# This Book Will Save Your Life

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Extract

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He stands at the glass looking out. The city spreads below him, blanketed in foggy slumber. Low pressure. Clouds roll over the hills, seeping out of cracks and crevices as if the geography itself is sending smoke signals.

Below him, far down the hill, a woman swims, her long brown hair floating through the water. Her suit is a beautiful bright-red dot, a rare tropical bird in a pool of unnatural blue. Every morning she swims—crawls like an Olympian. He takes comfort in her swimming, in her determination, rhythm, routine, in the fact that she is awake when he is awake. There is urgency in her stroke; she cannot *not* swim. She is his confidante, his muse, his mermaid.

He is at the glass; usually he is not here, not now. Usually he gets up and gets on his machine—he runs while she swims. He runs watching the electronic ticker tape go by, trading from a keyboard strapped to the treadmill, typing as he trots, placing his bets, going long and short, seeing how far up or down he can go, riding an invisible electronic wave.

Usually he, he usually. Everything today is not the same, and yet it is exactly the same and it can never be the same again.

He stands at the glass. The mechanical sounds of the house catch him off guard. Ice tumbles into the freezer bin, the coffeepot begins to fill with water, air whooshes out of the vent, billowing up the leg of his pants. He shudders.

"Hello?" he calls. "Anybody home?"

Usually he doesn't hear it. He hears nothing, feels nothing, he makes sure of that. He wakes up, puts on his noise-canceling headset, goes to the glass, looks at the woman swimming, and gets on his machine.

He is in a vacuum of silence—life canceled.

He didn't even know the coffeemaker was automatic—he doesn't drink coffee; it is brewing for Cecelia, the housekeeper, who comes between seven-thirty and eight. He breathes deeply—nice, the smell of coffee.

After years of making sure that he is left alone, he is suddenly afraid to be alone, afraid not to hear, not to feel, not to notice. He presses his ear to the glass. Music. Up the hill men are installing a lawn where there would otherwise be nothing—scrub. They have built a bulkhead, a frame for the grass, and are rolling out sod. They are making a small putting green—one hole.

Above and below, a chain of houses climbs the canyon wall: a social chain, an economic chain, a food chain. The goal is to be on top, king of the hill—to win. Each person looks down on the next, thinking they somehow have it better, but there is always someone else either pressing up from below or looking down from above. There is no way to win.

He stands at the point of the house, where two thick panes of glass meet, a sharp corner jutting out over the hill like the prow of a ship. He stands—captain, lord, master, prisoner of his own making.

Ahead, in the distance, there is something orange and smoky; it takes him a moment to decide—brush fire or simply dawn in Los Angeles?

YESTERDAY SEEMS realer than real, a dream, an accident, like some sort of seizure or suspension. Did something happen?

There is a depression in the earth, a large soft circular

indentation that he doesn't remember from the day before. He looks at it, mentally measuring—approximately eight feet in diameter, about fifty feet from the house. Where did it come from? How long has it been there? How would he describe it? Like the mark made by the back of an enormous ladle pressed into the earth. Do things like that happen overnight?

On the floor of the living room, on the glass-topped coffee table, near the sofa, in the otherwise ordered world, there is debris, little bits of things, plastic nubbins, a piece of tubing, ripped paper, a single piece of bloody gauze—proof.

He is thinking about the pain. It started as a knotty cramp in his back, a strange tightening from his gut up into his chest. The lentil soup he had for lunch? He waited. He took an antacid. It got worse, spreading, searing knifelike down the leg, pressing up into his jaw, a rock-hard ache, a long sharp knitting needle poking into his arm, pain trickling into his fingers—were they numb? His whole body splitting like an ax cutting through fresh wood, a spasm pulling his shoulder blades back like a bow arching, bending him forward, curling him into a cramped crushing "c," a hard, violent spasm that could crack a man in two. He didn't think to call anyone, didn't know who to call, what to say, exactly where was the pain? It was everywhere, staggering, sweaty, dizzy-making.

Early on, while he still could, he went into the bedroom, put on a nice pair of pants, a belt, a casual sweater, shoes and socks. He dressed as if he were going out with friends, to a dinner party, to some low-key event, muted colors, soft fabrics. He dressed thinking he might have to get himself down the hill, to a doctor's office, not realizing that it was already late, already past the hour when anyone would still be there.

