All These Wonders
True stories about facing the unknown from
THE MOTH
“The great story-teller Frank O’Connor said that every good story should end, in spirit, with the exact same words: *And everything that ever happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.* (He actually got to use that ending, once.) In this new book of Moth stories, that test of significance, of meaning, is – once more – met again and again. There are very few of these well-told tales that don’t have those words as an invisible addition. You can mouth them to yourself as the story ends: *Jesus, she could never have felt the same about anything after that ...*

And if *I’ll never feel the same* is the moral of every good story, *We’re all in this together* is the moral of every Moth occasion. Of all the alchemies of human connection – sex and childbirth and marriage and friendship – the strangest is this: You can stand up and tell a story that is made entirely, embarrassingly, of I’s, and a listening audience somehow turns each I into a me. This is the alchemy of all literature and it is *what makes The Moth fly.*”

Adam Gopnik
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EDITED BY
Catherine Burns
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I admit it. I’m a Mothaholic. I became an addict after the first taste and if this is your first then you are in luck. It’s a sweet addiction. And if you’ve come to this after listening to the Moth podcast or after a live Moth then you already know what’s coming.

Eight years ago, my friend Hannah suggested I listen to the obscurely named Moth podcast. After listening to the first story I needed another. Immediately. If you’ve seen me on a street corner laughing out loud or on a tube or plane shaking at the shoulders (trying not to weep) blame The Moth. A stranger asked “Are you okay?” I told her, “I’m listening to a story on The Moth”. Her eyes widened “The Moth podcast? I love the Moth podcast,” she said. I’d love to say we got married. We didn’t.

There are more stories passing between more people in more ways now than at any other time in human existence. The migratory nature of stories has never created such beautiful and terrifying formations to so many. The Moth is one of the best ways. I’d say it was a market leader if the term market leader didn’t kill the spirit of The Moth. The Moth is a migratory species of storytellers. We cross
all borders. There are no visas. We all have a story. So it was gobsmackingly bonkers to receive a call from Meg Bowles of The Moth inviting me to tell a story at The Moth live at The Union Chapel in London.

Imagine being a fan of star wars then receiving a call “Hi, it’s George Lucas here. We’d like you to be in our next film.” Bring. It. On. My enthusiasm and excitement turned slowly to anxiety and melting panic as Meg’s weekly calls encouraged my story to take shape. That’s what The Moth do. They tease out the story from the teller. A moth is drawn to the light of the flame, so the idiom goes. Were The Moth’s directors trying to draw me to the warm flame inside the story?

Sometimes we are not aware what the real story is but when it hits us we know. That’s what happens with The Moth stories. They hit you. That is why they call. They wanted me to find the flame. The stories don’t need to be grand. They don’t need to be serious. They can begin as simple as “I was walking home”. One of the most incredible stories I’ve heard on The Moth is about a guy walking home.

The day came. The Moth event in London sold out in twenty-four hours by word of Moth. See what I did there? The Moth community around the world is all by word of mouth. Hundreds of people gathered in one giant room to listen to strangers tell an unpublished true story. (I said unpublished not unpolished.) This is London. There’s a book launch by a world class author nearly every night, American superstars are on the West End theatre, there’s a cookery class by a Michelin Star chef somewhere. There’s probably a Beckett play performed by Lisa Dwan somewhere. Everything is here, and yet this audience wants to listen to a true story by a series of strangers. That is the power of The Moth. There will be a story in
INTRODUCTION

The Moth which will move you to tears or laughter or more likely both.

I am so nervous I could eat my knuckles. The woman who created the hair style of David Bowie walks off stage after telling the magnificent tale of a girl from the ‘burbs whose life changed by chance. The familiar applause that I hear on The Moth podcasts fills the room.

You have got the right book at the right time. The book is the venue. In holding this book you are in the audience. The speakers are waiting for you to turn the page.

