



Beginnings

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Abstract: Not once in my life did I seriously think I might one day become a therapist. The idea might have existed as a joke within me, as friends and acquaintances had always come to me with their problems, telling me how gifted a listener I was. Some had even suggested, over the years, that I'd make a great therapist. *Cute*, I'd always thought, *but I don't think so*. So, my choice to become a therapist--which I barely trusted at all--came as a surprise, the realness of which I did not believe until I was encircled within it. With nothing to reference but two months of experience at Sloan-Kettering and a feeling that I was ready for my life to change, I interviewed at the two biggest and nearest schools, was accepted into one of them, and braced myself, as though lifting off for another planet. I had no idea at all what on earth I was doing or where it would leave me, and only vague speculation as to why I was choosing this path. It felt crazy to me, diving right into uncharted waters. And it would take some time before I learned to integrate that nothing could have been saner than the risk of a life without guarantees.

What's the Point?

*If we knew the point,
Would we forfeit the line, the wave, the form,
The formless?
Would we miss the points
That disappear into the magic of
The pointless?*

Every story begins somewhere, sometime; this one, at a time in my life when I was emerging from a dark ocean that was calm enough to keep me afloat and furious enough to draw me under whenever hope cracked a smile. I didn't yet know it, but I was finding my way towards change, initiating a shift in landscape that would alter my life completely. What I did know was that I

had become fed up with despair, pissed off enough to do something about it, and gentle enough to appreciate my efforts without knowing where they might lead me, or if they would lead me anywhere at all.

I was twenty-seven years old, living with the family export business that my grandfather had begun and my mother had inherited. Me in the bedroom, a self-imposed confinement, surrounded by the jarring sounds of office tedium: the popping typewriter my mother still used; the softer computer keys made manic by her onslaughts of speed, punctuated by little blips of silence; the chatty business calls with well-known suppliers and customers overseas; the banal discussions with a friend she had employed to help her with the cutting

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and arrangement of textile fabric samples; the chopping sound of that heavy-duty cutting machine. It all seemed so crass and loud, always way too early in the morning for such sudden sounds. Or too late in the evening. My folks lived three stories below and my mother made her own hours, so she was in and out of the apartment as she pleased. Even after I'd asked her to check in with me evenings before she came upstairs, it was difficult for me to insist on privacy. But then, I'd been working in the family business too, for four years, ever since I'd returned from college. Against my will and wishes, it had somehow become the only life I could manage to patch together.

My grandfather, whom I loved dearly and whose judgment I had come to trust over the years since his death, had named the company after me in 1973. Ariel. The same name he imagined as my own when I was still in my mother's womb. The rarely voiced but well-understood family myth was that exporting textiles was my destiny, should I fail to find another. And not knowing what else to do with myself, I had become caught in that narrative, even though nothing could have interested me less than exporting and textiles.

Coming out of college, all of my hopes had been wrapped up in writing a novel I began to envision during my last year in school. When I moved back home, amidst confused ideas about what was supposed to happen next in my life, I typed out one chapter after another, stuck within a loop of ceaseless editing, revising, and refining. I took notes on themes and characters and scenes with no destination in sight and little drive for publishing. My initial intention for college had been primarily to develop my identity as an artist, since making images had been my greatest joy from the age of six, but I had managed instead to shut down that part of me. So I held on to writing, my other great love, as if it were the lifesaver keeping me afloat. It was the only thing I knew for sure that I wanted to do.

When I began to work for the export

company, I justified it as a way to earn my keep while I followed my true passion. I had no intention at all of making it my life's work. But as time passed, the unspoken story that had begun to linger within my psyche, supported by my parents' incessant questioning of intent, was that my written efforts were an invalid pursuit, since I was unwilling to apply them towards a practical vision. Through my parents' eyes, the export company was a more realistic aspiration, and as I spent greater hours learning the business, unaware that I was acquiring their lens as my own, my dreams of writing a book slowly fizzled into the bluntness of my bland life, till I could hardly discern one day from another.

Putting a spin on a growing feeling that I had been letting myself down, I entertained the possibility that my grandfather had wisely laid down a path I might follow, whose joys, though still hidden from me, I would one day unveil. From time to time, I would reapply myself toward this desperate hope, as if trying to save a marriage that was sour from the start. I even went so far as to take a course in exporting, hoping that I might transform the company into something that better suited my interests. It was the most god-awful boring topic I could possibly imagine, but I clung to my dim and misguided faith that something would eventually click for me and light the way. Soon, having banished the writer within me as well as the artist, I was next in line to inherit the business if I could somehow find it within me to embrace the years ahead of learning how to promote, buy, and sell. But I couldn't.

It was no secret that I couldn't stand the work. And my mother was at a loss to inspire any interest in me, which, I'm sure, saddened her some. Yet, there I was, reduced to an image of adulthood I'd hated to witness as a child: the money game; the anti-creative act; the calculation of profit; the buying of someone else's goods for cheap and the selling of them for a little less cheap. I knew such work had accounted for the

comforts I enjoyed, and that, for my grandparents, a proclivity for business had been the stuff of life itself, but I had also known, even as a child, that I would want something different for myself when I grew up. But when would I grow up? Stuck within a life that was seemingly unfolding without my say, I felt utterly snuffed out and shut down.

