

Anatomy of a Miracle

Flew was the word. Not the one with a fever, but just like the angel, you said, flew.

The grey-black maculated face of your great dane had felt around for my hand under the covers, his muzzle wet with the first snow of the season, which I must have picked up on subconsciously by the absence of tapping, at the window and tin gutters, amid the sounds of a coffee maker breathing its astronaut breath and a cast iron door squinking shut on a fizz of kindling, plus maybe I'd noticed the way the wetness had settled lazily on top of his head, with only a few flakes dripping down each droopy flew. That was the word, you said, for the superfluous anatomy dangling from a dog's upper lip.

And did I know that dogs don't have a clavicle? They have collars, but no actual collarbone. "Here," you approached a set of laminated posters, illuminated by the cold light of our gauze-curtained winter, opposite, but turned instead towards rubber glove-rich drawers in search of a boxcutter — this was, after all, the whole reason for our slippery pilgrimage — then made an H-shaped incision in the packing tape, peeled off a protective membrane, removed paper entrails by the slow uncrumpling handful, and exhumed the life-size replica of a human skeleton.

Loosely piecing it together on your pleatherbound table, a hybrid halfway between massage and medicine, you told me with a twinkle that — despite being careful ever since the dog days of summer when we met, carpooling with mutual friends down to the river, with a quick pitstop to pick roadside berries near a private plot of evergreens, arrayed neat as war graves (where morels should grow wild in a year or two, I'm told) — that you'd felt for the first time a baby, yes technically a fetus, kick your tummy: you were leaning over your very pregnant patient when you intercepted that message, that fragment of a Morse code miracle.

I assembled the base, which consisted of five casters plugged into a plastic asterisk, along with a shiny aluminium rod — same as any doctor's or artist's instrument stand, only the tabletop was replaced by the detailed cast of a pelvis.

Up sprouted the spine in a trunk-like column, bare until the branching of ribs: the first two floating (drummers and pipers), three more false ribs (lords, ladies, and milkmaids),

and finally the true ones (seven swans and so on) in an almost conical narrowing, towards the neck, of that empty thoracic cage, the little bird it harboured having long since abandoned its nest.

You began pinning limbs like ornaments on the torso, and had already hung the final "tibula" (my anatomy classes were showing their age) and its fibial bedfellow by the time I pulled out a trio of toothbrush cases, choked full of chalk and red ochre, along with my last phalange worth of charcoal. I loosened up with a quick sketch, *Girl Rummaging Purse*, rummaging for what... lipstick? fountain pen? but having drawn the latter, I looked up only to find its sanguine ink had flown like magic across the room, and was now lighting up this and that titbit of osteology.

"She's got your waistline too," I teased, but you pointed my attention at a threesome of textbook Phenice traits. (Thankfully your donkey of a dog was left behind, probably lying down on his round beds, plural, stacked like pancakes before the fire, and busy circumcising an ox pizzle, because otherwise all the joules in his necklace couldn't protect that rare combination of chasable laser and chewable pubis.) "What should we name him?"

Having unwrapped the last piece, you posed for two more drawings: *The Soliloquy* (that first of your two masters must have coincided with my art school days) followed by *Girl Placing Angel or Star atop Strange Tree*, standing on one foot among opened boxes and brown paper. I was confused by your choice of name: did you mean to say Goodbody (an obvious reference among anatomy buffs) or Dogsbody (perhaps after the dog-fearing hero of the Telemachiad, whose equally poor schema lacks the tell-tale organs)? I didn't question your choice. Instead, I gave a fully extended thumbs up, along with a lengthy wink, as I double-checked your height in heads, and into this quiet measure there came a sound, muffled and mirthful, of children assembling their own winter golem, perhaps a whole fleet of porcelain soldiers, or a fortified kingdom from which to hurl snowballs like the oversized pearls of a fever dream. "This is gonna be so helpful for my kid patients," you said, finally letting go of the pose to spritz your work surfaces while I washed the soot from my hands. "I can't wait for them to visit!"

It must have been the lysosome solvents that reminded me, on our way out, to flip up the new month on your calendar: I'd only just learned (from one of your favourite podcasts) about those vintage ads, with their fearful advent, if not red-circled on the newsprint then in one's head, to hint at a certain off-label use, long since replaced by a legalized procedure, at least here, in Canada, up to 24 weeks (though that number

dwindles to zero in so many countries, and swelled beyond bursting to 33 months in a certain middle-eastern town, if I recall correctly).

After deadbolting the door to the pilates studio (the outermost in a matryoshka-like series of nested rooms) which accommodates your modest private practice, which in turn contains the little closet where during appointments you might hang the purse that otherwise graces your waist, itself bearing god only knows — after locking up and carefully shuffling to your car, parked conveniently by the recycling bin, I asked what was the greatest gift you'd ever received.

