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## *Letter from Majorca*

FROM *The Paris Review*

LET'S SUPPOSE YOU are a serious person, or you transmit to yourself certain conventional signals of a sort of seriousness: you reread Tacitus, you attempt to reread Proust but it can't be done, you listen to Bartók and to Archie Shepp.

Also: You can't stop moving your bowels, or your body can't. You have a body, you are a body. You don't know what's safe to eat these days, or when. You're so sick that you take off your clothes when you use the bathroom, for safety's sake. That was a hard lesson to learn. Let's stop saying *you*.

I had a body. It was a problem. It hurt most of the time. I dreamed of one world and woke into another. I woke in pain from bad dreams of my divorce, again, and listened to Wayne Shorter's *The All Seeing Eye*. It would see a lot of things, that eye. Think of all it might come to know and desire to forget.

My throat hurt, my stomach hurt, I coughed, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and thought about death: I heard its soft footfalls approaching. I had some blood tests, I took some medicine. I spent a lot of time in bed.

At the time I'm telling you about, I was earning some money, not much, as a freelance journalist and a teacher in a university, writing about education, about gun control, about fashion or music, reviewing new novels through a haze of rage and envy, telling myself that *whatever it takes* means *whatever it takes*, doing whatever I had to do to convince myself that I was not a number two schmuck.

The wife tells her husband, *You must be the number two schmuck in the whole world.*

*Why can't I be the number one schmuck?* he says.

*But how could you be number one?* she says. *You're such a schmuck.*

There was nothing the matter with me that was not also the matter with everyone else. I was not as interesting as I thought I was. My major problem, inadequate or inappropriate love from my parents, was as common as dirt. And one rainy day, all the boring poignancy of these realizations detonated in me like an atom bomb, burning the dead shadow of each former torment or preoccupation onto solid rock. Those silhouettes, that record would remain: the museum where I used to be.

*All right, I thought, I've had enough. Some other way from now on, but not like that, not anymore.*

And so I quit my university job after shouting at a student until she began to cry. "You're crying?" I said. "Why are you crying?" She ran away.

I had done this to innumerable boys over the years and had considered it good for them, but a girl's tears shocked me and made me see myself as I was: cruel, power-mad, an abuser of children, because in our time twenty-year-olds remain children, and they themselves are not entirely to blame. We have failed them. Let's stop saying *we*.

I shouted at a pretty girl with long black hair. She often stayed after class to discuss her favorite books with me, sitting next to me on my desk, playing with the strap of her shirt and smiling in a way that becomes familiar to every teacher, flattering and dangerous, and when she ran away crying I saw that I had scolded her in order to prevent myself from going to bed with her.

And later, when I realized that her name, she had a man's first name, was also the name of a friend with whom I was angry because I had praised my analyst in his presence and he had applied and been taken on as an analysand, when I realized that by driving my student away I was also murdering her name-twin, my rival sibling, I thought, *These kids deserve better instruction than I am currently capable of providing.*

Once I admitted how much I wanted to kill and eat the children who had been entrusted to my care, I tried to forgive myself for any harm I might have done them over the years, for all the crackling bolts I had hurled from my cloud of self-serving ignorance, and I left that institution of learning to resume my position

of nothingness in a world where I had no power to abuse my subordinates because I had no subordinates, where I had no authority save whatever I might seize by force or by cunning—where, as each day proves afresh, people will walk smiling through puddles of your blood, smiling and talking on their cellular phones. They're going to the movies.

People at parties in Cambridge asked me *What do you do?* with alarming regularity. I had spent the previous thirty years in Kentucky, never once having been asked what I did, because what would be the point? I do some task I don't care about in order to be able to afford to stay alive, the same as you do, and then I clock in at my real job holding down a stool at the Back Door or Check's Café or Freddie's Bar-Lounge or Jake's Club Reno.

In Cambridge, at parties, I said whatever came first into my mind.

"I manufacture organic catheters."

