THE GOLDEN VANITY

By Ben Lerner

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The author waited for the librarian in the coffee shop on the little commercial strip across from the campus. He sat by the window facing the Gothic stone buildings and watched the students walk head down against the wind.

Someone said his name because his coffee was ready. He approached the counter and collected the giant cappuccino, noting the flower pattern in the foam. As he started the walk back to his table, the coffee-shop door opened, admitting cold air and a middle-aged woman, surely the librarian; she recognized him and waved.

His problem was that the coffee required two hands, or at least he had taken it with two hands, one on cup and one on saucer, so as not to spill coffee or upset foam; he couldn't return her wave. He felt himself scowling at this situation, realizing too late she'd think he was scowling at her. His solution was to look at the cup with exaggerated intensity, in the hope that she would understand his dilemma. He walked slowly, eyes fixed on the dissolving flower, to the seat beside the window, having ruined everything.

But he remembered Dr. Roberts’s idea. Roberts had said that when the author found himself in one of these “false predicaments,” and he began to draw shorter and shorter breaths, he should just describe whatever little crisis he’d manufactured, what he was feeling, to whomever he was meeting in the same “winning and humorous way” he recounted it after the fact to Roberts.

The librarian was at the table she'd inferred was his destination by the time he reached it. He set down the cup and saucer with excessive care. She had a lot of curly hair he only now saw as auburn. He shook the hand she extended and said:

“I wanted to wave to you when you came in but I had this coffee in my hands and I was afraid I'd spill it and then I was afraid that by failing to wave I appeared unpleasant and then I felt myself scowling at appearing unpleasant and then realized I must really seem unpleasant and so had already made a disastrous impression.”

She laughed as though this were indeed winning, and said, “You sound like your novel.” The anxiety dissipated, but into flatness. He spilled some of the coffee lifting it to his lips.
The year before, they'd found cavities in the author's wisdom teeth; they needed to come out. He could elect I.V. sedation (“twilight sedation”) or just local anesthetic, as the dentist suggested. They'd taken a panoramic X-ray of his head, chin on a little stand while a camera whirred and clicked around him, and then scheduled the extractions for the following month, when the dentist was back from vacation. There was no rush. It would be a few days of unpleasantness, that's all. Let the office know twenty-four hours in advance if you want the I.V., said the receptionist, whose fingernails were painted with stars.

He learned from the Internet that the difference between twilight sedation and local anesthesia was not primarily a difference in the amount of pain but in the memory of it. The benzodiazepines calm you during the procedure, yes, but their main function is to erase your memory of whatever transpires: the dentist getting leverage, cracking, a sudden jet of blood. This helped explain why the people he asked were fuzzy regarding the details of their own extractions, often unsure if they'd been sedated or not.

That October his ruminations about twilight sedation dominated his walks with Liza. They would meet at Grand Army Plaza in the late afternoon and head into the Long Meadow of Prospect Park, then wander along the smaller trails as the light died in the trees. Finally, it was the last walk before he had to call if he wanted the I.V.

The unusual heat felt summery, but the light was distinctly autumnal, and the confusion of seasons was reflected in the clothing around them: some people were dressed in T-shirts and shorts while others wore winter coats. It reminded him of a doubly exposed photograph or a matting effect in film: two temporalities collapsed into a single image.

“I don’t want them working on me when they know I won’t remember what they’re doing,” he said.

“We are not talking about this again,” Liza said. It was characteristic of Liza to begin an activity by claiming she’d have no part in it. “We’re not having Thai food” meant that she’d come around to the idea; “We’re not seeing that movie” that he could buy tickets.

“But more than that,” he said, ignoring her, “I can't figure out if abolishing the memory of pain is the same thing as abolishing the pain.”

“And who knows,” Liza said, quoting him from previous walks, “if the memory is really abolished or just repressed, distributed differently.”
“Right. And that could be worse,” he said, as if this were an original idea. “A trauma cast out of
time, experienced continuously, if unconsciously, instead of as a discrete event.”

