

MAN FINDS HIS VOICE

(in the essay collection *Committed*, 2005)

A picture that comes to mind when I think of meeting my wife is this: a tall, lighted window on the fifth floor of an apartment building on the rue Monge in Paris. It is the middle of the night. And by the middle of the night I mean, very specifically, that Pacific island of an hour when on either side of you the day feels, indeed is, too far removed to touch; too far even to remember.

Look in that window, now. As if, say, you are observing this strange, floating scene from the fifth floor of the identical building across the street – a dentist's office, as it happens, closed for business. Sit in the empty, vinyl-clad hydraulic chair, in the darkness faintly illumined by stainless steel implements, and take an interest in what you're seeing twenty-five yards away: the double windows opening onto a terrace deep enough only for a single chair (though no chair is visible); the odd lack of curtains or shades; the sparsely furnished white room with walls glowing from a single, tiny halogen bulb. A chest of drawers in one corner; on the floor, a contemporary patterned rug; at the back of the room, a simple wooden bed. An IKEA of the spirit. The lamp a slender black flamingo dipping its neck over the bed, on which a young man wearing nothing but boxer shorts, with a borrowed paperback of John Fowles' *The Magus* cracked open on his chest, lies in a fitful, not quite unconscious state somewhere between sleep and psychosis.

This is me on the night before I met my wife. It is June, 1991 and I am 26 years old.

I say met my wife, but in fact I'd met my wife a few months earlier, at a party in Cambridge, Massachusetts on my last night of a semester spent teaching Harvard undergraduates. The Gulf War was on. Aleksandra was still a college junior, all of twenty (and, for the record, not my student): I thought her

the loveliest and smartest of a room full of lovely, smart young women. She seemed to have traveled everywhere at a ridiculously young age. She spoke French and was preternaturally well read – by which, given my concerns of the moment, I suppose I meant not that she had read Austen and Balzac and Woolf (she had), but that she had also happened to read my own first novel, published two years earlier. I learned that she had spent part of her childhood in Paris, where her parents still lived and where I'd been living for more than a year. The conversation ended with her giving me their phone number and suggesting we might see each other over there sometime. Then I returned to my temporary rooms, packed my bags, and by next evening – Valentine's Day, with bombs falling over Iraq – was on a plane back to Europe.

Now it seems reasonable to wonder, as I didn't feel comfortable wondering then, what sort of person my future wife had encountered that evening at a party in Cambridge. Or, more accurately, how did that person *appear* to her on first acquaintance? Because the person she would meet again in Paris just a few months later, and, whether on that very day or on the days to come, to whom she would generously commit her most private heart, was in many ways a fundamentally changed person; the same, maybe, yet so frayed at the edges as to be more or less unrecognizable to himself.

It was snowing the morning I reached Paris. Out the taxi window, the city appeared gray, foreign, inanimate. I lugged my bags up the the five flights of stairs, my footsteps echoing through the old stone building: there was no one here I knew. My apartment was freezing. The refrigerator was empty. I went to bed with my socks on and slept all day. I remember that sleep because it was one of the last periods of rest, save for more than a few alcohol-induced stupors, that I would experience for quite a while.

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The panic attacks I began to suffer on my return to Paris were not the first I had experienced, but they arrived with far greater frequency than in the past. At first they were tightly focused on the question of my writing – whether the second

novel I'd been diligently working on for the past year was good enough, or any good at all. I suspected a negative answer – how strangely satisfying now to have been so prescient – and the unarticulated fear of it began to haunt me like a dead man walking. Wherever I went I heard lifeless footsteps behind me, and they were my own. This was unpleasant, to be sure, though not completely unprecedented, and so at some level still manageable. What writer doesn't have doubts about his talent, especially after a surprising early success? (The reception of my first book, *Bicycle Days*, had far outstripped my hopes for it, not to mention my shallow reserves of self-belief.)

It didn't help that I felt I had few people to talk to at the time. I had enjoyed a small group of close friends in Paris, Americans mostly, but in the last few months they had all decamped for other countries. In their absence, like any desperate animal, I availed myself of what consolation was on hand.

