Malaria

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When I was in college in Eugene I had a girlfriend named Nora Vardon. We had fallen together sort of accidentally, I talked to her first at a vending machine where we were both buying coffee, and things progressed in the usual slow ways, we went out one cold night to look at the blurry stars, and that led to some kissing, and from there we started the customary excavation of our families, revealing, not quite competitively, how crazy they both were, she with a raft of depressives and schizophrenics and me with a bunch of drunks, mainly the men on my father’s side. She had an open, genial, feline face, with big cheeks and dark eyes, and a big soft body that was round in parts and that was covered, for three months out of the year, with the big textured bruises left by lacrosse balls. She was very pretty, really, and I counted myself lucky to be around her. I was skinny and out of necessity got cheap haircuts, so I wasn’t much to look at, and I tended to be secretive, I suppose you could put it that way, although I had nothing to be secretive about, being only twenty and unadventurous.

But Nora and I hit it off. She was studying botany, for which the college had a sort of reputation, and spent her hours in the long white greenhouses at the edge of campus. The heat affected her well. Her hair, brown and a little wavy, would become affixed to her cheeks, and as she worked at the potting tables her dark eyes would take on a comfortable, meditative languor there amid the odor of the soil and the dense humid air and the metallic smell of water dripping from the galvanized piping. To find Nora there I would have come from the library’s back door and out across a section of newly planted pines, which were staked to the earth as though they might otherwise pull up their roots and walk away. The sky in winter was usually sealed with a dense marine overcast, but inside the greenhouses the light was bright, brilliant, and contained. “My ride is here,” Nora would say to no one, as I came down the concrete walkway—or, “My Orlando,” with the accent purposely wrong, on the last syllable, and her mouth would make its charming little O, and I’d give her a kiss, and it would be enough to make me happy.

Nora and I had friends, most of them Nora’s, actually, and we did the usual collegiate things, mostly just drinking, sitting around talking until late: black Emory from Philadelphia, fat Harold the townie, tall flaxen Winnie from Texas, the sad red-haired poet Matt Grange. I worked with Matt three mornings a week in the alumni office answering phones. Matt would sit at his desk composing his lines and crumpling them up and throwing them away, and I would sit at my desk across the room from him, doing nothing, and every now and then a perfect peace would come over me, for no reason I could find, and even just sitting and typing under the fluorescent lights—with the rainclouds gathering beyond the tall windows—seemed a civilized and decent thing to do, maybe for the rest of my life. At the time I didn’t have much idea what I wanted, in the larger sense, but it didn’t worry me. I thought I might like to work for a newspaper one day, maybe in Eugene, or maybe in Seattle, where I came from, but there was plenty of time, I thought, and plenty of time after that, too. I wasn’t headed anywhere on any fast track, that was plain even then, and I didn’t have any kind of natural flair, but I had Nora, and it felt to me like a fair exchange. I was romantic, in the silly way of young men. The rest of my life, I imagined at the time, would be only a collection of details—addings-on—corollaries—to the central fact of Nora Vardon.

Eventually it came time to visit Nora’s parents, Jack and Annette Vardon, who lived a few hundred miles north, in Vancouver, British Columbia. Mr. Vardon turned out to have a friendly oblong head and a mustache, and he worked—I was never quite sure about this—as an engineering manager, or a consultant engineer, maybe as a consultant to other engineering managers, at any rate he went
off every day in his beige raincoat and came back at night and seemed to make a good living at his business, whatever it was. We didn't see much of him. Mrs. Vardon stayed at home and played tennis in the backyard, and had given Nora her dark eyes and round girlish cheeks. “Orlando,” said Annette, on the back porch where we ate, “what an interesting name that is.” The day was unusual, almost warm, though it was only the middle of March.

“They wanted me to be different,” I said.

“You're not Spanish?”

“No,” I said, “German, mostly.”

“We named Nora after her Spanish great-grandmother.”

Nora’s mother wore a little white dress that showed her knobby knees. “Believe it or not my mother always wanted to be Jewish. In fact she always said she was Jewish, but everyone knew she wasn’t. But she wanted to be.”

