

A Day in the Life of a Quantum Cat

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Recommended Citation

Birk, Ilsa J. () "A Day in the Life of a Quantum Cat," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol1/iss1/8>

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A Day in the Life of a Quantum Cat

by Ilsa J. Bick

Stories begin and end with a lie. Whether this is bad or not is relative. For a writer, lies are tools of the trade. For example, endings: Stories never end. A story is a Möbius strip of infinite possibilities and tangential associations, roiling around and around in your brain. Whether or not there's an end all depends upon where you pick up the thread. Open to page three, and presto! Hamlet's alive and kicking. Thumb ahead, and poor Ophelia's off her nut, or flip back a bit, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very decidedly *not* dead, thereby giving Tom Stoppard a bit of a headache.

Writers lie. The end is never THE END, not only because your brain's been irrevocably altered by the simple act of reading, but because writers are just itching for you to pick up the damn thing and read it all over again, or recommend it to a friend who will then tell her friend, and then her friend will tell Oprah, and *well!* Those royalty checks are a testament to the unending nature of it all, aren't they? And we won't even talk about sequels now, will we?

And so it is with a very queer animal called a quantum cat, an animal defined by lies, an oxymoron through and through. Now, the cat doesn't have to be a cat. Why physicists insist upon picking on cats is obscure; for all the difference it makes, the cat could be a canary, a gorilla, or a woman. Consider the predicament of the quantum cat: trapped in a box containing a radioactive source, a detector, and a hammer poised over a glass bottle filled with poison. Cyanide gas, perhaps, though there are some physicists who insist that the dirty deed be accomplished with a gun. (Honestly, physicists are fascists.)

Back to our box. Radioactive things, like humans, decay, energetically spitting out little electrons and protons and what-have-you and, in general, flying apart at the seams and making a riot of the place. Like people, radioactive things hurtle headlong toward supreme, maximal, glorious entropy; like people, they might muck up the rest of us along the way. Anyway, detectors detect, and so, as our radioactive source decays, there's a chance a particle will be emitted at the precise moment the detector has been switched on. There's just as strong a chance—fifty percent, actually—that the detector won't detect a thing at that moment because the source *hasn't* emitted a particle just then, these things being random events, as likely to occur as not. (You with me on this?) For our unfortunate feline—or woman—life, or death, boils down to a probability, the whim of a submicroscopic bit of energy. All of existence hinges upon observation. If the particle strikes the detector, the detector trips the hammer or the gun; the bottle goes bust, or the gun goes bang, and the cat is reduced to a lifeless lump of fur (splattered or no, depending upon the weapon of choice). Of course, the particle might not strike the detector,

in which case the cat—or woman—lives another nanosecond in which to contemplate the fact that there's nothing remotely interesting inside this box, not even a television.

But here's the real fly in the ointment. Schrödinger said we couldn't know a thing until we look in the box. Seeing defines truth. The cat might be alive or dead, but we can't know the reality of it all until we collapse probabilities in the instant of observation. So, as long as we don't look, our quantum cat—or woman—lives a lie: existing in a half-dead, half-alive state, as a mass of probabilities and of superpositions, as the prevailing reality in the box. A sample both decaying and not, a bottle of poison both broken and not, a gun fired and not. A cat, or a woman, simultaneously alive and dead. A quantum cat is a mass of after-images blurred around and overlapping their margins, never quite coalescing into something recognizable: a picture snapped with a defective Polaroid.

The headaches of such a world-view are enormous. No wonder poor Schrödinger declared he was sorry he'd ever had anything to do with it. He and Einstein had quite the tiff about the whole thing, the randomness of quantum mechanics putting Einstein off his food.

But we were talking about lies and endings, not-endings and quantum cats. Am I a quantum cat, you ask?

Oh, most definitely.

I fulfill all the conditions. First, the setting: north corner room, in a two-story, yellow and white trim clapboard on Edgemere Place, nine long blocks southwest, on the outskirts of Oberlin College, Ohio. Middle of February, requisite bleakness, piles of snow, frozen sparrows, the winter of the soul, that sort of literary tripe. My quantum box is my little room here, crammed with books and memorabilia and my computer and the sheaves of my writings, such as they are. My self-dissections, I call them, but more on self-dissection in a moment.

As for poison. . . well, that depends on your definition. Some call it bile—that green stuff that's supposed to come of a bad liver but is a metaphor for envy, greed, unfulfilled desires, bad karma, a crummy marriage. I'm married—to Francis Fairbridge, a transplanted Brit and film professor at the college, but ours is not a crummy marriage. It's just a marriage, and in any event, that's not the poison or the weapon, or rather he's not one or the either. At least, I don't think so.

(Ah, the tag line, the tease: I brought it up, you say, there must be something to it, yes?)

