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To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

Written by Joshua Ferris

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To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

A Novel

Joshua Ferris



PENGUIN BOOKS

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For Grant Rosenberg

Ha, ha

—Job 39:25

The Son of a Stranger

One

THE MOUTH IS A weird place. Not quite inside and not quite out, not skin and not organ, but something in between: dark, wet, admitting access to an interior most people would rather not contemplate—where cancer starts, where the heart is broken, where the soul might just fail to turn up.

I encouraged my patients to floss. It was hard to do some days. They should have flossed. Flossing prevents periodontal disease and can extend life up to seven years. It's also time consuming and a general pain in the ass. That's not the dentist talking. That's the guy who comes home, four or five drinks in him, what a great evening, ha-has all around, and, the minute he takes up the floss, says to himself, What's the point? In the end, the heart stops, the cells die, the neurons go dark, bacteria consumes the pancreas, flies lay their eggs, beetles chew through tendons and ligaments, the skin turns to cottage cheese, the bones dissolve, and the teeth float away with the tide. But then someone who never flossed a day in his life would come in, the picture of inconceivable self-neglect and unnecessary pain—rotted teeth, swollen gums, a live wire of infection running from enamel to nerve—and what I called hope, what I called courage, above all what I called defiance, again rose

up in me, and I would go around the next day or two saying to all my patients, "You must floss, please floss, flossing makes all the difference."

A dentist is only half the doctor he claims to be. That he's also half mortician is the secret he keeps to himself. The ailing bits he tries to turn healthy again. The dead bits he just tries to make presentable. He bores a hole, clears the rot, fills the pit, and seals the hatch. He yanks the teeth, pours the mold, fits the fakes, and paints to match. Open cavities are the eye stones of skulls, and lone molars stand erect as tombstones.

We call it a practice, never a business, but successful dentistry is very much a business. I started out with a windowless two-chair clinic in Chelsea. Eventually I moved into a place off Park Avenue. I had half the ground floor of an apartment complex called the Aftergood Arms.

Park Avenue is the most civilized street in the world. Doormen still dress like it's 1940, in caps and gloves, opening doors for old dowagers and their dogs. The awnings extend to the curb so that no one gets wet on rainy days stepping in and out of cabs, and a carpet, usually green, sometimes red, runs underfoot. With a certain cast of mind, you can almost reconstruct the horse-and-carriage days when the first of the nabob settlers were maneuvering their canes and petticoats through the Park Avenue mud. Manhattan suffers its shocks. The neighborhoods turn over. The city changes in your sleep. But Park Avenue stays Park Avenue, for better or worse—moneyed, residential, quintessentially New York.

I borrowed a lot to refurbish the new place. To pay back that money as quickly as possible, I went against the advice of the contractor, the objections of Mrs. Convoy, my own better instincts,

and the general protocol of dentists everywhere and ordered a floor plan without a private office. I installed a fifth chair in that space and then spent the next ten years killing myself tending to five chairs in five rooms while complaining about my lack of privacy and raking in tons and tons of money.

Everything was always something. It did no good to bitch about it. Some days I really held a grudge. I'd tell myself to get over myself. What could be better than a thriving practice and a management structure with me on top? My days weren't any longer than yours, except Thursdays. Some Thursdays we didn't get out of the office until ten o'clock. I almost slept okay those nights, when the pills seemed almost redundant. (First thing to go when you medicate to sleep are the dreams. Look on the bright side, I said to myself, as my dreams first started to fade. You're being spared, upon waking, the desperate need to convey to someone else the vivid images of a rich inner life.)

Everything was always something, but something—and here was the rub—could never be everything. A thriving practice couldn't be everything. A commitment to healthy patients and an afternoon mochaccino and pizza Fridays just couldn't be everything. The banjo couldn't be everything, either, unfortunately. Streaming movies directly to the TV was almost everything when first available, but soon fell off to just barely something. The Red Sox had been everything for a long time, but they disappointed me in the end. The greatest disappointment of my adult life came in 2004, when the Red Sox stole the pennant from the Yankees and won the World Series.

For two months one summer, I thought golf could be everything. For the rest of my life, I thought, I'll put all my energy into

golf, all my spare time, all my passion, and that's what I did, for two months, until I realized that I could put all my energy into golf, all my spare time, all my passion, for the rest of my life. I don't think I've ever been so depressed. The last ball I putted circled the hole, and the rimming impression it made as it dropped was that of my small life draining into the abyss.