"I'm a butt scientist."

"I am an AM/FM clock radio."

For a while, when I sensed they might find it contemptible, I had thrown it into people's faces that I worked in a deli. It was true: once, in Cambridge, I had made a sandwich for Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. "I think that was Arthur Schlesinger," I said, and the next person in line said, "Who's Arthur Schlesinger?"

And once I made a Reuben for a Weimaraner. Probably I made a lot of sandwiches for dogs without knowing it, but the lady I am thinking of made it clear to me that I was to be careful with her dog's sandwich, take it easy on the Russian dressing.

I was proud of myself on the day I quit my university teaching job. I remembered when I was still a little boy and my father came home from work, too tired and sore to bend over and take his own boots off, and I was so pleased to take his boots off for him, the brown and white laces and the brads and the dry mud flaking onto the floor; and my mother said, "How was work today?" and my father said, "I quit."

We sat down to dinner and we did not speak. Soon the phone rang, and my father smiled. On the phone was someone who had heard about how my father had told the foreman off, good, he deserved it and only you had the guts to give it to him, we always have a job for a man like you, can you start tomorrow. He could.

Now that it was settled, we finished eating our dinner, meatloaf

and mashed potatoes maybe, or hamburgers and thick-cut, deep-fried potatoes, my father's favorite. And that night my mother sobbed until she vomited. This happened many times when I was a boy.

I told my girlfriend I had quit my teaching job. "That was dumb," she said.

It was at this time that the captain called me long-distance from Tunisia and said, "I need a man. Get over here."

"I'm sick," I said. "I don't know how much help I can be to you."

"All I need is arms and legs," he said. "Do you still have arms and legs? Then buy a ticket for Cagliari and meet us in Carloforte."

The captain was a gray giant out of Tel Aviv. One holiday I had seen him surrounded by his daughters, by his sons-in-law, his grandchildren, his pretty young girlfriend, and I thought, *This man has something to teach you about what a certain kind of happiness is in life, so learn it, you dummy.*

I already felt *at sea*, as they say, *lost in familiar places* is another thing they say. I decided to spend some time at sea, where my bewilderment might make more sense, because disorientation and chaos would actually be happening.

Why do people feel things and go places, tell me if you know.

That was how my odyssey began. I flew to Heathrow Terminal 4, where a man in one of the many airport bars drank a bottle of Worcestershire sauce, put the empty in his briefcase, and chased it with a pint of ale. A morose Russian paced near Aeroflot. I flew on to Sardinia and hired a car, and soon I was alone, under the moon, without the luggage Alitalia had lost, on the last ferry to the island called San Pietro.

The boat was forty-three feet long and there were five of us, myself and four Israelis, on it for five weeks. I had never been sailing for more than two hours at a time, in Boston Harbor. I didn't understand the captain when he told me to take the French seasickness pill.

There was work to be done, and so after three acid-yellow heaving-ups they left me to my fate, sprawled on my back with a bucket nearby. Shattered by nausea and fear, I sweated through my shirt and took it off and wrung it out and wiped myself with it. I was sick



all day and night as we crossed from Sardinia to Minorca. I hadn't had a drink in eight years, but hello, vomiting, it is always nice to see you again.

When the captain saw that I could sit up and drink water, he said, "You're a sailor now," and he sent me fore. It wasn't true that I was a sailor, but it was true that a task helped me to focus on something other than my constant boring suffering, something to do with the jib roller, it's all a blur.

I wasn't going to be sick again for more than a month, but there was no way I could know that. As we hobbyhorsed up and down, pitching hard over the waves, I saw first the sea and then the sky, black sea, night sky, burning moon, a foretaste of death.

Both Odysseus and Captain Ahab are heroes of departure and return, for Ahab too returns: to his death-home, in the whale.

Shlomo's English was good. He told me about the Dead Sea Scrolls. He told me about Brazilian agronomy. He told me about Joseph Stiglitz.

