

THE GROUNDHOG

(from *A Just God*, 1982)

For Carol

Dear – ,

I'm writing this letter in an odd pocket of time – which you've probably guessed, since a letter scratched in tiny print on the torn-out end papers of a book must look as desperate as a note floated in a bottle. The fact is, I've written many letters in my life just like this one, but never mailed any of them. I'm not sure they count as messages. They've always been written in the empty pages in the fronts and backs of books, and always under the same circumstances: when I'm sitting in a plane waiting for take-off.

You see, I'm at the Chicago airport right now and we are moving away from the terminal to get in line for the runway. It's 8:10 p.m., Monday the 4th of February. (I always note the date and time in these letters.) The sky is clear. A light snow is on the ground, blowing and sparkling. It's ten below zero.

You and I have never talked about flying (we've had so little time to talk about anything), but the preparation for take-off and the first five minutes or so of the climb always play such hell with me that it's almost habit by now to scribble a note like this to a friend – by way of a Last Testament, I suppose. Even knowing that if anything *did* go wrong, the Testament wouldn't last. That's why I said these letters don't count as messages. Since they're written *as if* I'll never again see the person they're written to, I can say all; since they're limited to whatever blank

pages there are in whatever book I'm carrying, I have to be succinct. Mortality dictates the content, limited resources the form. When I'm airborne I can feel free to dispose of the results.

I don't know what you could have made of the cryptic message I left on your answering machine last week, telling you I was leaving town. If you've called my office, someone probably told you that I had to leave abruptly because of a family emergency. My mother called me, you see, to say that my father dying...

You remember (it was only two weeks ago!) our first night together, when my sister called to say that my father had had a heart attack. All was well, though: the attack had been mild and he was "stabilized." That was the word she used over and over again. "Mom says not to worry. He's stabilized." (The captain has just come over the loudspeaker to say we're 15th in line for take-off.) How odd it was to return to you in bed after my sister's call. I didn't want to cast a pall over our first night together; didn't want to seem to be showing off "sensitivity," as it's so easy to do under such circumstances, buying affection cheap. But suddenly telling you seemed the most natural thing in the world.

We lay a long time quiet, you recall. Your skin felt remarkably cool. Your hand lay on my back... Could you hear my heart crumpling like a piece of paper? If I had not already fallen in love with you, I might have fallen in love with you then – but for the wrong reasons. There are enough delicate springs in any new relationship without one side basing its affection on a blocked artery in a third party's heart.

Love and disasters make me see omens everywhere. Just having met you I began reading portents of our relationship around me: in the constellation of spots on a glass, in the color of a doorman's coat, in the hieroglyphic twirl of a loose thread on a sleeve.

But other, more sinister omens kept intruding. In a single day, my kitchen and bathroom sink *and* my bathtub drain stopped up. I sat down after work one day to write my father a letter and my typewriter had a seizure: I looked down at the page when I'd finished a paragraph and all my thoughts seem to have been cast into Serbo-Croatian. I went into the next office. The typewriter there had no ribbon...

I knew from the omens that something was up. The Something crystallized last Thursday morning, when my mother called me at work, asking me to come home as soon as I could – in fact, “*before nightfall*” if I could. That was how I asked for a ticket when I called the airline. “I have to fly to Chicago,” I said, “and arrive *before nightfall*.” The woman on the other end didn't seem to think it strange for me to put it that way. My mother had said my father's condition had deteriorated, his heart had failed, and they had had to “jolt” him to get it started again.

So I was not surprised when the ticketer said to me, “We'll have to wait a moment, sir. *The machine is down and I can't get a reading.*”

“It'll be up in a second,” I said. And so it was. The machine came back and I said, “It only needed a jolt.”

I had to run back to my apartment, pack a bag, and make it to the airport for a 2:30 flight. But after I had gotten to my apartment, do you know what I did? I cleaned the place. Even with so little time I rinsed the few dishes left from breakfast, wiped them and put them away; scoured the bathroom sink; swept the kitchen floor; straightened some fallen books; sent the trash down the chute. Not for busy-work but because I thought: if he dies, you will not be the same person when you walk back in here. I was cleaning for a guest, then; a sort of blind date with myself. The I who left would not be the I coming back.

The Steinberg card you sent me of a man and a woman dancing in a living room was on my dresser. On the back, in your hand: “When is our next dinner?” I thrust the card into my inside jacket pocket. A man and a woman cheek to cheek in a living room seemed a good talisman. Let them keep dancing, I thought; let the question of future dinners stay open.