So work, fun, and total dedication to something bigger than myself, something greater—my work, golf, the Red Sox—none could be everything, even if each, at times, filled the hour perfectly. I'm like that dreamer desperate to describe his dream when I try to explain the satisfactions of replacing a rotten tooth with a pontic so that a patient could smile again without shame. I had restored a baseline human dignity, no small thing. Pizza Fridays were no small thing. And that mochaccino was a little joy. The night in 2004 when David Ortiz homered against the Yankees to jump-start the greatest comeback in sports history made me simply happy to be alive.

I would have liked to believe in God. Now there was something that could have been everything better than anything else. By believing in God, I could succumb to ease and comfort and reassurance. Fearlessness was an option! Eternity was mine! It could all be mine: the awesome pitch of organ pipes, the musings of Anglican bishops. All I had to do was put away my doubts and believe. Whenever I was on the verge of that, I would call myself back from the brink. Keep clarity! I would cry. Hold on to yourself! For the reason the world was so pleasurable, and why I wanted to extend that pleasure through total submission to God, was my thoughts—my reasoned, stubborn, skeptical thoughts—which always unfortunately made quick work of God.

Non serviam! cried Lucifer. He didn't want to eat the faces off little babies. He just didn't want to serve. If he had served, he would have been just one more among the angels, indistinct, his name hard to recall even among the devout.

I've tried reading the Bible. I never make it past all the talk about the firmament. The firmament is the thing, on Day 1 or 2, that divides the waters from the waters. Here you have the firmament. Next to the firmament, the waters. Stay with the waters long enough, presumably you hit another stretch of firmament. I can't say for sure: at the first mention of the firmament, I start bleeding tears of terminal boredom. I grow restless. I flick ahead. It appears to go like this: firmament, superlong middle part, Jesus. You could spend half your life reading about the barren wives and the kindled wraths and all the rest of it before you got to the do-unto-others part, which as I understand it is the high-water mark. It might not be. For all I know, the high-water mark is to be found in, say, the second book of Kings. Imagine making it through the first book of Kings! They don't make it easy. I'll tell you what amazes me. I'm practically always sitting down next to somebody on the subway who's reading the Bible, who's smack in the middle of the thing, like on page one hundred and fifty thousand, and every single sentence has been underlined or highlighted. I have to think there's no way this tattooed Hispanic youth has lavished on the remaining pages of his Bible such poignant highlighting so prominently on display here in the hinterlands of 2 Chronicles. Then he'll turn the page, and sure the fuck enough: even more highlighting! In multiple colors! With notes in a friar's hand! And I don't mean to suggest he simply turned the page. Dude leaped forward three, four hundred pages to reference or cross-check or whatever, and there, glowing in ingot blocks, was the same

concentration of highlighting. I swear to God, there are still people out there devoting their entire lives to the Bible. It's either old black ladies or middle-aged black guys or Hispanic guys with neckties or white guys you're surprised are white. Thousands of hours they've been up studying and highlighting Bible passages while I've been sleeping, or watching baseball, or abusing myself carnally on a recliner. Sometimes I think I've wasted my life. Of course I've wasted my life. Did I have a choice? Of course I did—twenty years of nights with the Bible. But who is to say that, even then, my life—conscientiously devout, rigorously applied, monastically contained, and effortfully open to God's every hint and clobber—would have been more meaningful than it was, with its beery nights, bleary dawns, and Saint James and his Abstract? That was a mighty Pascal's Wager: the possibility of eternity in exchange for the limited hours of my one certain go-round.

I remember a time when I took part in some of the city's many walking tours. The entire point of a walking tour is to demonstrate how much has changed, how much is changing, and how much will have changed from some point in time before you were born to some point in time long after you're dead. Eventually the walking tours became so depressing I stopped cold and took up Spanish. But not before I learned how, as immigration patterns shifted, and one ethnic group supplanted another, houses of worship once vital to the neighborhood lost their significance. This was especially true on the Lower East Side, where a multitude of synagogues ministering to the needs of early Jewish immigrants had been retrofitted into the churches of later Christian arrivals. The architecture of the buildings could not be altered, however, nor the details of their facades. And so there are some

churches in the city where the Star of David or the relief of a candelabra or an impression of Hebrew letters sits fixed in the concrete alongside a roof-mounted crucifix and a marble statue of the Holy Mother.

Keep clarity! I cried. Remember how easily one house of worship can be transformed into an opposing house of worship, or risk your soul to changes in demographics and to man's infinite capacity for practical repurposing.

