

# Evacuation Instructions

*Elliott Holt*

1

His wife has disabled the smoke detector.

“It annoyed me,” she says. “I couldn’t concentrate with the noise.”

“Why was it beeping?” he says. “What happened?”

She is reading, curled up with her legs tucked under her body, the book resting on the arm of the sofa. She looks up at him slowly. It takes a moment for her eyes to focus. “What?” she says.

“Why was it beeping?” he says again.

“Oh,” she says. “It was toast. Just burning toast. That thing is too sensitive.”

There are wires dangling from the ceiling. There is a crack in the paint. “What did you do?” he says.

“I hit it with a broom,” she says. “I couldn’t make it shut up.”

He can see her, standing on a chair, hair flying everywhere, stamping her foot and slamming the broomstick into the ceiling. “But what did you do to your nose?” he says.

“What do you mean?” A trickle of blood is winding its way from a nostril to her chin.

“Look,” he says.

It takes her a minute to realize what’s going on. She is like a cartoon dog that has to smell the smoke before she knows her tail is on fire. “God,” she says as the blood spills onto her blouse. “That’s so gross.”

He follows her into the bathroom, watches her stuff toilet paper up her nostril and tip her head back. “Probably allergies,” she says.

“Do you want to lie down?”

“It’s fine.”

“And the smoke detector?”

“It made me want to slit my wrists,” she says. “It was too insistent.”

“That thing could save your life,” he says.

She rolls her eyes. It is a bad habit she has. This impatience with the world, and her inability to hide it. Even after eighteen years of marriage, he’s not immune to her behavior.

“And if there were a fire?” he says.

“I’d smell it. I’d get out.”

“And if you were asleep?”

She shrugs, tugs a bloody piece of toilet paper out of her nostril. “I’d hope for the best. Or maybe,” she says, narrowing her eyes at him in a gesture that is simultaneously mocking and flirtatious, “I’d just burn to death.”

## 2

“You have no sense of mortality,” he says, not for the first time.

She is packing her bags and catching a plane to Khartoum. Going after the story, as she always does. She still believes in the sanctity of public radio. There are little plastic bottles filled with shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer. Her entire half of the bathroom in miniature. He has filled Ziploc bags with vitamins and vials with antibiotics. He has bought travel packs of Band-Aids, cotton balls, Q-tips. He arranges his offerings on the bed in neat rows.

“You worry too much,” she says.

Her hair is still wet. She’s just out of the shower and she smells like peppermint.

“Have you seen my hair stuff?”

“Which hair stuff?”

“Orange bottle. You know.”

He does know, but can’t remember. She wanders out and he can hear her rustling around in the bathroom, moving jars across the counter, pushing the shower curtain open and then sliding it back into place. The scratch of curtain rings against metal rod.

“You found it,” he says when she walks back into the room.

“Yes. Thank God.”

She is smoothing the cream through her hair. Without it, it gets frizzy and hovers in uncertain wisps around her face. But with the cream it dries in ringlets, so golden and glamorous it surprises him every time. She twists damp strands of hair around her finger. This is how she sets the curls. The first time he saw her twirling fingers through her hair years ago, he thought he should look away. It seemed like a secret ritual.

“Okay,” she says, zipping up her bag.

“Did you call a car?”

“I’ll get a cab on the street.”

She’ll be back in six weeks. She is always nonchalant when she says good-bye.

“Do you have sunscreen?” he says.

She laughs and kisses him, lightly.

“You don’t have to go.”

“What’s the worst thing that can happen?” she says.

“You could die. You could be shot. You could get in a car accident on those terrible roads. You could get some kind of staph infection. You could get held up by bandits. You could drown in the Nile. You could be raped by your translator.”

“But I won’t.”

He follows her to the elevator, rides down to the lobby, escorts her out onto the pavement. The sun is so bright it makes him sneeze.

“I’ll be back for you,” she says as she heads for the curb.

## 3

Danger is everywhere. A bike messenger killed on his route. A woman electrocuted while walking her dog. A child at a bus stop struck down by a drunk driver who veered onto the sidewalk. Lead lurking in paint. Carcinogens in food. Runaway trucks. Tainted blood. Secondhand smoke. Vehicle recalls. Pyramid schemes. Poison in water supplies. Kidnappings. Hijackings. Suicide bombings. Birds with flu.