“So many of these people,” Liza proclaimed gravely, making a sweeping gesture that included
couples on benches, families playing in the grass, and a group of women practicing Tai Chi, “are
living lives ruined by repressed trauma surrounding their wisdom teeth.”

“If I take the drugs, it’s like dividing myself into two people.” He ignored her again. “It’s a fork in
the road: the person who experienced the procedure and the person who didn’t. It’s like leaving a
version of myself alone with the pain, abandoning him.” They turned south onto the path that
would eventually take them to the lake.

“And then you meet him one day in a dark alley. And he wants to settle the score.”

“I’m serious.”

“Or he starts inserting himself into your life, sabotaging your relationships, causing scandals at
your work. You’d have to kill him, kill yourself.”

“And what kind of precedent am I establishing, exactly, if I deal with a difficult experience by
inducing amnesia.”

“You already have amnesia. We have this conversation every day.”

“Look, I have to decide tomorrow. One business day before the procedure.”

“What do you want me to say? I’d do local if the dentist says that’s sufficient and save the three
hundred dollars you’ll have to pay out of pocket for the I.V. But I’m a lot tougher than you are.”
She was. “You’re going to do the twilight-sedation thing because you’re a weakling. It’s a sure sign
that you’re going to do it that you keep worrying about it.”

They walked in silence until they reached the lake. On the near shore, a group of teen-age girls,
maybe Mexican, were dressed in white, practicing a dance involving paper streamers, tinny music
issuing from a portable stereo. The softening sky was reflected in the water. Airplanes moved
slowly toward LaGuardia; a few swans moved slowly across the surface of the pond. Everything
suddenly complied, corresponded: the pink paper streamer in a girl’s hand echoing the rose streak
of cloud that was echoed in the water. He felt the world arrange itself around him.
“I’m just doing local,” he resolved.

“The sublimity of the view has lent the young man courage,” Liza said, deepening her voice.

“Shut up,” he said.

“Napoleon alone on the eve of battle communing with the Alps, receiving their silent counsel.”

“Shut up,” he said, laughing.

When he woke up the next morning, he called the dentist’s office and told the receptionist he wanted the I.V. Then he called Liza and said he’d changed his mind and would she go with him Monday because they won’t let you leave unaccompanied with all those drugs in your system. She sighed theatrically and said sure.

That night he was going on a date. Or at least he was meeting his friends Josh and Mary for drinks, and they’d invited a woman, Hannah, they thought he might like, who might like him. It was the only kind of first date he could bring himself to go on, the kind you could deny after the fact had been a date at all.

Since late the previous spring, when he’d published his novel to unexpected praise, the women his friends attempted to set him up with had invariably read his book, or had at least glanced, in advance of their meeting, at those preview pages available online at Amazon. This meant that instead of the conventional conversations about work, favorite neighborhoods, and so on, he’d likely be asked what parts of his book were autobiographical. Even if these questions weren’t posed explicitly, he could see, or thought he saw, his interlocutor testing whatever he said and did against the text. And because his narrator was characterized above all by his anxiety regarding the disconnect between his internal experience and his social self-presentation, the more intensely the author worried about distinguishing himself from the narrator the more he felt he had become him.

He spent most of the afternoon at the little drafting desk beside the window, answering e-mails from the college, where he was on leave from teaching, and failing to answer interview questions for a small magazine in England, worrying about his teeth. He did laundry—there was a small washer-and-dryer unit in a closet—and he paced the eight hundred square feet of his third-floor apartment distractedly, opening a book at random, reading a page, returning it to the pine shelf.
without knowing what he'd read. He showered, stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on the inside of the laundry-closet door, and considered his unfortunate body, how it might appear to Hannah, whoever she was, how he might compensate for its many flaws through strategic angling and flexing.

They were meeting at a bar in Dumbo far from any train. When the sun had set, he decided to take a long walk, eventually make his way there. It was still unseasonably warm but there was now an implication of winter in the air. Lights and voices looked and sounded different within it, sparkled more, carried farther. He turned left onto Atlantic from Fourth Avenue, the Adhan issuing from the mosque’s crackling speakers, and slowly walked the mile and a half to the Promenade. He leaned against the iron railing; the intensities of Manhattan loomed across the water.

