

Day 6

Morning

Jack's Big Book tells him:

As hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another.

--Homer, *The Iliad*

The greatest griefs are those we cause ourselves.

--Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

He inserts the T-shaped wooden bookmark, clasps, lifts, and with calculated and embroidered respect arcs the book closed.

Jack has just returned to his room from the hotel's exercise facility. There, to release and inject endorphins – endogenous morphine – through a wall in his brain, he performed without breaks both aerobic and weightlifting exercises followed by steam room, sauna, hot tub, 10 laps in the pool, hot shower, shave, cold shower (to close his pores), and styptic pencil (to stop the bleeding from his shaving cuts). Later he has two appointments and plans to take the family truck in for an oil change.

“Did I *again* not sleep,” he says out loud even though alone or did, as he suspects, phasic rapid eye movements manage to sneak, camouflaged, once or twice into his fire-and-ice fatigue? Jack believes they did. Dissociated sensory images, dream vestiges, some ambiguous and some pounding and angry, are crawling up the back of his head.

Also:

Nausea persists.

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His body is not regulating its temperature, it moves from chills to sweating to both.

He has shortness of breath he tries to combat with long inhales followed by slow exhales coupled with moans (if he believes no one is listening), the moans a comical attempt to dissolve the physical aspects of his panic.

Frequently, right now for instance, he feels nape, wrist and finger tingle-flushes that, like nitrous gas infusions, mimic hyperventilation and poor circulation but are otherwise reasonably enjoyable.

Tremors, as he lifts his hands, are borderline perceptible.

The skin on his head under his hair is scaly.

His eyes hurt.

Eight o'clock a.m., Eastern Time, ten minutes from now, begins day six of Jack's physical withdrawal from his overuse, okay abuse, of synthetic opioids. There is no psychological withdrawal, if such a thing exists, as Jack does not crave *anything* except, for reasons occluded, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, which he now calls his Big Book. Jack is disappointed. His desktop research, though unreliable, concluded with an acute withdrawal period of five-to-seven days so day six became glorified, but it looks like he will be beyond this range and roll far down the flat part of the bell curve. One of Jack's doctors suggested he stay crystal clean, no anything, for at least four months so all neurological functions return to normal.

"Normal" is one of four words which when followed by the word "people" have increasingly bothered Jack. The other three are "average," "ordinary" and "innocent." Jack believes without paranoia that these phrases, often used by the mawkish and the smug, are condescending, presume conditions that don't exist, and seek to justify, authorize or incite groupthink, condemnation or revenge. Jack is developing a detailed, alphabetical list of wince

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words and phrases as speaking them will, is his theory, be a purge exercise that helps with the nausea.

He turns on the TV in his hotel room. The hotel is one mile from his house and is where he went to withdraw after his wife, Morna, whom he calls his primary uncontrolled variable, told him to leave because he was not welcome to withdraw in their house. Jack's future with his family is, at the moment, beyond what he can know, so the TV will fill some waiting time. Weekday TV, particularly on certain channels, is eerie and fascinating to him. He watches three consecutive hours of reality shows about murder and prison. This is the dark, thick stimulus Jack needs. He would like to restore his gravity and dissipate the residuals of last night's dreams, if that's what they were.

Jack turns off the television, lifts his graphite pen, which is of perfect weight, completes his alphabetized wince list, then goes before the mirror in the bathroom ready to spew the words and phrases. He raises the paper which holds the words just below the plane of eye-level eleven inches or so from his nose. It vibrates. He strains to separate his lips, places his other hand against the center of his stomach, and lets them roll out, two per starting letter (except for the "p's" and "x"), like Noah's pairs reeling off the Ark after the ride:

"analytics... athleticism... beauty parlor... beefcake... cankles... coming..."

(Solely as an orgasm word, he notes to himself.)

"...did the best you could... doubled down... ethnic cleansing... eye candy... folks... foodie... ground zero... guru... horny... hunk... inflection point... innovate... journey... jumped the shark..."

He throws up in the sink, in-between the sink and toilet, then mostly in the toilet. He uses a bath towel to wipe his lips, toes and shins, in that order, then continues.

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“... keen... kindle... leading edge... loved ones... made love... man up... nifty... no worries... obnoxious... out-of-pocket... p’s and q’s... parenting... partying... pie... pimple... ping... pissar... pity party... pocketbook... preggy... pre-owned... pundit... pussy...”

He vomits again, this time no attempt to guide the landing. The “p’s” just kill him.

“...queenie... quote-unquote... reach out to... red meat... salad days... spooning... teachable moment... trotted out...”

