

Trauma

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Extract

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Chapter One

My mother's first depressive illness occurred when I was seven years old, and I felt it was my fault. I felt I should have prevented it. This was about a year before my father left us. His name was Fred Weir. In those days he could be generous, amusing, an expansive man—my brother, Walt, plays the role at times—but there were signs, perceptible to me if not to others, when an explosion was imminent. Then the sudden loss of temper, the storming from the room, the slamming door at the end of the hall and the appalled silence afterward. But I could deflect all this. I would play the fool, or be the baby, distract him from the mounting wave of boredom and frustration he must have felt at being trapped within the suffocating domestic atmosphere my mother liked to foster. Later, when she began writing books, she fostered no atmosphere at all other than genteel squalor and heavy drinking and gloom. But by then my father was long gone.

In those days we lived in shabby discomfort in a large apartment on West Eighty-seventh Street, where my brother lives with his family today. I never contested Walt's right to have it after Mom died, and have come to terms

with the fact that to me she left nothing. Indeed, it amuses me that she would throw this one last insult in my face from beyond the grave. It was more appropriate that Walt should have the apartment, given the size of his family, and me living alone, although Walt didn't actually need the apartment. Walt was a wealthy man—Walter Weir, the painter? But I don't resent this, although having said that, or rather, had I heard one of my patients say it, I would at once detect the anger behind the words. With consummate skill I would then extricate the truth, bring it up to the surface where we both could face it square: *You hated your mother! You hate her still!*

I am, as will be apparent by now, a psychiatrist. I do professionally that which you do naturally for those you care for, those whose welfare has been entrusted to you. My office was for many years on Park Avenue, which is less impressive than it sounds. The rent was low, and so were my fees. I worked mostly with victims of trauma, who of all the mentally disturbed people in the city of New York feel it most acutely, that they are owed for what they've suffered. It makes them slow to pay their bills. I chose this line of work because of my mother, and I am not alone in this. It is the mothers who propel most of us into psychiatry, usually because we have failed them.

Often a patient will be referred to me, and after the preliminaries have been completed and he, or more usually she, is settled comfortably, this will be her question: Where would you like me to begin?

"Just tell me what you've been thinking about."

"Nothing."

"What were you thinking about on your way to this appointment?"

And so it begins. I listen. Mine is a profession that might

on the surface appear to suit the passive personality. But don't be too quick to assume that we are uninterested in power. I sit there pondering while you tell me your thoughts, and with my grunts and sighs, my occasional interruptions, I guide you toward what I believe to be the true core and substance of your problem. It is not a scientific endeavor. No, I feel my way into your experience with an intuition based on little more than a few years of practice, and reading, and focused introspection; in other words, there is much of art in what I do.

My mother did eventually recover, but there is a strong correlation between depression and anger and at some level she stayed angry. It was largely directed at my father, of course. I have a clear memory of the day I first became aware of my parents' dynamic of abandonment and rage. Fred had taken Walter and me to lunch, a thing he did occasionally when he was in town and remembered that he had two sons living on West Eighty-seventh Street. For me these were stressful events, starting with the cab ride to an East Side steakhouse, though in fact any time spent with my father was stressful. One summer he took us on a road trip upstate to a hotel in the Catskills, a journey of pure unmitigated hell, the endless hours sitting beside Walter in the back of the Buick as we drove through the endless mountains, and the atmosphere never less than explosive—

Fred Weir was still handsome then, his dark hair swept back from a sharp peak in a high-templed forehead, a tall, athletic fellow with a charming grin. He wasn't a successful man but he gave the impression of being one, and when he took us out to lunch I marveled at the peremptory tone with which he addressed the waiters, brisk unsmiling men in starched white aprons who, in that adult room of wood paneling and cigar smoke, thoroughly intimidated the

lanky, nervous adolescent I then was. My anxiety was not eased by the presence of steak knives with heavy wooden handles and sharp serrated blades, and a sort of diabolical trolley that was wheeled, steaming, to the table by a stout man with a pencil mustache who with the flourish of a gleaming knife indicated the meat and demanded to know where I wanted it carved.

When Fred grew bored with us and showed signs of calling for the check, Walt would ask him for investment advice, claiming to have considerable funds stashed away. Walt was always more curious about our father than I was. As a boy he was intrigued as to what went on in our parents' bedroom, when they shared a bedroom, that is. He wanted to get in there and find out what they *did*.