Poison can be bad memories, unconscious conflicts, bad breasts, penis envy—oh, analysts live for that stuff. Still others call poison and weapons for what they are: alcohol, pills, sometimes a knife, sometimes a gun. A belt, a rope, a tie. Now you're talking. The first two, the alcohol and pills, I've got: booze aplenty—very good wine, thank you, Gundlach Bundschu here, a Chateau Cheval Blanc there. And Valium, Serax, Ativan, Prozac, Lithium, pills that look like Skittles, a few masquerading as vitamins, a couple handfuls of Haldol, some other stuff left over here, souvenirs from years past. Other venues—guns, knives, garrotes—well, the clean-up's a bitch. So there's condition two for you.

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And am I heading toward maximal entropy? Am I falling apart, splitting at the seams, losing my marbles?

Well, that's what they say.

So, there's just the last condition to be met. Is there a detector, that Almighty Observer to determine, with a glance, if I am alive or dead?

Why, absolutely. I wouldn't be caught dead without one.

That's Francis. Film professors are professional watchers, so passivity's second nature, observation a snap. In fact, he's standing right outside the door—the lid to my box—just itching for a peek. I feel him. Marriage does that to you. Habits coalesce, thoughts merge, words—those things we sling at one another in a feeble attempt at making ourselves understood—go by the wayside. I've heard his creaking up the stairs, the groan of the loose board as he's turned left and slouched down the corridor to the bedroom, then the returning creak, the hesitation, the pause, the slow shuffle, like an old man with Parkinson's disease. And, most especially, I've heard that pause and his breathing. The wood of the lid to my box pushes in by imperceptible degrees beneath my fingertips: retreats, pushes in, retreats, in perfect synchrony with the tidal ebb and flow of his breath. And he's probably counting the bottles I've set out in the grey hours of morning: empties for the milkman. And I think that I like this imagining of my own half-dead, half-alive quantum man, reassuring myself that he's still there, probably. (Though why I depend upon such blocky solidity is a little bit of a mystery, what?)

Oh, that language, that contagion. That little "what" at the end—that's what Francis would say. Poor Francis. He's never quite managed it, you know, that transition from English vernacular to American slang. Oh, he'll get it right sometimes. Now and again, he'll call the stove a stove instead of a cooker; a nap isn't always a kip, and, in recent years, he's gotten down "elevator" for "lift," but just barely. Language gives definition to the world; words and labels are the things into which we bump or around which we jostle our way, and language, so intangible, is so potent. He's a brat, she's a ninny, he's my father, she's my lover. Language is ingrained into consciousness as indelibly as a tattoo. So language is Francis's stigma, an identifiable marker of person and place, and Francis can be counted on to come out with the implausible, like slapper, straight on, or bangers and mash (sausage and potatoes to you).

My favorite? Brilliant. *Brilllllliant*. The word just rolls off the tongue, a trilling cascade of consonants falling out of the mouth, like water spilling over rocks. *Brilllllllliant*. We think it means wondrous, a stroke of genius, marvelous, what a guy, what a gal! People who don't know how Brits speak positively glow. They assume Francis is acknowledging their intellectual prowess, their moral acumen. But he's not, you know; he's simply giving them the English equivalent of great, wonderful, good idea, what say, now heave off, old chap.

That language. Well, he wouldn't be Francis otherwise. Nor would I be I. It's amazing, how he's rubbed off, giving me shape and definition: guilt by a long association of thirteen years. I think in his accent sometimes. We have lengthy discussions, he and I, in my head most of the time, argu-

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ing this issue or that. Most of them are monologues—his. Lengthy diatribes about film, or polemics about campus politics. Francis waxing eloquently on the new department chairman, or the absolute abomination of colorizing old movies. They are of equal weight upon Francis's mental scales. No, that's not fair; he cares about colorization more.

Yet he's so hard to imagine as real, and I suppose you'd say that, all homage to Schrödinger, I'd have to crack open the door and take a peep to observe just what's there. For the sake of argument, let's say that just beyond that door is another world, a parallel universe, the obverse of my own, the opaque backing to my mirror. Man to my woman, inquisitive physicist to specimen quantum cat. And where there was only the void a bare minute before, now there's Francis. And yet he's just a phantom, something to which I've given shape in my mind, relying on memory and past experience. You see, I can imagine him as any Francis I choose—the Francis as I know him now, or the Francis of nine years ago, ten days ago, a month ahead, a century past. Francis is an amalgam, a kaleidoscopic panoply of frozen instants and inscribed sensations. When words fail, as they so often do, and my mind cannot recall, my body summons. So I remember our first kiss, not as a setting or time but as a thrill of expectation stirring in my gut, as a catch of breath at the back of my throat. Or I can summon up the first time we made love as a liquid ache in my thighs and the remembrance of how exquisitely my nipples hardened beneath the rough flesh of his palm, the musty smell of sex, the salty tang of sweat and semen.

At times, however, Francis might as well be one of my hallucinations. There have been moments, hours, days when I've doubted his existence, his solidity, this life. Like childhood — you can never recreate it, and once it's past, it's irretrievable. Of childhood all you can have are what you call memories but are really verbal infections and sensations.