He can’t sleep while she’s away. He stays late at the firm and then finds himself wandering the apartment in the wee hours, too unfocused to read, too bored to watch TV. He perches at the window that overlooks the river and tries to will the sun up. He doesn’t tell his wife everything. He doesn’t tell her that he uses her tweezers to pluck gray hairs from his head. They fall into the sink one by one, like tiny scratches on the porcelain. She’s going to worry him to death.

He doesn’t tell his wife that he has packed an emergency kit—in case, God forbid, some kind of terrorist attack requires them to leave the city. It contains all the recommended items: a flashlight, water, duct tape, batteries, a short wave radio, nutrition bars, seven bags of dried fruit for each person. He bought fourteen bags, even though he knows that in the event of an attack his wife would be determined to stay and cover the story.

## 4

Two months later at a cocktail party:

“And then these ridiculous militiamen were shooting at our car,” she says. She is drinking scotch on the rocks. She swirls the ice around in the glass with a swagger.

“How terrifying!” says her friend, rattling a mound of cashews in her palm.

Was it terrifying? It doesn't seem so in the telling. Was she actually scared or did she, even in the rain of bullets, keep her head up, knowing that she would live to tell the story? Is there any doubt beneath all that hair? She lights a cigarette and takes a long drag. She promised to quit.

“Your wife is really something,” says one of her colleagues.

She's won an award. There's going to be a book. They're taking her picture for *Vogue*.

“Yes,” he says. She really is something.

There was a time when she thought *he* was something. When she said he was the smartest man she knew. Before he made partner, and when she was still a freelancer, writing about seafood, not war zones. She stayed up with him—all night if necessary—while he wrote appellate briefs. “It's like college,” she said. “Like the giddiness of exam week.” She read while he worked. Sometimes stretched out on the floor next to his desk, like a schoolgirl, with the book under her chin. She kept his mug full of fresh coffee, told him bad jokes when he needed a break, slid cool reassuring fingers down his shirt to work on the knots in his back. She spread maps out on the living room floor and made plans for all the places they'd go. “You're working now,” she said, “but think of the fun to come.”

There was a time when he worked harder to compensate, when he coached himself into being cavalier. When his wife wanted to go to India on vacation, he went along with her and managed to keep his worries about malaria and impure water and unsafe roads to himself. And there were moments on that trip, when he sat beside her in a rickshaw hurtling down a street teeming with chickens and dust, when he actually got swept up in her enthusiasm. She wanted to wander and mingle and taste food from street vendors. She ate meat of questionable origin, fruits without protective peels, and still returned to the States free of parasites.

After they were back in their apartment, where the bass and treble were carefully calibrated on the stereo, where the half-and-half was organic and the newspaper was waiting outside their door every morning, he wondered if he had missed something. Maybe he should have tried more of the strange street foods his wife had tasted. Maybe he had wasted energy covering their bed with the mosquito netting every night. Maybe the water purification tablets had just been taking up space in his duffle bag. Maybe, he thought sometimes, the joke was on him.

5

A month later, they are getting ready to spend a weekend in the country, in the wilds of Connecticut. There will be swimming and she's trying to find a particular bathing suit.

“That brown one,” she says, “that makes me feel like I'm in St. Bart's.” She is bending over, probing corners of her closet that she rarely enters. “What time are they expecting us?”

“Lunchtime,” he says. “They're having a big lunch in the garden. Sheila's usual approximation of Tuscany.”

He is looking at their picture in *Vogue*. In the photograph he is in profile, looking at her. The light has caught his bald spot. “My God,” he says. “I'm old.”

“You're not old,” she says from the closet. “You look very dashing.”

“I'm forty-four,” he says.

“Aha!” She stands triumphantly, holding the Lycra suit aloft like an Olympic medal.

“I'll drive,” he says.

His wife usually likes to be behind the wheel. But today she takes the passenger seat without complaint. She fastens her seatbelt. It's a perfect July day. Cloudless, the sky is an empty promise.