At two o'clock one morning, panicked to the tips of my fingers by the certainty that I was and would always be a failure, I phoned a woman I had slept with a couple of times but otherwise hardly knew. Groggily perplexed, if not alarmed, by my impromptu call – to say nothing of the maniacal warp to my voice – she bravely offered to let me spend the rest of the night at her place. I was at her building practically before she could hang up, taking the stairs to her apartment two at a time. Soon I'd slipped into bed beside her. She was already fading back to sleep – no doubt in the hope that I was just a bad dream and would be gone with the daylight – while, awake in the darkness, I shut my eyes and tried to convince myself that this shared bodily proximity, and not my unappeasable terror, was the real reason I had come.

Later in the night, finding me sitting at the foot of the bed with my head in my hands, she drowsily inquired if anything was wrong. I told her I was anxious about the novel I was writing, about whether it was really any good at all. For a few long moments she said nothing. Then she sighed, rolled over, and reluctantly asked me what my book was about.

As I told her the plot, I kept my back to her and my head in my hands. Because she knew hardly anything of the work I'd been doing, I had to start my narrative from the beginning, which made it long and tedious and finally confusing, even to me; especially to me. My voice was a painful droning until it stopped, somewhere in the middle of fictitious events, after not much had happened and even less had been revealed. We sat in unvarnished silence as the night lengthened like a mirror tilted to reveal a barren, moonless sky. Ahead of schedule, it seemed, I had reached a dead end in my own story, had glimpsed the truth that this woman was a stranger to me and that I myself was less than nothing, a figment of my own wasted imagination.

My condition worsened over the next couple of months. My anxiety lost its pinpoint focus on my writing, grew formlessly expansive, voracious, until finally it began to break down the soft, naked core of my self. Internal walls crumpled like paper, leaving every idea I'd ever had vulnerable to annihilating negation. A sense of absolute aloneness in a vast universe took hold, and with it an unbearable terror of death, which in turn drove my exhausted mind into a dank cave of dangerous morbidity. That these and similar feelings were obvious clichés of a kind, familiar to millions, only increased my despair: I could not seem to be original even in collapse.

Bit by bit I became afraid of the dark. Lights would be extinguished and, wherever I happened to be – at home, in a theater, riding the Métro – within seconds an awareness of my own debilitated psychological state would rise up and encircle me like a noose, and the room would start to whirl, suggesting oblivion. After an afternoon showing of (what else?) Woody Allen's "Bananas", during which the projector temporarily broke down and the small Left Bank cinema in which I sat was thrown into blackness for perhaps two minutes, I was so unnerved that I stopped going to the movies altogether.

I began to drink wine from dusk until early morning, when, the halogen light in my bedroom forever shining, I would pass out for an hour or two, before

the sun and the sounds of traffic would enter my thin, unshrouded windows and rouse me back to consciousness. It was not thoughts of suicide which frightened me then, but a recognition of something weaker and more shameful: a draining away while still alive.

That spring I made friends with an older American novelist and his wife. They would invite me to their apartment on the rue des Saints Pères for long drunken lunches with a varied group of wildly gregarious journalists. Their invitations afforded me one of my few effective means of temporarily keeping my panic at bay, and I always accepted. Once established in their spacious, smoke-filled rooms, I always drank a great deal, and sometimes stayed on through dinner (I even did the dishes once, after my hosts had gone to bed). It was on one of those blurry occasions, early in June, that I saw Aleksandra for the second time.

The livingroom was crowded with people and ringing with laughter. She entered alongside her parents – the same good people whose phone number, in a fit of doubt, I had thrown away months before without ever dialing. I watched her scan the room, recognize me in surprise, and stop. I have little recollection of what was said from that point onward; only of her pale, smiling face framed by dark brown hair looking up at me. I see her father's face too, pale as a moonbeam, and her mother's. That is all. The sound of her voice, but not the words. A sense, somehow, of a door being knocked on, and of a light appearing like a sudden flame on the other side.