The first time I crashed through the lid of my box was the time I shattered the sliding glass door of a neighbor's house and slashed open my elbow: the unconscious forerunner of my later preoccupation with self-dissection. What I remember is the riveting sensation of a complete and utter astonishment. Perhaps this is what I have been trying, in vain, to recapture, or perhaps its adult transmogrification is eroticism, that wonderful pleasure so pointed as to be both utter self-absorption and total dis-ociation, codified in the moment of orgasm, like Bernini's St. Theresa stabbed through the heart. I remember the obdurate solidity of the glass giving way before my imperious, headlong progress. I remember the sound of splintering glass. I remember the absolute stoppage of time; I remember standing in place, shocked by this sudden turn of events, this traumatic rupture in my hitherto young and unmarred life. Of pain I remember not a thing. My body mercifully swathed my mind in a sort of mental bandage, shielding me from what my mother tells me she saw: the torrent of blood spattering the concrete at my feet, the bits of flesh dangling from the open wound, like pieces of meat inexpertly hacked away from a carcass, and, peeping through, the pinkish-white gleam of the exposed bone. She says that I was very brave, that I cried not at all, but

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I remember none of this. She says that I sat, perfectly calm, in the back seat of the neighbor's car while she held towels to my gushing arm; that I walked without tears from car to emergency room. That I watched with old eyes and almost preternatural calm the progress of the doctor's meticulous fingers probing the wound. That I was unflinching in scrutinizing the application of needle to flesh and thread through muscle and skin, through fat and bursa.

Of the repair, I remember the smell of iodine, and there is the briefest of images in my mind—a snapshot—of a bespectacled physician with sandy hair and gloved fingers so white they looked like grubs. But what I do remember finally is that after the doctor had finished stitching me up—my right elbow, that is—a nurse blindsided me on my left and jabbed me with a tetanus shot just as I was sitting up. I remember that I was giggling little giggly bubbles. And I remember that shot. The shot wasn't just the point of a needle; it was like being stabbed through with a rapier, as shocking as the moment I erupted in a shower of glass from kitchen to the hot yellow air of a summer's afternoon. Only this time it hurt.

I shrieked. I thrashed. I think I scratched someone. It took the doctor, my mother, and three nurses to hold me down. They mummified me finally, in this cocoon of burlap. I remember being shoved onto a board of some type, and then I remember the feel of leather straps being cinched down around my middle, my arms, my legs. I tried biting a nurse, and then they strapped down my head with a gauze bandage and tape, trussing me into total immobilization. I remember the smell of my own fear, and the smells of the accumulated sweat and fear from dozens of children before me. The straps reeked; the material was stained with blood and sweat and my own pee. A papoose they called it, perversely. The horrors of the world pressed upon my consciousness, and suddenly the doctor and nurses, my mother, were disciples of Mephistopheles: demons with pink eyes, yellow teeth, and bad breath.

My analyst was of the opinion that I dissociated. Stepped out of myself, to one side, at a moment of high anxiety, at a time when I perceived, in my six-year-old mind, that I was on the brink of death. Such a phenomenon was, he assured me, quite normal. Trauma is ubiquitous, he said. You can't avoid it. It grabs you unawares, and everyone has been traumatized at some point in his or her life. Trauma causes the mind to snap shut, clamp down, swing a steel barrier into place. That's why there are gaps, flaws, bubbles in the globes of our brains, like balls of imperfect glass. But there's still memory of a sort. You can't forget something you haven't already known. So our dangers come back as premonitions, ghosts, boogey-men floating in the black of the bedroom. Trauma returns as flashbacks of uncanny clarity, and, in extreme cases, as multiple, alternate selves, each with a life and accumulated memory of his or her own. Trauma is the bedfellow of pain, and pain is the stylus in the book of our memories. As long as there's pain, things never really end.

And pain: I'm not sure when dissection, as an occupation or as an art, first occurred to me. The revelation wasn't one of those indelible experiences, like the time I had my first migraine, or lost my virginity (not at

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the same time, thank God). But this journal—this one last attempt at self-observation as I sort out whether or not this cat's had her day—is yet another example of self-dissection. I write not in the hope of exorcising demons but to catalogue the things inside me, all the hidden goodies stuffed in this package, and because while I write, I'm still alive. No one's penned my end, and history fascinates me. I'm not after truth *per se*, though reality would be a start. But just as I am composed of hidden orifices and miles of invisible tubing, so the histories inside my head, those voices imagined and experienced, form a narrative of a certain type of world. This world envelops the various manifestations of myself in all my different guises and shapes, from fledging sprog in my mother's womb, to gangly adolescent with raging hormonal imbalances and budding breasts, to the woman Francis—that man breathing outside the door, that hulking academic in a Panama suit who just happens to be my husband—thinks he knows and with whom I retain a dim association. So this narrative is for me and for him and for those multitude of others, the observers of my progress through life, the principal players in my internal drama.