When they pull into the driveway of the house, they can hear the dogs barking. Every time they see Sheila, she seems to have more dogs. He carries the bags inside—he likes these opportunities for chivalry—and his wife follows. He pushes open the screen door and then four dogs—two black ones, poised and alert; one fat and golden, with drool slipping out of its mouth; the last small and quivering and a mottled white—come bounding down a long hallway, pushing worn rugs out of place in their enthusiasm. There are few things more comforting than other people's chaos.

They spend the night in the guest room. And as they fall asleep with one of Sheila's black dogs sandwiched between them his wife takes his hand, and sighs. It's a long, wistful exhalation. It's a sigh that causes the dog to shift position, so that there are suddenly canine toenails pressing into his stomach.

“Sweets?” he says, but she is already asleep.

He awakes to the sound of the dog licking. The dog gulps when he swallows; his licking is greedy and vaguely sexual. He opens his eyes and sees that the dog is licking his wife's face. Licking up the blood as if he was hired to do it.

He shakes her, watches her sit up, sees the blood pour from her nose, roll down her chin, faster now, and the dog sits up, leans closer to her, tilts his head, extends his slimy pink tongue. The dog is scruffy, of a breed he can't identify. It has no business here. His wife looks at it, for a moment, as if pleading for mercy.

"It's just a nosebleed," she says, but the blood swims into her mouth and she can't get the words out clearly. In all the years they've been together, she'd never had a nosebleed, not until three months ago, and never like this, with the blood coming so fast.

"It will be fine," she gurgles, but the bleeding won't stop. He breaks the speed limit on the way back to the city later that morning, heads straight to the hospital and then lets her off before he goes to park. Alone in the garage, he wends his way through the dark rows of cars, and suddenly feels like he can't breathe. If he has a heart attack, here in this forsaken place, would they find him? Would an ER nurse wander out here for a smoke break and perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on his crumpled body?

He finds his breath again, shallow and heaving at first, but then he's moving into the light outside the garage and crossing the concrete toward the hospital entrance. You just have to make it inside, he thinks. Then you're in good hands.

6

"How can it be malignant?" she says.

His wife's body is rife with tumors. The oncologists say she will be lucky to live six months. The first tumor was in her nasal passages—mucosal melanoma, they call it, which he's never even heard of—but there have been many tumors discovered since. The doctors announce their detection as if shopping for fruit. This one the size of a grapefruit, this one a plum.

He devotes hours of every day to research. He trolls the Internet for information about clinical trials for which she might be eligible. Their options are limited; she's already Stage IV and most trials are only open to patients in whom the disease has not advanced so far. Applying to clinical trials, it turns out, is like trying to get into college. They discover a meritocracy based on immune systems, in which certain patients are valued for the unique way in which their bodies respond to the challenge. His wife's doctors present case studies of patients for whom various treatments worked, and it brings out his wife's competitive streak.

"I can handle this one," she says to her oncologist one day.

They are trying to persuade him to recommend her to the team running a particularly compelling clinical trial.

"I don't know," the doctor says. He sucks in air to punctuate his doubt.

"I want to try it," she says, as if they are talking about scuba diving or hang gliding, instead of a toxic cocktail that will be administered into the bloodstream via IV.

They have read the literature; the treatment has been effective in a mere five percent of patients. But his wife is used to being a success story.

"We'll see," says the doctor. "We'll see."

He imagines making his case to the doctor leading the trial. Exhibit A: the X-ray with the original tumor. Exhibit B: a CAT scan that reports metastases as if they are geological formations. He'd put his wife on the stand to display her incredible endurance.

He reads turgid medical journals, clipping any articles he finds relevant. There are drugs that sound like the stuff of science fiction: Interleukin-2, Gemzar. There are various immuno-therapies described in militaristic prose. Targeted attacks on rebel cells. It reminds him of his wife's reports from Kinshasa. He dedicates a file box to the case and labels folders for insurance claims, prescription information, records of radiation sessions. When she is finally admitted to the trial, he considers it his victory.

7

She proves to be a good patient, informed about her options and cheerful with the hospital staff. She makes jokes during chemotherapy, lets the nurses help her with crossword puzzles. He drives her to the hospital every week and brings her home again, and tries to find food she'll feel like eating. For a while, she wants cantaloupe because she says it's refreshing, and so he buys all the cantaloupes he can find, carrying them home two and three at a time and piling them up on the kitchen counter. In the morning it always takes him a moment to figure out which way to slice them open, and when the melons prove overripe—as they inevitably do on occasion—he feels it is his fault.

