



Origins

Boston & San Francisco

It's my very last morning with a liver in one piece. Bradley, my partner of almost three years, stirs next to me in bed in the predawn darkness. His body is warm—too warm with a mild fever. His normally pinkish, pale skin is jaundiced and sallow, contrasting strangely with his deep brown eyes and dyed black hair. It may be five in the morning but it's time for us to get up—though if all goes well we won't be conscious for too long.

“How you doing, sweetie?” I ask him that a lot. More than most people would deem necessary—but then, Bradley isn't most people.

“Okay, I guess,” he replies, kissing me good morning. *Par for the course*, I inwardly sigh. Even on what's probably the biggest day of his life he projects bland neutrality. But I know what lies deeper: a soulful depth, a warm intensity that's entranced me, kept me close, even in moments of conflict or doubt that haunt the best relationships. We're eleven years apart in age and in some respects come from different galaxies, but on a fundamental level we connect. And on another level, too: even in this condition his lanky, broad frame stirs my passions. I know he feels the same about me.

Knock knock. “Boys, we'd better get a move on,” I hear my mother's voice through the white hardwood door. My parents have driven the five hours south to Boston specially for this day. In the cozy living room of my South End apartment my father sits in a plushy red-leather armchair watching the Weather Channel.

“It’s going to be nice. Almost sixty degrees,” he says, though the statement is superfluous: the brightening skies say it all. Besides, none of us plans on spending much time outdoors.

“Come Lee, we have to leave.” My mother, ever the organizer. He gets up with a creak—he’s recovering from a number of surgeries of his own, on his back and knee. We thunk-thunk down my building’s squeaky wooden stairway and emerge into the still morning. Bradley fusses with luggage as my parents pile into his aging plum-colored Infiniti. We hum down a deserted Storrow Drive, the stately brick townhomes of Back Bay glowing orange in the morning sun. To our left the Charles River Basin shimmers, its surface glassy and calm.

At Massachusetts General Hospital we rendezvous with Bradley’s parents—graying, heavysset, always primly attired. Appropriate for a boy who used to help pick out his mother’s dresses. George and Mary are smiles and friendliness as always, but I sense a bit of nerves. His mother, from whom Bradley gets his square-jawed face and dark hair, talks a mile a minute—though she’s an intelligent woman and her observations are apt. She’s got a medical background and explains to my slightly befuddled father how it’s set to go down.

“They start with David then move on to Bradley,” she says. “But Bradley’s operation’s going to go a lot longer. About seven or eight hours.”



We’re in the reception area of the transplant surgery room, where a chatty African-American nurse hands us a number. *Like a deli*, I chuckle inwardly, noting the tear-off ticketing roll. I’m not nervous—at least not overtly. I’ve researched and contemplated and ruminated about this moment for months. Now it all moves forward, full speed ahead.

I’m the first to be seen by the anesthesiologist, a slim, dark-haired woman with a cool, rote demeanor. After a hurried goodbye to everyone I hear the words “I’m going to give you a little sedation.” After that, lights out. I don’t even make it long enough to hear the countdown.

Biliary atresia is extremely rare. Bradley was born with it, emerging from the womb without a bile duct. Over the years of our relationship I learned a lot about this seemingly mundane yet crucial bit of tubing: it connects the liver to the small intestine, enabling food to be digested. At one month of age Bradley's skin turned brown and he nearly died. Only a then-pioneering emergency procedure, developed in Japan, saved him from becoming an infant-mortality statistic. But jury-rigged plumbing inevitably calls for a permanent fix, and in cases like his that means a liver transplant. He made it longer than anyone imagined without one. When he graduated high school his mother wrote to thank the doctor who'd saved him as a baby—"did a Hail Mary," she termed it. It was only a couple of years into our relationship that his sporadic health problems became acute. He needed a liver soon.