“Be Jewish?” I asked, for clarity.

“Oh, God knows why. She thought it had some caché, I suppose. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, if you ask me, in terms of what you have to face in this world.”

“Sure.”

“Now, I admire the Jews,” said Annette.

“Mom.”

“I do. I guess everyone does these days. If you don’t, you’re an anti-Semite. But I suppose in admiring them I’m doing something wrong.”

“You're making them exotic,” said Nora. “You're othering them.”

“Well, I guess I don’t know what you mean. And they are exotic. They are. To me, they are. I don’t know any, really, except Elly Bergman, and she doesn’t count, she’s not really anything. Which not knowing any is a failing on my part. But they’re a very healthy people. Doctors. And they are sad people, which I like. I like sad people. It’s the way people should be. If everyone was sad we wouldn’t have all these problems.” She cast her arms wide. “Don’t tell me we need all these problems.”

While visiting her parents Nora and I slept in separate bedrooms: me in her older brother George’s room (he was living in an apartment a mile or so away, and had taken all his things with him, so the room had a neutral, underinhabited feeling) and Nora in her old childhood bedroom with the posters and so forth. Nora wouldn’t sneak in to see me at night, and I didn’t exactly want to take the initiative and go next door, but during the long days, with the father gone and the mother off somewhere with friends, we made up for it in George’s room. Not in hers, Nora insisted, because that would be too weird. And then afterward we’d laze around naked with the light through the windows, listening to the garbage trucks churn through the neighborhood. “I can’t believe she said those things,” said Nora. “You know she’s always had a thing about Jewish people. I think she’s afraid she’s secretly somehow one of them. That her mother was right. That wouldn’t bother you, would it?”

“Your mom’s cute,” I said. “She looks like you.”

“Like me?” She considered this. “Maybe me on a very bad day.”

We were going to be there for about a week, and on the second day, George, the brother, came around to do laundry and to eat. George was thin and dried-out, like a kind of cowboy, and his long fingers fiddled, fiddled, and touched his turtleneck sweater up over his chin. Nora loved him, and grew sly and contentious with him around. “Mom says you still don’t have a decent job,” she said.

“Oh, but I do. I’m fully employed, soaking the rich.” He rolled his eyes at their parents in the next room. “You know how that goes.”

“No,” she said, “I’m working for my money.”

“Sure. You just get the check in the mail. I’ve got to manage the little dollies. Manage, manage, manage. They require,” he said, turning to me, “manipulation.”

“I like them.”

He eyed me appraisally. “Where’d you get this one?” he said. “Don’t tease him.”

“Actually, I’m not teasing,” he said gently. “The last one she brought around here was a real bastard.”

“Ingraham,” she explained, “from high school.”
“But I like this new guy.”
“I’m likable.”
“Hey,” George cried agreeably, “me too! Okay, let’s play some tennis.” He thrust himself out of his chair and clambered around in the closet under the stairs, emerging with a pair of old wooden rackets.
“Well, George,” Nora said, “we’ve got perfectly good regular rackets.”
“No.” He bowed. “This is the tradition. If you don’t mind.”
“Okay,” I said.
“It is,” he pronounced, “more sporting this way.”
He was better than I was, I think—I mean he could hit the ball squarely and very hard and he served fast and accurately, he had grown up with the court in his backyard, after all, whereas I had only bonked the ball around in the neighborhood parks. But he had no stamina, and he wouldn’t run for balls he could have got, so I kept it fairly close for a while. He began to get red in the face, and he took off his shirt, which showed his narrow chest, with a fuzzy badge of black hair on his sternum. The sun lit half the court through the pine trees with a stagy, slanty beauty. I wasn’t in the best shape either, I began to fade halfway through the set, but I did all right, and finally I beat him, 6–4. He sagged at the back line and I felt a moment’s compunction for my having been, as it seemed to me suddenly, impolite, a poor houseguest, but then he joined me at the net, flushed and sweaty. “Nice,” he said.
“Thanks. You too.”
“Yeah, well, I’ve got malaria,” he said, flicking sweat from his eyebrows, “just for your information.”
He wasn’t that much older than me: a year, maybe two. It stung him, I thought, to have been beaten at home, with his sister watching, off and on, from the upstairs windows. I said, “Sorry.”
“Not your fault. Got it in Ecuador.”
“You’re better than I am,” I said. “Just lost your wind. Plus these rackets.”
“Yeah, well, don’t go to Ecuador.”