Taking the plunge into a literal self-dissection must have come to me during one of those times when I'd stopped taking my medications. I've gone off and on over the years, a physician's compliance nightmare. At present, I'm off, have been for a long time. Going on thirteen years, ever since I met Francis, a new epoch into which I was stamped, sealed, delivered, I'm yours, I'm his, I'm not sure I'm really my own. I've spent years teasing apart fantasy from memory and memory from reality. (Some of it I've put into books, those other packages, those neatly typed tomes gathering dust in the closet: second shelf from the top, far right, beneath the burgundy cardigan, if you're interested.) I've grown used to close analysis of the stuff spewing out of my mouth, those words which taken together form life narratives, under the misapprehension that such fabrications count as true representations for the goods inside the package. At least that is what analysts, counselors, do-gooders, priests, nuns, and scream therapists want you to think. No, I've not gone to them all. Though I know longing, I've no taste for religion, and as for screaming, that's not my style. But I have produced all that rote Freudian verbiage. Guided tactfully by my analyst, I've discovered that I lusted after my father, hated my mother, lusted after my mother, hated my brother, bitten the bad breast, suckled at the good, wanted a penis, and taken it up the ass. In a way, analysis is a religion. You have to understand and learn to repeat over, like catechisms or Hail Marys, the watchwords.

Want to see if your analyst is awake? Say *penis*. Better yet, say something like *I remember my father giving me enemas*. No, no, even better—I want YOU to give me an enema. Nothing gives an analyst more titillation, more self-congratulatory warm squishies than when you verify that he is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, important and right. What counts in analysis is that you produce a story the analyst regards as your truth. Such a story invariably gives him a starring role. Acknowledge that, play it out, and then you're cured.

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It is, of course, all a bunch of shit.

So, packages. Well, we're all packages: a framework of bones, over which a tent of skin has been stretched, the relevant orifices produced, the tubes and twists we call guts starting at the pucker of the mouth and folding, end upon end, until they terminate in that other little pucker immortalized in *Breakfast of Champions*. Other organs, other systems, more or less in harmony, each with complementary halves, like dipoles maintaining a curiously balanced tension.

Nothing new or novel in that, you say. For Christ's sake, if she hasn't got anything else more illuminating than that, what say we switch the channel?

But wait. The point is that what you see is not what you get. Keep in mind that we're talking probabilities here. What you see is a nicely done-up package, all sugar and spice, or snails and puppy dogs' tails (how phallic, wouldn't you agree?). But it's the inside that counts, how it's all connected. Ideas. Superpositions. Complexity at the margins of chaos. So, am I merely an idea, the summation of how and when and if I'm observed?

Well, we could debate that. The phenomenologists, the philosophers, the postmoderns would have a field day. I mean, some of them write whole books on the subject. Merleau-Ponty, Baudrillard, Jameson . . . the list goes on. Words, words, words, all amounting to their own little universal truths, which dutiful graduate students must master if they're to get on in the profession, the world of academe being much like the world of the psychoanalyst or, for that matter, the priesthood.

But we all hunger after substance, not words; it's the feel of the book we remember, the touch of a lover's tongue, not words. Of words we retain only a general impression, which fades as time passes, until all that's left is a recollection of rumpled sheets, or the color of the book jacket, and one's own marginalia, scribbled in No. 2 graphite. What matters is what can be taken between one's fingers or experienced through the senses and registered as real.

Here's an example for you. Water is made of hydrogen and oxygen, but can you tell me why it's wet? What *is* wet? All this talk about constructed selves and atomized selves and eruptive selves and deconstructed selves . . . believe me, I've heard it all. What you learn about academics is that what passes for knowledge depends upon how abstruse it all sounds. The automatic assumption—if it's obscure, it must be important. If your brain aches, so much the better. No pain, no gain. Academe is nothing but turgid passwords, banded about from one academic to the next, each operating under the self-satisfying delusion that university-speak elevates them above the common rabble they're analyzing. From first-hand experience, I can tell you that there's nothing so smug as a coven of academics sitting out reality while the rest of us duke it out in the muck of life.

Anyway, back to that bright idea of dissecting myself, properly, anatomy text at my left elbow, scalpel grasped like a conductor's baton between the fingers of my right hand.

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I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *oh-ho, one of those. A suicide.*

Wrong-o. A suicide has no finesse. A suicide's all cut and slash, blood spurting, slow death by degrees in a warm bath, like Marat/Sade, or Seneca in that Monteverdi opera. Now I know that Seneca committed suicide, forced into it by Nero, but I'm not at all sure that he did it so pristinely in a bath. But if I recall my Roman history rightly, suicides tended to fall on their swords, or got their slaves to ram daggers into their throats. That's the way Nero bought it, that coward. Tacitus will tell you. Tacitus was a vindictive sort, sure to point out when a certain so-and-so had wounds in his back: Roman code for the guy was yellow. Back then, suicide was about honor.

Modern-day suicide has a certain crudity. Suicide is designed to be that one indelible image seared into the retinae of the ones who find you: the husband, the wife, the mother, the son. A nice *Take that, and won't you be sorry when I'm dead, ha-ha?* A suicide is all black, black rage.