Imagine The Moth to be an encampment in the desert. Take a seat. Someone will make space for you. It’s dusk in the land of story. What’s happening? Who knows? Someone’s gonna stand up and speak? Something about their life – something that means something to them, something that may mean something to you. The sun dips and fires, rising stars spill across the sky like shoals of silver fish. You see there are as many small fires as there are stars. This is not an encampment. It is the world. The air is perfect body temperature. It is. The Moth is by the people for the people. That’s you.

Now listen. Look. Now read.
The Eternal Music of the Spheres
I am a fifth-generation native New Yorker. And while there is certainly something cool about that, there is also actually a downside. There was a moment when it occurred to me that while many other American families also first landed in New York, for the most part, at some point, they kept going – pioneering their way west with little more than the rags on their backs and all of that.

Meanwhile, it’s like my own family got off a boat, took two steps, and were like, “Good enough for me. Forever.”

All of that is to say I come from people to whom “discovering the great unknown” means . . . New Jersey.

But seriously, it didn’t take me too long to realise that the reason for that was mostly fear, and that that fear pervades everything: where you live, what you do for a living. You find the first solid thing, and you don’t risk going any further.

But as it would wind up, my mother was something of a pioneer herself, although not without her share of false starts. At twenty years old, she had hardly been outside of Brooklyn, and when she did finally leave a year later, it was only because she married a cop from Queens, which she then called “the country.”
They had a baby – me – but by the time I was two, they had divorced. So to make a little extra money afterwards, she had to take on a weekend job cleaning apartments.

The very first was this duplex with Manhattan-skyline views, filled with antiques and artwork. But as it winds up, it would be her last. Because over the course of a year, she would go from being the cleaning lady to the secretary to the girlfriend of the multimillionaire who owned it, named Mark.

They never wound up living together full-time. They were both divorced, so it was sort of been there, done that. But also my mom had this philosophy, which was if you take someone’s money, you have to take their advice.

“When it came to raising you,” she said, “I wanted to do it my way, which had to mean on my dime.”

So she would go on to spend every weekend with him, and then every weekday back home in Queens, living this dual life . . . for the next twenty-two years. On the weekends when I wasn’t with my dad, I was right there with her. Together, Mom and I became like superwomen: able to jump social strata in a single bound!

Because of my mom’s plan, my life was never very different from anybody else around me. I wasn’t sent to some elite private school or moved to a penthouse. So I grew into your typical Queens teenager. I smoked blunts, and I drank 40s, and one of my best friends had a baby in high school. I was a walking cliché in every way, except for the fact that I still spent every odd weekend talking with this art-collecting, croquet-playing, brilliant (if pretty intimidating) man at his mansion in the Hamptons.

When I say “talking,” I actually really mean it. I don’t just mean we made a little chitchat. I mean that after dinner every odd Saturday night for twenty years, he would ask me some enormous question.
He would say, “If I told you that the universe was infinite – that it had no end – how would that make you feel?” (And for that one I was, like, five years old.)

But I lived for it, really. We would go on for hours and hours. My mother would just kind of leave us to it.

Eventually she’d come back in, and she’d be like, “Are you two gonna talk about the moon and the stars all night?” That’s actually what she came to call them, our moon and stars talks.

At sixteen, like all teenagers, I didn’t want to be away from my friends for five minutes, let alone a whole weekend. So I called Mark, and I asked if I could bring them to the Hamptons.

Ring. “Mark speaking.”

“Hi, it’s Tara. Could I bring some of my friends next weekend?”

“That would be fine.” Click.

He wasn’t one for small talk.

But there was a problem. What the problem was, was that some of my friends had no idea about any of this. Now, that’s not because I was trying to hide it. It’s really because the details weren’t exactly easy to slip into conversation.

They’d be like, “Hey, Tara, you want to go smoke and drink on the corner?”

“Well, I had been thinking of discussing the Hudson River School painters over dinner in Bridgehampton, but what the hell!”

Truly, I was nervous about telling them. The only thing I can kind of compare it to is like coming out: “I have to tell you something, and I hope you find it in your heart to accept me . . . but I know a rich guy!”

But truly, it was awkward, because I really wanted them to come, but I also didn’t want them to be embarrassed,
so I had to explain. So literally, here we’d be in the schoolyard, and on one side kids would be beatin’ the crap out of each other – that’s how we do recess in Queens – and then on the other side I’d be huddled up with my friend Lynette, trying to explain *antiquing*.