I was the last person onto the plane. They practically shut the hatch on my heels and we were taxiing onto the field while I was still strapping myself in. Good, I thought; the pilot knows we have to beat nightfall. The sight of the terminal passing away on the left, the light bump of the wheels made me grope for my pen and the book I’d bought on the fly at the airport. (Something called *Supper Of The Lamb*. Turned out to be a cookbook by a priest.) But I had gotten no further than “Dear Dad” on an empty back page when we took off, and I laid the book aside. Besides – I was enjoying that feeling of placid invulnerability that comes at the extremes of joy and sadness. I felt absolutely certain the plane wouldn’t crash – as if my father’s critical condition had guaranteed my safety. As if he were a hostage keeping me alive.

Nevertheless, I managed to dispatch three gins on the way.

In the window seat (I was on the aisle), an Asian woman was nursing her baby. She looked to be Cambodian, and didn’t even have enough English to recognize the words “coffee” or “Coca Cola” when the stewardess came by with drinks. She stared at the stewardess with baffled calm. I liked the woman immediately. I liked her valor in the face of a world of indecipherables, and I liked her own indecipherability. She said to the stewardess: “*Wa.*” The stewardess poured her a glass of water. I couldn’t tell from her face if that was what the woman had wanted, but she accepted it.

(The plane I’m actually on right now just lurched, and we’ve begun speeding down the runway for take-off.)

My brother-in-law met me to take me to the hospital. We had to drive out of the city to my parents' town over a dead space 60 miles long and as flat as a table. Snow had fallen the preceding night; that flattened everything still more, ironed out the land like a crisp clean sheet. Those bare trees seemed to have thrown up their hands.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Hanging on," my brother-in-law said.

He described an operation of some kind which the doctors had performed on my father that afternoon. My ears were still plugged from the flight, though, and the details escaped me except that my father had not been expected to last the time on the table.

"He hung on, though," my brother-in-law said. "And that's a sign. That's *certainly* a sign..." We were silent for a while, and then he said, "Your father just told us today that he's been having small heart attacks for two years, and never told anybody. Can you believe that?"

I did believe it, but didn't say anything.

The last mental picture I had had of my father was of him running behind a lawn mower in his yard the summer before. But when I walked into his hospital room and saw him, I didn't believe this could be the same person – could not even be the same *object*, this gasping bellows sprouting tubes in all directions. I thought of those potatoes that roll out of sight on the shelf until you move something aside and find a grotesque undersea-like thing, the eyes gone out as roots and the roots clutching like tentacles. A clear plastic mask hung over the bottom half of his face, a plastic bag attached to it inflating and crumpling as he breathed. His head was like the knob on a sewing dummy. At the bottom of the bed his thin shanks stuck out from under the blanket, cased in unblemished white elastic stockings and all out of place, as if the elegant legs of an 18th-century fop had somehow found their way into this picture. He seemed to be asleep.

Some woman seated beside the bed let go of his hand and came toward me. It was my mother. Her hair was standing all about her head, gray and frizzled. I felt an impulse to laugh, to say, “Stuck your finger in a socket?” – which is what *she* used to say to me when I’d appear with my hair uncombed. But she had put her arms around me and whispered, “I’m glad you could come.” A grim party hostess. The impulse to laugh abandoned me. I felt solemn and unreal. I almost said, “I made it before nightfall” – to show I had fulfilled my part. What I said was, “I got the earliest flight I could.” She nodded, but only absently, already turning back to the bed.

My father’s eyes came open and looked right at me. At first there was nothing. Then I saw how his body let go when he recognized me. He said something into his mask and its inside surface clouded, beading over.

“Hi, Pop,” I said.

I had known from the start that that was what I would say. It was how I had addressed him when I was a boy, how I had stopped addressing him when the enmity of adolescence had come on, and how I had lately started addressing him again – to bridge that enmity, or retract it. He lifted one finger. I took his hand.

“Don’t talk,” someone said behind me – a nurse.

My father struggled for breath, staring at me from behind doped eyes. I realized that my very presence there was a bad omen. He had to know that I was only standing there because he was dying. I was not comfortable playing a death figure, and my face cracked open into a horrible grin, a grotesque *memento mori*. His hand slid out of mine.

“He’s sleeping,” the nurse said, a ghoulish sportscaster at this match. “With what he’s on, he’ll sleep for four hours.” She recited a litany of pills. That relieved me, as if he was invulnerable to death for four hours until the medications wore off.