A dissection is something very different. The specimen is treated with respect, and so there was nothing of self-loathing in my decision: more a sort of curiosity, a wish to see just how I'd been made. I'd exhausted other avenues, having at the end of my seemingly interminable analysis no more idea of how I'd come into being as the person I was and am than a mushroom. So I got a basin, the scalpel, the blunt tweezers (the better to blunt dissect and not harm the muscles), the gauze, the gloves, the steri-strips and ace wrap (the better to put myself together for the trip to the emergency room), and the anatomy text. Carmine D. Clemente, *Anatomy: A Regional Atlas of the Human Body*—leather-bound, forest green with gold letters.

I locked myself in the bathroom. Silly, I'll admit: I was pre-Francis, so there wasn't the remotest chance anyone would burst in and stop me. But there was something almost sacred about it all, like a sacrifice, and it seemed tawdry to do it in the kitchen, over a sink filled with yesterday's scummy pots. So I had made myself comfortable, with a sturdy chair, a pillow behind my back, a wad of towels to catch the drippings.

I remember staring at my left wrist a long time, noting the thin tracery of blue veins that emerged more starkly the longer I gazed. I had already studied the anatomy in some detail, and so knew that the radial artery, the one on the left, was the more difficult of the two to get at. I also knew that the ulnar artery was much closer to the surface, with the ulnar nerve nestled right alongside, directly beneath a thick fibrous membrane called the flexor retinaculum. The membrane was supposed to be tough, but even so I was careful. As I said, I didn't want to die. I just wanted to flay myself open and lift the lid, take a peek, poke around, observe that moment of reality, probe my corporeality.

Two things surprised me. The first was that cutting through skin takes work. It doesn't just happen no matter how sharp the scalpel. I had decided to lay open the tendons first, and so had my sights on the synovial sheath of the flexor carpi radialis, the big bulge the left of center. So I laid the scalpel over the skin and tried making a longitudinal incision,

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starting at the bend of the wrist and working straight down.

Note for would-be suicides: Be firm about it. None of this scratching shit; you'll be there all day. And listen, if you want to do it right, make your cuts lengthwise, not across. Go one better: the radial artery is most superficial on the back of your hand, in that little hollow you can make by crooking out your thumb at a right angle to your fingers. The anatomical snuffbox, they call it—a handy little place where, in years gone by, men held their snuff and pinched.

Secondly, all that blood you see, regardless of where you cut, that's all from superficial arteries and veins, unless you nail the ulnar artery doing it straight across, the old fashioned way. So you'll bleed like stink, but you're not going to die that way.

Another tip: the way they do it in the movies, having the would-be throw her hand back? Horse crap. That protects the arteries. They disappear behind tendons and bulging muscles. To avoid this problem, pull your palm toward you, as if you were imitating a rapist going for your breast.

Fourth tip, and absolutely the last, I swear: Cutting straight across is for wimps. Easy to join up again, like a plumber puts in joints to shore up a fractured pipe. Cut lengthwise, and you're likely to slash the sucker to ribbons. If you want to do it right, I mean.

I got through on the fifth try. Red blood welled up. I dabbed with gauze. I used the tweezers to tease the skin open.

As we used to say then, far out. I felt absolutely no pain. I was prepared for pain, expected pain, and yet there was virtually none. It was as if I had risen above to view myself from an observation lounge, the type they have in surgical suites. I saw a right hand with a scalpel, slicing; I saw white synovial sheaths, I saw red meat and yellow fat give way beneath the blade and shiny tendons revealed by the tweezers. I saw blood. And it was happening to me, and it wasn't me at the same time. That old dissociation again. Some trick, huh? Get battered around enough, and you'll get it, no time flat.

The artery surprised me. I found the radial artery right where it was supposed to be: beneath the tendons of the abductor pollicis longus and the extensors pollicis longus and brevis. I remember staring at it, stupefied. The artery was a dull white burnished with pale pink nerves webbing over the course of it. And it really did pulse, a fraction of a second behind my heartbeats, which had grown extraordinarily loud in my ears. The artery pulsed like a faint afterthought. So the hidden throb of my heart which, as I shifted my gaze from wrist to left breast (for I was quite naked), caused my breast to lift and fall, was mirrored, a split second later, in the beat of that tiny tube. Perversely, my nipples hardened beneath my ravenous gaze, as if caressed, bitten, scoured by hungry lips. My thighs ached, my hidden lips moistened, became engorged, throbbed for fulfillment. I trembled.

It was one of the most potent, erotic moments I have ever known. Sensation generated by thought, sensation made manifest in that bit of plumbing. The body as architectural triumph, as ego-eroticism, as hallucination, as subject to an iron will.

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Now and again Francis will touch the scars. He never asks, but I can feel the questions through his fingertips. That is, I have the impression of feeling; I inadvertently trashed a few nerves. Nothing major, but over the size of a half dollar from wrist to mid-thumb there isn't sensation so much as the ghost of remembrance. That is, I know how skin ought to feel when touched and so when I see his touch, I manufacture the illusion of sensation. (That old sight as truth thing again: I've been playing the quantum cat for decades.)

