

all  
this  
could  
be  
yours

jami  
attenberg



First published in Great Britain in 2020 by  
Serpent's Tail,  
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ  
[www.serpentstail.com](http://www.serpentstail.com)

First published in the United States of America in 2019 by  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York

Book design by Greta D. Sibley

Copyright © Jami Attenberg, 2019

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 325 5  
eISBN 978 1 78283 590 5



JUST BEFORE

# I

He was an angry man, and he was an ugly man, and he was tall, and he was pacing. Not much space for it in the new home, just a few rooms lined up in a row, underneath a series of slow-moving ceiling fans, an array of antique clocks ticking on one wall. He made it from one end of the apartment to the other in no time at all—his speed a failure as much as it was a success—then it was back to the beginning, flipping on his heel, grinding himself against the floor, the earth, this world.

The pacing came after the cigar and the Scotch. Both had been unsatisfactory. The bottle of Scotch had been sitting too close to the window for months, and the afternoon sun had destroyed it, a fact he had only now just realized, the flavor of the Scotch so bitter he had to spit it out. And he had coughed his way through his cigar, the smoke tonight tickling his throat vindictively. All the things he

loved to do, smoking, drinking, walking off his frustrations, those pleasures were gone. He'd been at the casino earlier, hanging with the young bucks. Trying to keep up with them. But even then, he'd blown through that pleasure fast. A thousand bucks gone, a visit to the bathroom stall. What was the point of it? He had so little left to give him joy, or the approximation of it. Release, that was always how he had thought of it. A release from the grip of life.

His wife, Barbra, sat on the couch, her posture tepid, shoulders loose, head slouched, no acknowledgment of his existence. But she glanced at him now as he paused in front of her, and then she dropped her head back down again. Her hair dyed black, chin limping slightly into her neck, but still, at sixty-eight years old, as petite and wide-eyed as ever. Once she had been the grand prize. He had won her, he thought, like a stuffed animal at a sideshow alley. She flipped through an *Architectural Digest*. Those days are gone, sweetheart, he thought. Those objects are unavailable to you. Their lives had become a disgrace.

Now would have been an excellent time to admit he had been wrong all those years, to confess his missteps in full, to apologize for his actions. To whom? To her. To his children. To the rest of them. This would have been the precise moment to acknowledge the crimes of his life that had put them in that exact location. His flaws hovered and rotated, kaleidoscope-like, in front of his gaze, multicolored, living, breathing shards of guilt in motion. If only he could put together the bits and pieces into a larger vision, to create an understanding of his choices, how he had landed on the wrong side, perhaps always had. And always would.

Instead he was angry about the taste of a bottle of Scotch,

and suggested to his wife that if she kept a better home, none of this would have happened, and also would she please stop fucking around with the thermostat and leave the temperature just as he liked. And she had flipped another page, bored with his Scotch, bored with his complaints.

“The guy downstairs said something again,” she said. “About this.” She motioned to his legs. The pacing, they could hear it through the floor.

“I can walk in my own home,” he said.

“Sure,” she said. “Maybe don’t do it so late at night, though.”

He marched into their bedroom, stomping loudly, and plummeted headfirst onto their bed. Nobody loves me, he thought. Not that I care. He had believed, briefly, he could find love again, even now, as an old man, but he had been wrong. Loveless, fine, he thought. He closed his eyes and allowed himself one last series of thoughts: a beach, sand bleached an impenetrable white, a motionless blue sky, the sound of birds nearby, a thigh, his finger running along it. No one’s thigh in particular. Just whatever was available from a pool of bodies in his memory. His imaginary hand squeezed the imaginary thigh. It was meant to cause pain. He waited for his moment of arousal, but instead he began to gasp for air. His heart seized. Release me, he thought. But he couldn’t move, face-down in the pillow, a muffled noise. A freshly laundered scent. A field of lavender, the liquid cool color of the flower, interrupted by bright spasms of green. Release me. Those days are over.

• • •

Ninety minutes later an EMT named Corey responded to his last call of the day. The Garden District. A heart attack, seventy-three-year-old male. The patient's wife let him and his partner in wordlessly, and then had leaned on the doorway to the bedroom, watching them work, until she finally deposited herself on the couch in the living room. Stone-cold ice queen. Her eyes bulging, frog-like. A row of creepy-ass clocks clicking above her head. So many diamonds on her hands and neck. He subconsciously stroked the two diamond studs in his right ear, one a gift from his ex-wife, the other for which he had saved scrupulously.

Before they left, patient in tow, Corey told her the name of the hospital where they'd be taking her husband. He could not get a verbal acknowledgment. She simply continued to stare. He waved a hand in front of her face. He was low on patience. He never got enough sleep. The last thing he needed was to have to take her in, too.