A few evenings later, I went to dinner for the first time at her parents' apartment. A dusky, incipient moon hung over the Place Saint-Sulpice as I walked into the sixth arrondissement and turned up the rue du Cherche-Midi. It was the hour when normally I might have begun to feel the stirrings of panic, but tonight I found myself thinking about Aleksandra instead.

She opened the door wearing red jeans and black boots and a black short-sleeve sweater. Behind her stood an enormous dog, a Bouvier des

Flandres. Fortunately, he stopped barking (at crotch level) when he saw that she was pleased to see me.

From that evening I carry two memories in particular. The first is nothing more than standing alone with her in the kitchen and testing strands of cooked spaghetti from the pot to see if they are done. The second is sitting beside her on the sofa, a book of photographs of Normandy open on our laps; and the pulsing sensation of my hand, pressed down by the weight of the book, resting hidden against her outer thigh.

There is also the overall impression her parents made on me that evening – which, I suppose, gives some indication of the impression which I must have made on them. They could not have been more gracious to me, or stood less on ceremony. They struck me as witty, smart, engagingly eccentric, and thoroughly trusting of their daughter's ability to handle herself in the company of would-be suitors – of which, clearly, I was not the first. They seemed unconcerned by, or perhaps just unaware of, the recent instability of my mind. But then they were both writers themselves – one the European correspondent for *The New Yorker*, the other an anthropologist – and so, I reasoned, could be counted on for a certain degree of insanity themselves. From that first evening onward, their apartment came to feel like a haven to me, where I might let down my emotional guard without fear of being judged. The following month, in fact, after Aleksandra had left France and I had risen a few notches farther on the nut meter, I would pass quite a few live-saving afternoons reading in their garden, sometimes talking to them and sometimes not, while they went about their business, as if I were already a member of the family.

I had dinner there very happily once more in the next few days. This time I brought my stepfather, a poet, who had just flown all the way from his home in Hawaii to check on me, and to make sure that I wasn't going to do something stupid to myself. Dozens of late-night phone calls and rambling letters no doubt had given him and my mother a more informed picture of my current psychiatric condition than I'd intended. As it happened, he and Aleksandra's mother were

longtime admirers of each other's work; everyone quickly became friends, and the evening, even to my somewhat erratic perceptions, glowed with a sense of intimate promise.

Then life resumed. The next day, as planned, my stepfather and I took the train south to the Lot, where for many years he'd owned an old stone farmhouse. We stayed there ten days, gardening and reading and talking, while I struggled to keep afloat on a briefly becalmed tide of panic. I could see that he was trying hard to shore me up, and when I could feel anything at all, I was deeply moved by his efforts. He had brought with him – as I imagined a St. Bernard might carry a flask of brandy to a skier buried in an avalanche – a bottle of Xanax prescribed by a friend. But in those days neither of us knew the first thing about anti-anxiety medication – this was still, relatively speaking, the dinosaur age of psychopharmacology for the general consumer – and despite my continued, nerve-wracked insomnia, I declined to take any of the pills. Of course, I had no such reservations about continuing my nightly downing of a bottle of Cahors, followed by a glass or two of plum eau de vie.

The narrow, claustrophobia-inducing second bedroom, with its sharply sloping roof and two single beds placed head-to-head, had several times, in the 50s, been slept in by my stepfather's friends and fellow poets, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Maybe it was their raving, haunted spirits which kept me awake despite my faithful boozing. In any event, in the country as in the city, my nights were long and weird.

Probably the most curative thing my stepfather did for me during our time together down south, aside from simply keeping me company, was to repeatedly bring up the subject of Aleksandra. He has always adored her. Out of the blue he kept announcing what a lovely young woman she was, while shooting me a look that declared I'd be worse than a fool if I let her slip away. It was enough, coming from him, a man I loved and admired – to say nothing of how well I knew he'd always done with the ladies – to intermittently rouse me

out of my state of anxious navel-gazing and into serious thoughts of a possible relationship.

