

Gabriel Sage

In Full Detail

The early morning light was a deep purple, the color of bruises. It was dawn, and the sun was still buried beneath a horizon crumbling in the far off distance, although bits of stark orange were slowly bending into view. I leaned over the steering wheel to let my lower back lengthen, and warm air from my car's windshield defroster blew into my face. I put my glasses on and the blue lenses shifted my vision monochromatically sapphire; the details through my windshield became vibrantly worth writing about. The interstate carrying me south to Los Angeles lay flat and eventually disappeared with the curvature of the earth. On each side of the road I could make out creases in the small mountains, folds of rock preserving shadows hiding themselves from the incipient amber burn. Above me, the clouds seemed somehow strange, all wispy at the bottom and solid on top. I tried to think how I would describe them—the way their density broke in reverse—and decided on the appearance of being upside down or maybe inverted. Watching them made me feel as if the entire sky had been flipped over, and I was driving across the firmament changing between azure lanes, looking into an asphalt atmosphere where a few broken-glass stars clung to the last bits of darkened strata. It was fitting, and as I blinked perspective back, the world remained capsized, or maybe inverted.

The dashboard clock read 6:23. L.A. was three hundred miles away. The car swayed and made my keys in the ignition click rhythmically together. A ramshackle fence of barbed-wire flanked the road. Behind it the occasional horse lipped the grassy ground and an invariably broken down car with no wheels sat on its skeletal chassis. When I rolled down the window, the cold air was damp with water vapor. It clung to the inside of the car. With the cruise control engaged, my feet lay unoccupied on the heel-worn floor mat. As the sun came fully up, horizontal light made long reaching shadows of everything vertical. A hangnail on the ring-finger of my left hand caught in the dimply, honey-comb-pattern fabric of the door panel. I picked at it with my thumb, turning my hand into a poorly executed okay-sign. It was a Tuesday, and my dad had just begun radiation for the cancer in his abdomen.

About an hour later, I pulled into a gas station to get fuel and coffee. As the nozzle gently shook in the mouth of the tank, I opened the trunk and took a notebook and pen from my pack. I wanted to get something down about those clouds before I forgot. The ballpoint hovered above the page as my mind settled, then fell across it in

adjectival scrawling. I have always liked the scratching sound of an inky nib strumming clean paper—it's like the white noise of writing. When I finished and looked up, the pump was static, the fuel dispenser was exhorting beeps concerning my receipt, and I had missed a call from my dad.

When I called him back, his voice sounded strained and brittle. "Hey. Are you on the road yet?"

"I am. Just stopped to get gas actually. Shouldn't you still be asleep?"

"Yeah, but I had to get out of bed. I'm too nauseous to lay flat, so I came to my office to sit. Maybe you can make me some tea when you get here."

"Of course, but Pops, I'm four hours away still."

"That's alright. I'll just wait right here."

For the rest of the drive, I didn't stop or look up at the sky again.

When I did get to his house, I let myself in. As I pushed the front door open, the rubber weather strip hissed air like a vacuum seal releasing on some kind of cryogenic laboratory; something I had seen (heard) happen before at his house after initially entering from being gone for a week or more with all the windows closed. It had only been two weeks since I had been here, since the radiation treatment had started, but when I stepped inside I knew immediately things were different. The details were all off, and while most people wouldn't have noticed, I know my dad, and Pops doesn't let the details slide. Where his gray athletic shoes were usually arranged by the door, there wasn't so much of a careless pile, as an unenthusiastic stagger, as if they had been placed there by someone who couldn't bend down properly. The waist-high bookshelf wasn't cluttered, just speckled with knotted plastic bags and some half-empty water bottles. Sitting on the coffee table were a few days' worth of newspapers, stacked but still folded and tied with white-plastic string. The top one dated from last week. There were get well cards on the piano and one that had fallen onto the ground, either unnoticed or too inconvenient to pick up. There was also an alien and inscrutable smell that I ignored and pulled my bags through—something I would have to give words to later in my notebook.

I entered his office, and Pops was sitting back in his Havana-leather chair with his feet up, just where he said he would be. The television was showing a muted black and white movie. Pops had his eyes closed but opened them as I stepped in. He looked like he had lost more weight than could be counted in pounds on both hands. His expression was slack-jawed and exhausted, skin a waxed almost translucent pallor. Empty glasses and waded tissues besieged him. The

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guy on screen was wearing a double-breasted trench coat you could tell was taupe and must have been playing a detective. A gasper hung from his lip. When Pops spoke nothing moved but a slight hinging of his mouth. “You’re here.”