Shlomo said, "I ask myself, who are the wisest people in the world? The answer is, the Jews. This is well known.

"And who are the wisest Jews? A moment's reflection reveals that Russian Jews are the wisest.

"Next we must discover who are the wisest of these Russian Jews. And the answer comes back, clearly the people of Odessa.

"So who are the wisest Jews in Odessa? The members of the old synagogue.

"It's plain to see, then, that the wisest man in the world must be Rabbi Loew, chief rabbi of the old synagogue of Odessa. But he's such an idiot."

And Amatsia said, "My brain is fucking." He meant his memory was going bad. Asked for an example, he explained that in the army he had once carried a dead man on his back for two days and now he couldn't remember the man's name. He shook his head. "Fucking," he said.

Amatsia didn't talk much. He smoked. Every now and then he picked up the binoculars and looked at the colors of the flags of other ships and said, "Fucking Germans."

One night, docked, we met a German couple in a Spanish restaurant. "You talk about Jerusalem, I think," the man said, "in your

beautiful language. It is so interesting. I too have been to *Yerushalayim*, so interesting. Yes, and to Haifa also. A beautiful city."

The captain said, "Do you know what we say about the beautiful Haifa?"

"What is that?"

"The most beautiful thing in Haifa is the road to Tel Aviv."

All the Israelis, a little drunk, laughed.

"Yes," the German said, "this is a kind of humor, I think."

Amatsia had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean with the captain ten years earlier. He smoked, and I smoked too, pretending to be him, because I wanted to fit in and because he seemed to be an admirable man, quiet and hardworking, and from time to time the captain snarled at us in Hebrew.

"He says smoking is stupid," Amatsia said.

I smoked a cigar on a bench along the dock and saw a waterfront bum coming from a hundred yards away. He was burned brown and wrinkled by the sun. He looked like a wallet someone had been sitting on for forty years.

"Have you got another *puro*?" he said. "You speak English? You understand me? Don't worry about Spanish. English is the best. A very good language. With English, you go anywhere in the world. All places. If you know Spanish, what does that get you? Tell me, where can you go?" He made a face as he gestured around himself, disgusted by the beauty of his native Spain.

It had been a long time since Señorita Geile had taught me Spanish with her hand puppet named Teodoro, a little bear. I had written the Pledge of Allegiance, *juro fidelidad a la bandera de los Estados Unidos de América*, as a punishment when I was bad, which had been often, and I had memorized *poesía*, but now I couldn't remember one word of it, which is not what *memorize* means. I memorized the Pledge of Allegiance, and I memorized this fact: I am bad.

A cabdriver said to me, "How many languages do you speak? Your Spanish is very bad, we're not going to count that one." He adjusted his eyeglasses and said, "The real money in this cab-driving business is the night shift, the *putas*. Tell me something. How do you say *fucky-fucky* in English?"

I floated in a sea of Hebrew, or in an estuary of Spanish and Hebrew. I made up ways to spell what I thought I was hearing. It's

astonishing what you won't need to know in this life. I got by for weeks with nothing but *ani rotse le'echol mashehu bevakasha*, which means, I think, *I want something to eat, please*. I thought about language—speaking in tongues, rebuking the Devil—and I thought about twins: about my new sibling, the fellow analysand I loved and had shared my precious analyst with and now wanted to kill. I would kill him and eat him. Maybe I would eat him first.

There were twins at my high school, nice shy Vietnamese boys. They were king-hell math achievers, but they hardly spoke a lick of English. At first I figured they spoke French at home, or Vietnamese, but I came to understand that they didn't speak those languages either. They'd had one another since birth, before language, and they had never seen the need to learn to speak anything.

The Israelis were competitive in all things, and they soon set out to establish who was the greatest shipboard cook. The contest lasted for weeks and was delicious, but I was often unwell, and there was the small problem of the head onboard. I made it filthy, sometimes twice, because I was unwell, and then I made it clean again, not without some effort. I have cleaned a lot of toilets, I worked as a janitor at one time, and I can tell you land-based toilets are preferable, they do not move.