Eventually he turned from the river and wandered back through Brooklyn Heights. On a small cobblestone street that dead-ended unexpectedly, some conspiracy of brickwork and chill air and gaslight gave him the momentary sense of having travelled back in time, or of distinct times being overlaid, temporalities interleaved. No: It was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1912 or 1852, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them. He felt that anyone who had ever paused before the lamp as he was pausing was briefly coeval with him, that they were all watching the same turbulent point in their respective present tenses. Then he imagined his narrator standing before it, imagined that the gaslight cut across worlds and not just years, that the author and the narrator, while they couldn't face each other, could intuit each other's presence by facing the same light, a kind of correspondence.

Reggaeton from a passing car returned him to himself. He checked his phone for the time and directions to the bar and walked underneath the roaring bridges into Dumbo, his hands cold with anxiety as the meeting place drew near. He was late enough now that he assumed Hannah would have already joined Josh and Mary. He found the address—no sign, just a single exposed bulb near the door—touched his face to see if it was greasy, would be shiny, but found it dry. Then he located the little packet of breath strips in his coat pocket. When he tried to place one on his tongue, he realized he'd accidentally removed several mentholated strips at once; they congealed into a gummy mass, which he spat onto the sidewalk.
The bar was twilit in the speakeasy fashion, dark wood and a tooled tin ceiling, most of the seating in panelled booths, no music. It was quiet enough that he could hear the bartender shaking one of the artisanal cocktails whose prices he was resolved not to complain about aloud, and he immediately saw Josh, whose face was at this point mainly beard, and Mary, who was wearing a hat, a cloche he’d already decided was a mistake, in a corner booth across the room. He couldn’t see Hannah, who was behind a panel, but inferred her presence from Josh and Mary’s posture, the nature of Josh’s wave, maybe the number of glasses on the table.

Would you know what he meant if the author said he never really saw her face, that faces were fictions he increasingly could not read, a reductive way of bundling features in the memory, even if that memory was then projected into the present, onto the area between the forehead and chin? He could, of course, enumerate features: gray-blue eyes, what they call a full mouth, thick eyebrows that she was probably careful to have threaded, a small scar high on the left cheek, and so on. And sometimes these features did briefly integrate into a higher-order unity, as letters integrate into words, words into a sentence. But like words dissolving into sentences, sentences into paragraphs and plots, combining these elements into a face required forgetting them, letting them dematerialize into an effect, and that somehow never happened for long with Hannah, whom he was now beside.

Who was in profile three drinks later, laughing at Josh’s high-pitched imitation of their boss, petty tyrant of the production company where they edited film. He watched her tuck strands of black hair behind her ear, noted its pointed helix, only now perceiving her nose ring, silver but appearing rose gold in that light. Then, Josh and Mary gone, they were side by side in the booth, leaning against each other a little more with each drink, and he was saying these things about faces to her, how it’s important for a writer to be “bad with faces,” and she asked if he had ever seen the satellite image of that rock formation on Mars—one of those standard textbook images used to illustrate “pareidolia,” a term he’d never heard. It’s when the brain arranges random stimuli into a significant image or sound, she explained: faces in the moon, animals in clouds. She took out her phone and Googled it, and he used the excuse of looking together at the little glowing screen to press more closely against her.

On the wall behind Dr. Roberts hung a tactically inoffensive abstract painting, rhythmic brushstrokes in lavender, blue, green—very competently executed visual Muzak. If you asked the author what Roberts looked like, he would conjure the painting rather than the face.
Roberts said, “I understand your writing has garnered some attention, but how exactly would you, in your early thirties, have any papers that a university library would be interested in collecting?”

The author said he shared Roberts’s surprise and paraphrased the special-collections librarian: because he’d been “particularly precocious,” her phrase, and because in his twenties he had co-edited a small and now defunct but influential literary magazine, they suspected he might already be in possession of a “mature archive.” Moreover, collecting practices were changing, and papers were now often sold in increments. They’d buy, let’s say, a third of the author’s papers now, then acquire the other two installments across the years. Since he would presumably want all his papers in one place, there was an institutional interest in establishing a relationship early, to invest in him. The author pronounced “papers” in a way that made it clear he was placing the word in quotes.