“In the flesh. How are you feeling?”

“Lousy. The radiation is really knocking me out.”

“When did that start? You haven’t mentioned it on the phone.”

“Recently I guess. I didn’t want to distract you from your school work and writing.”

The guy in the trench coat was talking to a woman in a small hat, but without volume he was just fervently pantomiming. They were in an apartment and kept looking around the room for something. I gave Pops a hug and noticed the smell from earlier, only stronger. He tapped my back in the embrace.

“Well, have you told your doctor about the nausea?”

“Yeah, he prescribed me Zofran.”

“Is it helping?”

“I’m not sure. I keep throwing it up.”

Pops was talking to me with his eyes closed, lids and lashes making fluttery exerted pulses under the compression of a concerned forehead. He had a blanket over him that protruded against his distended stomach, a sweatshirt hung in folds from his shoulders. Looking at his torso, I was overwhelmed with a surreal sense of sickening mystery. The notion of something—some engorged asymmetrical mutation of cellular disarray, dire and tumoral and grisly—sitting right there hidden just beneath his skin, was unsettling. Perhaps worst of all was the prognostic reticence. The hard-swallowed reality that there were no tangible pathologic answers, and other than the current course of irradiating everything in his abdominal cavity, all we could do was wait for the scheduled surgery and see what they would find.

The guy in the trench coat and the woman in the small hat were really tearing the apartment apart: dismantling the sofa, lobbing desk drawers, taking picture frames off the wall. Finally, after tipping over a roll-up bureau with a silent crash, a wall-safe was unearthed. Pops was sort of dozing with his mouth open and his head back as if he were washing shampoo from his hair. A bucket with a nacreous residue of phlegm and chyme sat on the floor next to him. I picked it up and gathered the glasses and errant tissues into it. The trench coat had been hiding a pistol that was now in the guy’s hand, and with a couple noiseless pyrotechnic blasts, the safe door swung open. The conclusive piece to the cinematic puzzle had been discovered, no doubt. I took the bucket into the kitchen, emptied and cleaned it, and put a tea-kettle over a burner on the stove. When I got back to his office the movie

was off and Pops was sitting over in his chair, leaning forward into his knees. I gave him the empty bucket, and he filled it back up.

The next day I rose before the sun again to take Pops to his radiation appointment at UCLA. The house was cold with a thin morning-chill and dark enough that I had to turn on a light to get dressed. I walked into the living room, and the wall-heater was clicking on with Pops facing it, standing so close he looked like he was trying to climb inside through one of the small slanted grates. The thought amused me, and I deliberated between *slanted* or *angled* as better diction, figuring I should probably write them both down either way. I have always been absorbed in chronicling the details so I could write about them later—trying to keep a record of the minutiae that is easily forgotten. Perhaps even more so in the terror of desperate times. Knowing that a moment could fit into my notebook and become a story, an essay, a poem, made it easier to move past. Everything became detached and distanced. Incidental data stockpiled for eventual interpretation. It was also the point of detachment. Where I became estranged from the things and people around me, focused more on documenting than participating. My tendency is to let all kinds of relationships attenuate and break. Girlfriends, guy friends, friends that are girls, a long chunk of time with my mother. I collect the experiences, and if people get hurt, I watch the pain like it is something pressed between glass slides under a microscope. Everyone may be the star of their own movie, but the scriptwriter is often somewhere else entirely, alone with a pen, trying to imitate real life as best they can.

I noticed that Pops had turned around and was finishing a sentence directed at me, his gaunt expression anticipating a response.

“Sorry. What?”

“I said, ‘I’d like to leave soon in case there’s any traffic.’”

“How soon is soon?”

“Like ten or fifteen minutes. I was about to come and wake you up.”

“I thought the appointment was for seven-thirty?”

“It is.”

“But it’s just after six.”

“...”

“Okay. Ten-or-fifteen-minutes-soon.”

“Thank you.”

We drove in silence, and when we got to the hospital, we were thirty minutes early. Pops was still unresolvedly cold, and we had the heater on and the windows up. I found a place to park, and we sat quietly in the torrid climate. Pops closed his eyes briefly and let his head fall into shampoo-rinsing posture. I took out my blue-lens glasses.