I was visiting Europe with Connie the last time I was in a church. We must have seen eight to nine hundred churches during our twelve days there. Ask her and it was more like four. Four churches in twelve days! Can you imagine? I was constantly taking off and putting on my Red Sox hat on account of some church. The church was always famous and not-to-be-missed. There was never any difference from one to the next. No matter the time of day or intake of espresso, I was overcome, when entering a church, with an attack of the yawns. Connie insisted that the yawning didn't need to be quite so vocal. She likened my yawns to the running of lawn equipment. She said she expected to turn and find wood chips shooting from my mouth. I frequently found myself reclined on a pew receiving her looks of outrage. But come on, it was just a yawn! I wasn't making crude gestures. I never suggested we party in the church. The one time, I said it would be nice to get a blow job *behind* the church, out by the dumpsters. That was obviously a joke. There weren't any dumpsters out there! We weren't at a grocery store. I have a sickness for blow jobs behind grocery stores. You can't do it very easily in Manhattan. It is most easily done in New Jersey, where it also happens to be legal. Connie took Europe far too seriously, I thought. She somberly studied the frescoes and fine print, worrying the infinite. Poets are a ponderous

bunch. (Connie's a poet.) They're hypocrites, too. They'd never step foot in a church in America, but fly them to Europe and they rush from tarmac to transept as if the real God, the God of Dante and chiaroscuro, of flying buttresses and Bach, had been awaiting their arrival for centuries. What thrall, what sabbath longing, will overcome a poet in the churches of Europe. And Connie was Jewish! On Day 3, I started calling it "Eurpoe" and didn't stop until we touched down in Newark. Being in Jersey, I suggested we stop for groceries before heading back into the city, but Connie had had enough of me by then. To me, a church is simply a place to be bored in. I say this with all due respect to believers. I'm not immune to the allure of their fellowship of comforts. I, too, like to take part in sanctifications, hand-holdings, and large-hearted sing-alongs. But I would be damned, literally damned, if any God I might believe in wanted me to go along with the given prescriptions. He would laugh at the wafer. He would howl at the wine. He would probably feel an exquisite pity toward those mortal approximations. Oh, what do I know? Only that the boredom that overtakes me inside a church is not a passive boredom. It's an active, gnawing restlessness. For some a place of final purpose and easy outpouring; for me, a dead end, the dark bus station of the soul. To enter a church is to bring to a close everything that makes entering church with praise on the lips a right reasonable thing to do.

My name is Paul O'Rourke. I live in New York City, in a Brooklyn duplex overlooking the Promenade. I'm a dentist and board-certified prosthodontist, open six days a week, with extended hours on Thursdays.

There's no better place on earth to live than New York City. It has the best museums, theaters, and nightclubs, the best variety

shows, burlesques, and live-music venues, and the very finest in world cuisine. Its wine stock alone makes of the Roman empire a sad Kansan backwater. The marvels are endless. But who has time to partake of the marvels when you're busy busting your ass to stay solvent in New York? And when not busting your ass, who has the energy? Since arriving in the city twelve years ago, a proud immigrant from Maine, I had been to a dozen art-house films, two Broadway shows, the Empire State Building, and one jazz concert memorable only for the monumental effort I expended trying to stay awake through the drum solos. I'd been to the great Metropolitan Museum, that repository of human effort mere blocks from my office, exactly zero times. I spent most of my leisure time standing outside the plate-glass windows of real-estate brokers, looking at the listings alongside other priced-out dreamers, imagining brighter views and bigger rooms that would sweeten my nightly escape from the city.

When I was dating Connie, we'd go out for a nice meal three or four times a week. A nice meal in New York might be made for you by a celebrity chef with several Michelin stars, a Rhone Valley boyhood, and/or his own TV show. The celebrity chef was not likely to be in the kitchen, which was usually peopled exclusively by Hispanics of disparate origin. Still, the menu was driven by the freshest seasonal ingredients hand-picked at farmers' markets or expedited overnight from the sea. The dining rooms were either chic and intimate with striking lighting or loud and packed with exclusive clientele. Both were impossible to get into. We managed only by remaining diligent and keeping up pressure on the phone and calling in favors and making bribes and lying. Connie once told a reservationist that she was dying of stomach cancer and had chosen that restaurant as her last meal out. We sat down at every table excited but exhausted, and we looked over each menu, with

its entrées priced with full period stops, and we ordered the things to order and drank the recommended wines. Then we paid and went home and felt wasted and dull, and in the morning we wondered where we should go next.

After Connie and I broke up, I played a little game with myself out on the streets of Manhattan. It was called Things Could Be Worse. Things could be worse, I said to myself, I could be *that* guy. Things could be worse, I said not a minute later, I could be *that* guy. Parading by everywhere were the disfigured, the destitute, the hideously ugly, the walking weeping, the self-scarred, the unappeasably pissed off. Things could be worse. Then a woman would pass by, one of thousands of New York women, coltishly long legged, impossibly high booted, always singly, or in pairs and trios, in possession of that beauty whose greatest cruelty was that it meant no harm, and as I died a little of want and agony, I said to myself, Things could be so much better.