Shlomo wouldn't take his turn cleaning the head. "It stinks," he said.

"The head smells fine," said the captain. "What stinks is human shit."

We could urinate over the side if the sea wasn't too rough. "One hand for you, one hand on the ship," the captain said, "and no matter what lies she may have told you, boys, one hand for yourself is plenty. Most of the dead men in the sea have their flies open."

On the boat, we did laundry like this. You wore your underwear until you felt you were no longer a member of the human race. Then you turned it inside out and wore it some more.

I found myself thinking about my father, about a time we had gone to a baseball game together. We were in the parking lot. "When are you moving north?" he said. "The forty-third of Delfember," I said, and he laughed, and then he said, "Help me," and I turned around and my father had shit in his britches.



He'd been out the night before with his best friend, Jeff, a bartender who was blind in one eye and drunk in the other and tended to wear a black T-shirt that said *Vietnam Veteran*, in case any onlookers happened to wonder if Jeff might be a veteran and if so, of what conflict.

And when I say *tended* I mean he wore that shirt to funerals, a T-shirt at a funeral, that was Jeff all the way. When his own brother, when Jeff's brother, Sarge, had died, my father had lent him my mother's car and Jeff, already crocked at ten in the morning, had almost run it off the road on his way to the service, scraping it along the guardrail and snapping off its side mirror. My mother said nothing, which was not her habit.

My father too was a Vietnam veteran. So were a lot of men in my family. One of them was my uncle, who died of Agent Orange-related complications. "Let that be a lesson to you," my father said. "Don't join the service, and don't let your friends join the service. Because they tell you what to do. They tell you where to go, they tell you what to eat. They tell you when to die. And then you're dead."

In that parking lot, my father was right to trust in my expertise. I was well acquainted with the problem at hand. I was a promising young drunk, bad with women and an easy vomiter, and occasionally I had to shit as well. I had shit the bed once and kept sleeping and got up in the morning, going happily about my day off, and had not noticed until my then-wife came home from her job and asked me what it might be in our bedroom that smelled so much like shit. And, of course, it was shit that smelled that way. That was the answer.

And so I was prepared to aid my father. As in so many endeavors, the first step is to lie: I said everything was going to be just fine. I told him he had to be brave for a few minutes, could he do that, could he walk, if not we could find some other way but that would be the simplest, and he said he thought he could.

We walked past the parked cars and trucks and the yellow paint on the asphalt toward the gray concrete of the arena and its public restroom. I got my father into a stall and stood outside and told him to take his shoes and socks and jeans and underwear off. My father hated public restrooms. Once, when I was a little boy, I had noticed he did not wash his hands after urinating and asked him



about that habit and he had given his explanation, saying, "I'm confident that my penis is the cleanest thing in this environment."

His drawers were not so bad after all, but I threw them in the garbage just to seem like I was doing something to help. I passed him handfuls of paper towels. "Check your legs down to your ankles and feet," I said. "Check your socks. How are your pants? We want to keep them."

"What if we can't?"

"Then you wear my shirt around your waist like a kilt until we get back to the truck," I said. But he washed and dried himself and put his pants and socks and shoes back on. And that was that. It was nothing he could not have done on his own if he had given it a moment's thought, instead of willing himself to helplessness, to asking for help. *Orders make you stupid*, the captain told me, *figure it out for yourself*.

What do you know, I'm finally shitting my father. God knows I ate enough of him. I am thirty-seven years old, five feet, ten inches tall, 180 pounds, a hairy man like Esau with an increasing amount of gray in my chest, a miniature facsimile of my father is half extruded from my rectum, otherwise I am in good health.

The past is behind me, burning, like a hemorrhoid. My parents will not die if I wish them dead. They will die because life is finite.