He lay on the sofa, something he'd never done before; it was against the rules—the private, personal rules we all have for ourselves—no lying down except in bed and never during the day.

He lay on the sofa trying to get comfortable. Was it something he'd done with the trainer, some wrong twist or turn? Or maybe he was getting a bug, cold or flu? The pain continued. How had it come upon him? Had the pain just started, or was it always there and he was just now noticing?

He got up, took some ibuprofen, and stood at the glass looking out over the city, at cars on the boulevard below making the turn, climbing into the hills. The sky was starting to fade, headlights were on, houses were glowing with life. The coyotes howled. The city in the distance was both so large and small.

He was standing at the glass—overcome by pain. Collapsing, every blood vessel, every nerve, every fiber in his body folded in on itself, as though starved, parched. He was standing at the glass in pain, and the strangest thing was he didn't know where it hurt, he couldn't feel anything.

He began to cry. He cried without making a sound, and when he realized he was crying, the very fact of crying, or the fear of it, told him that something was very wrong. And he cried harder.

Was this "It"? Was this how "It" happens? Was there something before this, something he should have noticed, a warning? Or was this the warning? Either this was the warning or this was IT.

HE DIALED 911.

"Police, fire, ambulance."

"Doctor," he said.

"Police, fire, ambulance."

"Rescue," he said.

"Police, fire, ambulance." It was a recording.

"Ambulance," he said

"One moment please."

He waited to be connected, and in the moment of silence,

the pain left. The pain passed, and then he began to think it was all a nightmare, a daydream, a lousy lunch gone down wrong.

Just as he was going to hang up, a woman came on the line. "What is the emergency?" she asked, and the pain returned, reminding him.

"Pain," he said. "Incredible pain."

"Where is the pain?"

"I think this is IT," he said.

"Sir, where are you feeling the pain?"

"Everywhere."

"Have you sustained an injury—a gunshot wound, fall, snake bite, bow and arrow?"

"No," he said. "No. I'm home, I've been home all day. It's seeping through me, it's like I'm soaking in pain."

"How long have you been in pain?"

"I don't know."

"Minutes, hours, days?"

"Hours at least." But it could be days or years—he had no idea.

"On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?"

"Ten."

"How would you describe the pain—sharp, throbbing, stabbing, dull?"

"Yes."

"Which of those best describes how you're feeling right now?"

"All of them."

"Do you have a history of heart attack, stroke, or seizure?"

"No."

"How old are you?"

"Fifty-five."

"Are you home alone?"

Inexplicably, this question terrified him. "I'm divorced."

"Is anyone there with you?"

"No."

"Have you ever had this pain before?"

"I never noticed it, until today." He was becoming increasingly anxious. It felt like a test—too many questions. Was she going to send help or just talk to him all night?

"Are you short of breath?"

The idea of a heart attack or a stroke hadn't exactly occurred to him. It had occurred to him that this was IT, but not that he was having a heart attack.

"Can you cough for me? Take a deep breath and give me a couple of good strong coughs."

He did the best he could.

"Can you confirm your name for me and your address?"

"You can call me Rick," he said.

"Is that your real name?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Do you own your home?"

"Yes."

"Is there any other name that your phone or property would be listed under?"

"Richard," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Novak," the operator said.

"How do you know who I am?"

"Our system is enhanced. Help is on the way. As part of a pilot program which helps train crisis counselors, I can transfer you to a counselor who will remain on the line with you until help arrives."

"Are you trying to sell me something?"

"No, sir, there is no additional charge. It's a service you qualify for because you fit the profile?"

"Profile?"

"You're in the right ZIP code with a potentially life-threatening crisis. With your permission I'm going to transfer you to a counselor; her name is Patty."

"Is she real or automatic?"

"She's right here; one moment."

"Hi, Richard, my name is Patty."

"Hi, Patty," he said.

"What are you doing, Richard?" He didn't know how to answer that.

"I'm dying."

"What are you dying from?"

"Pain." A rupture, an explosion, a slow, tortured death.

"Where in your body is the pain? Can you close your eyes and go into it?"