"Before I forget again, we should watch *It's a Wonderful Life* together — I think you'll like it!" How did you know I hadn't seen it? "Anyway, not that you want to hear about my ex, but he once surprised me by coordinating a few extra days off from my old job and booking a little trip for the two of us. That, and jewelry. The rest of the time he was terrible at gifts. Feels mean to say, but he always gave me the things I'd have bought myself anyway: tennis shoes, new sheets, a shelving unit..."

Was it possible you shared my "uncanny knack," as mom mythologized it in the family Christmas cards? "This time, there's absolutely no way he'll figure out what we're getting him," boasted last year's letter after a touching in memoriam to her father (who always managed to sneak a potato into an unsuspecting winter boot) and a summary of the year's events which, in my case, consisted mainly of a motorcycle crash (announcing by omission my long distance breakup) from which I was recuperating at a last-minute artist residency in Iceland until the 24th, when I was scheduled to return right after my sunburnt mom and very suntanned dad. I struggled to stay up with them past midnight for our traditional exchange, and despite lively stories accompanied by photos from their cruise, I passed out on the couch somewhere between San Francisco and Cabo San Lucas. Visions of confetti were still eye-floating around the room when I finally awoke cradling a four-foot-long cylinder which looked less like a gift than a roll of wrapping paper. Any layperson with a rich-enough imagination would surely have guessed ostrich quill or Fabergé pencil, and I might have been similarly fooled, had my dream of a strange hypnotist not coincided perfectly with the outstretched arm of our apple tree swinging a star-shaped piñata, empty save for a photograph of the real gift (an heirloom, ironically delayed with their checked luggage) printed and enclosed in their pearlescent letter.

But if I've been blessed with the ability to guess my gifts, to see through layers of frill and trickery better than any x-ray technician, which you didn't believe — but *if* (and at

this point, we made our little wager, the prize being a peak at the loser's juvenilia: your fanfic, my stick figures) — then I should also say I've been cursed in equal measure: I might be a worse gift giver than your ex. Among my own exes, one secretly loathed certain scents (judging by their undying fill line); one loved her monstrous *costilla de Adán* — until the twelfth day, when it returned to the earth for want of a green thumb; and one, in true California-girl fashion, became allergic to a particular alloy or patina in her ring.

"I made it sound like i'm hard to please, but you'll be fine. And hey, if you start to panic, you can always send my bff a message..."

But my cry for help must have taken a wrong turn at a satellite and drifted into space.

The roads weren't motorcyclable for the next couple weeks, so I hadn't even returned the first dud gift when my followup message, cancelling the original cry for help, was met with your friend's urging me to refund the mountaintop bed and breakfast: the weather had presented me with my first peak inside your detached garage, messy according only to you, and there, leaning against a waist-high stack of firewood and a Molossus Brand "Oversized / Dog Food Bag" (their copywriters must moonlight as poets, the way that epithet bulked up all three of the following syllables), there, by the outstretched wing of my passenger door, were a pair of skis which had been kept in your parents' joint custody, then just your dad's, while you were off studying at various top tier schools in topographically low-grade towns. "It'll remind her too much of an ex... how about jewelry? She wears gold and silver." Didn't he buy that too? "This is different, trust me... or how about a painting?" Not enough time. "Or there's these books she likes..."

After days of scouring secondhand stores, and comparing against her collection, I was more than ready to give up on my quest for a fair-to-mint copy of somebody's *Anatomy* that she didn't yet possess, when all of a sudden, as if marked by twin roundlets of miraculous light, I spied two conspicuous leather spines sandwiched between gluten free cookbooks, the first of these being a tween adventure novel, but the next... alas, its frontispiece was badly disfigured.

Guaraldi played me out. I watched the arbitrary shuffle of my feet, like duelling planchettes pushed by low spirits, as they visited the remains of an alphabet scattered

haphazardly about the sidewalk: the initials of love fingered in cement, a vandal's nervous tic, the yes and no flyers of a petty political rivalry, a street number sweetened by honeycomb tiles... the latter having led me into a boutique with an expertly curated blend of timeless and contemporary pieces you'd surely love (these clashing only with the fossilized fad of its name: two sticky nouns suspending the ambered insect of an ampersand — think *Crane & Storey*), and whose displays may well have been mood boards for your own bursts of interior design, on high shelves or in the dead centre of the dining room table, in those few places safe from a curious head or oblivious tail.

