

Letters

The Farmhouse, Vermont; 1982

R, R, R,

Hey. I'm safe. Thanks for the loan of your phone and thanks for feeding me. Old flames, two ships—

I got a job on a boat in Gloucester. At first the smell was hard to get used to but I'm getting used to it. I kind of like it. I like the way the engines rumble. As long as they are rumbling, everything is safe. They've given me the scut work, which is fine, given that it won't last forever. Fish guts, everywhere. When we lower the booms, birds into the sea, the ship grows wings. It's a sight.

You can reach me at my parents' farmhouse in Vermont, where I've set up a darkroom in my father's old bedroom. I've hooked up the answering machine you gave me. Thanks.

Why is it I am always saying thanks?

There are seagulls here everywhere. I never really saw before how graceful they can be. Like hawks, only white. I love to watch them sweep across the water. Then lift, magic. I suppose all flight is a form of magic. One thing I love to be is transported, especially along the surface of the water. Like that.

I left for you a book I like under the bed.

S

—

From the Badlands, 1984

RRRRRRRR,

Hurry.

S

—

Bayeux, France; 1987

Dear Gulliver,

You don't know me but I'm your dad. After you were born, I held you. I also stood by while you were circumcised, as was my duty. I hope someday you forgive me that. Your mother thought we shouldn't, and I thought you should look like me, and she said you already did.

That's called a penis joke, by the way, which liberated women like to make often at the expense of men. Truth is, it *was* pretty funny. And then I said I was serious, and your mother said, Oh, I guess you're right, which believe me is not something she says very often.

I hope someday you know me better than I know my dad. I love my dad, I am proud of my dad, and in general I have always obeyed my dad, but I do not know him. He is more like a figure than he is a bodily presence. He wants to know you, by the way. He keeps demanding pictures, as if I worked at the mall.

Listen to your mother. She is always right.

I took some photographs of people praying in a big cathedral today. Your mother permitted me to have you baptized, which allowed us to introduce God to you. But your mother and I have not yet figured out how to introduce you to God. To religion, which tries to describe God—like poetry, or chemistry. Mostly you know God when you speak to God. Which is what you do when you pray.

Tomorrow my dad and I go to Paris. I collected these stones on Omaha Beach in Normandy—once the place of a great battle. I will tell you about soldiers after you turn five. Your grandfather, who was there at the time, most likely never will. But I will tell you that he was very brave, that he was one of the first to cross the Dragon's Teeth of the Hurtgen Forest, and that this is why his knee hurts when it is cold out.

The water here is too cold to swim. There are giant, furry cows chewing the rich green grass on the dunes behind the sea. Today, I saw a fighter jet with Dutch markings sailing across the shoreline. Seeing me, standing alone on the shore, the pilot dipped his wing.

Dad

—

Panama City, Panama; 1988

Dear Gulliver,

I had to have an emergency root canal. Did you brush your teeth? Swish and Rinse? A root canal is when a man in a big digger truck drives into your mouth to build a great big canal like the one in Panama, which is the big lock the big boats go through in our *Big Book of Boats*. In Guatemala, which is not too far from Panama, there are many digger trucks to do this work, but they are also rusty. It is very important you brush your teeth so that someday when you go to Guatemala you also do not have to have a root canal. So please don't ask your mom for more than one piece of candy a day. A rule is a rule. I will be home soon and we can go to Buckingham Fountain and look at the lights. Also, your mom tells me we need to go sneaker shopping.

Dare I eat a peach?

Kiss your mom. Brush your teeth.

Dad

—

McClean, Texas; 1989

Dear Gulliver,

Today I rode a quarter horse and above us there was a hawk drifting through the blue sky. A great horse sails across the land the way a hawk does the sky. Also today we began to brand and castrate the calves. I will tell you about castration when you are fifteen.

This is why cowboy boots look so funny:

The long part which covers the shin and calf is to protect you from thorns and cacti. Also, when afoot, snakes!

The pointy toe is to make it easy to slip in—and out of—the stirrup, which is the dangly part of the saddle, in case your mount—that's what cowboys call a horse—throws you, and drags you all the way to Dodge (in Kansas, ask your mom to show you on the place-mat).