Mom was distressed when we returned from these outings, having in our absence awoken to the possibility that Fred might exert a stronger influence over her boys than she did and that we too would then be lost to her. It fell to me to assure her of our love and loyalty. Then she lavished her affection on me for a while, until she grew distracted and drifted off down the hall to her study. Hearing the door close and the *tap-tap-tap* of the typewriter, I knew she would not come out before it was time for a cocktail. I was comforted by the sound of the typewriter. If she was typing then she wasn't crying, although later she was able to do both at once.

But I remember one day when we returned to the apartment and she wasn't waiting in the hallway as we came up the stairs. This was unusual. We let ourselves in and at once heard her crying in her bedroom. It was pitiful. Walter said he was going out again, I could do what I wanted. I see myself with great clarity at that moment. The choice was simple. I could walk out of the apartment with him and

spend an hour or two in Central Park, or I could go and knock on my mother's bedroom door and ask her what was wrong. I remember sitting down on the chair in the hallway, beside the low desk with the telephone on it, where she always left her keys on the tray and fixed her hair in the mirror on the wall above it.

"I'm not waiting," Walt said from the front door.

A sudden fresh gust of misery from the bedroom.

"I think I'll stay."

"Suit yourself," he said, and the front door closed behind him.

For another minute I sat on the chair in the hallway, then stood up and walked slowly toward her room. This is how psychiatrists are made.

Much of my later childhood and adolescence followed this pattern. I did not make friends easily, and I was more content by far with a book than with the company of my contemporaries. Walter by contrast was a gregarious boy and often brought his friends back to the apartment. This was a source of pleasure to my mother, although if she was depressed she would withdraw to her bedroom. At times like this it was a cause of concern to me that Walter's friends made so much noise. I remember I stood in the doorway of the living room once and asked them to be quiet, as Mom was resting. They were dancing to Bill Haley. Walter would have been about seventeen; I was three years younger. I remember he turned the record player off and they all stared at me, six or seven of them, older kids I'd seen in the corridors of the high school we attended on the Upper West Side.

"What did you say?" said Walter.

If it hadn't been for the fact that Mom was trying to sleep I would have fled.

"I said, I think you should turn it down."

They all stared at me in silence. It was a form of mockery. "What did you say?" said Walter again.

"Turn it down! She's trying to get some sleep!"

He looked at the others and solemnly repeated my words. They started laughing. They slapped their thighs, they yelped like hyenas; they lifted their heads and howled, all to humiliate me. Then Mom's bedroom door opened down the hall. She shuffled toward the living room, yawning. She was in her robe, barefoot, and she hadn't brushed her hair. It was the middle of the afternoon and I felt embarrassed for her in front of Walter's friends, who had fallen silent. She stood in the doorway and asked what was going on, and Walter told her. She was still half asleep. She turned to me.

"Don't be silly, Charlie, I was only reading. You people have fun, I don't care."

She went back to her room with a wave of her hand and I left the apartment feeling like a fool.

When I returned to New York after my residency at Johns Hopkins, I didn't move back to Eighty-seventh Street. Mom told me she didn't want me in the apartment. She said she needed silence in order to write. I understood what she was telling me. It was not a rejection, though it was framed in those terms, because she also gave me a new set of keys. Don't abandon me, she was saying. She was stabilized on antidepressants but there were still times when she would suddenly, precipitately go down, and then it was me she needed.

One such occasion was when Fred remarried, to a woman many years younger, which Mom found hard to accept. For a long time I had known she still loved him, and despite her salty disdain—"What a *rat*," she'd spit—it escaped nobody who knew her well that she continued to carry a torch for this feckless man. In both the novels she published in those years she drew thinly veiled portraits of him, and the authorial attitude to these philandering crooks was one of ill-concealed affection. But his second marriage hit her hard and, as I'd feared, she suffered a rapid relapse. I went to the apartment as soon as I heard.

She was in her bedroom. All the drapes were closed even though it was the middle of the day. She lay on the bed with her back to the door, her legs pulled up. She was not fully clothed. She heard me come in but she didn't move.

"Mom?" I sat on the side of the bed. For some minutes there was silence in the room. There was a faint smell of stale perfume and cigarette smoke. "How long have you been in here?"

No answer.

"Do you want me to run you a bath?"