My mother had gotten the doctor's permission to sit for however long she wanted, and had been staying all night with my father, every night, holding his hand and talking to him if he woke up, to calm him. (The nurse said to me, "Your mother has heart enough for two.") We are not a *discussing* family, and she did not ever talk about his condition – or her own – except to say, "His pulse rate is better now," or "He had a bad dream during his nap," or "He got to have eggnog with his lunch today."

She would leave him in the morning (that is, when morning was reported, since there were no windows in the hospital for a hundred feet, and nightfall or daybreak was hearsay), when my sister or I would take over the watch. My sister did not wake up on time one morning, tired from the going to and fro, and my mother simply sat another three hours. At home, she would breakfast, shower, sleep until noon or one, and go back to feed him his lunch. She would leave him again at suppertime, then return at about nine to stay the night at the hospital. *And she always dressed to go there.* The first time we were leaving her house I saw that she had brushed out her hair and put on fresh lipstick. I nearly asked, "What's the occasion?"

While my father slept that first evening, my mother and I went to the hospital cafeteria for supper. My mother talked about the other patients in intensive care, her eyes continually roving among the doctors and nurses at the tables around us. In a way I was disappointed; somehow I had always expected that such Grand Events would change us, turn us into a *discussing* family. But they never have. When my sister got divorced, I only heard about it a month after it was all over. It was never mentioned again. I went out with a girl in college for a couple of years whom my family were very fond of; about a month after we'd broken up my mother asked me, "How's Sally?" and I said, "We're not seeing each other anymore." She

nodded. That was it. Sally's name has never been heard from any of us since. That's our family: we hear, we nod, we acknowledge the Event and leave ourselves to our private darks.

The whole extended family is this way – my aunts and uncles, cousins, everyone. At gatherings we do not talk about family, or about ourselves. The conversation is as general as it would be among neighbors at a backyard gathering – maybe more general. When you are not of a discussing family and are perhaps more opaque to each other than members of other families, such determination as my mother showed in spending twelve and sixteen hours a day at my father's bedside seems all the more mystifying, since its springs are so hidden. I would see her there at his bed holding his hand for *hours*, staring at his face as if to divine something out of it, and I would ask myself, what is this? Is it love? Habit? Fear of loss?

If my parents live to be 108, I shall not really know or understand them. I will have *met* them. I think that this has made each of us something of a mystery to each other. Hence the suspicion of omens everywhere. Hence search for clues. Hence the way I pour myself out in doom letters written on planes, letters not meant to be mailed, letters meant to remain a mystery to everyone but me the writer.

Don't let me be a mystery to you, love.

I sat at the bed while my mother went home for the evening. My father woke several times, seemed unaware of me, drifted back to sleep. They had taken off his watch, and each time he woke he'd lift his arm and stare at the spot where it had been. This his other hand would encircle the wrist and chafe the spot, as if he were a magician conjuring a watch there.

My own watch might as well have been off, too. Going in and out to visit over the next couple of days I lost the sense of the gradualness of time, of its patient tenderness in shifting from light to light to shade. There were a few minutes of clear light at morning on the way out to

the car, a blast of sun at noon, a gray wash when I came out at evening. Clocks were replaced by the machines measuring pulse and heat pressure, time by the hypnotic flick of cryptic figures on the various machines around the bed. Sitting there so long you found yourself mesmerized by the orange digital numbers that flashed continuously or the green lines that etched my father's inner topography on screens, panning across the peaks and valleys of his heart. Outside and inside got confused with his functions on display everywhere. As if looking at those screens you were looking at the end of some taproot he'd put out.

"Don't look there," my father would say. It bothered him that people coming looked to the machines even before they looked at him.

"Don't you ever read the figures?" I asked him.

He said, "I don't even want to know what's there."

My mother relieved me at ten o'clock. I took her keys, drove to her house, and watched a late showing of *Gimme Shelter* on television while I got drunk in a chair. When they take the film back to show the killing a second time, the blade flashing down, I turned off the set. I dialed your number but hung up before it had even rung. Is it silence in our family, or decorousness? I thought it would be *unseemly* to speak with you then.

When I arrived at the hospital the next morning my sister told me that the cardiogram had changed again overnight, and now the doctor wanted to put in a temporary pacemaker. I saw the doctor in the corridor.

"What are the chances that he'll last through this?" I asked.

"Not very good," the doctor said, and walked away. (A doctor after our family's heart.) So my mother did not go home for her rest, but waited while they took him down for this new piece of machinery to be hooked up.