“And do you have a ‘mature archive’?” Roberts asked. He seemed to like the phrase.

“No,” he said. “Almost all the correspondence about the magazine was e-mail, and I had a different e-mail account for much of that time. I never printed anything. What I do have is boring, logistical. And in terms of my own work”—he was trying not to place “work” in quotes—“I don’t write by hand and don’t save drafts on the computer.”

“What do you have?”

“Oh, massive and obsessive electronic correspondence with my best writer friends that’s poorly written and full of gossip and shit-talking and divulges all manner of embarrassing information. I have a folder full of postcards from authors, some of them famous, politely thanking me for sending them my book.”

“Do libraries buy e-mails?”

“Apparently they’re starting to. Electronic archives. She said everything is changing as the technology changes. But they wouldn’t want anything I have. And I wouldn’t want anyone to see it, even after I’m dead.”

Roberts made a pause that italicized the author’s last four words, silence that had the same effect as repetition.

“A year ago, this would have been weird and silly and flattering, their interest, and now it seems like some institutional premonition that I’m going to die.”
“There is no evidence that your condition is going to worsen,” Roberts repeated, without impatience, for the thousandth time.

“I’m also surprised to find,” the author said, ignoring him, “that I want to have ‘papers,’ want to leave and be left those traces, that it would authenticate me.”

Roberts made the pause that meant “Go on.”

He had told the story so many times that slight variations crept in. He couldn’t recall the exact sequence of events. For instance, had he found a message the day after the extractions saying he should call the dentist as soon as possible, or did he answer a call directly from the dentist that afternoon? Either way, the day after the procedure, a week before his scheduled follow-up, he was standing beside the window, staring at the clock tower on Hanson Place, cell phone to his ear, listening to the dentist say there was a problem with his X-ray. “There is a problem with my X-ray,” he repeated with his sore mouth. The dentist said he happened to be reviewing the file and there was an area that concerned him. “You are concerned about my teeth,” the author confirmed. “I want you to see a neurologist,” the dentist replied. There was a full beat before the dentist said, “Everything will be fine, I think.”

There was a poster of Picasso’s dove in the first neurologist’s waiting room, watercolors of Manhattan sunsets where they sent him for bloodwork, photographs of orchids where he waited for his cat scan, his MRI.

Finally, he got in to see Dr. Walsh, famous in his field. Silver hair, rimless glasses, a purple tie under the white coat. He was always almost smiling, at least the corners of his mouth were slightly upturned, because his blue eyes were narrowed in a perpetual squint, enabling him to express a kind of optimistic concentration without seeming patronizingly upbeat.

When Dr. Walsh told him the findings, the author was looking at a print of a painting of a beach scene: two empty white wooden chairs facing the sea, a small sailboat in the middle distance. He had a “mass,” what is called a meningioma, located in his cavernous sinus; it appeared benign.

“Who chooses this art?” the author wanted to ask.

“The art?” Dr. Walsh would further narrow his eyes.

“Do you choose this stuff or does the hospital buy it in bulk? Where does it come from?”
Dr. Walsh would swivel in his chair to see the image the author was staring at, then turn back to the author, but not speak.

“I understand the desire to have some decorations that indicate this isn’t just a hospital room, that a patient isn’t just a pathologized body, that this isn’t purely the realm of science. I understand that the exclusive criterion you or the institution would have for selecting an appropriate image would be that it’s inoffensive—if not actively calming, at least not agitating. It’s supposed to prove that you are neither a machine nor an eccentric because it nods blandly to established cultural modes, the medium of painting and the clichéd instance of it. They are images of art, not art.”

“Three doctors at the hospital share this consultation room,” Dr. Walsh might respond, adjusting his wedding band.

