweetheart, we humans flame out all the time.

But she didn't say anything, and he wouldn't call her out for feelings she hadn't copped to yet.

He'd been thinking of Stick a lot lately, and thinking of Stick made him think of that time in New York, that girl in the apartment. Her breasts had been

heavy, hot-to-the-touch breasts, her skin like flames because she was breathing under that skin, and pumping and living and fucking, and she smelled like coconut. And it had ended up costing him eighty bucks and he'd only had \$60 and the bartender punched him in the stomach and threw him onto the sidewalk. And how Stick came tumbling out of the building, how he called the bartender-guy a goddamned shit-faced monkey motherfucker, and helped Emil up and laughed and laughed, and then went off to war.

He doesn't at all regret it, that time with that woman. It was a stab at humanness. Because being human is about being alive, and being alive is about being an animal. Not what's for dinner; Not do the numbers add; Not what are the knuckleheads think about the Sox, or the Celts, or the Pats. And standing in front of the Apocalyptic plaque in the museum with his daughter, he wished he could make her see this nuance of feeling, without disabusing her of her faith in him to be a good person. He wished she would ask.

Submerged, the film about marine life, was in a blow-up dome, meaning that industrial fans kept the dome inflated. Emil and Annie had to crawl inside the inflated plastic dome, and the film was projected onto the dome's ceiling. There were lots of kids in there, and Annie and Emil found floor space opposite the

door and opposite the projector that was set up in front of the door. Given the crowd, they sat on their butts with their feet pulled in close, and craned their necks up.

"You should put your glasses on," she said. He conceded. These were the glasses he was wearing in the snapshots from her birth. Holding his wife's hand. Holding the blanket with the brand new life inside it.

He looked at Annie, but she was looking up. So he looked up too and caught this breathtaking scene of purple and gold lobsters jockeying for a hiding place among the coral. Naked pink nautiluses competing with each other for shells. An orange octopus at once stuffing itself into a tiny crevasse and then emerging to coil through the sea, majestic and boneless except for its beak. Who knew such beauty existed under the surface?

Since the film was too long for the smaller kids, the dome cleared out as quickly as it filled. Emil and Annie lay on their backs, hands under their heads, and looked up at the sea life above them. It reminded Emil of how Annie used to lie next to him to watch Yogi Bear. Sometimes next to him. Sometimes on him, like he was a boat, or half on him--her feet in his face, totally unselfconscious.

It reminded him too of the meteor showers he and Stick used to watch, and how the universe had seemed so vast when they were seventeen, and how it

seemed less vast of late.

When the film ended, they watched the credits all the way through--an acknowledgement, he felt, that Annie had enjoyed it. When the credits ended, she stood up, signaling she was ready to eat.

"Did you like it?" He reached his hand up and she took it. At the same moment, the film started up again. But this was the last show? Had they lucked into a freebie? The film projected itself onto Annie's face and neck and shirt, and Emil saw his daughter beneath jellyfish, urchins, starfish, and squid. Diluted in blues and fish and kelp and seaweed. Like she was drowning. Or had long-ago drowned. He wanted to rescue her, shake her, tell her to live. On the other hand, he wanted to ask her, in his most casual voice, to stay right there on that small square of carpet with him. Want to watch it again? he could say.

But the moment had passed and he could see in her eyes it was time.