“Okay.” But as far as I knew he’d never been to Ecuador.
“Or if you do,” he said significantly, “take precautions.”

My only real dealing with Mr. Vardon came just after this, while I was in the hall, heading for the shower. “You give the boyo a workout?” he asked.

“I said something nice, I don’t know what.”
“Used to play. That’s why we built it. For me. But I fouled up my back. Fixing a flat tire, if you can believe it. So I just get to sit here and look at it. At least it gets some use from somebody. My wife likes it. And you beat George. Good for you. I never could. That lucky bastard.”
“Said he’s a little sick.”
“Sure. Actually he smokes too much and never exercises. He’s got the body of a forty-year-old man. Like a little skinny one.”

I thought about telling Mr. Vardon what his son had said to me, but I thought both of us would end up looking a little strange. Or he’d look strange and I’d look mean for repeating it. So I just kept my mouth shut, and Nora’s father walked off into his bedroom, where, with the door open, he shucked off his white shirt with a brisk, demonstrative flourish. His stomach was still trim, his biceps hefty. Then he reached over and closed the door, and that was really the last I saw of him until several months later, after everything had changed.

Heading home aboard the all-night charter bus, Nora slept on my shoulder and I sat with my head resting against the glass, with the sewery citrus stink of the bathroom catching me now and then. At about three in the morning we passed through Seattle, where all the drunken uncles of my line were sleeping it off. My own parents had managed to construct a safe little life for themselves and for me but this project had taken up all their effort, as I thought of it then, and while they were proud of me for walking the straight and narrow, and I could admire them for having done the same, we didn’t really have a lot to say to one another anymore. (This has remained true until today, in fact.) It was as though none of
the three of us quite knew what to do with ourselves if our lives weren’t burning down in the way everyone else’s were. So I wasn’t sad or particularly anything as the bus barreled through the city and south toward Oregon. The bus stopped in Kelso and we all wandered around stunned in the fluorescent lights, smelling the hash browns, and then it was back on the bus for the last hours south into Eugene, which, in the early morning, was a lovely place, pink and yellow, with sheets of pale sunlight falling over the college buildings and fog rising from the fountains, the fast-food franchises just opening up, and the dark gray houses holding within themselves their little secrets, innumerable men and women starting up from their beds, getting on with the day. The joke, when I was in high school—or maybe it was really a joke from The Breakfast Club, I don’t remember—was that if you didn’t actually have a girlfriend you said you had a Canadian girlfriend, someone who was off somewhere out of sight, immune to judgment. But here I was with the Canadian girlfriend on my shoulder, for real. It was true now, and different from what I thought it would be, easier, less contentious, more like real life than I had imagined it would be.

Nora and I stayed in Eugene that summer, working, and over the weeks that followed Nora got mostly bad news from home. George had gone back to work, then quit again. Then it turned out he’d actually been fired after he started a fire in the grease trap, which closed the restaurant for two days, after which he moved back home, into his old bedroom. Then he stopped coming out of his room. It sounded ominous to me, as though he was seriously off-track, but Nora never thought of it that way until George was arrested naked, in the summer rain, in the middle of the high-school athletic fields, turning in circles and talking to himself. After this his parents kept him at home for a while, watching him, and there were long conversations back and forth which I basically got the gist of, they were obviously worried about his mind, and eventually (after what seemed a long delay) they took him in to see a doctor, and he was medicated, which seemed to help. The Vardon family history had found another occasion to express itself, evidently. I never told Nora about his malaria comment, though I felt uneasy about it—I saw it now for what it seemed to be, an early indication of some delusion.

“He says he’s hearing voices,” Nora told me. “But everybody hears voices. I hear voices. Everybody does. I hear my name in the cafeteria, I always think somebody’s calling me, it’s this voice, but it’s not—it doesn’t have any qualities. It’s not masculine, it’s not feminine, it’s just a voice, it’s like the idea of a voice. It’s like telepathy.”