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They weren't prescription or even sunglasses, just simple black frames with a lightly-tinted lens. I use them to help me see the detail of my surroundings in new ways—to help me turn a scene into poetry. I put them on and looked around through the wash of blue: the annular smudges on my windshield formed intersecting arcs just outside the reach of the wiper-blades; a pigeon nested comfortably in the curve of a red stop-light; a familiar green awning (now a dark cyan) heralding corporate coffee snapped smartly in the wind; someone in a tracksuit and athletic shoes jay-ran across the street with pattering footsteps; a slight flickering movement rose and fell in my dad's throat as he breathed.

Pops opened his eyes and checked the time, turning only at the neck to face me. His skin a sort of pallid turquoise.

“Okay, here is the plan . . .”

Only I didn't hear the plan; because as soon as the aspiration from the word *okay* crossed the enamel threshold of his teeth, I at once recognized the peculiar aroma from the house yesterday and discovered its insidious source. Intensified in the vehicular swelter, the cancer, angrily shifting in his viscera, was clawing up and out through his esophagus, into the air. I could actually smell the sickness festering. Fetid and unnatural and sour. The odor of rot and decay. Of death. A pungent smell that was at once sharp and dull, ghastly and replete. Unlike anything else. I imagined it as some kind of reaper-like bird of prey, with slick black feathers that always looked wet and something skin-colored clutched in its talons—the obsidian of its eyes depthless and unforgiving, the beak wrenched into a sort of gaping grin, pulled back hysterically and exposing in its center the dark rot of disease.

“ . . . then just find somewhere else to park, I'll call you when I'm done, and you can meet me at the front of the building.”

The bird reeked from inside of him.

After I dropped him off, I immediately began rolling descriptors of aviary redolence through my mind, wondering if I had paper and pen stashed in the glovebox. But before I could check, a guilt overcame me. A flash of chest-caving disappointment accompanied by the warm facial tingle of moving blood. I was doing it again. Absconding into my imagination, hiding behind a blue and purple wall of imagery, scent and texture. While my old man was in the midst of defending the delicate front-gastro-lines against civil invaders, in an invisible war within himself, I was distracted by syntactic reconstruction and plot development. In my compulsion to transmute experience into literature, I became myopic and presently sterile, traded feeling for representation. I let Pops go into the hospital by himself so I could sit in the car and imagine how I might one day write about birds and death. Instead of being with him, I let his pain fall under my plot-

making microscope. I felt deeply removed. A patron in a movie theatre, watching a simulacrum that looked and felt exceptionally real, but was still knowingly there on display. Spectral flashes of light to be analyzed and embedded.

I wondered how much in-the-moment-type living I had consciously avoided so I could stockpile it for a story, an essay, a poem. How many conversations had I tuned out of to better picture them with speech tags? How many people have I treated like characters tangled in plot? The guilt twisted in me. A strange and miserable remorse riddled by paradox. This was not drug-doing, money-stealing, lie-telling remorse. It was something else entirely. It turned writing into a kind of vice-like turpitude that felt as if it should be addressed by a program with a dozen steps, when it was supposed to be a type of uncomplicated linguistic catharsis. Except here I was, with Pops in the hospital and my hot face full of tingling blood. Distant and hidden in the preserved shadows of my head.

When we got home Pops blanketed himself in the Havana-leather. I made him tea and lined his bucket with a plastic bag, then left him to do his sleepy hair-rinsing routine. In the dining-room, my notebook sat on the table and, if it had a face, I would have read its expression as beguiling. I went into the kitchen to find food but there was nothing there. Pops was subsisting on complete-nutrition-shakes and the cabinets and fridge were cobweb empty.

Not long ago, this kitchen would vibrate from use. The tintinnabulation of pots and pans, the crowding heat of the oven, and the persistent aroma of garlic was as part of the house as the walls and ceiling—as part of Pops as his nose and mouth . . . and stomach. I could picture him here easily, standing at the counter, pushing a kitchen knife through a heap of garlic. Now, it was cavernous and cold. I found some trail mix and stood on the ceramic-tile floor eating in the abeyant atmosphere, pressing my toe into the grouting. Instinctually, I began drafting the scene in my head. It was part of an unwritten story about a son and a father, something staggering and intimate with all the right details and adjectives. Then I stopped, aware of the narrative hole I was digging myself back into. Lapsing within the fiction of my imagination while truth in need of attention slept in the next room. I was a few notebook pages and afternoon reveries away from disappearing when I needed to be attentive. From being completely buried under the regret of an immovable absence.