The front of the sharp heel is to catch the stirrup, for balance.

The back of the sharp heel is to dig into the dirt after you've roped your calf or wild mustang—something your father cannot do at all.

But when a *real* cowboy ropes a varmint, the cowboy leaps off the horse and grabs that rope and digs those sharp heels into the dirt to bring that varmint to a standstill. *Varmint* sounds like a bad word, but it isn't. It's one you can use.

Some cowboys wear spurs on the back of their boots, which are sharp pieces of metal, to dig into the sides of their horse, though most of the cowboys I know do not use spurs because they hurt the horse. City folk, just so you know, do not like cowboys. Not because city folk are bad. I think city folk don't like cowboys because they secretly wish *they* could ride a horse. Everybody wants to learn to ride and to love a horse. To ride a horse—it is a gift, like walking.

You may also notice lots of city folk like to wear cowboy boots. Your mom likes especially that purple pair because they make her look pretty and almost tall.

The fancy stitching is so you look real sharp.

What do you do before you cross the street?

Dad

P.S. A real cowboy always measures the size of his horse w/ his hands, not his feet.

—

Chicago, Illinois; 1990

Dear Gulliver,

There is something magical about the mail—the way you slip a letter into a box and then the letter travels through the day while you wait for the letter with all those hieroglyphics to reappear inside another. Airmail.

I put your name today on the mailbox—it is beneath your mother's and my own.

Your mother washed all your clothes today, including the Special Blanket with the Green Frogs. For dinner we had your favorite, Rice All Over the House. There is an agency in Washington DC which is trying to help us find you. The police in Rome still look; they tell us not to lose hope. Thousands of people have your photograph. It's one I took of you at St. Peter's. You are wearing your moose sweater and warm plaid pants. What a beautiful boy, they say.

Fear, the Buddhists say, is what blinds us. Your mother is brave. Your father is trying to be more like her.

I stripped and oiled your trike—there was a lot of sand in the bearings. There is also sand in your brown shoes. When you come home we'll dump out the sand together. Your shoes are by my old cowboy boots beneath the French Guy's picture of the Blue Lady.

Dad

—

Rome, Italy; 1990

Dear Gulliver,

I saw the television show today—the one your mother orchestrated with her friends in DC. An entire segment devoted generally to missing children and specifically to you. Your mother sent to me the videotape. Apparently you are good for ratings, and now there are hundreds of pounds of viewer mail. Most of the letters so far are kind. Only a handful appear to be from quacks.

There is no trace of you in all of Rome. That is the repeated conclusion of the investigator. In fact there is no trace of you in all of Italy.

In the video there are shots of your room with all the toys picked up and the park where we go to take pictures and there is a long, moody montage with sentimental music involving the narrow staircase you like to play on with your digger trucks. There is also a shot of our mailbox with all of our names on it. Your mother is very well-spoken and cries only once. She is wearing the blue sweater we bought for her birthday at the Big Store downtown. Field's.

Marshall Field's.

The sky in Rome is full of sparrows. This evening I went to St. Peter's Basilica and lit another candle. I watched the Papal Guards do their changing of the guard, which they do every night. I looked for you in the dark.

Dad

—

Chicago, Illinois; 1990

Dear Gulliver,

I never knew I wanted to have a son until I learned about you. Until your mother took my hand and put it on her body and told me you were so.

Sometimes I am afraid of finding you. I keep writing to you in case I do.

A song of lamentation is made with notes, like these I keep writing to you.

Your grandfather, my father, died this morning. He was sitting in his den in the big brown chair. He had been reading a book he loved very much. I have marked the place.

My father believed you would be returned to us.

Gulliver, I do not know how people bear the loss of those they love. I do not know how this is possible.