He swallows. The volume and pitch of his voice rise:

“...underprivileged... up and at ‘em... veggie... vittles... walk back... weasel words... yin and yang... zesty... zit.

Afternoon

Jack removes the basin drain to rinse down his sink vomit, flushes twice his toilet vomit, covers his floor vomit with dry towels, hoses off in the shower, re-dresses, and leaves for his one o’clock appointment, his first-ever meeting with Alcoholics Anonymous’s famous “12 steps” to recovery and *its* Big Book, advertised to be effective for drugs other than alcohol and even if you do not believe in a deity with power over, and concern for, you personally. Jack has taken his Big Book with him. He parks the truck and walks to the meeting building with the book pressed against his chest. He strokes its leather sheath, both an anxiety antidote and a cheap thrill.

Jack enters through a plain door facing the street, no windows of course, preschool plastic-and-metal tables and chairs, stale-milk walls, eye-crust linoleum, chipped-mica counters, and similar degradation to other things in the room Jack senses but cannot see. White fluorescents spread across the ceiling, bad idea, bad taste, they create skins that are sallow and pallid and translucent...*more nausea*...beyond what is necessary, beyond what kinder warm

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yellow light would have done for Jack and the others in the room, about three-dozen people, three-quarters male. This group at this particular location is, Jack knows, one of 35 meetings scheduled each week, five a day, all seven days. It is one of 53 locations within a 13-mile radius.

After pass-the-mike self-introductions – first name, age, time drinking, time sober, relapse history – two observations strike Jack. Each male ‘fellowship’ member looks about 10 years older than his stated age. And everyone has had at least one, and most several, relapses regardless of their number of weeks, months or years in the program.

It is Jack’s turn.

“My name is Matt.” No way is he giving his real name.

Chorus: “Hi, Matt!”

“I am 48.” (‘But look 42 or 43,’ Jack tells himself, ‘definitely if I lose the 20 pounds.’)

“I am not an alcoholic and am an atheist.”

(Chorus: Deep-sucked group hush, then exhaled groans.)

“I am here because a year ago I had opiates prescribed regularly for a medical condition, enjoyed them, abused them, feared physical withdrawal, was recently ‘outed,’ and need to be here to show my wife, whose name is Morna, I am using every resource available to aid my recovery because my first priority is to keep my family close and strong.”

As the meeting leader walks to the front of the room, Jack is told by Pascal, the older man sitting next to him, who speaks under his breath, that the group is 100% old-school drunks save three or four who have combined drunkenness with coke or meth, all women he adds, and maybe Narcotics Anonymous would be better as Pascal would be surprised if anyone in this group would relate to Jack’s experience. Jack says thank you.

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On a wooden stool behind the podium, her knees and thighs tightly joined, Una, a personal trainer in workout uniform with marbled arms and shoulders, tells her story of addiction, sobriety, relapse, sobriety, relapse, sober now for 20 months. The 20-month sobriety streak has given Una meeting leader status. She is one of the alcohol-coke combos. Una advises the group she considers any passion outside devotion to the higher power an addiction or at least a false idol: alcohol, coke, sex, food, soft drinks, men, exercise, shopping, dancing, romantic ideals, material aspirations. She says fuck and shit a lot, occasionally apologizing for her language, and speaks of her uneven history with program sponsors and steps. Jack feels certain Una is making coded eye contact with him every minute or two, which, but for his tremors, freezes him to his seat. Una's narcissism is severe and creates uncomfortable currents in the room (at least for Jack). As she continues her speech, her arms and face now more kinetic and her legs akimbo, knees peeking around the podium, Jack gradually learns that for some reason she *and nearly everyone in the room* are having trouble accomplishing step 4, it is a nodding, smirking, shared joke every time step 4 is mentioned. Jack has not yet read the steps, now he is curious.

Next speaker is Cordero, a 25-year-old boy, he looks like a boy, who acts altered, says he has been clean for twelve days, then gives his history, starting about nine years back, of car accidents, hospitals, incarceration, pancreatitis, no real relationships, and yesterday's important moment, the reason he is speaking. Cordero had a rising urge to drink last night then told himself no, he didn't want to drink, listened to himself, and didn't. Good, Jack nods. The boy then explains how this moment was not him, but the glory, the higher power, the *Him*. Cordero now understands he can be saved, and the method, as long as this method knows how to repeat itself on every relevant occasion. Cordero finishes by saying it is important to share his

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epiphany – Jack’s internal word, not the boy’s spoken one, which was ‘awakening’ – so others in the group can have hope. Before Cordero passes the mike he adds as an afterthought, but guiltily, as if until then he wrongfully planned to withhold the information, that twice he has been diagnosed mixed-state bipolar – mania and depression at the same time he explains – but does not accept that or take medication for it and if he did the booze would just make things worse. Next, Agnes, a heavy woman who makes eye contact with no one, cries through her entire presentation, which is about her need to end a five-year abusive relationship or she will never stop drinking and get better and this is the first time she could say that out loud with others present and it is hard.