She was gone by the time I got back to Paris – to a summer film course in New York, and then to Harvard for her final year. All was not lost, however: during the spring I had made plans to leave Paris and settle permanently in Cambridge, where I would teach again. So the stars were seemingly aligned for us, after all – yet, somehow, not: back once more in my curtainless apartment on the rue Monge, without either my stepfather or Aleksandra to talk to, I quickly descended to a new level of mental instability. The days were an obstacle course of quicksand swamps and hidden trapdoors; the nights like one long, hellish summer in Finland. The internal weather, to paraphrase W.C. Fields, was fit for neither man nor beast.

When I wasn't writing pages of execrable fiction (I was nothing if not dogged in my literary efforts, I must say that much for my younger self), I was engaged in the metaphorically apt task of deconstructing my physical life in Paris: searching for someone to take over the lease on my apartment, and trying to sell or loan my sparse collection of IKEA furniture. It was a lonely, depressing job, this dismantling of an existence which two years earlier, flush from the success of my first novel, I had embarked on with such excitement. In the end, typically for me at that time, I panicked, and wound up leaving everything in return for a hastily scrawled promissory note from an Irish couple I'd never met, who seemed unlikely to ever find the means to make good the debt; and, indeed, I have never seen a cent of that money.

During this strained, inglorious last month (A Moveable Feast it wasn't), Aleksandra's parents offered me my only real refuge. Several afternoons a week I would sit in their garden, like Hans Castorp after a binge, reading a long, depressing novel (I can't remember what novel it was, only that it was long and infinitely depressing) or, more likely, talking to Jane, between her bouts of writing, while Vincent, between *his* bouts of writing, watered the roses nearby.

Every so often Jane would say something provocative about French politics or some book they'd both read – and Vincent would calmly interject with “No, Jane,” and continue with his watering. I found it all remarkably soothing. And so my final weeks in Paris passed.

It was a not entirely human being traveling under my passport who limped into JFK one steamy night in late July. I dropped my bags in my aunt's apartment downtown, downed a couple of drinks, and made an emergency appointment with a psychopharmacologist for the next day. Then I called Aleksandra and told her that her parents and I had become friends while she'd been away.

She replied that she already knew; they'd told her all about it.

Our first official date, two nights later, at a Japanese restaurant on Columbus Avenue, coincided with my second day of taking the anti-depressant Imiprimene. The pills could not have started working yet, but I didn't know that at the time. By then I was pretty worked up about the whole idea that I was “sick” and needed medicine – though clearly I *was* sick and needed medicine, as well as a good kick in the head – and without much fight I gave in to the questionable impulse to tell Aleksandra all about it over dinner. Not exactly the sort of first date banter from which hall of fame lovers are made. But then Aleksandra, with her own eccentric family, had already shown herself to be nearly immune to my odd tics of behavior and my nerves as electrified as a barnyard fence. She listened to my story of epic self-absorption with rapt attention and perhaps even a dollop of implied sexual compassion; and then we walked uptown to her apartment. We ended up lying on her bed watching a tape of “It Happened One Night.” And it *did* happen that night, I'm glad to report. Eventually, we fell asleep.

When I awoke it was four in the morning, and I had two epiphanies in succession. The first was that I was in bed with this beautiful, sexy, remarkable woman. The second was that I had not brought my medication with me. It is an indication of just how far I had fallen from the modest plateau of sanity that the

second ephiphany somehow managed to trump the first. My face grew hot. I tried to go back to sleep but it was no use. Aleksandra opened her eyes to find me already dressed and whispering about forgotten pills and rogue panic attacks and what a good time I'd had but why, so sorry, I had to leave.

She was away for August and I didn't see her, though we spoke on the phone a couple of times. In early September, I drove her up to Cambridge in a rented car loaded to the roof with our belongings. We were both nervous and a little awkward with each other. We knew a good deal more of each other's histories and personalities than we had at the start of the summer. But where France had seemed a separate place, a kind of visitation, the journey that day, in its mundane purposefulness – I was driving her up so she could start school and I could start my job – felt weightier, and at the same time uncertainly settled.

Then, halfway there, something unexceptional occurred that made us both feel more comfortable. From the highway we saw a sign that said "Food and Books," and decided to stop there for lunch. True to advertising, as we paid the check we were allowed to take a secondhand book from a shelf of titles patrons had left over the years. We jointly chose an old jacketless hardcover of Wallace Stegner's "Angle of Repose." The book sits on a shelf in our house now – as does, in a different room, an empty bottle of champagne from the night of our engagement five years later.