I regarded the pretty curve of her shoulders. The easy warmth of an Oregon July filtered around the edges of the window frame. I put my hand on the small of her back. I whispered: “Nora.”

“Don’t,” she swatted at me.

“But sweetheart,” I said, “you’d know if you were crazy.”

“But I probably wouldn’t. Don’t you see? That’s sort of the definition of crazy.” She fixed me with a hard, calculating stare. She had her own opinions, and I didn’t then know how to talk her out of them, or that I was supposed to simply listen to her, I was too young to know what to say or do, I had so little experience with things and with women in particular, and I believed a kind of frictionless amiability was what would serve my interests. So when she said things like this I mostly just discounted them, thinking that would help. She said, finally, “We’re sort of a pathetic couple, when you think about it.”

“No we’re not,” I said. “You’re great, and I’m great.”

“Not you and me, dummy,” she said, “me and George.”

What I did next was, I took up tennis as seriously as I could. I found I remembered the nice contact the ball made with the strings—a kind of exponential action, with the ball plus the strings multiplying to more force than I could have hoped to exert on my own. It was partly an aesthetic choice, looking back, I suppose, I liked the way it felt when I hit a ball well, but I can further see
that something else must also have been at work, some unkind fascination with the strangeness of George, with the fact that he had begun to fail in this very obvious fashion while I had, so far, not. With my summer ID card I could use the courts behind the Recreation Building. I signed up on the bulletin board and ended up playing with a set of people who were variously serious about the game—a doctor from Ghana who wore blinding whites, a janitor who owned the most expensive racket I had ever seen, a Mark-8 Wonder, which produced a faint supernatural whistling noise like a hunting owl, a homeschooled sixteen-year-old boy named Elliott who had no offensive instincts whatsoever but who could return nearly anything I sent his way, so he beat me consistently—and so on. I was not exactly serious about the tennis itself, but about the project of self-definition, as I see it now, because this was something very straightforward that I could be, or at least do. Nora’s lacrosse friends would not recognize me in the fall, and neither would Matt Grange—or better yet they would recognize that they had never really seen the true me. And it was not just that I was not failing as George was. I think this summer was also the period when I first struck on the idea of ambition, that I could be something in particular, rather than just myself in general.

Nora went back and forth to Vancouver by herself a few times that summer and fall but it wasn’t until Thanksgiving that I went north with her again. By this time George had been living at home for some months. Mrs. Vardon greeted us at the bus station, wearing a white sweater and a puffy white parka, her black eyes and round cheeks seeming, in the cold morning light, like something arctic, adapted for long darknesses. “Orlando,” she said, taking my arm. “Now, you know about George. You know he’s a little different than when you last saw him.”

It was a Saturday, so Mr. Vardon was home too. He was in the dining room reading a newspaper. “Hello, Orlando,” said Mr. Vardon. “Welcome again.”

“Hello. Thank you.”

Together Nora and I went upstairs. George’s white door was closed. No sound came from it. Nora knocked. “Come in,” he said.

In some ways her brother looked the same. A smoky, sweaty, outdoor odor had filled the room, not unpleasantly; a window was open, and the room was cool, almost cold. He wore a T-shirt and was skinnier than last time I’d seen him. His expression was different, less fierce, more uncertain. “Hey,” he noted, “it’s the boyfriend.”

“Hi,” I said.

Nora said, “You look good, Georgie.”

“Yeah, bullshit,” he said.

“It’s cold in here,” said Nora.

“I still get hot,” he said. “It’s something to do with the pills.”

Addressing me, he gestured languidly to the dresser, which held five brown plastic bottles. “Screws up your thermostat.”

She said, “You should comb your hair.”

“Sure, but if I started now it’d look suspicious.”

“Oh, it would not.”

“The other thing is,” said George, but only to me, “you know how I was hearing voices, well, it’s still happening. But now it’s like in the background. Like the radio. But I can’t even listen to the radio anymore. It’s just too much blabber. Music’s okay. But even then, they talk through the music, it’s like annoying, it’s like they have a plan to talk during the good parts.” He shrugged. “Whatever. You know.”