Now the analyst who constructed his version of my reality was a very wise man. At least, I think he was wise. Analysts cultivate an air of world-weariness, of portentous ponderousness. That particular analyst smelled like Altoids, and the backs of his hands had liver blotches. The skin was thin, like expensive parchment. And he was old, *really* old: pushing ninety, I think. He died two months after completing my analysis, perhaps from the exhaustion or out of sheer relief. *Thank God, she's gone; you can beam me up now.*

So maybe he was right, and I dissociated. But if it's true that, at the brink, we can step away from ourselves, dis-inhabit our flesh and our minds, and obliterate terror, does that mean we can be and not be at the same moment? And does that mean that, dead or alive, we're all just a bunch of mewling quantum cats? While we're waiting for someone to see us, does time always stand still? Are there always those moments we pivot about in an eternal orbit, like trapped moons, waiting for the hammer to fall, the pistol to go off, the booze to finally drain away, the pills I've been swallowing as I write this, one by one, to dissolve?

Like Francis? Like stolid, dependable, stoic Francis? Francis who is still out there, on the other side, waiting, anchored in an endless ellipse between his soul and mine?

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *oh, an anguished, unfulfilled artist, she's playing at Vincent Van Gogh.*

Get real. (Oh, God, look who's talking.)

I understand that my behavior, my *depressions* might appear that way, as if I've turned totally inward, self-absorbed, oblivious to everything. What total shit. I've never felt things more keenly than now, and this pain that convinces me I'm still alive and makes me want to die at the selfsame moment is an anchor. Better yet, pain is a belay to a sheet of icy mountain, something so tangible that I'll bet you I can clamber up this solid rope of agony faster than angels ascended Jacob's ladder.

And, God, what an awful word. *Depression*. I'm in a *depression*, they'd say. What do they know? It's like saying life is all hills and valleys, and I've taken a wrong turn and gotten lost in some canyon somewhere—a deep, dark gash in the earth, with high walls of sheer granite. And there's that rope of pain, daring me to grab it because, you see, it's a rope of memories, and each strand, every inch means continual confrontation. So when I do “climb out,” as the pharmaceutical companies say—the doctors say, your friends say, they all say—my hands will be scarred and rubbed raw from hauling myself up on all that pain, all those memories.

And you'll notice that the goal isn't to climb the highest mountain. No,

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no euphoria, no feelings of grand achievement, no wind in my hair, song on my lips, no images of Julie Andrews cavorting around the Alps. (That was pretty pathological, you know. By rights, they ought to have nabbed her, put her back in the convent, yanked out her ovaries, forced her to her knees, and gotten her to say a few dozen Hail Marys. Or better yet, scrub the kitchen floor, eat dry bread, and wait for all that wild abandon to go away.)

No, what you've got to settle for, what passes for mental health is that thin little strip of even terrain in between mountains and valleys. Not too bumpy, not too curving. Just right. Euthymia, they call it. *Eu*, from the Greek for good or well, but also implicated in *Eucharist*, that sacrificial meal of Holy Communion. There's religion again. More blood, more flesh, you see, except *eucharistiã* means gratitude, thankfulness. Thank you for your blood, O Lord, thank you for letting us chow down on your flesh, like famished cannibals.

I wish I could pray.

Eu-thymia. *Thymos*, meaning mind, spirit, soul. Hence, *euthymia*: good soul, grateful mind. Only gratitude has nothing to do with it, and it's not a question of goodness. What you're aiming for is evenness, the open plains, the unbroken prairie of life.

That's so dumb. Since when did any road, anywhere, not have potholes?

But I was talking about memory, wasn't I?

Maybe. I'm getting a little fuzzy. I'll bet if I looked in the mirror, I'd be unfocused, blurry around the edges, a penumbra. Maybe, in the measuring of myself, I wouldn't even be there. Oh, God, remind me to tell you about Heisenberg before we're all through.

Memory . . . well, all right, might as well, now that I'm here. The most vividly pleasurable memory I have is of Francis: the evening he asked me to marry him, to be precise. I knew something was up. We were living together at the time, and I had this habit of checking his bank balance, and there, scrawled in a cramped handwriting approaching hieroglyphics, was something which had cost him a cool thousand. A ring, I thought, though I didn't dare hope. A ring. I'd be legit. My parents had been haranguing me for what felt like a decade about our sinful relationship, though we'd been living together a bare two years. Like the color comics, I could count on my mother's phoning every Sunday, and upon her avid receptivity should I choose to say anything the slightest bit critical of Francis. *Him*, my mother called Francis. Never *your boyfriend* or even *Francis*. And you'd never catch her even thinking the word *lover*. My God, for three years, she thought I slept on the couch.

Oh, he agreed to put you up on his couch for the weekend. How sweet. Oh, you bought groceries with him and had supper. How nice. Oh, you and he are moving to where? Well, isn't that nice of him, isn't that sweet, isn't that charming? And tell me, dear, where will you sleep?