I knew what I was saying. She reared up on one elbow and over her shoulder shot me a pathetic look. Her eyes were ringed with dark shadows: she was a haunted, frightened creature, almost unrecognizable to me.

Then she sank back once more. From her near-fetal position she murmured, "I smell bad. You don't have to tell me."

"You don't smell bad. I just thought you might like to get in the tub."

Silence once more. Then up on the elbow again. "That rat."

"I know."

“Have you seen him?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“Let me run you a bath.”

She didn’t refuse. In my experience a depressive episode is not life-threatening when there is still concern for personal hygiene.

When I came back from the bathroom she was sitting humped on the side of the bed with her legs dangling down, inspecting her fingernails. She looked like an old bird in her oversize sweater and black tights, a sick old bird with a broken wing. “Is she beautiful?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

Quick as a viper, this—how did I know unless I’d met her? “I just know,” I said.

“Cunt.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant me, or my father, or his young bride. I didn’t ask. When her bath was ready I told her I’d be in the living room. It was no better there in terms of stagnant air, brimming ashtrays, gloom and such. Torn photographs on the rug in front of the fireplace, a few charred embers in the grate. I pulled back the drapes, opened the windows, tidied the place as best I could. I went back to the bathroom and tapped on the door.

“You all right in there?”

“Fuck off.”

“Ma?”

“You met her. You traitor.”

It would almost be comic if this were somebody else’s mother. If I weren’t alert to the reality of her suffering. If she hadn’t already given me so much cause for concern.

How can any man see his mother in pain and not do everything in his power to relieve that pain?

When these episodes were becoming more frequent there would be periods of days or even weeks when I left my office in the evening and went straight up to Eighty-seventh Street. Often I stayed the night and slept in my old room. Walt refused to visit Mom when she was depressed, and I got angry with him about it. I remember him saying that Mom didn't want to see him, she only wanted to see me.

"Don't be absurd," I said. "It's you she adores."

I remember having this argument in Walt's loft on Chambers Street. He didn't stop working. A big messy canvas was pinned to the wall, a field of red with thin black vertical spikes at irregular intervals. He was smoking a cigar.

"That's exactly why she doesn't want me coming around," he said. "She doesn't want me to see her like *that*."

"Oh Walter, what new bullshit is this?"

Walt and I could get angry at each other in seconds. It alarmed others. It worried Agnes, my wife, to whom I was still married at the time, when she first saw it happen, that two otherwise civilized men could so quickly become so abusive.

"Think! Isn't that what you're meant to be good at? She doesn't want me around when she looks like death. She wants me when she's at her best!"

He noticed that he was dripping paint on the floor. He clamped the cigar between his teeth and plunged his brush into a jar of dirty water.

“So you get the good mother and I get the mad mother. Thanks a lot, Walt. Christ, you’re a selfish man.”

“I didn’t fucking set it up!”

I don’t remember if I responded to this. I think I may have turned my head and with a sickly, injured expression stared out the window. The World Trade Center was under construction then, two massive, fretted frames of red girders poking into the sky. When I turned back Walt was absently wiping his fingers on a rag.

“Any message for her?” I said from the door.

Now he was at the sink with his back to me. When he didn’t reply I repeated the question.

“No!”

Years later I remembered the argument and realized he was right. When she was in a state of abject despair she was indifferent to the impression she made on me, but Walt must be spared, Walt was excused. So he learned early on that he need never make an effort with Mom, and strangely her love thrived on his neglect. She seemed to think the fact that he so rarely visited her proved he was much too busy, certainly far busier than me, but of course he was so much more successful than me. She said this once to Agnes.

“But Charlie’s a brilliant psychiatrist,” said Agnes.

Mom’s reply was a classic of maternal spite.

“Oh, anyone can be a psychiatrist,” she said. “It takes talent to be an artist.”

The call came from her housekeeper. It was early February 1979. She’d come in that morning and found her unconscious on the bedroom floor. By the time I reached the apartment her own doctor was there, arranging for her to be admitted to Beth Israel. He and I stood apart for a

minute or two and spoke quietly about what would happen next. I was at her bedside in the hospital when she came to, and so was Walt. I remember how her hand lifted off the covers. It was like a little bird trying to take flight, and failing, but it was an ugly little bird, clawed and liver-spotted.

“Mom?”