Unlike the day before, I wasn't seeing my father when things were all over, but at the front edge of events. The doctor said each of us could go in for five minutes and then the nurses would take him downstairs "and we'll get to work on him." I waited at the door while my sister went in. A moment later one of my father's nurses walked up to me and pointed at my eyes and said, "You can't go in there with those tears. Wipe them away."

Do you remember the last time we talked you quoted Henry James? It was the moment in *Portrait of a Lady* when Ralph says that the reason for death is to teach the living the value of life. We never feel so much as when we're watching others dying, he says; that's the feeling of being alive, the sense that we remain... Now that I have seen my father in that bed waiting to have a plumbline dropped into his heart, knowing that he might only have ten or twenty or thirty more minutes of life, I can only say I felt remote then from *any* value in life. I had no sense that I remain. Or I had a sense that *I* would "remain." I was being left behind. My father was going on someplace, heading into some unreachable region, and I could not see much value in staying. If anything, there was only a sense that we here left behind *go on* – uselessly. There's more of the value of life in your little finger than in any scaffold of dead men's bones.

My father did not say anything to me when I went in. He only looked at me. I had to work to meet his eyes. We had nothing to talk about, or say. I probably didn't even stay for the full five minutes. He lifted his hand, pointing at something, I thought. Then I realized he wanted to shake hands, and I took the hand and held it for a moment, a partner in some grim deal in which we were both aware of being cheated.

My mother went in with the chaplain, a round pinkfaced man in a cheap toupee. Obviously the comic relief. To be shriven and given last rites by a clown – is it cause for hope or despair?

“His pulse rate went down after Father anointed him,” my mother said as she and my sister and I went to the waiting room. There was only one other person there, a woman watching a quiz show. After we had been there a few minutes the woman turned to me abruptly and said, “He won ten thousand dollars yesterday.” “Yes?” I said, puzzled. She pointed to the screen. “*Him*,” she said. “He is *really something*.” I watched the man in question closely. Bells rang, lights flashed. The woman applauded the screen. “Attaboy!” she cried.

In the chair next to mine my mother woke up. From under half-closed eyelids she looked at the woman, then at the screen, where the extraordinary man was holding his hands clasped over his head in victory. Dollar signs flashed across his face. She settled her head and went back to sleep. Some soap operas came on.

A doctor came in and said, “Looks good.” My mother raised her head instantly at the sound of his voice, staring with dream-anaesthetized eyes. He nodded to her; the news got through. She gathered herself and rose and led my sister and me back to the silent fray down the hall.

So it was. Up and down that sunless corridor. My mother was so familiar in the place that no one even questioned us either at the desk downstairs or at the various nurses’ stations along the way. There was a magical feeling of invisibility, of walking through not doors but walls – my sister and I tagging behind my mother as we used to do as children, but now like shades on tour, pulled by my mother’s strength.

My father stayed low all afternoon, but by evening seemed to pick up, and even talked in snatches. I had not yet gotten used to him still being there. It seemed odd for someone in had practically written off the day before to be asking where I had gotten my jacket, or what the weather was like. Odd for a dead man to ask to have the sports page read to him. Such banal

topics seemed not only interesting suddenly, but *vital*, now that he glowed with the light of something rare, of survival. I had the feeling that if all the lights had been turned out I could have read the sports page by the light my father cast.

The omens and portents had not stopped. Before supper that evening I turned on the news in the waiting room just in time to see the newscaster look slyly into the camera and say, “Well, folks, that’s the news. But the big question for tonight is: Will the groundhog see his shadow tomorrow?”

I nearly jumped out of my chair.

“Good God!” I said. “Let’s hope he sees *something!*”

I proposed to stay the night with my mother. When we headed out the door at about ten o’clock, I was stopped in my tracks, stunned by the immense black downs of sky reaching over the flatness and whiteness of the snowfields. There seemed to be too *much* sky, allotted to too little earth. A moon was whistling in all that blackness, and the stars looked like waterdrops that had just been sprayed into it, frozen and glistening at the tops of their arcs. Living in a city had tricked me into thinking I was substantial. Now my mother and I stood looking up, evaporating into the cold.

“Have to go,” she said, and walked quickly away over the crunching snow and started the car.

(The wheels have stopped their beat. – We are tilted. – We are aloft.)

My father was awake when we arrived, lying in a kind of twilight with all the lights off, my sister in the chair beside the bed. They did not notice us coming up to the door, and from the way my sister was bent close speaking to him I thought that the reserves had broken down and that they were now *discussing*, saying things of import, in the confessional gloom. She even had

her hand in his. But as we came in the door I heard her murmuring, "...with the meat loaf I had some beans with sliced almonds, not very good. Fruit cocktail for dessert..." He was listening intently; his eyes even put us off for a moment so that he could hear the end of the menu. The mundane topics of conversation must have taken on a certain luminosity for him as well as us.