I always wanted to scream, where do you think, you old bat? But I heard myself mouthing her words right back. Yes, mother. How charming, how sweet, how nice. How *him*. (My best lessons on how to be a quantum cat

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came from my mother. If you refuse to see, whatever you're not seeing doesn't exist.)

We set off for Montreal, Francis and I. Before we'd gone, I had searched the apartment inside and out, looking for anything remotely diamond-like which might have set Francis back a thousand dollars, but no luck. We stopped in Vermont and Maine, climbed mountains. I do remember that the view from Stratton was spectacular, and I remember, too, that I expected this to be the very best spot for any man worth anything to propose to a woman worth everything. The setting was ideal, cinematic in the extreme, certainly up Francis's alley. So I waited. I took my time cutting up cheese and handing him crackers. I looked away coyly, allowed him time to dig furtively into his knapsack. An actor couldn't have had more cues.

Nothing happened. We ate our cheese, our crackers, our apples, our M&Ms, and drank a bottle of white wine. I think it was a chardonnay. Australian, as I recall. My hopes sank as did the wine in the bottle. The wine made me fuzzy; the chocolate made my tongue stick to the top of my mouth; and it seemed a long way down to the car.

Of all things, Francis popped the question at a bar, in Montreal. We'd had dinner, and Francis had ordered champagne. Aaahh, I thought, champagne. The drink of special occasions. The fizzy of champions. And Francis had insisted that we go to a fine French restaurant, only we were on a tight budget then and had to settle for the cheapest of everything. Even so the waiter hovered, like an anxious bee. The poor man darted here and there, pouring cheap champagne so astringent it tasted like nail polish remover, while keeping up a running commentary, in a heavy French accent, on *ze ladee's buuuteee*, on *how luckee eh mehn* Francis was, and on and on. The restaurant was hot, and the champagne gave me a headache. Cheap champagne will do that, you know; they infuse it with carbon dioxide to get the fizz.

Anyway, muzzy-mouthed, with a timpani playing against my temples, I staggered out of the restaurant and down the boulevard alongside Francis to, of all places, a bar. But they don't call them bars in Montreal; they call them taverns. I didn't want to go to a bar, much less a tavern. I wanted Tylenol, I wanted a shower, but Francis was insistent.

So we're in the tavern now, and it's hot as hell because there's this fireplace going full out, and Francis asks for the table at the hearth. I've ordered ice water, something that extracts a nasty look from the waiter who senses a bad tip coming. I've excused myself to go the ladies' room and wash my face and paw through my bag for aspirin, finding one intact and the other in crumbs, which I blot up with moistened fingertip and suck off, all the while trying to figure out what I'll say to my mother to whom I've stupidly, stupidly hinted what might happen. I come back, and there's Francis, perspiring: a picture of misery in a navy blue coat and white shirt, a paisley tie garroted about his neck.

He shoves a black felt box toward me. Open it, he says.

My heart leaps into my throat. The thousand clams. This could be it. I act all agog with surprise and reach for the box.

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You remember, Francis says as I'm fumbling, those garnet earrings you liked so much.

Earrings. I falter. He's bought me earrings. I can hear my mother already. *How nice, dear. How sweet. And how many years has it been with him?*

Weakly, bravely, forcing my lips into a smile while thinking about what I'll say to my mother next Sunday, I open the box, and there, nestled in the middle of black felt, is a single, glorious solitaire.

Will you marry me? Francis asks in the same instant.

All of a sudden, Francis's cinema is reality. A strange sense of vertigo overwhelms me, and we are transformed: Francis's Scotty to my Madeleine. The fire blazes with renewed vigor in the tavern's brick fireplace. The frame: a close-up of teacup, blanket, the accidental brush of fingers. Hitchcock couldn't have choreographed it better.

But that's not what I remember most. This is: After we made love in our hotel room and were lying naked next to one another atop the sheets, while Francis slept, I gazed at my ring, for hours. To me, it seemed the largest diamond I'd ever seen. In reality, it was microscopic, more like a diamond shard than a real gem. But for me, it was incandescent, glowing like a miniature comet blazing across a dark sky. Maybe something primordial, maybe something . . . radioactive.

Ah, I can see you nodding with satisfaction, there it is, the source of her decay.

Right on, bro. Go to the head of the class.

With marriage, I lost self-observation. Maybe I never really had it. But just as we ask what is the measure of a man, we acknowledge that we do, indeed, measure against some standard. And here's where Heisenberg comes in. Heisenberg said we could never be certain of our measurements: that the more accurately we know one aspect of some thing, the less accurately we know about another aspect. Example: I stopped being me as soon as I took Francis's name. Trite, a bit simplistic, but I sense that I'm running out of time here. I became known, very accurately, as Mrs. Fairbridge, and what I was before retreated, as a sea anemone senses danger and withdraws its tentacles. I became measured alongside that standard. Yes, yes, what you see is what you get, to a point. But the hell of a quantum cat's world is that the act of measuring a system—of observing a world, a cat, a woman—forces the system, the world, the cat, the woman into one reality versus another. The observer makes a choice of what and just how to measure, irrevocably altering the ability to measure anything else, and then what the observer chooses becomes what's real. My analyst saw me this way, my mother that, Francis still another, my lover a fourth way, the grocery clerk a fifth, and where, oh where, am I?