The eyes were bleary. She was confused. Her voice was weak. She wanted to talk about her family.

“No, Mom, just rest, you can tell us later.”

The light all at once flared in those watery eyes and she seized my wrist. She tried to sit up but couldn’t. Nor could she talk anymore. A little later she fell asleep and we left her. When we were out in the corridor the elevator opened and my father emerged. I told him she needed to rest. Walt suggested we go somewhere for a drink.

We sat at a quiet table in a hotel bar a couple of blocks from the hospital. The years had not been kind to Fred Weir and his decay was marked. He’d failed to shave properly, leaving patches of stubble on his throat and jaw. His suit was cheap, the cuffs frayed, and the collar of the shirt was yellowed. More telling was the faint air of apology that clung to him now and, too, the dampness, the lifelessness in the eyes, all of which suggested heavy drinking, loss of vitality, collapse of self-esteem. Also, he’d done jail time in Florida for a firearms offense. He looked like what he was, I thought: a loser. As a boy I always tried to please this man, to keep him from hurting my mother, and what a waste. He wasn’t worth it, and I believed at one time that this was why she gave all her love to Walter, and none to me. Physically, and to an extent temperamentally, I resembled Fred Weir, and the older I got the clearer it became. With his long, pallid face, his shambling gait, the lick of gray, greasy hair falling over his forehead, the ingratiating grin that would

once have opened doors, opened hearts—he was the template, I was the issue.

Walt by contrast was built on Hallam lines, Mom's family, big in the chest and across the shoulders, florid, shaggy, a barrel of a man, a locomotive, where I was a stork, a palm. Fred was a washout. A soak. "What are you drinking, Dad?" said Walt.

It was a small, gloomy room with a padded bar, a few round tables with lamps, the lingering odor of cigar smoke. Some sort of Muzak was playing. We were the only ones in there besides the sad-faced man in a short white jacket who stood behind the bar. Walt half-turned in his chair to bring him over. Fred settled his elbows on the table and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and a certain ease was at once apparent. He was at home in a bar. "I think in the circumstances a dry martini, Walter."

"I don't want anything," I said.

"Two dry martinis," he said.

"Olives or a twist?"

"Twist."

The three of us sat in silence until the drinks arrived.

"So Charlie, what's the story?" Walt said at last.

"A vascular accident. That's a stroke. There could be another in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours."

"Which means what?"

"It'll probably kill her."

"Oh god," Fred said.

"That troubles you?" I said.

"Back off, Charlie," said Walt.

I knew why I was so angry, and that it wasn't my father's fault, but I saw no particular reason not to displace it onto him, and if I could make Walt mad at the same time then so much the better. Walt watched me over the rim of the glass

as he took a sip of his martini. Fred left his untouched, as though to indicate his indifference to alcohol. I wished I didn't see this; I wished the three of us could just have a drink without rancor, like regular guys.

"So, Walter," Fred said, "I read about you in the paper."

"Where do you live now, Dad?"

"I travel a lot," he said. "There's an office in Jersey City that can usually find me."

The tone was distinctly evasive.

"So what do you do, Fred?" I said. "What does all this traveling involve?"

"It wouldn't interest you, Charlie."

"Sure it would."

"Lay off," said Walt.

"You two boys going to have a fight?" said Fred, picking up his drink at last. He'd always encouraged our fights when we were boys. He liked to see us going at it.

Again we sat in silence. Fred finished his martini and Walt signaled for another round. Fred stared at the table with his hands laid flat on either side of his glass, a cigarette between his fingers. He looked up. The gray skin of his jowls and cheeks had acquired a few purple spots of bloom.

"You think it cost me nothing to leave your mother?" he said.

"No," Walt said.

"Yes," I said.

Fred leaned over and gripped my arm, shaking his head. He looked as though he was about to cry.

"Christ, man, you're a fucking *shrink*," said Walt.

"I hate that word," I said.

Fred sat with his elbows on the table, his mouth pressed to his clasped fingers, the cigarette smoke drifting across his troubled, sagging, blotchy face.

“That’s what you really think, son?” he said.

I sat regarding my father and nodded my head.

“Shit, Charlie,” Walt said.

I stood up and without looking at either one of them I walked out of the hotel and hailed a cab. I wanted to be at home listening to classical music with my eyes closed. I wanted my mother not to die.