“Let’s try to stay focussed,” Liza would say if she were there, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“But the problem, one of the problems”—cold spreading through him, as when they’d injected him with contrast dye—“is that these images of art only address the sick, the patients. It would be absurd to imagine a doctor lingering over one of these images between appointments, being interested in it or somehow attached to it, having his day inflected by it or whatever. Apart from their depressing flatness, their interchangeability, what I’m saying is: we can’t look at them together. They help establish, deepen, the gulf between us, because they address only the sick, face only the diagnosed.”

Instead, he’d asked, a tremor in his voice, “Am I going to be O.K.?”

“It is entirely possible that the tumor will never grow larger and that it will remain asymptomatic,” Dr. Walsh explained.

“Is there a surgical option?” he heard himself say.

“You could consult with a surgeon, but I don’t believe so. No.” Dr. Walsh stood, walked to the adjacent wall, and slipped an X-ray onto the illuminator, which he switched on. “I believe the location of the neoplasm rules that out.”

“So what do I do?” He could not make himself join Dr. Walsh at the illuminator, would not look at the cross-section of his skull.
“Well, we don’t really do anything right now.” Dr. Walsh sat back down. “Except follow you closely. We will develop a strategy if and when symptoms present.”

Headaches, disordered speech, weakness, visual disturbances, nausea, numbness, paralysis.
Prosopagnosia, pareidolia. The softening sky reflected in the water. Silver but appearing rose gold in that light. The momentary sense of having travelled back in time.

Say they join his family—parents, brother and sister-in-law, and their boys, two and five—on Sanibel Island, off the Gulf Coast of Florida, for the winter holidays.

It’s dark when they arrive at the rented beach house, turning onto a gravel drive. The warm air is redolent of jasmine, the surf audible, a sound he’s always found alien. He tries to remember the light snow that morning in New York, beads of precipitation on the oval window streaking as the plane took off.

The author carries his younger nephew, Theo, into the house, which smells vaguely of sunscreen, citrusy disinfectant. He walks with Theo, who has one thumb in his mouth and his free hand down the author’s shirt, up to the watercolors of seashells and starfish, recalling his confrontation with Dr. Walsh about medical art as though it had happened.

Theo finds and squeezes his nipple, which makes the author start and laugh; since Theo began to be weaned, he goes after the breast of anyone who carries him. He gives Theo a raspberry on his neck, which causes him to shriek with laughter, then puts him down and watches him waddle away toward his mother, who’s just entering with more bags, screen door slamming behind her. On the porch, Hannah is showing Cyrus her thumb trick.

Hannah goes upstairs to unpack, his brother and sister-in-law to establish the kids in their room. He sits with his parents drinking the Coronas the previous guests left in the refrigerator, his dad playing the cheap guitar he travels with.

“Have you been able to do any writing lately?” his dad asks, playing the chords of “The Golden Vanity,” a song he’d sung the author as a child.

“Just this.”

“I wouldn’t be able to write anything right now, either, if I were you,” his mom says. “With so much stress. But I really think you’re going to be O.K.” The author looks at her. “I really do.”
He used to cry at the end of “The Golden Vanity,” when the boy who has managed to sink an enemy ship is left to drown in the ocean by a double-crossing captain, so his dad would improvise additional stanzas for the ballad in which the boy was rescued by a benevolent sea turtle and deposited safely on an island.

His nephews come running down the stairs in their pajamas, hair wet from the bath. His dad starts up a song about his two grandsons and their magical airplane pj’s.

His brother and sister-in-law follow. “Maybe your uncle will tell you a story,” his brother says, opening a beer.

“I know a story about the world’s biggest shark,” the author says. His sister-in-law had told him about Cyrus’s most recent obsession. “But I don’t know if the boys like sharks.” The boys insist loudly that they do.

The boys’ room is empty save for a rickety bunk bed on the off-white carpet, a large red suitcase open on the floor. He hears Hannah showering in the adjacent bathroom. The window is open; he smells the jasmine again. He lies down in the bottom bunk with Theo and stares up at Cyrus’s mattress. Cyrus is sucking audibly on the leg of the small stuffed “piggy” he still won’t sleep without. It takes the author a while to pick up the sound of the surf.