In this white-light room the 12 steps, in the style of the Ten Commandments, are nailed to a thick wooden board on the wall behind the podium. Jack studiously begins to read, absorb and integrate:

Step 1. I admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that my life had become unmanageable. (Jack: It is not my fault, but a disease over which I have no control and no ability to cure.)

Step 2. I came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. (Jack: It’s not my fault, it’s a disease, I have no ability to cure it myself or with the help of others, I am insane and need magic.)

Step 3. I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand Him. (Jack: Not my fault, disease, can’t fix it myself, insane, must surrender free will, need magic from a supernatural being that is male.)

Step 4. I made a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself. (Jack: Whoa! I am strong enough to take responsibility, in a fearless manner no less, for assessing my moral

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strengths and deficiencies even though it's not my fault, a disease over which I have no control, I am insane, have surrendered free will, and need magic from the male superpower. This is why everyone is stuck on step 4.)

The meeting ends and Jack stops reading the steps so he can leave first, which he does. As he steps on the sidewalk, he opens his Big Book at the wooden-cross bookmark:

There is strength in the union even of very sorry men.

--Homer, The Iliad

How dreadful the knowledge of the truth can be

When there's no help in truth!

--Sophocles, Oedipus Rex

Jack feels warmer (then colder).

Jack looks at his new sports watch, smiles approvingly, it was a birthday gift from Morna, and sees it is almost time for his three o'clock private session with psychologist Ewan Supaman, Ph.D., but first the oil change. Jack brings in the truck, discusses with the automotive intake attendant synthetic oil and other fluids (they agree, nearly winking at each other, that new fluids do promote health), a multi-point inspection, and whether the tires are okay and if they are not Jack will retain the replaced ones to make swings at home for his young children. A police officer comes in with his car problems, and the three of them discuss graphic accident scenes the officer has attended, families and divorce, high crimes and misdemeanors, and bad, bad people.

Once the talk progresses to a higher level of common comfort the officer and the attendant begin to share some private-sounding information about their lives which Jack knows he won't repeat, not for tact or kindness, but that his short-term memory will not convert the data to mid- or long-term memory. Jack decides not to share with them his private thoughts, self-

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editing having become a dying art Jack is trying to preserve and, anyway, he is about to see Ewan for that, but this three-way feels good to the point Jack is certain endorphins are releasing in him. The attendant assures Jack the truck will be ready by three-thirty. On to Supaman.

As Jack walks to Supaman's office, it is across the street from the auto shop, he notices a voicemail has been left on his handheld. He listens and sure enough it is a message from the doctor, who needs to reschedule their appointment. Jack has not ever actually seen Supaman and this is the third scheduled appointment in three days the doctor has postponed near the last reasonable moment. Therapy strategy, Jack guesses. He calls Supaman. The reception is clear so they have a short phone session. Jack tells Supaman about the highlights, from Jack's view, of the 12-steps meeting, and his reactions. Supaman agrees, a bit impatiently if Jack is hearing right, that the program is problematic, explaining that use of an external source to achieve control instead of building from one's own core is not good and the probability of failure imposed by the external source being a supernatural force that does not exist is really not good. Cognitive dissonance (among other things). Jack makes a mental note to be that succinct if he shares his thoughts on the topic with others. *Lex parsimoniae*. They again reschedule (Jack rolls his eyes), wish each other well, and click off the call.

The conversation with Supaman starts Jack thinking about the crux of the matter, between him and opiates that is, and it becomes clear, Occam's razor cuts away Jack's dissonance. He abruptly stops walking, forces a breath, and blurts quite loudly as the people on the street who are walking near him nervously veer away:

“Beliefs in a higher power and afterlife are not valid or available to me and I will never accept them, but their absence must be replaced with *something* – the liquid morphine came

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close.” Jack starts to feel anger at his parents, which he then carefully dismisses, for not brainwashing him to believe when he was little.

Evening

Jack gets his truck, returns to the hotel for room service, more murder and prison TV, and with hope for peaceful sleep, a blank screen, day seven.