Cadaveric livers are near-impossible to come by these days, but there was hope in a new procedure—living donation. The liver is the only organ in the human body (other than skin) that regenerates, making it possible to chop a healthy liver in two and have it grow to full size in both donor and recipient, like amoeba in biology class. Family members across the country began lining up to be tested... only to discover they didn't match for one reason or another. After months of watching this state of affairs, I agreed to undergo the same testing—and, amazingly, was declared the only match around.

I'll be honest: I didn't want to do it. It's a four-hour operation, a major incision, a big scar. Precisely timed with procedures on the recipient, living liver donation is the moon shoot of surgeries. But in interviewing other donors—including those who endured complications—I came to realize that this was a risk I was ready to take. I wasn't going to let my lover die on me if I could help.

That said, my other niggling worry was our future together. A lifetime of illness breeds caution, rootedness—and endless frustration. Bradley hails from a family who've lived for generations in New England. As a pediatric patient he's been told his whole life the things he could not do—and as the only child of doting, well-to-do Boston-area parents he'd skirted many of the rites of young-adult independence. From the day we met he was a curious creation, a man-child who's had to look death in the face but never finished college.

Sometimes he would get reckless, partying with his youthful peers, occasionally binge drinking and taking days to recover. Up until the surgery my impression of him was of one in limbo. Waiting for an absolution, a life-giving change, a second chance. I hoped this would be it.



I awaken in intensive care, my stomach stiff but in surprisingly little pain. I'm not sure where Bradley is or how he's doing. My only discomfort comes from the tube in my mouth going down my throat; I max out my morphine drip to blur that sensation but my body's not having it: soon my gag reflex kicks in and I puke it up.

"It's okay," the nurse says as she rushes in to clean me up. "That's how some patients tell us they're done with it."

Just then the two mothers walk in. Bradley's doing fine, though his surgery was longer and more complex than they'd anticipated. Recovery for him will be slow. I'm out of the hospital in three days and he follows not too long after. I'm up and walking within a few days, he within a few weeks. His skin is flushed and rosy once more and his liver numbers are stellar. By the end of the summer we're mostly back to normal.

Not so our future together: like a couple thinking a baby will make everything right, I fancied this event papering over the chasms between us. My life lay in a different sort of limbo, a lingering byproduct of the dot-com crash earlier in the decade: a home and boyfriend in Boston, and a software consulting job that tossed me around the American expanse like seeds off a farmer's hand. I wanted out of this craziness once and for all—and Bradley did as well. Our relationship had become *de facto* long-distance, with endless arrival delays at Logan Airport our typical Friday night ritual.

California offered an answer: although there were tech jobs closer to home, to be sure, all the best work for my subspecialty lay across the continent. San Francisco was one former hometown and a coterie of friends out there worked hard to lure me back. Bradley was at first unsure—he worried about losing his health insurance and about a reprise of his last out-of-town foray: incipient illness saw his schooling

in a Midwestern college town abruptly cut short. As the months passed, however, and he grew stronger, he warmed to the idea of life on the other coast. He wanted to return to school and the notion of doing it out there seemed appealing. *Okay, then.* I put my Boston place up for sale and began planning our next steps, a shared life in a new town.

Then it all went up in flames.

A preliminary scouting trip west proved the career possibilities real...but also turned Bradley's mind around. He embroiled himself in a bitter fight with an old friend of mine. *Oh, melodrama.* I didn't think much of it but Bradley did: in a series of ever-degenerating squabbles our own relationship began to founder. When my condo back home finally did sell he panicked, did an about-face, announced he wouldn't be joining me on my move west. Not long after, he jumped into a relationship with someone else.

Four years—the longest I'd ever been coupled. Half my thirties. I packed up my life and headed off alone into the western sky, Elphaba-like from *Wicked*, to start everything anew.



Bradley and I had talked of traveling overseas, but health and timing precluded such ambitions. For me this was nothing new: immigration and limited finances had confined me to North America my entire adult life. I could find my way around airline hubs like Chicago O'Hare airport blindfolded (best burritos: terminal 3 food court), but knew little of the world beyond: the museums of Paris, the traffic in Mumbai, the beaches of Thailand, the ruins of Machu Picchu and Angkor Wat...all little more than abstractions, places other people see and explore.

