

The Question of Where We Begin

We begin with the trouble, but where does the trouble begin? My uncle takes a pistol and blows his brains out.

Now we may proceed to the aftermath. The removal of the body. The cleanup. The reading of the will. The funeral in West Palm Beach, Florida. The woman he wanted to marry, taking the ring he gave her and putting it on her finger after the death.

But this beginning is not satisfactory. The mourners are now parsing their theories of why. Did you know that he was brain damaged when that city dump truck hit him twenty years ago? Look at his children grieving on the front pew of the funeral room. Why wouldn't they visit him except when they wanted his settlement money? Had his settlement money run out? And where is his ex-wife? Why couldn't she love him enough to stay with him (for better or for worse, right)? Do you think it's true he was physically violent with her like she told the judge?

Now we're thinking the trouble doesn't begin with the big event. It's the grievance that led to the big event. Perhaps he wouldn't have killed himself if his children had more demonstrably loved him. Perhaps he wouldn't have killed himself if his wife hadn't left him.

Perhaps his wife wouldn't have left him if he had never been physically violent with her.

Perhaps he would never have been physically violent with her if his brain chemistry had not been altered by the city dump truck that hit him twenty years earlier. So perhaps we begin at his house, in the morning, him buttoning his work-shirt, smoothing the patch that bears his name on the pocket of his shirt. Perhaps our story is about the workings of chance. What if he had stopped or not stopped this particular morning to get coffee? What if he had ordered two hash browns in the McDonald's drive thru instead of one hash brown, but had to wait a little longer for his order, since only one hash brown was ready, and the second hash brown was still in the fryer?

But this, chance, isn't story. Chance doesn't satisfy the itch story scratches, or not chance entirely. Story demands agency. But whose? My uncle was no dummy. Why was he a common laborer? Why didn't he go to college?

Now we're parsing family-of-origin stuff. His mother and father. My grandmother and grandfather. She was a lazyish homebody who wore a muumuu in her trailer every day of her life I knew her unless it was beauty shop day. He was a well-point foreman who spent his child-raising years as a raging alcoholic who yanked the curtains off the walls. She didn't finish the eighth grade. He only finished the sixth. Maybe if she had thought school was important, my uncle might have gone to college, got a white-collar job, missed the dump truck. Maybe if he hadn't made my uncle sleep in the bathtub almost every night, my uncle might have been more alert in school, been encouraged by some teacher to go to college, got a white collar job, missed the dump truck, married a different woman, had different children, earned until he was eighty.

But what if his mother and father had never met and married at all? What if sperm and egg had never met? Or what if, as my grandmother once asserted, sex was not a nasty thing forced upon her in the night, but rather a thing of love and passion? Or what if something had been different in Owensboro, Kentucky, where they met in a roadhouse? What if the idea of love somehow transformed my grandfather into a man who could declare that for his seventeen-year-old bride and their children-to-be he would never touch the bottle again? If we change a variable here and there, my uncle doesn't lock the doors, lie down on his bed, stick the pistol in his mouth, and blow his brains out.

And if we can lay some causal blame upon my grandparents, what about their parents? Who was this Kentucky coal miner Jess Westerfield who kept making babies with women and then making babies with their sisters? What did it mean for my grandmother, the little girl she was, to sleep in winter on the floor of a drafty shack in the mountains near a clear-cut someplace? Who were the men her stepmother aunt brought home at night after her mother died?

Again we enter into the questions of chance and existence. What if a mine collapsed upon Jess Westerfield before he could make his way from the bed of one sister to the bed of another? What if he mistimed a subterranean dynamite fuse and blew himself to death? What if there was a weakness in the rope that was used to lower his cage from the surface of the mountain to the mine shaft below? What if the rope snapped, and he was crushed among the others in the bent metal, or run through by some sharp stalagmite? No Jess Westerfield, no Wilma Whittler. No Wilma Whittler, no uncle. No uncle, no suicide.

Thinking this way, we're soon thrown upon the exigencies of history. What if that proto-Westerfield had not got on the boat from England and sailed somewhere toward the southern colonies? What if somebody a generation or two later had not heeded the call west, and settled in some Appalachian hollow and made somebody who would make somebody who would make Jess Westerfield, who would settle even farther west, in Owensboro?