Dad

—

Hvar, Croatia; 1991

Dear Gulliver,

Everywhere I go people know all about you. I met some people on an island today and they asked me all about you. On this tiny island is a small goat-keeper's house: but there is also the Blue Grotto, which is a cave fed by the Adriatic Sea. The sun lights up the cave so that everything inside the cave is translucently blue; inside the cave, I swam in the cool blue water. I could see my body floating in the blue water. I think whenever possible you should swim naked with others who are also naked. In this manner only will you be seen as others are seen. Shame is a consequence of concealment, never revelation. Your mother taught me this.

Where are you? Why can't I see you?

Last week I thought I saw you in Vienna. You were feeding ducks in a park with two other boys. Then your mother called out your name, and you ran to her, and she lifted you up into the sky. You were laughing. She kissed you.

I stood on a balcony today and watched some people dance in the moonlight. Tomorrow I have decided I am going to go to a city named Dubrovnik which has thick castle walls. The city, it was once a great fortress. There is soon to be another war in Europe.

If that *was* you, kiss your mother.

Dad

—

Sarajevo, Bosnia; 1992

Dear Renée,

It is as bad here up close as it appears to be from far away.

When bad things happen, one turns away. That's what I always do. When my father died, I told myself, Don't look there, and poof, he went away. When Gulliver vanished, I looked—outwardly—but I did not look inside myself. I made him go away, too.

You are braver than I; I've always known that. It's why you always forgive. It's why you never stop hoping. You check the mail. You get on the phone. You keep the place safe and warm, should he show up tomorrow, or the day after next.

By not looking, by turning away, I've lost part of myself. My history, my life. I've lost my father *and* my son.

I've lost what made me; I've lost what I've made.

To not look anymore is to become willingly blind.

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I thought I saw him in Vienna—a year ago. He was with some boys and a woman who looked to be his mother, who *was* his mother. What I'm telling you is that if that was him, then he was happy. He was loved.

And that's when I understood that we don't want to find him. That *I* don't want to find him. That's when I understood that either he is with a family which loves him or he is not. More than anything I want him snuggling up with somebody on a sofa. I want him saying, *Read to me. Dad? Read this.*

I've seen what happens to the orphans. I've seen what people do to them. If he is not with a good man and a good woman on a sofa, being read to, then do we really want him to be alive? Do we want him alive and suffering just so we might find him? How are we to find him?

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It hurts, this looking, and I am trying not to blink. Meanwhile the only time I feel alive anymore is when I am unaware of feeling anything—when I lose myself to a moment, or to a book, or to sleep. It's like sex: you're out of the body only while you're having it. I miss

you, that out-of-body partner of mine. I miss us losing each into the other's self. That sense of transport. And God knows I miss the body and soul our out-of-body experience made. That perfect boy with the magic heart.

There are war junkies everywhere and the city is under one massive fucking. *Welcome to Hell*. Today an old man on the street tried to sell me his coffeepot. He was sitting behind an overturned bus; the bus provided a screen from snipers, as did several cars stacked one upon the other. *Spiders*, people call the trucks that stack the cars. I gave the man sixty marks, all I had in my pocket, but one can't buy redemption. One has to earn it. When I refused to take the pot, he gave me a pen. He put the pen in my hand. He closed my fingers around it and would not let me let it go.

Then I understood I had to take it. I could not give and walk away with nothing. Who could bear that? That humiliation? If one gives, then one must let others also give.

It's a shitty pen of Communist vintage celebrating the '84 Olympics—obviously treasured, this being among the last of his possessions. Perhaps it was a gift. The ink keeps skipping, I do know that; this pen will be a possession I treasure long after the ink runs out. When winter comes people will burn their books for fuel. It's barbaric, the daily threat to survival, and the means required here to survive. People carrying their own excrement in bags to find a place to bury it. The children, scavenging; the boys and the girls being pimped out to the UN troops who are here to save them. The black-marketers skimming off the relief only to sell it back to a bankrupt population.

I've been opening up my eyes. It hurts, this looking. Sometimes there is a tremendous fire in the sky; sometimes I can't stop from shaking, but I am not afraid. Not anymore. Accident, I've decided, does not derive from Fault: nobody *intends* to wreck the car, or plane. Sarajevo, this obscene war, is the last (please, one hopes)

great disaster of the century which made it. The Holocaust, it took place in a chamber—first in the courtrooms, then in the camps. Fire: it requires oxygen to breathe, fuel to burn, and people always forget. This disaster has been caused by those who saw it happening and looked away. Why must suffering always be caused by those who also suffer? Don't those who also suffer ever learn?