I thought about all the son-and-father plot intentions I had been working out recently, and I resolved to never write *that* story.

As we drove to the hospital again the following morning, I set the heater to full broil and turned to Pops. “Okay, here is the plan. This

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time I'm going to drop you off, park, and meet you in the hospital. I want to be there. I can still get the car after and pick you up out front." He didn't speak but smiled and nodded in accord.

In the waiting room of the hospital I struggled to ignore the sterile and fluorescent-lit particulars soaking my sensorium. With my head hung and my eyes fixed on the cruciform of abutting vinyl tiles, I thought about everything that has happened since Pops got sick. Perhaps it was because trauma blurs what would otherwise be crisp memories; or that in relying on scribbled notes I let parts of my cortexes relax; or that making up stories meant my own timeline would never be intact. But there were critical gaps in my recollections. Despite being in that movie theatre of detachment, removed way into the back row watching the film play, the frames were out of order and decomposing into static: Pops complaining of stomach pain and inconsistencies in his usually epicurean appetite. Static. A few inconclusive tests results yielding the possibility of a dyspepsia-type issue. Static. Failed amelioration. Static. Exacerbation. Static. Sitting at my desk calling a friend all lachrymose telling him that a rather heinous and large sarcoma had been discovered pressing against Pops' stomach and kidney. Static. I wanted so badly to remember the actual phone call when my dad told me what they had found, the tangible beginning, but the moment was unrecalable, a complete mental lacuna. A violet static.

Then I realized, like movies, all memories will only ever be still images flung together as motion. Their own kind of bruised light, hiding themselves in unlit creases while some unaccountable vibrant amber appears from behind the horizon commanding attention. If that is true, maybe making up stories is an essential way of filling in the inevitable distances and gaps. Minutiae reanimated. Fiction less a departure than a connection. I still felt the residue of a paradox-guilt pulling in opposite directions, but maybe ensconcing myself in detail was not so much affective abandonment as a profoundly necessary form of white-sheet therapy, college-ruled confession, and blinking-cursor ablution. Maybe sometimes things need to be blue or purple, and sometimes they need to be orange, and other times no color needs to be noticed at all.

Just then I saw a doctor emerge from Pops' room. He was taking long and rubber-bottomed strides, squeaking down the hallway in my direction. I stood up and stopped him, told him he had just been with my father and that I wanted to ask him a few questions, to find out about the nausea, the pain, the future, anything. He looked at me, a little uncertain but also sympathetic. "Well, the truth is a lot of things are still up in the air, they vary from person to person. We won't know about remission rates until the proper reports reach the oncologist. Not

until after the surgery. Even then it can be difficult to say. These types of tumors are challenging to remove entirely. In terms of the radiation, this is often the hardest part. There is not a lot that can be done in that regard, even palliatively. Once we get the tumor out, things will start to improve. Then as they say he can ‘eat, drink and be merry.’”

“Eat, drink and be merry?”

“As they say . . .”

“But the end of that is ‘for tomorrow we die . . .’”

He gave me the uncertain-sympathy look.

The doctor walked away. I turned around and Pops was approaching from the side, unnoticed.

“Did you hear all of that?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think?”

“It’s alright. I’ll just do the best I can.”

It was the single bravest thing I had ever heard in my life.

I looked at him, and for a second I didn’t see his fragile posture or slack skin, his exhaustion or ill-fitting sweatshirt. I saw a knife-fighter, waving the silver blade of a kitchen knife in a cobblestone alley, lowering his center of gravity in preparation to fight. No clouds were in the sky, upside-down or otherwise. At the other end of the alley was a monstrous black bird with abyss eyes, everything about it piercing and razor sharp. The whole scene was blue until I removed my glasses. Slowly, the distance between Pops and the bird decreased. As he swung the blade from hand to hand, its curved edge flickered each time it caught orange light from the sun. The air might have smelled like garlic. There was a sudden burst as they both lunged together. Dust kicked up and blocked my view, and I anxiously waited for it to clear without breathing.