What if the winds had not cooperated in 1588, and the English had not won the Battle of the Spanish Armada? Would anyone in North America be speaking anything but Spanish at all? Would anyone in England?

And what if the Taino Indians had known enough to find a way to kill and silence the genocidal murderer Christopher Columbus in the year 1492? Would the continent have been overrun by Europeans?

And what if the Anglos, Saxons, and Jutes had not imposed their barbaric Germanic languages upon the Celtic Britons at the point of the sword? And what if the Roman Empire had not grown fat and lazy and become overrun by Vandals? And what if, on some prehistoric plain somewhere, the people *homo sapiens sapiens* had not triumphed over their Neanderthal neighbors?

And now our trouble—the inciting incident of the story of my uncle's suicide—has moved past the historical and into the cosmological. It could be, as the ancient Finns say, that the world was formed from an egg that was broken. Or it could be, as goes the diver myth of the Iroquois, the earth was covered with muddy water at the beginning of time. When a Sky Woman fell from above, she was caught by water animals who made a home for her by diving into the seas to bring up mud, which they spread onto the back of Big Turtle, and this mud grew into the great landmass. For all I know, maybe the Incas were right when they spoke of an earth covered with darkness until the god Con Tiqui Viracocha emerged from the present-day Lake Titicaca to create the sun, the moon, and the stars, and to fashion human beings from rocks he flung toward every corner of the world, and he kept two of them, a man and a woman, by his side in the place they call the navel of the world.

But this of course is the story of my uncle, and if on his terms—a man who came of age in Florida in the 1960s—we're talking origins, we're talking either the

Big Bang Theory, in which the universe began from some ultra-dense and ultra-hot state over thirteen billion years ago, which predated the fabric of space and time and has continued to expand outward ever since, or, more likely, we're talking the literal rendering of the Book of Genesis he would have heard in the Southern Baptist church as a child: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.*

By one way of thinking, we've entered into a cold intellectual exercise of technical cause and effect, which couldn't be any more distant from the story of a flesh-and-blood man who wore a mustache his entire adult life, who never felt comfortable in a suit, whose smile was crooked after the accident, whose voice was believed by his nephews to be unsettling and weird. We're laying blame and skipping all the important stuff, like how it seemed the last time we saw him that he was finally turning it around, that this woman he was with was a good thing. She was a jeweler. He had bought a house. Together they were buying a commercial building. You could see a future where she joined him on the cross-country road rallies he occasionally raced. In time you could see him becoming a man who didn't complain about losing the love of his ex-wife and his children every two or three hours. You could foresee a big-screen television in the living room, a big black leather sofa, satellite channels, the premium package with the college football games from the western states and Formula One auto racing from Europe and Brazil. You could see that the ring he had bought her would soon enough be on her finger where he wanted it instead of in her purse where she could think about it. You could see her negotiating with herself over time, talking herself into marrying him. That was why they were so often coming to visit my parents' house in the months before he died, no doubt about it. She was willing him a close-knit family so she could join it.

At the funeral, somebody said what always gets said, which is all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to

his righteousness. And I wondered, if the story started there—because that's the classic *In the beginning* scenario—what did that say about a God with agency sufficient to create everything and set it into motion, and apathy enough to let it proceed as an atrocity parade?

Or what does it say about me, the god of this telling, that I have to take it there? Because it is within my power to do what I now want to do, which is to start the story with the more pleasing trouble Henry James prescribed—the trouble of he and she, and how they met, and how he toured her jewelry shop, and how she showed him how to shape a ring, set a precious stone, finish a setting, display the thing under glass, move a delicate hand in the direction of the display case, match a ring to a finger, watch a man and woman walk away wearing the symbols of their love. And couldn't I end it somewhere in the world of promise, he and she beside a lake somewhere, he opening the box, showing her the ring he had commissioned for her, he being sure to seek out the finest jewelry maker in town, knowing her discerning taste, and she saying she approved, the ring was lovely as the man is lovely, turning to him, kissing him, saying not today and not tomorrow, but there will come a day, I feel it, I believe it, something good is in our future?

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