There are men who keel over at lunch, who are having lunch at the most wonderful, delicious, most expensive restaurant in town and—boom—they just fall over and die. Kaboom. He could be one of those. He could go just like that—out like a light, his aunt used to say. He could step outside, fall down dead in his driveway, and be eaten by wolves, picked apart by vultures. There was no difference between his body and the pain—his body was the pain.

"Richard, what was the last movie you saw?"

It was one of those "only in L.A." questions—even as you were dying people were talking about the movies.

"I have no idea," he struggled to think back. He remembered seeing *Bonnie and Clyde* at the Wellfleet, Massachusetts, drive-in a million years ago.

"Do you have any hobbies? Do you play golf?"

"I like to swim," he said, surprising himself.

"Where do you swim—do you have a swimming pool?"

"No."

"When did you last go swimming?"

"About five years ago. At a hotel in Miami; I took a woman there for a long weekend. It ended badly." He paused. "I think I'd rather not talk right now. It's very distracting to try and have a conversation."

"What would you rather do?"

He imagined old people with the "I've fallen and I can't get up" transmitters around their necks. He imagined them lying on the floor, talking to the transmitters, while help was on the way, just grateful that someone would come and pick them up.

"Patty," he said, "where are you from?"

"Minnesota," she said.

"I thought so," he said. "You sound like someone from Minnesota or Modesto." He was sitting on the sofa, staring at the glass. "That's OK, you don't have to keep talking to me. I think I'd like to just be quiet so I can concentrate."

"Are you able to sit, stand, or walk?"

"I'm in pain," he repeated as though that meant something.

"They'll be there soon," she said.

He wondered if he had enough cash to pay them—he wondered where that thought came from—he didn't have to pay them, he already paid them, that's what taxes were for. When he was married and living in New York City, he once ordered Chinese food and was still on the phone with the restaurant when the order arrived. They used to joke that the restaurant had a satellite kitchen in the building's basement. He and his wife always kept cash in the apartment to pay them—they were always paying someone, deliverymen, doormen, handymen.

"Are you there?" she asked.

He heard sirens in the distance, the rumble of engines, trucks climbing the hill, the siren grinding to a stop outside his house. He could see the reflection of the red flashing lights in the glass. He knew they were out there.

There was a knock at the door.

He lay on the sofa, thinking he should get up.

"Richard," Patty said, "the firemen are at the door; can you let them in?"

"I don't know," he said, scared, like all of this was a bad idea, like he never should have called.

He watched. He saw them walking around the side of the house, coming down the hill, their flashlights bouncing, their heavy coats, like branded elephant skins, with iridescent numbers glowing. He heard their radios squawking.

They announced his name over a megaphone in a way that compelled him to surrender.

"Richard Novak, can you hear me, can you open the door?"

"Is there a key hidden somewhere?" Patty asked.

"The garage is open."

"Good luck, Richard," Patty said, hanging up.

They came in carrying bags, their coats smelling like fire.

"I'm on the sofa," he said. "I'm crying."

There was no fire.

They were surrounding him, kneeling in front of him, talking to him. "We're going to take your pressure and give you a little bit of oxygen."

He nodded.

"Are you in pain right now?"

"I don't know," he said, speaking into the plastic mask. His voice sounded muffled, distant. "I don't remember anything."

A police officer arrived. Were they going to arrest him for making a crank call, for crying wolf, wasting public services, pulling a false alarm?

"Are you home alone?" the cop asked.

He nodded again—why were they so obsessed about who was home?

The house was filling with people—calling him by name, talking to him very loudly. The paramedics arrived and opened boxes—hard cases, like tackle trays. They set up the machine he'd seen on TV, the defibrillator. He prayed they weren't going to use it on him. He was conscious, wasn't he? On TV the medics call out "All clear" and "Stand back" and then shock the hell out of the person. The machine was sitting there, ready, green light—go.

"That's a nice de Kooning," one of the paramedics said.

They took off his shirt, put leads on his chest, swapped the oxygen mask for the small tubes that go up your nose.

"It's a pinched nerve," he said, looking for a way out.

"And I really like your Rothko. I saw that one once at MOCA."

"It was on loan," Richard says.

"Oh yeah," one of the firemen said. "I thought that looked familiar. That's by the guy they made the movie about, Ed Harris."