He tells the boys to listen for the waves and then to imagine that this bunk bed is a ship at sea in search of the world’s largest and most vicious shark. What does vicious mean, Cyrus stops sucking long enough to ask. It means mean and ready to eat people up. The moon is high in the sky and you can see its light on the water. We have to be very, very quiet because we don’t want the shark to hear us. We’re sailing out to sea to capture this shark and so we have to look very carefully in the moonlight for its fin. Its dorsal fin, Cyrus contributes from his bunk. That’s right, its dorsal fin, the author whispers, Theo’s hand searching in his shirt.

I see it, the author quietly exclaims, but then he encounters a problem with his tense. He doesn’t know how to continue the story in the present, at least not in a way that would put the boys to sleep as opposed to enlisting their participation in a kind of game. To his surprise, he feels the onset of panic, cold spreading through him. The particularly precocious author can’t handle the formal complexity of the bedtime story. He takes a long pull on the beer, which doesn’t help. The author is having difficulty ordering his speech.
He takes four deep, deliberate breaths, counting them out as Roberts suggests. Theo imitates him, inflating his little chest. This happens to him several times a day, this sudden fear that symptoms are presenting. Now that we’ve spotted the shark, the author resumes, let’s put down the anchor of our boat and I’ll tell you all about him. He’s reassured by the sound of his own voice—no audible tremor. There once was a shark named Sam, who was thought vicious but ultimately proved to be brave and kind when he saved a family whose ship was sinking, et cetera. And he led the family to a sunken treasure, although Theo was asleep by then.

The author opened the door to his room. Hannah was towel-drying her hair in front of a long mirror, the reflection of her face blocked by her body, though she could see him. “I’ll be right down,” she said.

Downstairs he found the last Corona and joined the others. He was surprised to feel drunk already.

“We’re thinking of going to the beach,” his brother said.

“The old folks are going to bed,” his dad said. His mom was already in their room. He had no idea what time it was.

“Come with us,” his sister-in-law said.

He yelled up to Hannah to join them when she could. His brother found a bottle of red wine in a kitchen cabinet. They opened it and walked out back and across the moonlit gravel to a path that led around another bungalow and down to the beach. The path was covered in crushed shells and surrounded by low trees, mangroves probably. Small things fled their steps in the dark, lizards or insects. Then they emerged onto the beach and he was stunned by the panoramic sky, the impossible number of stars. The sand was brighter than he expected, glowing, and they walked midway to the water and sat down on it, passing the bottle between them.

There were a few small fires along the beach where people were camping. They tried to remember the last time they’d been on a beach together. Had it been ten years ago in Barcelona? No, there had been a wedding in L.A.

Then his brother asked, “Where’s Ari? Did she go to bed already or is she coming?” They heard what could have been the slamming of a screen door in the distance, and his brother said, “That must be her.”
But the author said, “She isn’t in this story.” He thought his speech sounded a little slurred, his voice issuing from far away. He heard laughter, and turned and saw the embers of cigarettes on the balcony of one of the beachfront condos.

“Why not?” his sister-in-law asked with disappointment.

He picked up the bottle his brother had screwed into the sand and drank. It took him a long time to say he didn't know how to explain it, that if he knew how to explain it she would be walking toward them now, not Hannah. I've divided myself into two people. A cut across worlds. Footfall on gravel, then crushed shells, silence when she reached the sand.

There was the sound of clapping from the condo, and he turned back to see that someone had launched a balloon from the balcony. No, a lantern, an illuminated red paper globe, probably a threat to sea life. It floated slowly past them and out over the water. From their respective present tenses, they all watched the same turbulent point.

The day of the extractions, he had taken the train with Liza to the office on Madison Avenue near Central Park. They rode the elevator to the twenty-eighth floor. He signed in with the receptionist, and he and Liza hung up their coats and sat down in the cramped waiting room. He was embarrassed to admit how nervous he was, but Liza knew it, and reassured him by making gentle fun of him, asking if he had any manuscripts she should burn if he didn’t “pull through.”