When I was in college, one of my teachers said, "What's the matter with you? Are you waiting for your parents to die before you write something honest?" and I said, "That is the dumbest question I have ever heard."

My mother calls collect from Hell. She rides her bike and goes swimming. There are a lot of ibises in Hell. She sends me a picture. It's pretty. I'm shouting into the telephone, I'm trying to shout but it's hard to make a noise, my jaw won't work, my teeth are long and getting longer, they break against each other, everywhere I turn I'm biting something. I bite the telephone, biting.

My parents are not dead. I mean hell on earth, plain old regular real hell. You know that hell? That's the one I'm talking about. And even when they are dead they will live on in me, burning in my hell-head, it's so crowded in here, still yammering about what I ought to do: *Now I see how it is, you drop a coat hanger on the floor and if no one is watching you don't pick it up, that's the kind of man you've*

*become*. My dead father in particular is very interested in the proper configuration of everyday household items like coat hangers.

Ibiza was on fire as we approached by night from the sea. A third of the island was burning. We anchored and watched airplanes swoop to fill their tanks with seawater. They flew high over the mountains and dropped water on the burning trees again and again. It was the biggest wildfire on the island in all of recorded history. It was still burning the next day when we left.

Shlomo, swimming just before we pulled up anchor, was stung by a jellyfish. "Do you want me to pee on it?" I said.

"No, I want you to shit on it," he said. "Americans!" he said.

On that boat, surrounded by blank water and blank Hebrew, with a somewhat less blank Spanish awaiting me on shore, I was free from the obligation to apprehend and interpret. If I don't understand what you want from me, I don't have to try to do it, I can't. The sea is incomprehensible and uncomprehending, the sea doesn't care, which is terrific, depending on what kind of *care* you are accustomed to receiving. The sea is wet.

As a teenager I was once waved through a roadblock by a police officer who then pulled me over and ticketed me for running the roadblock. "I don't understand what you want from me," I said, something I had already, at that early age, said many times to many different people.

"What's the matter with you?" the officer snarled, something many different people have said to me, and when my father and I went to court we found I had been charged with attempting to elude a police officer and failure to comply. My father knew the judge, or should I say the judge knew my father: she had been his girlfriend in high school. My father and I were wearing the nicest clothes we owned.

"Well, Mr. Prosecutor, what do we have here?" the judge said, smiling.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," said Mr. Prosecutor, and he was also smiling, and they were speaking to and for my father, not to me, although I had been charged with *attempting to elude a police officer*, for Christ's sake, I still don't understand it. I got off with a fine for making an illegal turn. The judge knew my father, everyone knew my father, just as everyone had known my

grandfather, and even people who had not been alive at the time knew that all the lights in Hodgenville, Kentucky, had gone out when my grandfather died. I was not a tree, I was an apple, I had not fallen far from those trees, but I had fallen. Somewhere there had been an apple and a fall. This much we knew.

If anyone wanted something from me on that boat, he said my name; if no one said my name, I was not wanted. And *I was not wanted*, I floated for a month in a sea of unmeaning noise, I was free from the horror of being deformed by another person's needs and desires.

I became a twin, a sibling to myself, and I gnawed myself for nourishment in the red cavern of the womb, relaxing into my own death.

I ate myself until there was nothing left but my mouth. Then I ate my own mouth. Then I died.

But no one ever dies. I got off the boat and hailed a cab and took a train to Madrid.

In Madrid I went to the Prado, where I looked at Goya's *Saturno devorando a su hijo*. There he sat, sickened, with his horrid mouthful, and the whites of his eyes were huge.

I had always thought of Saturn as vicious, as power-mad. I had never realized how frightened he was, how compelled to commit and experience horror against his will. I began to cry. I felt sorry for Saturn. He didn't want to eat anyone. His stomach hurt. He wasn't even hungry.

And I flew home. Last night I dreamed the Devil bit my penis off. This morning it was still there, or *here*. Where I am is called *here*.