The paramedic shook his head. "Ed Harris played Jackson Pollock, those were action paintings, drips. This is Mark Rothko, darker, more serious."

"Are you paramedics or art experts?"

"I was premed and art history at Harvard. Do you take any medications?"

"Vitamins and some spray for my nose, bad sinuses."

"Sir," the paramedic said, "we're going to send an EKG into the hospital, and from there they'll advise us about further treatment. While we're waiting, I'm going to start an IV."

The seriousness with which they treated him made him nervous. It was no joke; they acted as though they were saving his life.

"Are you allergic to aspirin?"

"No," Richard said.

The paramedic put two tiny baby aspirin in his hand.

He chewed. The pills made a paste, a dry, pink, powdery paste that tasted like childhood.

"It's nice you're here," he said to no one in particular.

"Base to field number four, the strip looks good, you're clear to transport."

They lifted him onto the stretcher, and as they lifted he cried out; he didn't know why. There were firemen, paramedics, and policemen all around him, carrying him—no one had car-

ried him in years. He tried to help them, to make himself light.

A cop asked where his house keys were—in a silver bowl on the kitchen counter. They locked the door and handed him the key.

As they wheeled him out, the ride, the bumpy rocking, made him sleepy.

"Does everyone feel sleepy?" Richard asked.

No one answered.

They wheeled him into the night—the red lights of their trucks ricocheting off the house. He breathed deeply—oxygen.

They drove him down, winding round and round the canyon. The farther they went, the riding backwards, the siren's dampened wail, the stop and start of the meat wagon's wobbly waddling, all conspired to make him disoriented, nauseated, lost. He could almost see it coming; as they backed up into the hospital bay, he closed his eyes, dropped his jaw, and puked. Widescreen, he vomited everywhere, spraying the back of the ambulance with black BB pellets of lentils, spraying the faces of the men as they hurried to free him. They threw the sheet over his face to protect themselves, to absorb. As the stretcher was pulled out, as the wheels dropped to the ground, he passed out.

And as fast as he was unconscious, he was conscious again, fully alert, as if launched from a cannon. Had they given him something, a little picker-upper, a shot of the secret sauce?

"Mr. Novak, can you hear me?"

He was afraid to speak, to open his mouth, but he nodded.

"Do you know where you are?"

He nodded again.

They lifted him off the gurney, onto a bed, and wiped his face.

"I'm sorry," he said when it felt safe to talk.

"No need to apologize," someone said, which prompted him to repeat, "I'm sorry."

His mind raced; he was no longer sleepy, he was awake, very awake. His thoughts skipped: Were his papers in order? Who did he leave the Rothko to—MOCA or MoMA? Should he have done things differently? If he died, would his lawyer even know? For comfort he added up his money—how much was in each account, how much was enough?

Had they given him something, a drug that made him speedy? Should he say something, should he tell them that everything was happening too fast? He watched the second hand of the clock—slow, so slow.

"Take a deep breath. Just keep taking those deep breaths. I need you to relax. You're in good hands, Mr. Novak, very good hands."

They were poking him, drawing blood, checking and rechecking his pressure, his pupils, looking at the endless EKG. With cheap ballpoint pens, they wrote on his clean white sheet.

An impossibly skinny woman came to the side of the bed, a twig, a lifeless tree. "Do you have your insurance card? Who do you want us to locate if . . ." Her bones were sticking out, elbow, wrist, collar, every bone was practically bare, picked clean. "We need a name and number." She was like a contact from the other side, booking passage. He expected her next question to be: Do you have any dead relatives that you'd like to have dinner with? I could make you a reservation.

He gave her his lawyer's name. "I don't know his number."

It was all so surreal. The fluorescent lights were so harsh, he kept thinking that at any moment they would overwhelm him, bleach out everything; at any moment he'd be going towards the euphemistic white light.

"How did it start?" A resident stood at his knees with his chart in hand.

He couldn't remember, couldn't remember when he could remember, he had no sensation of suddenly not remembering, no one thing or another slipping his mind, but more the

sensation that there was nothing. He was searching and seeing nothing, no pictures, no memories, no idea where he'd been.

"Mr. Novak, do you understand what I'm asking? When did the pain begin?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "Not sure if it just started or if I just noticed it. The more attention I paid, the worse it got. Is Patty here?"