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Evil, I think.

Like most academics, the members of my generational tribe, I used to think Evil was a quaint little word to describe the consequence of unenlightened self-interest rubbing up against the common good.

Now I think, Evil took our son. And now I see it everywhere. Evil, dressed in the body of an old crone, hitting a toddler with her fist. The woman is not the Evil which takes advantage of her weakness. The Evil is instead what is now inside her. And then the Evil flutters, out her eyelids, and then the Evil soars across the burning sky, and then the Evil is thriving in the hands of a Serbian peasant mounting a heavy machine gun—the *death planter*—strafing leisurely a residential tower, floor by floor, as if to paint it.

Evil. It's not a disease; it's not a misunderstanding; it's not a Point of View. It's a fire which consumes before it kills; it's the ice in the soul which will not thaw. It's the weak-willed heart.

Evil, it's not a person. It is what a person does.

As is Good.

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What do I know? I know the twentieth century began in Sarajevo and I know that is where it's ending. I know the twentieth century was not America's Century. It was Everybody's. And maybe it is the century which will finally teach the residents of this world that the sacred will not protect the living from what the living do—and will continue to do—to one another. Rather, it is the work of the living to protect that which is sacred. It is the work of the living to protect the libraries and the schools, the chapels and the parks—and all the

living souls, gathering therein to speak. It is the work of the living to protect that which all the members of the choir hold dear, and close, lest its mission perish.

It is a mistake to call this war an accident. Fault is an act of will, a break in the tectonic plates which hold this world together. This war in Sarajevo, it prefigures what is yet to come. The wars forthcoming against cultures and civilians—the wars of the weak against the weaker. Nobody is safe. The world is not a vault—though it will most certainly be our tomb—and in the next century, millions more will die, horrifically, and they will die because we did not pay attention. Because we did not open up our eyes and look.

We should stop going to the Vatican and to Mecca. And we should start making our pilgrimages to Sarajevo and to Jerusalem. If people in Ohio knew what Sarajevo looked like, if they could see it and touch it and walk on all the broken glass, the people of Ohio would not permit this to go on.

Having been there, I know. This morning I went to the Shrine of the Seven Brothers, and said my prayers, and dropped my coins. Then I went to the basement of St. Anthony's and talked with a priest. After a while a woman came in to sing.

I dreamed I was driving my father's car across the country. I knew it was a dream when I realized there was no traffic. You were in Chicago, and happy, and I was having a conversation with my father. When I checked my mirror, there was a boy in the backseat. My father always said Gulliver would come back to us—but maybe he meant something else. Maybe he meant Gulliver will come back to the world.

My father has come back to the world—his ashes, spread across that field in Vermont, along with my mother's—and I do know that I am talking with my father more than I did when he was alive. I think I'm talking with my father because my father wants me to know that he has found him. That Gulliver is no longer lost. Isn't

this the essence of faith? That no matter how one perishes, no one is ever lost? I think my father wants us not to feel so lost.

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Things unseen.

I was awakened from that dream by an explosion. There was a man in flames on the street, and by the time several of us had put them out, he had died.

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What I miss most is the future: I miss not being able to see him now. To see the boy and then the man he would have grown into. The shape of his eyes, the length of his hands. The sound of him singing alone in his room.

Accident is not an act of will, but Fault is. Just as closing your eyes can also be an act of will. What I'm saying is I'm trying here to open up my eyes but I can't see you anymore. I just can't see what it was we wanted to become.

We should be able to do that, at least that. If we can't see our son, shouldn't we be able to see at least that which made him?

Look, if something happens to me, it is not your fault. If something happens to me, read this again. It is not your fault.

I miss you,

S

—

Zagreb, Croatia; 1993

Dear Gulliver—

I know where you are only when I whisper.

Dad