"Come on, lady," he said.

Finally she let out a massive exhale and then began gasping for air. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear she'd been dying and had just come back to life.

## 2

Alex, in bed but not sleeping. Feet flexed. The air conditioning blasting for no reason. Yoga pants, soft, fluttering T-shirt, and cashmere socks, which were a birthday gift from four years ago, when she was not yet divorced and a man still wanted her to feel good. Laptop at twenty-nine percent, resting on her stretched-out thighs. Open to a brief, in which she ceaselessly typed, as if the pure intensity of her fingertips would somehow make this a winnable case, which it was not.

Alex, with the monstrously large brown eyes, unblinking, and the thin, serious, taut lips, and the delicate membrane of grief she regularly nudged up against, nearly stroking it; because of its familiarity, it now felt good to engage with the grief. There was no good or bad; there was just sensation.

Alex, alone this summer, in a house on a cul-de-sac in a subdivision of a town forty-five minutes west of Chicago, while her

daughter spent it away from home, with her ex-husband. On the night table, a mug of Valerian tea, which she drank every night, even though it never worked as it should. Like she sleeps. Come on. She's wired like a ceiling lamp, bolted and secured. But it's habitual, this tea. Maybe someday it will knock her out.

The phone rang. It was her mother, with whom she spoke rarely, except for the occasional grim conversations. Basic life facts exchanged. She had given up on her parents years ago. Things would never be honest between them. So why bother with any relationship at all? She answered anyway. No one ever calls with good news this late in the evening. If she didn't answer, she'd only stay up all night wondering what it was. Better just to know.

Barbra sounded frail and tender, a gravelly and sweet quality to her voice. "I have news," she said. Alex's father was in the hospital. Probably he would die. Alex gasped. "That's what *I* said," said her mother, and it was a good line—Barbra was sometimes funny, Alex flickered on that—but Alex didn't laugh. Anyway, her mother would like to know: could she come to New Orleans immediately?

"I need some assistance," her mother said. Barbra, who had never asked for anything except that her daughter be pleasant, and, sometimes, that she be quiet—both unrealistic expectations, Alex had always thought.

"I'll come tomorrow," said Alex.

Deeply, almost erotically, she was stirred. Now, this is happening. Now, things could be different.

Now, she'll never fall asleep.

### 3

In Griffith Park, with a direct, intense gaze, Gary watched the sun set over Los Angeles. Seeking clarity as his heart rate slowed. He'd been walking every day since he'd arrived, between whatever meetings he could get, a difficult task, especially in late August. Every morning he strode determinedly in a loop around the reservoir in Silver Lake, early, when it was still cool, and every afternoon he took a more leisurely hike in Griffith Park, ambling through the land on dusty trails and then up to the observatory. Making his way around cheerful packs of tourists stopped in their tracks, cameras held aloft, trained to hide all the bad angles. He never got to stretch his legs at home in New Orleans, not like this. As he walked today, he attempted to think about nothing. That was the goal. To get to zero in the brain.

Two hours ago, he had eaten an edible to help ease this line of nonthinking. It had been covered in chocolate.

His cell phone rang, and he didn't answer it because it was his mother, and why would he want to talk to her? She had showed up in his life lately, along with his father, after many years of a reasonable, healthy distance. The decades-long unspoken agreement to keep to their own corners of the country somehow spontaneously collapsed: they had moved to New Orleans—who knew why? Certainly it wasn't because of a sincere desire to build an emotional connection with him and his family. Closeness was not their thing, his parents. But there they both were, every other week, sitting in his living room, expecting him to offer them a drink. To cater to their needs. While they got to know his wife and child, whom he would rather protect from them—if he could, he would have built a wall to separate the four of them. And now everyone's talking all the time. *Chitchatting*. Wasn't it enough that he had to see his mother for dinner on a regular basis? Did he really have to take her calls, too?

He turned his attention back to the sun and the vibrant bright pink that surrounded it. To get to zero was not exactly correct. What he was seeking was an absence of a consideration of women. He didn't want to have to care anymore about what they thought or felt. He'd spent his whole life caring, in contrast to his father, who'd spent his whole life not caring. He didn't want that life any longer, though. He wanted nothingness. A flat line in the head.

Except for his daughter, Avery; he would care about her forever.

Next, his wife texted. He saw her name, but did not consume the comment beneath it. There were dozens of texts in a row from her to which he had not yet responded, and if he waited long enough, perhaps he would not be obliged to do so. He thought: If a text disappears from sight, does it even exist anymore? It becomes just a thought someone had once. I'm really on to something, he thought. He made a small fist in the air. I need to keep staring at this fucking sunset for five more minutes and I know I'll have it all figured out. Don't leave me yet, sunset, don't you dare die on me, little spot of orange and pink, not when I'm this close to figuring it all out.