But quantum cats retain a modicum of free will. There are times when I've left this box, when I've crept out of here and made my way to the bed, is it mine? Ours? The bed is large, square, the goose down quilt silvered with moonlight. On our bed, at night, when it's still and white, I see, instead of a quilt, a tombstone marking that temporary abdication of consciousness, with Frances posed precisely down the middle, like those

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graying effigies in old English churches carved atop granite sarcophagi.

Sleep isn't oblivion, you know. It isn't peace; it's a box, and sleep is the closest we come to being and not being simultaneously. Sleep is a side-long habitation: a universe into which we slip our minds and our emotions, in and out, like legs into sheer silk stockings. And when we dream, our limbs twitch and jerk, as if we were just aching to jump out. Francis jerks quite a bit. I've never been able to sleep comfortably next to him all curled up in that spoon-like way in all those movies he adores. For one, his hair tickles, and he's much too hot. He's like an octopus, all arms and legs flung over mine, pinioning me in place, and his breath roars in my ears. The room reeks of his masculine odors, and I don't need to see him at all to find him. In the night, I'm like an ant or a butterfly, sensitive antennae all aquiver, or like a lizard, tasting the air with my tongue, seeking direction by senses other than sight. When he sleeps, his breathing is very slow and deep; his chest is a bellows fanning the tiny spark of his life. The quilt rises and falls. I stand over him, pitying his fragility. One day as I'm taking his measure, perhaps I will force the reality, and the bellows will simply cease, the flame will flicker and die, the quilt will fall never to rise again, and his last breath will be that sigh, that release of spirit everyone writes about. If you think I gloat over this power, you're mistaken. No, I've concluded that my nocturnal ramblings are a form of reassurance. I prove to myself the content of the form; I fill in the black outline; I perceive that something inhabits what I suspect is on the other side of the door. The quantum cat turns the tables.

And he's there now. I press my cheek against the dark wood of my box. The wood is surprisingly cool, not at all warm or yielding. You expect that, you know. You read about it in books, though not mine, because I'm judged too eccentric, too odd to warrant a hearing, my say, that proverbial go.

Something's happening to me. Ah, he's moving, he's going to observe. How to describe this . . . it's amazing in its physicality. But I can feel him reaching now, his hand on the knob, the moment of indecision, that flicker of hesitation, and I am screaming, silently, please, please, wait, what will happen if you look, what will happen . . .

He turns the knob and pushes in the door. The hinges squeal, and he makes a mental note: *WD-40*.

A gust of cold wind rushes against his face. He's turned the registers off in here long ago, ever since Joan had the temerity . . .

Well, no use thinking of that now. He sniffs and pulls a face. The room smells musty and disused, and there's a stale feel to the place, like that scene of Miss Haversham from *Great Expectations*. Brilliant film, one of Lean's best. His eyes wander the room, searching for clues as to what's disturbed him, what's niggled at the back of his brain, like an itch he can't quite scratch. A stack of books teeters precariously on the corner of the writing table, shrouded by a thick layer of dust. Her computer still hums away, and there's her journal, open to that last entry, the pen alongside.

He's kept it that way; he's kept everything the same. And he can never

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quite get himself to close the book. It seems somehow wrong, like an artificial ending to something unfinished, or as if by closing the cover, he shuts a lid somewhere, and then the reality of all that past is lost.

"Coming?"

Francis starts. It's his wife, at his elbow. He'd quite forgotten. They were on their way to a party. New department chairman, usual rot. Bloody bore.

He smiles, a little quizzically. "Of course, darling. It's just that . . ."

"Yes? What? Something's troubling you. Ah, my poor dear, is it Joan again? I do wish . . ."

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

"You had no control, you know. Her leaving . . ."

"Yes."

"So selfish, so precipitous."

"Perhaps."

"To inflict . . ."

"Not her fault."

"Ah, my sweet Francis, you are so forgiving, you know, had it occurred to you that there were *choices* . . ."

"Of course."

"No, you're thinking that perhaps *you* might have . . ."

"I can never lie to you, can I?"

"No, you can't." She stands on tiptoe and brushes her lips against his right cheek. "I know everything you're thinking, everything. We see things exactly alike. The world is how we make it."

He smiles. So intuitive, so very much with him, knowing his thoughts, sensing his moods, so *one* with him. And so different from Joan: Joan he could never know, never grab hold. Joan was so mercurial, all sharp angles and odd corners, a chameleon shifting before his eyes. He never knew her, and now, well, all he has are her words, those volumes and volumes of thoughts he can't understand anyway.

"Yes, you're right. And no, I'm fine, it's nothing," he says, as he pulls the heavy wooden door shut. "It's just I could have sworn that, for a split second, there was something here."

He's closed the door. He's seen nothing.

♦ ♦ ♦
The End
Liar.

HP