I was drawn to an attractive *nature morte* with a candle made in the image of a Rodin (replacing the jeweller's artless mannequin), a single flame having turned Eve's face to serpents down her recoiling figure and onto a foil-stamped book to lap the shadows of a cream Kintsugi vase and its branchlet which, laden as it was with *fruits de grand mer*, as you used to call them, reminded me of a story you told me during our first little forage: despite the concerns of extended family members, you'd been, at a very young age, promoted to seamstress's assistant by the bestest grandmother in the whole wide world, the two of you spending cherished hours sewing muumuus and tutus for a talkative plush rabbit, until one day, after having plucked a needle from your mother's porcupine cushion while Frosty babysat the cousins, you were found crying unconsolably in a walk-in closet, though not a single drop of blood or pinprick could explain your sobs, poor thing, for you were simply desperate for the cartoon magic of a makeshift necklace (those are coals that were his eyes) to revive your limp doll, desperate for a best friend's familiar greeting, or look of recognition, a twitch of the nose, a wink, please, anything... and it wasn't until your tears had long dried that you finally removed that edible garland.

Not just to the shopkeepers, but to whomever helped me find the perfect gift — which will surely lift the curse — to whatever benevolent spirit or guardian angel led me there (and I think I know), I offered my deepest gratitude as I walked over the exit's tiled Goodbye.

At least the bottle of fortified wine I picked up that day (from a liquor store set conveniently between the boutique and a dealer of luxury bedding) was a no-brainer, since you'd already told me it's one of your holiday favourites — and though I left home this afternoon without it, my engine sputtered into its reserve tank, suggesting I fuel up

at the only gas station open for the next couple days, one with a busted card reader that forced me to pay inside, after which I returned to find a brave and savvy campaigner had, for lack of a windshield wiper, slipped his handbill into my helmet, reminding me, with its urging against drinking and driving, to go back for the wine that would so nicely follow the meal you spent hours preparing: a tofurkey loaf topped with wild mushroom gravy (morels and oysters courtesy of mutual friends), pats of plant-based butter ready to melt with miraculous ease on mashed potatoes and assorted winter veg (and eventually on stove-popped heirloom corn), and for dessert, a *tarte aux baies d'été*.

One of the pros of a faux turkey is that, there being no thoracic cage, even lousy kitchen knives cut through its glutinous gooseflesh with ease. One of the cons is its lack of a proper wishbone. I stepped out to comb the grass and garden beds of your front yard by phonelight, and ran back in, ashiver, with the perfect little furcate stick. The part of the wishbone we'd taken to calling the pearl or person in the boat, for its resemblance to that bit of the female anatomy, was in our case a slightly thicker nub of branch that broke off just above my thumb. You suggested that we watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, which, you insisted, didn't count as your wish: "Oh, no, if I told you, it might not come true." This line, and more, I would soon find verbatim in the film.

It was exactly ten forty-five P.M., earth- and movie-time (which I can't imagine was a coincidence), when the placebo effect of all that faux tryptophan finally kicked in. Night's plump droplets started drumming at your nerves... first a twinge in the tip of your left index, then a flex of the other bicep, a flinch of the brow, a broad glissando from pinky to pinky toe, until the mirror-like surface of your consciousness was wholly rippled over with sleep. That's when I heard it: the name!

But the question of the gift still dogged me... No more could I see through the opaque and flake-flecked wrapping paper than spy into the icy palaces of your dreams. Could it be — have I lost the blessing with the curse?

Re-reading for clues, I can make out a few ghostly glints and foregleams hinting at the gift I was to get *you*, which by now you surely know, and which still needs to be wrapped in this letter and placed next to a nondescript package you've ordered me not to go anywhere near, much less to palpate or put up to my one decent ear. But when I read too closely, everything seems so burdened with meaning as to be mute. The religious conversion, say, from 10:45 Pacific yields a passage more in line with Jimmy Stewart's character who learns how — or how not — "to give his life as a ransom for many..."

Sometimes my intuition, like a famous detective after the mystery's unveiling, will guide the slow-witted narrator (I'm speaking, of course, of my conscious self) along well-lit avenues of deductive reasoning. Other times it dives like a garrulous Jack Russell into an underground network of dream logic and metaphor, only to reemerge halfway across my brain with immaculate cap and cape ("It's not a miracle, it's Nature's Mikvah" you once joked about your ability to get out grass stains, blood, vomit, urine, or, with a wink, "any other protein you might produce") — then again, it might don a different costume altogether, holding in its maw a purloined letter or a boxful of Tom Sawyer's gold.