The phone rang again, and it was his sister.

Except for my sister, too, he thought. This plan for not caring, already gone awry.

He always wanted to talk to Alex, because she was not just his sister, but also his friend, and also, they had both survived that house in Connecticut together, and it was a natural instinct to accept her hand when she reached it toward him, although maybe he should have waited a beat longer before picking up, because the mother-wife-sister communication trifecta could mean nothing good, and there's no better way to ruin a sunset than picking up a phone call. But it was Alex, and he loved her, so he answered, and she was so breathless with the news about their father's heart attack she sounded nearly joyful, which anyone else might have found inappropriate but he didn't, he was on her team, and she was on his, and by the time he was done talking to her, the sun was gone, and he found himself in tears.

*There* was his moment of clarity. Because while he would have liked to erase the thought of women, perhaps more than that he would have liked to erase the thought of his father. And now that seemed possible. At last.

Nearby a woman was paused, post-hike. She stole looks at Gary, at his long legs, at his tight, sweat-stained T-shirt, at his emotion-filled face with its sizable, striking nose, at his dark curls dampening his forehead. He's crying, she thought. Is that touching, or is that a warning sign? She couldn't tell. Then she looked at his enormous hands. She saw no ring.

She thought to herself: If I ever have to meet another man online, I'm going to jump right off this cliff—I can't do it, I can't, not anymore.

The woman was a Pilates instructor; she offered private training for rich people who couldn't be bothered to leave their office or home. She was exceptional at her job. She had a waiting list. Her body was immaculate. She owned her own condo. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She couldn't meet anyone.

She studied his form, and thought: What if this man is the one, why not him? What if he turns his head right now and looks at me and smiles. That might mean he could love me. Love me, love me, love me, she thought, even as Gary turned and walked back down the winding path toward the rest of his life. Briefly, she felt like a failure. But it wasn't your fault, lady. You could never have known what was going on with Gary.

## 4

Avery was stretched out after breakfast on the bottom bunk, eyes glazed and dreamy, staring up at the names of the girls who had slept there before her, scrawled on the bottom of the bed above. Who knew there were so many names? Who was the first to sign it? Abby, Natasha, Tori, Latoya, and a few dozen more. Laying claim. Avery wanted to add her own name, but she wasn't sure she existed yet like the rest of them.

Or, for example, like snakes did. It was Snake Week at camp. They existed, because they knew their purpose. They slithered, they hunted their prey. Avery was twelve; what did she do? She ate, she breathed, she did her homework. But what did that accomplish? What if snakes were her purpose?

She thought of those she loved, which *Homo sapiens*. Her mother, her father, her cousin Sadie, whom she never saw but

texted with constantly, her grandmother, she supposed, her grandfather . . . The cabin door opened. It was a counselor, Gabrielle, the one who didn't shave her bikini line. Avery had seen her at the lake. Everyone had. Hair sprouting out from under her bathing suit. Avery didn't know if that was bad or good. It was just hair, she supposed. Why don't I know? Why can't I decide? Snakes are easy. Snakes, I know.

Gabrielle approached Avery, gently told her they needed to have a talk. All the other girls in the cabin said "Oooh" at once. They left the cabin and walked for a bit, the older girl resting her hand on Avery's shoulder, and then she put her phone in Avery's hand. Cell phones were forbidden at the camp, and Avery experienced a brief thrill holding one in her hand again. Cell phones were her friends, she felt. They were there for her when no one else was. There was always texting. There was always Instagram. There were always videos of snakes.

On the phone, Avery's mother spoke to her about her grandfather. That he was sick in the hospital and that he might die. "I thought you'd want to know," she said. "I know you two were buddies."

Were they? On the walk back to the cabin that already sweltering August morning, Avery thought of all the time she'd spent with her grandfather in the past six months. He'd pick her up after school and drive her around in his new car, all over the city, while he gabbed about his life, his business ventures. For the first month she'd paid attention to him, but she understood little of what he was saying. The following few months she'd stared out the window and daydreamed of animals and trees and grass and the river

and the coastline, where men made their living catching oysters and shrimp. But lately she'd tuned in again, and it was then she realized that the stories he told were all bad, that he did bad things. Even though he thought he was the hero.

Simultaneously bored and intrigued, she asked him if what he did was illegal.

"No one is innocent in this life. Everyone's a criminal, trust me. Except for you, I guess. You're pretty innocent, right?"

"I don't know what I am," she said, which was true.