Six weeks into the trial, she has follow-up scans to check on the status of the tumors. His wife is determined to be one of the celebrated people in whom the trial drugs produce miraculous results. For two days, they wait for news; they play Scrabble—game after game—in an effort to avoid thinking about it. During one game, she gets a fifty-point bingo on her first turn. L-A-T-R-I-N-E, she spells.

"You're unstoppable," he says.

“I feel good,” she says. “That’s what matters.”

But the report proves otherwise. The tumors are growing. One in her liver is eighty percent bigger than it was.

She is expelled from the trial. One of the nurses calls to tell her. It’s the Russian nurse who ate lunch with them every day. The one who told them, with an accented certainty they found reassuring, that a positive attitude was always the best medicine.

“But I’ve never been kicked out of anything,” says his wife.

The doctors leading the trial won’t even take their calls.

## 8

He looks up at the ceiling, at the dangling wires, at the crack in the paint and realizes that he hasn’t replaced the smoke alarm. He is violating a code. He could walk to the hardware store and buy a new one right now. He could fill its cavity with the batteries he keeps in a drawer in the kitchen, ready for moments like this. But he can’t summon the energy.

Everything is distorted. The operation to remove the first tumor left his wife’s nose slightly off kilter, just enough that looking at her makes him feel drunk, as if he might need to hold onto something sturdy. As if he might wake up with a hangover, two aspirin and a glass of water away from restoring everything to the way it was. But no: he can’t find his footing, can’t shake the blurry sensation of too much gin. She’s still distorted. The Interleukin-2 puffed her up, gave her the greenish bloat of a drowning victim, but now, the weight has dripped out of her, and she is sagging like a balloon after the Thanksgiving parade is over and the children have all gone home.

Everyone has ideas about how to beat this thing. There are videos. *Cancer Doesn’t Scare Me!* declares one sent by a second cousin in Texas. People urge them to find their inner child, to find God, and to lose themselves in art. He takes his wife to ceramics classes, yoga retreats and poetry readings, all meant to relax and inspire. Friends recommend diets and accompanying gurus, including the macrobiotic nutritionist they visit one Tuesday afternoon.

“You spent too much time on planes, flying around the world,” the man says to her. “You’re not grounded. What did you think would happen?”

“I thought I would live to be one hundred,” she says. “Longevity is in my genes.”

The man just shakes his head. He has a long, graying beard and wears rope bracelets. He gives them pamphlets about the macrobiotic way, about the evils of dairy and the wonders of hijiki.

“How could you bring me here?” she says on the way home from the appointment. “How could you let him say that to me? How could you let him tell me this is my fault?”

“I don’t know.” A good lawyer can always find a loophole, he thinks. It would be easy to poke holes in the flawed arguments of the guru. He could defend her case. But instead he says, “Maybe there’s some truth in it.”

And then suddenly she’s hysterical. In nearly twenty years of marriage, he’s never seen her hysterical. She is screaming at him but she’s hyperventilating and he can’t understand what’s she saying. She tries to open the car door in moving traffic, but the child-safety lock is on. She kicks the dashboard, but just once—a half-hearted conjuring of adolescent fury—before she gives up and lets her head fall into her lap. He pulls the car over and double parks. He puts his hazards on. She’s slumped in the seat beside him, hiding her face in her hands.

“It’s going to be okay,” he tells her. “It’s going to be okay.”

She sits up and looks at him as if he’s a consolation prize. “You shit-head,” she says.

His muscles soften, yielding to a current, and it’s a new feeling, as if every tendon is learning to let go.

## 9

His wife is a more angular version of the woman she was. When she comes into the kitchen one morning, with what’s left of her hair wrapped in a white scarf, she looks like a Vermeer painting. With the fat stripped away, she is her essential self. They don’t tell you how beautiful people can be when they’re dying.

“Cantaloupe,” he says, and places a bowl of the melon in front of her.

“I’m sick of cantaloupe,” she says. “I can’t even look at it.”

Her robe has fallen open; he can see her ribs.