Take, for example, the case of last Christmas: a friend of my ex's, both of whom I hadn't seen since before she literally called off our engagement, popped into my head for no apparent reason. I scanned the terminal, thinking my subconscious had spotted him peripherally, but I noticed instead a black-suited stranger gazing through dark glasses at a dangling sun-like ball of airport art, composed of thirty translucent yellow tubes, each like a fluorescent bulb tipped at both ends with metallic pencil points... and the whole feverish tangle wheeled around in a slow clockwise motion, seeming almost to freeze above my head at twenty past two (I checked my wrist) when the delayed flight finally spilled its first few passengers down the hall and through the sliding glass doors, followed by my parents (paper maché, medial zipper compartment; grandmother's ring, distal), then a few unrelated dummies, and there: my ex's friend. How did I know? The airtight plane hadn't even landed when he came to mind. Was his voice smuggled through the phone among the creaking of plastic deck chairs? His face stowed away in the background of a bustling market photo, ogling the disassembled cogs of a gold pocket watch or the swatches of red and brown leather that now matched my parents? Was he a frequent flyer in my subconscious, retroactively noticed the way a distant whistle or the word tinnitus seem to echo the remembered note ringing in my ears? It occurred to me that the man in the limo driver uniform must have held up the familiar name on white card stock and then tucked it back under his arm when he realized our turbulent flights were landing out of order — that I was arriving from Iceland, not Oakland (having mercifully opted for flight protection). But when I went to return my parents' unused trolley, the man, still staring where the sun (now winding backwards) used to be, was in the act of unfolding the rolled-up paper from my hypothesis into an impossible origami cane.

What else... Sleep. I'm trying not to let the screen wake you up but you passed out without putting on your sleep mask that you don't always wear to sleep but do when you find me writing after taking off your make up which you also didn't take off. Not sure that

made sense, but I'm past the point of editing. Sleep wants me too. Wants me to what? Gift... give up. Time to tuck myself in, first load paper print fold envelope my gift... curse! where did I could have sworn I — yes, here they are, safely pocketed with my leather-encased watch. How about 2:20? Even less decipherable. Here's a letter about a misleading Jezebel, "calls herself a prophet;" and here's the dream of a prophecy fulfilled by Herod's death. Few minutes left. Guess... guess this is it.

Merry Christmas.

Picture a window with the venetians raised over a pluperfect rectangle of radiant light, impossible to render directly — impossible, even, to really look at — though its reflection, if slightly dimmed and barrel-distorted by its fall into a bedroom of three-dimensional forms, may be glimpsed as it kisses you on the forehead, my bent subject, or adorns your delicate neck with a string of snowstorms reduced to fisheyes.

Red chalk adds a touch of blush in the cheek, a blaze in the outer ear, and, spilled onto the bare mattress, a port wine stain which you're spritzing (and then pretending to spritz, for the sake of my dream drawing) with your bottle of miraculous pet enzymes.

A mystery *troisième crayon* of either bone or charcoal black, which I've yet to replenish, now gently turns your beauty from the light and scratchily describes the tattered top sheet (wouldn't that be ironic) over which fought a pack of devouring dream dogs, or one real big one, all soot and darker merle-marks in life but sadly lacking from my vision: you had probably placed him, will probably place him, on his fireside beds by resumed threat of electric shock, so necessary during the day, but which tended to keep *you* up at night, the anode and cathode becoming a vampire bite that feeds not so much on his jugular as on your compassionate imagination. (As I write this, in the shuttered darkness of the devil's hour, an indicator winks to remind whomever it may concern to charge his collar.)

Did my eyes notice something strange about your Christmas tree as I placed my gift on that impossibly tidy skirt, white as a wedding dress? But then my nose went on misleading me. Let me fetch my first draft... I sniffed around at the base. Then higher. Higher still. All the way up to the star-shaped topper. Almost. The bookshelf? A bouquet of dried babies breath. So close. A chew toy, no, a child's plush rabbit (thanks again) mended with gold thread and polkadotted with wax from a pine-scented (ah-ha!) soy

candle. Of course! You must have returned to the scene of our first date and, after the initial shock and disappointment (who could love a plastic Christmas tree?) you had the bright idea to forage for my very thoughtful, very special gift.

All's left is to remove and plug the collar into its charging station under the port side table; pour out the untouched glass (you fell asleep before a single pouting lip could stick the rim) to keep it from being spilled by either sleeping beast or beauty (the two of you currently snoring in stereo); print again this letter, now with the correct guess (here: bundle of charcoal); and put the old one in the trash, and the new one under the tree, which seems now more than ever to be smiling its popcorn smiles. Almost forgot the pearls! Must remember not to throw them out... tear open the old envelope by its short side, the way my grandpa used to do in imitation (I learned last year) of Johnny Carson.

Questions: Has the curse in fact been lifted for good? Will my pouring out the wine not cancel the portended spill? the ensuing tug-of-war? the pose? even the snow? And what did you wish for? Will you receive an answer? *I hold in my hand the last envelope...* Do angels have wishbones?

Despite the true magnificence of my once-a-year trick, the answers remain unknowable to me — to the me who's writing this, right now — tucked as they are behind curtains of time, cloaked in paradox, or hidden away in other minds or planes of consciousness.

A little light is beginning to peak through the slats. How lovely.

Like a slit in the wrapping paper.