But die she did. It was as I said. The next stroke came within forty-eight hours. I’d spent many of those hours at her bedside. She reverted again to the subject of her family. She said she had misled me, that she’d given me to believe they came to America much earlier than they had. It seemed to matter that I understand this.

“What sort of people were they, Mom?” I said.

She was doped, bleary, weak. Her fingers trembled on my wrist. Her face grew light, almost humorous, like a child’s. Or like a young woman’s face, the young woman she once had been.

“Actors, Charlie! They were actors!”

It was our last conversation. The funeral took place at a Presbyterian church on the corner of Eighty-sixth and Amsterdam that she’d never set foot in. There was a death notice in the *Times*, and perhaps fifty people showed up. They were invited back to the apartment afterward while Fred and Walt and I accompanied the coffin to a cemetery in the Bronx. The atmosphere in the car was strained. It was a Lincoln town car and my father elected to sit up front with the driver. He and I were wearing black suits but Walt sported a dark blue affair with broad lapels and one of those absurd ties, huge and floppy, deep purple in color. It was the fashion then. His sideburns made him look like a werewolf.

I believe that of the three of us he was the least affected by our mother's death. He was gazing out the window as we drove north, and I could tell his thoughts were elsewhere. I leaned forward and gripped my father's shoulder.

"Is that you, Charles?" he said, turning his head so I had his face in profile.

"You all right, Dad?"

"Sure. What about you?"

I gave the shoulder a squeeze and withdrew my hand. It did not go unremarked by the psychiatrist inside my skull that by any standards this was pretty rudimentary communication; but it was all I was capable of, with him.

When we returned to the apartment Agnes was there. Since the separation I'd seen her only when I went down to Fulton Street to pick up our daughter, Cassie. Agnes had barely spoken to me in years.

"Hello, Charlie," she said.

"Hello, Agnes."

"I'm so sorry."

"I know. Thanks."

We embraced. I held her close. Over her shoulder I could see Cassie, aged eight, gazing at me. Behind her, stony-faced, stood her stepfather, Leon. On the rare occasions over the years when the three of us, Agnes, Cassie and I, had been together, and by an act of willful erasure I succeeded in forgetting the fissure I had created and glimpsed instead a family, it aroused in me a strong gush of pleasure. It was the idea of the three of us under one roof, living unexceptional routines and bound to one another by ties of unthinking affection. Such ordinariness struck me as the very acme of human achievement.

Then other people were crowding in, old family friends, my mother's few intimates, women like herself if such a

thing can be imagined, also the people she'd met in her late-blooming career as a novelist.

Later, when they had all left, I sat alone with the empty glasses and dirty plates and ashtrays while the housekeeper cleaned up, and felt an alarming plummeting sensation in my body. It was accompanied by what I can only call a wave of the purest blackness. I recognized it as the sort of precipitate mental collapse that had characterized my mother's depressions, and I felt, too, as I watched myself falling like a stone down a well, that I'd become infected with her illness. I saw it then, Mom's depression, as a parasite deprived of its host and finding me instead. A perverse idea, but I understood why my mood had changed so dramatically. In a compressed few hours I had encountered every person with whom I'd ever known intimacy save one, that being my mother, and she was dead. I was estranged from all of them except one, that being my daughter, who lived not with me but with her mother. I was approaching forty and I no longer regarded my life as possessing unlimited potential, or any at all. I felt my own isolation strongly, and while I was still sexually active the possibility of proper human intimacy seemed every day to recede further from me.

I sat by the window in my mother's living room as the housekeeper ferried stacks of dishes and trays of glasses to the kitchen. Outside, the light faded as the long winter afternoon came to an end. I could hear the woman working in the kitchen and for a second imagined it was Mom in there. After a while she came back into the living room and turned the lights on. She cried out when she saw me, as though she'd seen a ghost.

"Are you still here, Doctor?"

I got up out of my chair and left the apartment. Descending the staircase I remembered a story about a man

in an asylum. This man believes that his psychiatrist, whom he has met only once, is busy working on his case, finding the solution to his problem. It keeps him going. Then, after some months, he sees him again. The psychiatrist pats him on the back and asks what his name is, and what seems to be the problem. This was my mood. I felt as though I'd been putting my faith in some absent being who was working on my problem. When my mother died I realized that nobody was working on my problem, in fact no one even knew what my problem was.