“You’re a lawyer,” she says. “Can’t you help draw up the will?”

“It’s a conflict of interest,” he says.

“But you can advise our attorney,” she says.

Yes, he can. He knows enough about trusts and estates. He has a sense of mortality.

“I guess it’s not so complicated since we don’t have heirs,” she says.

She didn’t want children until it was too hard to have them. They had tried for a while when she was in her late thirties and decided it wasn’t meant to be. Now he thinks they didn’t try hard enough.

“I wonder what sort of parents we would have been,” he says.

“You would have panicked at every scratched knee,” she says. “You would have freaked out at the sight of a freckle.”

“You would have let the kids play in traffic if they wanted to,” he says and instantly regrets it.

“I would have shown them the world,” she says.

He imagines them at a playground, his wife on the slide with a child—is it a girl? It’s hard to tell in his vision because the child wears a hooded, puffy coat and has a decidedly genderless waddle—while he watches them coast down toward the dirt. Not too fast, he thinks. Please God, not too fast.

10

She won’t sleep now. She has a haunted look, as if her body is caving in on itself. She doesn’t want to close her eyes.

“You need rest,” he says, and strokes her back.

She likes to have her back rubbed, but it’s all bones now and her skin is almost translucent. He has no idea what time it is. His glasses are on the bedside table and he can’t read the digits on his alarm clock.

“I can’t,” she says.

Her voice is weary. Sometimes he can’t understand her at all.

“I’ll stay awake with you,” he says.

She pulls herself up and heaves her legs around to the side of the bed. She is trying to get out of bed, but she can’t walk on her own. He’s afraid to leave the room for even a minute, in case she falls.

“You have to lie down,” he says. “You have to rest. You don’t have to sleep, but you have to rest.”

She is quivering with the effort of sitting up.

“Shall I read to you?” he says.

She shakes her head. No.

It’s just as well. He’s too tired to read. He read to her all afternoon. What he’d like to do is talk. He misses talking to her. The doctors didn’t warn them about how quickly they would lose the opportunity. He misses the sandpaper quality of her voice. Listening to her on the radio, reporting from war zones around the world, he used to get aroused. It’s a voice that always sounds like it’s on the brink of something momentous. A voice that could break through walls if it had to. A voice that doesn’t have time for grocery lists.

He wants to ask her if she’s scared. He wants to know what it feels like to have the blade of the guillotine hanging over your head. Is everything in

sharper focus? Is there some sort of clarity that seeps in? She is reaching out into space, trying to touch something only she can see.

“Where are you trying to go?” he says.

He sits behind her on the bed and grasps her firmly around the waist. He wraps his fingers around her tiny wrist. His index finger travels up her arm, following the narrow rivers of veins. This is a body he knows. He has been down the curve of her legs so many times he knows the route by heart. He can see the constellations of freckles on her arms even when his eyes are closed. The ridge of her cheekbones, the shadowy valleys beneath her eyes, the vast plane of her shoulder blades, the stubborn black hair that sprouts from her right nipple. He knows the inside of her too; during sex, he can feel the lack of articulation, the way the angles soften in the days before she gets her period.

“We could go away together,” he says. “Anywhere. Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia...”

He’s always known how to get out. He’s spent his life noting the location of emergency exits, fire escapes, windows that can be broken. He presses on her collarbone gently, feeling its contours. It is solid beneath the papery skin. The skin seems to be pulling away from the skeleton, creasing like cellophane that won’t stick.

“Where shall we go? Chile? Madagascar?”

He reaches around her, over the side of the bed, feels around in the dark cavern below where they store their duffle bags. His fingers find the rough and sturdy nylon, the padded strap. This is what reliability feels like.

“You see?” he says, lifting the empty bags onto the bed, holding them out like evidence. “Just lie down and I’ll pack for us. You tell me what we need.”

She turns to look at him with a gaze that is terrifyingly vacant. He coaxes her trembling frame down, watches her naked head sink into the pillows and then pulls the covers up and tucks her in.

“Mmm,” she says.

“Hmm?” he says.

She doesn’t answer. He eases himself down next to her and sinks into the mattress. He can feel himself drifting, so he closes his eyes and wonders how the world will look when he opens them. ☞