(I realize that my sister is a shadowy figure haunting this letter. But that's just, I think. For such is the way we in my family hug the walls and shadows of each other's lives. In a way, I hope I have not made anyone too *vivid* for you. It would be untrue to the way we only *imply* our inner substance to each other.)

In the night underneath me, Chicago is passing away like a scattering of glowworms fixed where the lake falls off into space. I know this part of the flight: once we're up I start to feel a kind of manic exultation, an overpowering, undirected gratitude – or rather, a gratitude directed everywhere, at everything. I know that the feeling will stay with me until we've landed, and I know that I'll feel an urge to go up and down the line at the airport and shake hands with everyone in sight. Just for being there. I think that human beings (and all else?) must have an implanted sense of gratitude, an invisible thread in the chromosomal cable linking us to all that's been and all that's to come, and that that's the religious sense in humankind: not the need for some bearded Nobodaddy in the clouds to direct or stay our animal urges and oversee our fates, but an intense desire just to *thank* somebody or something for letting us in on all this.

To finish the hospital: my sister went home and my mother and I took up the guard.

Almost immediately the heat of his room and its airlessness made themselves felt. I took off my sweater and stationed myself by the open door, where I hoped some sort of wind current might reach me from outside. My father had been given his sleeping pill. I watched his eyes, fixed uncertainly on me, bat their way into sleep. I thought of you in your own night, a thousand

miles away. I wondered whether my time away had scotched what you and I had begun, thought of all the things that could have intervened and unhinged it. O Western wind when wilt thou blow... I felt as if in my mind I were looking at my wrist for a watch that wasn't there.

The heat in the place seemed to get worse. I realized that I had begun to sweat. Soon my head queased, the room tilted forward then leaned back, and I thought I was about to fall to the deck. I gripped the sides of my chair, ready for a squall that my mother, in her chair, was blithely ignoring. Canvas flapped near my ears – a starchy nurse creaking by. I folded my hands in my lap, finding that they had turned to a kind of clammy dough. Now I did look at my watch and saw that I had only...seven hours to go.

I whispered to my mother that I was going to get a drink of water, went down the hall to the bathroom, and threw up. Several minutes later I returned to his room and calmly seated myself. I was determined that my mother would not know I was sick. (*No discussing.*) A bit later I went down the hall, threw up again, then restationed myself in the room. And so I did about every forty-five minutes or an hour. And each time I came back to my chair I could think about nothing except how long I would hold out until my next trip to the bathroom. My mother dozed off in her chair... I knew that men with pregnant wives sometimes had sympathy pains, but not men with heart-afflicted fathers! I thought of those other, smaller attacks he had been having that he had not told anyone about. I thought of my mother, and how she had kept an ulcer secret until she collapsed when it perforated. The doctor said to her, "But haven't you been having any pain all this time?" "Pain?" she said. "Of course there was pain."

Next thing I knew, my mother was shaking my arm, saying it was time to go. I woke in my chair feeling as if I were surrounded by lightless sunlamps. "It's time to go," she said. I said

something that sounded like “Hum.” Didn’t move. My sister was staring at me funnily. “Sorry I fell asleep,” I said, trying to rise, unsuccessfully. My mother’s hand icepacked my forehead.

“You’re burning up,” she said. My brain rolled forward in my head like sacks of potatoes. Someone helped me out of the room, and home.

I slept for 21 hours on a bed of hot embers. A layer of ash formed; then cooled; and hardened; and I woke. That was yesterday morning just before dawn. I lay and watched my old childhood room lengthen and compose itself, filling with light. First a scratchy, shifting glow and then a smooth blueness and then candescent day, white and intense from the snow outside. My mother came in from the hospital soon after, looking in the door. “Much better,” she said – whether referring to my father or me I couldn’t tell. By afternoon, whatever hit me had passed off and I went with her to see him.

And my father? This morning he looked better than I felt, though he hardly the strength to tease a tissue out of its box.

“No reason for you to stick around here,” he said. “You’ve got work.”

He was probably eager to see me gone, since my departure would be a hopeful omen for him. And I did not feel as though I were surrendering him. After all, he had beaten the omens. Or had shown me that our eyes are not good enough to read them. What I expected did not come to pass. So the moral of the story remains unknown.

Will you ever see this letter?

Love,

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