As he lies in bed propped up by three pillows, the television still on, reception poor, Jack begins his drift. His eyelids start to twitch and the first dream arrives. His ex-wife, Talia, calls him on the phone, trepidation in her voice. He is not going to like what she is about to tell him. He braces for horrific news about their college-aged daughter or son, but that’s not it. It’s about the painting and the piano.

When they separated Jack left the house with its physical contents barely touched, including one large oil painting and his grandmother’s console piano on which as a boy he learned to play. On that piano his grandmother, Rachel, long before she died miserably from lung cancer at age 78, played ragtime while Jack’s grandfather, Hamal, long before he threw himself out a fourth-story window at age 85 (to end his dementia), taught Jack and his little brother, Calder, card games. Jack now sees Calder, how he looked about four years before he drowned in a lake at age 11, child-dancing to the ragtime with abandon, no inhibition. Then Calder stops dancing and with his perfect-skin face stares at Jack and presents tangible fear. Calder mouths ‘when will it happen’ as Jack stares down the phone at the invisible Talia.

The scene shifts to the painting, bought by Jack in a New England gallery twenty years ago and which is now, in his dream, on the door-facing wall of the entrance hallway of the house he and Talia once shared. Titled *The Upper Crust*, the textured oil portrays a tuxedo-gown

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affair, vibrant colors, but all faces viciously sanded away, no features or expressions, just rippled reds, pinks and oranges which make Jack think of overloaded veins, raw acne, and sterilizing chemicals for wounds. Overhead, where the chandelier or other light could have been, a cloud of noisy and colliding lines, streaks and circles, all gray and white, suggests the faceless crowd's discomfort with their impermanence in spite of their elegant costumes and well-timed dance steps.

Talia is calling to let Jack know that she and her husband, Penn, who died at age 46 from bariatric surgery complications, but is standing next to Talia in Jack's dream, need some money so the painting and the piano will be auctioned by them tomorrow. The phone becomes weightless so Jack tightens his grip but it starts a slow worming up his palm, presumably to float away once it has broken his hold.

"We agreed you could do whatever you wanted with the house and everything in it, except that the painting and the piano would *always* come back to me," wheezes Jack, barely able to speak, squeezing to keep the phone receiver as it continues its climb. Talia, who died of breast cancer, age 43, half-apologetically explains the various reasons this must happen, why it is best for all, and deserved in all directions. Then Talia's mother, Melba, dead from diabetes at age 61, appears to support and explain her daughter's position, something about generational endings. Jack now has no power other than to repeat, like a mantra, an elegy, "but we always..."

Next, hard-to-recognize images enter the dreamscape, they look like shoebox dioramas on a rotating circle with cellophane wrappings covering their openings. One diorama becomes closer and clearer and admits Jack in, it is his next dream, an Italian dinner on vacation on an island with Morna and their little boy and girl that occurred in day-life three weeks ago. The

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emotional surroundings, the tones, of this dream are different from the everyone-who-has-died dream, all warmth, unforced smiles, the children, intimacy. But that does not last.

At the next table, diagonally behind Jack's chair, is another foursome, a husband and wife in their sixties with their adult son and daughter, the husband loose-jowled and expressionless, his eyes merely scanners, the wife with fat everywhere and a painful sneer but Jack knows, because it is his dream, that not so long ago she was curvy, seductive, the purveyor of the highest of highs. Jack also knows, as the creator, that this toxic woman is somehow not a part of the family. The son and daughter wear motionless faces, wooden masks, they are working hard to transport themselves to another dimension of memory.

The bloated, ugly woman, who Jack sees is hell-bent to complete the father's decay, breaks her sneer and resumes her taunting and threats, which Jack knows have been going on for a while, long before he strained his ear and peripheral vision to bear witness. The son and daughter each hold the tabletop tightly with both hands to remain upright and closed-faced, their father simply remains numbed, until the woman finally makes good on her repeated promise to leave forever, rising and walking out the door of the restaurant. The other three say nothing, do not move, then as time passes through the meal, delivery of salads, appetizers, the main course, they gradually recover their faces and words, move to old, familiar conversations. By dessert, it feels like the woman had never been there. Morna stands, leaves Jack's table, walks to the other table with their young children in tow, and sits with relief in the departed woman's seat as Jack's daughter goes to the older girl and his son to the older boy.

Apnea, the absence of breathing, strikes Jack.

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He switchblades upright, awake, finds breath, and looks at his sports watch, which shows ten minutes before midnight. He forces himself out of the bed, turns off the TV, walks to the desk under the window and opens his Big Book, he tells himself, for the last time:

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

--Genesis 1:31, The Holy Bible, King James Version

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

--Vladimir Nabakov, Speak, Memory