Things Could Be Worse And Things Could Be So Much Better—that became the game, my running commentary on the streets of Manhattan, and I played it as well as the other slobs just trying to get by.

My life didn't really begin until several months before the fateful Red Sox summer of 2011. Mrs. Convoy came to me one day in January of that year and said that something strange was going on in room 3. I looked in. I vaguely recognized the patient. He was scheduled to have a tooth removed. A botched filling (not one of mine) had invaded the nerve, he'd put off the root canal I'd long ago recommended, and at last he was in great motivating pain. But he was not moaning or crying. No, he was chanting, soft and low. He had placed his hands palms up, with thumbs and middle fin-

gers touching, and was intoning something like, "Ah-rum… ah-rum…"

I sat down chairside. We shook hands, and I asked what he was doing. He had once studied to be a Tibetan monk, he told me, and though that period of his life had ended, when necessary he still applied his meditation techniques. In this case, he was preparing to have his tooth removed without the aid of anesthetic. He had worked under a guru who had mastered the art of eliminating pain.

"I have effected emptiness to the extreme," he told me. "You just have to remember: though you lose the body, you do not die."

His canine, in an advanced state of decay, was stained the color of weak tea but was still rooted to active nerves. No dentist in his right mind would pull a tooth without at least applying a local anesthetic. I told him that, and he finally agreed to the local. He resumed his meditative position, I juiced him with the needle, and then I went at his canine with a vigorous swaying grip. Two seconds into it he began to moan. I thought the moaning part and parcel of his effecting emptiness to the extreme, but it grew louder, filling the room, spilling out into the waiting area. I looked at Abby, my dental assistant, sitting across the patient from me, pink paper mask obscuring her features. She said nothing. I took the forceps out of my patient's mouth and asked if everything was okay.

"Yes. Why?"

"You're making noise."

"Was I? I didn't realize. I'm not actually here physically," he said.

"You sound here physically."

"I'll try to be quieter," he said. "Please continue."

The moaning started up again almost immediately, rising to a modest howl. It was inchoate and bloody, like that of a newborn with stunted organs. I stopped. His red eyes were filmed with tears.

"You're doing it again," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Moaning," I said. "Howling. Are you sure the local's working?"

"I'm thinking three or four weeks ahead of this pain," he said. "I'm four to six weeks removed."

"It shouldn't be painful at all," I said, "with the local."

"And it's not, not at all," he said. "I'll be completely silent."

I resumed. He stopped me almost that very second.

"Can I have the full gas, please?"

I put him under and removed the tooth and replaced it with a temporary crown. When the gas wore off, Abby and I were in with another patient. Connie came into the room and informed me that the man was ready to leave but wanted to say goodbye first.

I should have fired Connie after she and I broke up. All she did for me was write the patient's name on a card with the date and time of the next appointment. That was all she did, eight hours a day, longer on Thursdays. That and help Mrs. Convoy with the scheduling. And some billing, she also did some billing. But I had an outside service for billing. She never did enough billing that I no longer needed the outside service. And oh, right, the phone. Eight hours, sometimes more, of filling out little cards, inputting names into the schedule, doing not enough billing to save me from paying an outside service, and answering the phone. The rest of her time she spent glued to her me-machine.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Over there," she said.

My patient stood as I entered the waiting room.

"I just wanted to say… thanks! Thanks for everything. This is the last time you'll see me. I'm off to Israel!"

He was slurring just enough that I thought he might still be feeling the effects of the gas.

"Are you sure you don't want a few more minutes to rest up?" I asked him.

"Oh, no, I'm not going just yet. I have to take the subway first. I just wanted to say how much I'll miss you. I'll miss everyone here. Everyone here is so nice. That lady's nice. She's super nice. And she's super hot. I mean she's really just, like, oh, fuck me. I would fuck that lady."

He was pointing at Connie, who was looking on, as was the rest of the waiting room.

"Okay," I said, "you need to recuperate a little longer. Come with me."

"Can't!" he cried, shrugging me off. "No time!"

"Then we'll be seeing you."

"No, you won't!" he said. "I told you. I'm off to Israel!"

I started moving him toward the door. Connie handed me his jacket.

"But I'm not going to Israel because I'm Jewish. That's probably what you think, isn't it?"

"Let's just get you in this other sleeve here…"

"But you'd be wrong!"

I opened the door. He got up close and whispered to me with a sour anesthetic breath.

"I'm an Ulm," he said. "That's why I'm going to Israel. I'm an Ulm, and so are you!"

I patted him on the back and then gave him a little prod.

"Congratulations. Good luck."

"Good luck to you!" he said.

Gas makes people say funny things. I didn't think another thing of it.