It wasn't long before a nurse called his name and he passed through the door beside the receptionist and was led to a windowless room. He tried to make himself comfortable in the chair as the nurse took his blood pressure and remarked on the weather and then placed some kind of monitor on his ankle. Soon a muscular male nurse in purple scrubs entered with an I.V. stand, untangled and attached various wires, and cleaned his arm with alcohol. The dentist appeared, smiled at the I.V., and said in his Romanian accent, “Do I really scare you that much.” The male nurse finished setting up the I.V., left, and returned with a stand of tools that he wheeled in front of the dentist. The author looked away while the first nurse sank a needle into his vein.

He was in the middle of asking the dentist how long the procedure would take when he realized he was hearing his voice from far away; he left the question unfinished. That was because he was also walking with Liza in the park explaining how he had been right to elect the twilight sedation, late light filtering through the lindens. He knew he was still in the chair and at one point heard the
dentist ask, pausing the drill, if he was O.K., heard himself grunt affirmatively, but he was also explaining to his mom on the phone that the procedure had turned out to be a non-event. He was suffused with warmth; the universe was benevolent, the lamp positioned to shine into his mouth was the nourishing sun. He knew it wasn't but it also was, and then the dentist was saying, “All done.” He had no idea if five minutes or an hour had passed. He realized the first nurse was giving him instructions and he became aware of gauze in his mouth when he said, “Yes, yes.” Then he followed her to the waiting room without feeling the floor beneath him and watched but did not listen as she repeated the instructions to Liza, who thanked her and helped him into his coat.

The dazzling sun cleared his head a little, and by the time they were in a cab his sense of time had stabilized, but he was still so thoroughly suspended in the warm glow of the drugs that he experienced the sudden starting and stopping of the taxi while they inched their way east as a gentle rocking motion. He felt no pain, and only the awareness that his tongue was numb was vaguely uncomfortable, reminding him of the wounds packed with gauze. Had Liza been talking this whole time? He turned and faced her as they merged onto the F.D.R. Drive, and she looked beautiful, her arms raised to pull her light-brown hair into a ponytail; he watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed, saw the thin gold necklace she always wore against her perfect collarbone. Then without transition he was looking at the skyline of lower Manhattan, the buildings growing larger and more detailed as the taxi approached, though he was not aware of moving. Then he was aware of moving at an impossibly smooth rate, and there was the Brooklyn Bridge, cablework sparkling. Liza was cursing at the little touch-screen television in the taxi, which she couldn't seem to turn off, and he reached out a hand to help her and experienced contact with the glass as a marvel, like encountering solidified, sensate air. Then he was smoothing her hair back and she was laughing at this uncharacteristic intimacy, something he'd done only a few times in their six years. Now the view again, and it occurred to him with the force of revelation:

I won't remember this. This is the most beautiful view of the city I have ever seen, the most perfect experience of touch and speed, I've never felt so close to Liza, and I won't remember it; the drugs will erase it. And then, glowing with the aura of imminent disappearance, it really was the most beautiful view, experience. He wanted badly to describe this situation to Liza but couldn’t: his tongue was still numb; he couldn't even ask her to remind him of what the drugs would erase. While he was distantly aware that Liza would tease him for it later, that he was being ridiculous, he felt tears start in his eyes as they merged onto the bridge and he watched the play of late-October sunlight on the water. That he would form no memory of what he observed and could not
record it in any language lent it a fullness, made it briefly identical to itself, and he was deeply
moved to think this experience of presence depended upon its obliteration. Then he was in his
apartment; Liza gave him a couple of pills, put him to bed, and left.

He woke around midnight and felt like himself. His jaw ached a little. He pissed, changed the
russet-colored, saturated gauze, and took another painkiller with a full glass of water. He texted
Liza and also Josh, who had asked how it all went. He smiled at how much time he’d wasted
ruminating about the extractions; it was nothing. He streamed an episode of “The Wire” on his
laptop and fell asleep.

When he got out of bed late the next morning and had his coffee—iced so as not to disrupt the
clotting—he realized: I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza’s hair, the incommunicable
beauty destined to disappear. I remember it, which means it never happened. ♦

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