It wasn't always so, at least not for my forebears: in the early twentieth century two different sets of great-grandparents left their homelands in the Russian Pale of Settlement for the New World. A generation later my father's parents eloped to the Far East where they lived opulent lifestyles in the shadow of a World War. And just one generation ago my mother moved two continents and five thousand miles to marry a man she'd met only once. As a boy, a National

Geographic map hung above my bed; I would sleep and wake beneath the semicolon-shaped islands of New Zealand and the purple-blue depths of Antarctica's Weddell Sea.

I may have suppressed it, but wanderlust runs in my blood.

The old/new hometown, meanwhile, failed to deliver a fresh start. Although the professional side of things went well, the personal grew worse: lingering fallout from the fight between Bradley and my friend Steve continued. Steve grew angry at me too, our own efforts to work through emotional turmoil culminating in a nasty fight. *I want to run away again.* Really away. Right about then I spotted another article about round-the-world journeys, this one in the *New York Times*.

I must admit, I've never been big on "the healing powers of travel." In my youth this often seemed to mean well-off kids slumming it in youth hostels around Europe, mistaking shots of Ouzo in Corfu for an enlarged outlook on life. And I hated squalor: *Generation X* author Douglas Coupland's "Sheraton Enzyme," which supposedly kicks in during the later-twenties, for me kicked in at age five. Dirty bathrooms and crowded dorms were never my thing. Nor was my family, past explorations notwithstanding, all that inclined or financially able to take grand journeys. And we weren't the campervan or trips-to-Africa-to-build-schools sort of clan either.

But now everything's changed. I'm through the looking-glass. Only a very few can claim to have led an extraordinary life; mine feels more like an improbable one. Addressing its turmoil calls for something audacious, something I never would have otherwise considered in ten million zillion years.

Don't just go away. *Go everywhere.*

This first impulse is followed closely by a second.

Come on. That's fucking crazy.

In addition to the obvious reasons—I'm too old, I have practically zero overseas travel experience, I hanker for comfort—there's the deeper question: *what will a journey like this accomplish?*

I'm not sure yet. On one level, maybe it'll help me forget, drown out my angst in a sea of new experiences. More profoundly, maybe it'll help me answer the question: *why does this keep happening?* Oh sure, having your lover break up with you and hop into another relationship after you've donated sixty-five percent of your liver to him might seem

unique...but the pattern isn't. In every one of the places I've called home since striking out from my birthplace it's been the same cycle, again and again: anticipation, hope, optimism, a new circle of friends, a new job, sometimes a new mate. And then...disappointment. Discord. Heartbreak. And the cycle begins anew.

Travel may not be the answer, but at least it grants a different approach to the question. Perhaps this ultimate form of nomadism will cure me of this uneasy wanderlust that's plagued me my entire adult life, a rootlessness all too familiar to the American professional class. Up front I decide this will not be a voyage of asceticism, of self-denial. Perhaps that's a reaction to a closeted youth that went on longer than it should, but I've never found I garnered much insight from asceticism—another reason I think purity pledges are bullshit. Instead, my journey will be the opposite. Not the deranged antithesis of restraint, overindulgence. But rather a kaleidoscope, a chromatic dazzle, a Dorothy-stepping into Munchkinland Technicolor adventure.

I sit down and do some math—the genesis of so many things—and discover I can do this not in luxury but with a modicum of style. “Flashpacking,” the British call it. I'd just been granted U.S. citizenship, a tether for some but in practical fact a get-out-of-jail-free card for the incipient national—it's easier, as a citizen, to leave the country and return after a long trip. The pile of frequent flyer miles I'd been amassing for Bradley and me to use will now finally be spent. Seven months sounds about right—almost exactly the span of the 1872 Thomas Cook itinerary that once inspired Jules Verne. Though the way I'm feeling now, there's a lingering notion I might not return, become one of those “professional vagabonds” Internetting in from Papua New Guinea or wherever for years on end.

We'll see. For now, I just want—need—to leave.