"Who's Patty?"

"I talked with her earlier, the woman on the phone."

"I don't know anyone named Patty," the resident said, annoyed.

"My sister's name is Patty," a nurse said.

"She's very nice, Patty from Minnesota or Mendocino," he said.

The resident walked away.

"I can offer you this," the nurse said, handing him a portable phone. "Is there anyone you'd like to call?"

He shook his head.

"Sometimes people feel better if they talk to someone."

"Are you a pink lady or a nurse?"

"Nurse. I retired twenty years ago, but now I'm back. It's my second act."

"What brought you back?"

"My husband died and, truth is, I can't bear to be home alone at night. I wasn't sleeping, and so I thought, why not work nights, it keeps me off the streets and out of the bin.

"There's no one you want to call?" the nurse asked again.

Who would he call?

He parents were snowbirds, still somewhere in Florida—where? His brother in Massachusetts? The nutritionist who suggested the lentil soup that may have been the culprit? His housekeeper, the only one who would actually notice that he wasn't home when she arrived tomorrow morning? His trainer was also coming in the morning, and his masseur was due in

the afternoon, and at some point the decorator was going to stop by and tell him what color the guest bedroom should be—if he had their numbers he'd call them all and tell them to forget it, cancel everything.

He lay there realizing how thoroughly he'd removed himself from the world or obligations, how stupidly independent he'd become: he needed no one, knew no one, was not a part of anyone's life. He'd so thoroughly removed himself from the world of dependencies and obligations, he wasn't sure he still existed.

"There has to be someone," the nurse said.

"You're nice," he said.

"I'm old," she said.

"Do you mind if we . . ." Someone pulled the curtain around his cubicle closed.

Who would he call if he was never going to call anyone again, who would he want to speak to just once more—his son, Ben? He wouldn't do that to the kid, they didn't have that kind of relationship. Hi, Ben, it's your dad calling from the emergency room; just wanted to check in, see how your life is going, wanted to wish you BOL—best-of-luck. Hope you do better than me, kid, hope you get what you want, what you deserve and then some. Remember, son, this is IT.

His ex-wife. She left a message on his machine yesterday, or maybe it was a few weeks ago. He never called back—he didn't know why.

"Think about it," the nurse said.

His ex-wife runs a company that publishes life-style and self-improvement books, books that tell you how to live—what to do based on what sign, blood type, or color you are, coffee-table books on living simply and how to find time if you have no time and what to do if none of the above applies.

Over the two-way radio he heard the paramedics communicating with the hospital, calling in a Code Orange.

"What's Orange?"

"Celebrity," the nurse said. "They let us know so we can be on the lookout for photographers—sometimes the photo guys get here before the patient. The worst is a dead celeb, that's the money shot. Any photo of a celeb covered in blood is worth thousands."

"Field to base, Orange is female, mid-, late seventies, auto accident, possible head injury, vitals stable. We've got her in a collar and strapped to a board—we're on our way in."

"When do you find out who it is?"

"Sometimes we start guessing. We know the approximate age of the patient, where the incident occurred, and we start making bets—was it the Viper Room, up in the hills, in a store on Rodeo Drive, at the hairdresser's? You can get a stroke from tilting your head back in those hair-wash sinks and no one notices, until they try to sit up—we've had a couple of those—celebs are always having their hair done."

The resident yanked his curtain open. "They're coming to get you. I ordered a brain scan, want to make sure it's not an aneurysm, that you're not about to spring a leak, pop a berry." The aspiring doctor laughed at his own joke.

"I don't know where they find them these days," the nurse said, excusing herself as a pair of state troopers wheeled in a boy tied to a desk chair with yellow nylon rope, like he'd been lassoed.

"I'm God," the boy announced loudly.

"Hi, God, I'm the emergency-room nurse—can you tell me what you took?"

"Don't fuck with me," the boy said. "Don't fuck with God. Because I know, God knows. And I'm God, I can fly, I'm free. I'm God," he screams, "I'm God, I'm God, I'm God," each scream progressively louder than the last.

A doctor shined a light into the boy's eyes. "Tell me about yourself—what was your name before you were God?"

"I'm God, I'm Jesus, I'm nailed to the stake, that's why I can't move my arms. I'm God, God is a dog," he barked.