Sensing Nora and George wanted to be alone, I left them and went downstairs into the hallway. Mr. Vardon had gone off somewhere. I could hear Mrs. Vardon knocking around in the kitchen, making breakfast. I didn’t know what to do with myself. What could I say to anyone that wouldn’t sound hollow and ridiculous? I had had such a featureless life to that point, so free of pain, I thought, that I had no training in delivering sympathy. I didn’t know how to do it. And Nora did, or was quickly figuring it out. I stood alone in the front hall, feeling stupid and useless.

After a few minutes Nora came back down. “I got cold,” she said.

“Listen,” I said.

“He’s better than he was,” she said.
“Listen, when we were here in the spring,” I said, “George said something to me, and I know it maybe doesn’t matter, but I just wanted to tell you. He said he had malaria. After we played tennis. I feel like I should have told someone. Like maybe it was a warning sign.”

“Oh,” she said, distantly, “don’t worry about it.”

“But I do.” I took her in my new strong arms. “I worry about it.”

“Please don’t,” she insisted.

“Maybe I should have said something earlier.”

“But sweetheart,” she said, looking up at me, “you realize we couldn’t have done anything.”

“But I just thought maybe we could have.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” she sighed, sinking against me in quiet disappointment, “this has nothing to do with you.” George had left his door open, and it was becoming cold in the downstairs hallway, and then we were shivering there next to the banister, in our light traveling clothes.

Poor George lived on, and lives on still, as far as I know, sick and probably messed up in the predictable ways. He was important to me in the way such people can be, surprisingly, really out of proportion to their actual size in your life. I remember, for example, thinking about him some years later, one Seattle winter, a long time after Nora and I had gone our separate ways. I had come down with the flu and was deep under the covers at home, my wife off at work and me alone in the bedroom in the strange empty middle of the day. The peculiar quiet that entered my sickroom—the heated stillness—the dense damp packing of my chest—the fluid limpness that had overtaken me—and the individual details of the wallpaper, which my wife and I had newly hung, with its tiny red strawberries, and the imagined vastness of my old city beyond the windows—all the city’s long streets and silent windowed towers, and above it a complex geography of clouds and sky—all of it combined in some alchemy of illness so that I seemed, momentarily, to be inhabiting a continent of wildness, of strangeness. In the manner of men getting older I sometimes ended up thinking sort of longingly about the past whenever my current life was slow, or whenever I felt I deserved better, which meant that over the years I had on and off thought of Nora and her air of restrained tragedy, and her poor brother George. But this new fevered condition felt like a different world, one which I occupied for only a few hours, where love meant nothing, and where you could see, delirious, through walls—where you knew everything, and where no one would ever ask anything of you. That’s not quite it, but it was something like that. I was pretty sick, and it was a terrible afternoon, during which I felt a hideous estrangement from the plain objects of everyday life. The trees and empty cars I could see from my pillow seemed filled with a brooding, unaccommodating presence—a malingering spirit—and a peculiar half-light, like that of an eclipse, seemed to enter the room through the venetian blinds. I shivered because I felt, as I had never felt in my life, alone in the world—not only alone but as though I were the only human left around. But then after a while I returned to my senses. I was only sick, after all, and it was only a passing feeling, and slowly things resolved themselves into their familiar places, and I went on, after a day or so, pretty much the way I had before.

I don’t want to say that I ever really gave poor George Vardon a whole lot of serious thought. It’s just that once in a while his story, his terrible fate, would secretly animate a day for me as I walked around, and I would wonder what I was supposed to do with what I knew about him—with the whole fact of his sad life as I understood it. It was not the saddest life ever lived, of course, but it was enough so I would wonder: What are we supposed to do with what we know? What is George Vardon to me?

And these days it strikes me that possibly these aren’t exactly the questions. Maybe we’re not supposed to do anything. Maybe this is just a story of something that happened to me, and not even really to me at all. It’s really George’s story, that is, but naturally he can’t tell it, and neither can I. ☺