By the time I had become a dulled and despondent twenty-seven year-old, I entered into a relationship with Shoshana, a woman I had known in college. Her father had recently died and she was living in The Bronx, in an apartment that she and her sister had inherited from him. Shoshana recognized my hopelessness and, unlike my friends and family, she unapologetically looked me in the eye and called it what it was. Her own harrowing and seemingly bottomless mourning process also stood as a stark mirror for my despair. No longer was the depth of my suffering held preciously in secret. And, more importantly, no longer was I suspended in a net of seclusion. My slumbering soul had been awakened through a rusty empathy that often terrified me, as I witnessed her suffering from such closeness I could feel the breath of it on me.

The awkwardness of forming intimacy so near to my mother's livelihood and her father's memory compelled me to imagine possibilities of a different life, but I did not yet know how to make a living outside of the export company. Shoshana challenged me to revive my imagination, provocatively engaging me in a manner that was also gentle and kind. The first thing I learned through our friendship was that if I wanted change to happen, I had to place myself in situations that were new and unforeseen. I had sworn off academia from the moment I'd received a bachelor's degree, yet I found myself craving a return to the classroom---not for the sake of another degree, or for any pursuit of future aims, but just for the indulgence of interest and curiosity. This feeling surprised me. What surprised me even more was that I felt no urge to return to the art room, which had been the reluctant thread throughout

my college experience. I had yearned for a return to the creative roots that had given form to my youth, but at this moment such things felt laden with suffering and hurt, and so I gravitated towards classes in which I did not feel so heavily invested.

I enrolled at a local city university in courses on African-American history, Latino heritage in New York City, and the history of Jews living under Christian and Islamic empires. I received credit for these classes, but with no avenue of application, and for the first time in my life, I felt as if I was learning simply for the joy of learning. And it was a wonderful feeling, because I had been living in fear of the classroom since my earliest years in school, having associated it with humiliation, shame, vulnerability, and rage. Finally, I was learning how to be a student on my own terms; a *real* student, eye-to-eye with my teachers in a zone of mutual respect.

During this time, as Shoshana and I dreamt of possibilities for the both of our lives as best we were able, trudging through the muddle, she suggested on a tip from a friend that I investigate art therapy. I had heard the phrase "art therapy" somewhere random in my memory and I remembered having written it off as a ridiculous idea. I had never much cared for the field of psychology and my few sessions with a therapist during my college years had seemed anything but therapeutic. But at this time in my life I was willing to recognize that my cynicism had only shut doors before I got to see the stuff on the other side of them. In reality, I knew nothing about art therapy, or about psychology for that matter. I decided to learn.

I read bits here and there about the field, but I knew, with the help of Shoshana's wisdom and encouragement, that real learning would only come through experience. So, with little idea how to find places where I might volunteer, I picked up a Yellow Pages and called as many medical facilities as I could handle in a day, deciding that I'd stop at the first place that invited me to visit an

art therapy department. That place was Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, a highly regarded facility not too far from where I lived. It did not have an art therapy department, but it did have something called a recreation therapy department, which employed two art therapists. Upon hearing the words "recreation" and "therapy" linked together, my cynic monster popped its head, but I understood that it was only my fear of the unknown trying to talk me out of this venture. I had never worked in a setting even remotely like that of a cancer center and I had no idea how I would feel entering through its doors.

Much to my surprise, I felt at ease. I had decided that, if it felt right, I would quit the export business and volunteer at the hospital as if it were a full-time job, so that I'd have something to put on my résumé. If I liked the experience, I would apply to some graduate programs. All of these ideas scared the hell out of me, but I did my best to keep focus simply on what was in front of me. In short time, I found that I enjoyed the activities that took place around the recreation room, as well as the personalities that showed up there; and I learned, with a yet greater sense of revelation, that I felt extremely comfortable among people who suffered from severe illness, facing their own mortality. In fact, I felt *more* at home, *more* connected than I did with many of my family and friends. Several of them would ask me, "Don't you find it depressing?" I told them; on the contrary, I found it inspiring.

I knew very little about cancer. My mother's friend who'd worked with us in the office had recently died from cancer. Very suddenly. All I knew about it was that it had rapidly spread throughout many organs in her body and claimed her life within four months. Shoshana's father had also died from cancer. In fact, he had spent some time at Sloan-Kettering, while his malignancy had advanced. Through Shoshana's accounts, I learned how heartrending it is to watch a loved one die slowly, feeling powerless to do anything but offer love as best you

can, even while you feel as though your efforts are never enough. She had lived with him and taken care of him throughout his ordeal, doing all she could to preserve his sense of dignity, and still she felt oftentimes as if she had failed him.

What I understood about cancer came through bits of others' experiences. I'd never spent time in direct contact with a person suffering from cancer. Quickly, I learned that I didn't need to know anything about it; I only needed to know what was in someone's heart and what was in my own. I only needed to spend time being present, giving my attention, and opening myself up, the way a flower blooms, true to its own nature and not merely as a matter of choice. I only needed to show up. The rest would take care of itself. I had no idea about it at the time, but that was the first lesson I would learn about the meaning of therapy---one which I would have to learn over and over to this very day.

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