"Don't ever change, kid," he said. But he didn't sound convincing to Avery at all. It came out as a statement rather than a command. Then he lit a cigar, and the car filled with smoke. She waved it away from her face. When he dropped her off, he said, "Let's not tell your mother I was smoking around you." He handed her a hundred-dollar bill. "If she asks, you know, just tell her we ran into a buddy of mine who was smoking instead." She stared at the money in her palm and then looked up at him, silent, shocked. "You drive a hard bargain," he'd said, and handed her another bill. He gave her an appraising look. "That's a good skill to have." She nodded in agreement—to all of it.

She liked money, she guessed. Money was a thing you were supposed to like. But now Avery was a liar. Before this moment she was not a liar, and now, suddenly, she was one. Did he do that or did she?

In twenty years, she would date a man who smoked cigars. He was not good to her; the relationship was quite fraught, in fact. They snapped at each other, and argued about politics, about the man's employer, how Avery couldn't understand how he worked

for him, about morals, about ethics, about capitalism. They stayed together much longer than they should have, and every time he smoked a cigar Avery hated the smell, but for some reason, with all the things she gave him shit about, she never said a word about it. After the relationship was finished, she realized: I should have started there, with the cigars. The whole thing would have been over a lot sooner.

As she approached the cabin, her bunkmates stretching and chattering on the front porch, she tried to land on a feeling. She knew there was something off about her grandfather. That at the very least she might be better off if he wasn't around. But at the same time, she thought: Death is sad. No one should die. No living creature deserved to die. She knew it was nature. She knew there were cycles. Her other grandparents had died. (They were much better people than this grandfather, that she knew, too.) But someone, somewhere should be sad about her grandfather. And so, she cried.

When she got to her bunk, she lay back on the mattress and pulled out a pen. Next to all the other girls' names she wrote her own. And then, next to hers, she wrote his. *Victor*.

# 5

Ten a.m., and the house woke Corey before he was ready. A foundation that rattled when trucks passed nearby on Claiborne. The freeway on-ramp a half block away; traffic seemed endless. An ex-wife who put her phone on speaker for every conversation, as if the whole world was interested in her business. Never mind the three children, one just out of diapers, everyone coming and going as they pleased. Corey crashed on a couch in the second room off the backyard, formerly the office. One kid or another was always marching through, on the way to play their shows on the extra TV when they all couldn't agree on what to watch on the big one in the front room, or when his oldest, Pablo, a teenager, went to smoke cigarettes in the backyard. Plus, they liked to spend time with him, and he loved them all a lot, laughed with them, teased

them, poked them. How could he argue with his children coming to see their daddy?

Otherwise, it was almost like a room of his own. He had moved in a clothing rack from which he hung his uniforms, his jeans, his T-shirts, all pressed, his shoes lined up underneath. A family portrait—minus Corey—hung on the wall. Three dark-haired children smiling, all with varying degrees of dental stability, no baby teeth, braces, braces-free, and Camila, with her glittering hoop earrings and rosy décolletage and tired eyes. She'd had the photo taken during the late stages of their divorce. He liked to look up at them all anyway, pretend he had been at his job that day instead.

He was willing to work with the situation. And it was their right to go where they wanted. But couldn't they sometimes respect that he had a late shift?

Not my house, he reminded himself. Not my rules. He had landed there, debt-ridden, nine months ago. A few bad roommates in a row, lingering school bills, and of course, these children before him, who didn't come for free. He couldn't get out from under, no matter how hard he tried. Still, he was lucky to have ended up somewhere safe and solid, he knew it. The kids were in school, the house was clean. But he wanted more. He could not help but dream of living without any noise at all. He was not a quiet man, but he imagined he could become one if he had the right place to live. A silent, stable, powerful force in the world. Like a ninja.

The only place for real quiet was Camila's room, but sleeping with her meant all kinds of trouble, and also she liked to remind him who paid the bills around here, which made him feel less than sexual. Anyway, she hadn't welcomed him of late. He was all

kinds of trouble for her, too, he recognized that. The marriage had ended because they couldn't stop fighting. Money being the main topic, even if it was shrouded in other subjects: sex, food, and various aesthetic disagreements. Wearily, these past few months, they had come to a calm place between them. So long as they didn't pretend like they—as in the idea of the two of them as a “they”—could happen anymore, that this husband-and-wife thing was ever going to work, then they could still share this house. This noisy-as-hell house.

He had a plan, though. There was a new woman in his life: Sharon. She didn't love him, he thought. He didn't love her yet either, but he supposed he could, or come close, anyway. He wasn't so sure about her—how much love she had in her. Sharon was both warm and impenetrable. But he was working on it. In three days, his plan would be in play. I still got game, baby, he thought, I got some moves left.