In Cambridge, I moved into the second floor of a handsome 19th century house on Brattle Street. My own little sanatorium. What Aleksandra found over at chez Schwartz that autumn was perhaps not what your average college senior – or nursing home resident, for that matter – would have bargained for.

There were some positive signs of activity on the homefront, it's true. My teaching was going well; and having wisely jettisoned the Parisian roman à clef, I was contemplating the start of another new novel. More significantly, I had begun seeing a psychoanalyst four times a week, at whose suggestion I'd added a small dose of Klonopin (an anti-anxiety medication) to my present intake of

Imiprimene. The cumulative effect of these actions was to at least put a floor under my twitching feet; to stop the falling. And as the falling ceased, my vision grew less distorted and gradually I was able to gain a better view of Aleksandra, and she of me. For both of us during those first months in Cambridge a kind of watchful patience necessarily set in; a helpless, but by no means hopeless, waiting for the growth of intimacy.

Certainly, this was different from the evolution of so many romantic relationships I know of (including any number of my own failed attempts pre-Aleksandra), in which intimacy, or some simulacrum of it, is the easy part, the rabbit out of the gate, and patience with each other's natures is the virtue that must be learned, slowly and sometimes painfully, down the bumpy line of years. We are creatures, all of us, of more than mere habit; we are creatures of experience. But experience is not always, or even often, the stuff of bells and whistles, to say nothing of bestselling memoirs. So much of experience is quiet, nearly invisible. It might take the form of waiting, half unaware, for the first sign of a change of season; of an exploratory, wordless leaning into mutual passion.

All the same, I wouldn't want to give the impression that Aleksandra and I enjoyed a smooth and neurosis-free autumn that year. How boring that would be. The truth was that Aleksandra was Job, only much better looking. My extreme reticence at home – between analysis, medication, teaching, writing, the whole nine yards, I was left drained and virtually speechless, a human husk, by dinnertime – would have been rough going even on a monk; and my girlfriend, I must add, was no monk. The situation would have affected even the strongest of egos. In Aleksandra's case, the stress understandably manifested itself in a growing obsession with my analyst: she began to imagine that she saw him everywhere, a Freudian Zelig, even though she didn't know what he looked like. We would go grocery shopping at Star Market and she would come rushing up, grab me by the arm and declare, "I think I just saw Dr. Dugan by the broccoli!" And I would have to break it to her that it was not my analyst she had seen, but the stock boy.

And then, at Christmas, I left town for a month to visit my family in Hawaii. Outwardly it was a quiet trip, as quiet as the autumn had been. I spent most of it reading on the beach. Inwardly, however, I was beginning to hear voices. Not the panicked voices which still occasionally haunted me from my time in Paris, but voices at once new and resonantly familiar. It was Aleksandra I heard, and myself. We were talking to each other, holding intimate conversations which in reality had not yet taken place but which, inside me now, were already occurring with indelible meaning. And with the sound of her voice came countless tactile images of her, her curves and scent and skin, and a sudden, powerful awakening of my passion.

Many aspects of our relationship intensified dramatically upon my return to Cambridge. I won't describe them all here – suffice it to say that many involved the enthusiastic laying on of hands. More notable even than the physical, though, was the fact that I finally began to speak openly of my feelings for her, and one of the first things I said was that I loved her. Not long afterward, I asked her to move in with me, and she agreed.

All of which indicated a change in our relationship profound enough that Aleksandra ended up giving it its very own title. *Man Finds His Voice* was how she aptly described that period in our lives. Nearly thirteen years later, long free of psychopharmaceuticals and daily aware of my good fortune, I think the title is still a good one. Man – or this man, anyway – is still happily finding his voice. As he should be. For who can fathom the illogical reasons, the terrifying depths of commitment, the brazen far-sightedness which might lead a whole person to passionately bind her soul to a broken one? I am here today to tell you that I was once the recipient of such a bestowal, which can only be called love.

John Burnham Schwartz

May 2004