Before you know it, there we were – me, Lynette, her boyfriend, Rob – piled into the back of his red hoop-tie, flying down the highway heading from Hollis to the Hamptons. For brevity’s sake let’s just say that Rob is like Eminem and Lynette’s like an Italian Rosie Perez. They’re in the front, and I’m in the back.

Now as we’re getting closer, I’m getting a little more nervous, and I’m thinking of all these things to explain.

I’m like, “Oh, shit! Did I tell you about the ketchup?”

“The what?”

“You can’t put the ketchup bottle on the table.”

“Where do you put it, on the floor?”

“No, listen. You gotta take the ketchup out of the bottle and you gotta put it in a little bowl with a spoon first. Remember that.”

“Oh, and I didn’t tell you this: there’s no TV there.”

“Dear God!” That always got the biggest reaction.

“What does he do all day?”

It’s like in Queens, the most diverse place in the world, the one thing everybody has in common is a perpetually blaring TV set. So that would lead me to have to explain what we did after dinner instead of watching TV, which was the talks – the moon and stars talks.

Like I said, I really loved them, but they weren’t for the faint of heart, meaning that Mark did not care if you were some kid unaccustomed to this type of thing. He talked, and he argued with you like you were his peer, and he fully expected you to keep up. So I was not sure if my friends were gonna be into that, or if he was gonna
be into them, but too late. There we were pulling in to the driveway.

The most shocking thing you first saw at Mark’s place wasn’t the hand-laid stone pool, or even the regulation croquet court, or the five-bedroom historic farmhouse. It was Mark himself. He was six foot ten. Again, six foot ten. Everyone just sort of looked at him like, Is that a man or is that an oak tree wearing chinos?

Likely because my friends ignored my stupid paranoia and were just themselves, the day went without a hitch. But still, that night as we finished up dinner, I couldn’t help but be a little nervous again, as I knew the questions were coming.

So Mark says, “Presuming we can fix all of the societal ills right here and now, where would you begin? Go.”

Really, you have to understand that nobody is asking us these kinds of questions. Maybe, sure, we’re at an age where you may be starting to think bigger picture, starting to think about what you are gonna do for a living. But we come from a place where it always felt like there were only two job options: cop . . . not a cop. It was what your parents did: you took the first solid city job that came along, and you held on for dear life. And you were proud, and you did your best, and you did it forever.

Solving society’s ills doesn’t get you a pension. We weren’t thinking about these kind of things.

So I kind of look away, I look down. But then I hear Rob say something, and I look up, and then I see Lynette kind of disagrees with that. Then I see that Mark is nodding along, and it’s on, just like that, and not just that one time.

There would be many more moon and stars talks over the years. And it was a beautiful thing, because I think what most of us would tell you now is that those talks forever changed the way we thought of ourselves. Those
All These Wonders talks made us think that maybe there was a little more to us than we knew.

For some of my friends, certainly not all, but for some, and definitely for me, they even made us think, Well, shit, if (a) I like talking about these big things, and (b) the universe is infinite, then (c) there’s gotta be more job options than cop.

But really, I think that when we stood at that same crossroads as our parents had, it was this experience that gave us something that unfortunately they didn’t have, and that’s just the confidence to know that we had a choice.

And so here I am today, living in a whole other world: Manhattan, a whopping twenty minutes away from where I grew up.

But that is not because of fear. That’s my choice.

TARA CLANCY is the author of The Clancys of Queens. Her writing has appeared in the New York Times Magazine, the Paris Review Daily, and the Rumpus. She is a Moth GrandSLAM winner, and her stories have been featured on The Moth Radio Hour, as well as NPR’s Snap Judgment and Risk! Tara lives in New York City with her wife and two sons. www.taraclancy.com

This story was told on Feb 10, 2014 at Cooper Union, New York City. The theme of the evening was Flirting with Disaster: Stories of Narrow Escapes. Director: Jenifer Hixson.