

Reflux

Everything changed with that one ragged breath.

It first happened in a hotel room in Niagara Falls. I was thirteen years old and at the stage in life when a veritable natural wonder of the world seemed like nothing much. Earlier that day, on one of those ridiculous boat rides that take you straight into the falls and also your impending death, I had stared up into the heart of the thing. I let the devastating magnitude of the beast overwhelm my senses – the crashing of water on rock filling my ears, the angry spray of mist pelting my skin, the scent and strange feeling of freshwater spattering all around me. I observed all of these things, I recognized that they existed, and I immediately turned my attention to a cute boy on the other side of the boat.

My parents have always been fond of long road trips to various destinations across North America. By my thirteenth year, we'd driven to Florida, Texas, Colorado, Maine, Tennessee – thousands of roads and trees flashing by, an endless moving sky that I loved to stare at for hours in the backseat of our car. I would stare out of the window, my mother would read a doctor's memoir or a copy of *Pediatric Annals*, and my father would drive, drive, drive, only stopping to relieve his bladder, refill the gas tank, or pick up a Big Mac. He especially loved to drive at night. He never slept anyway, so why not take us somewhere instead of spending the night staring up at the bedroom ceiling? We would leave our house at absurd times - three or four in the morning – to avoid traffic later in the day, he told us – but really he just wanted to be able to drive and look at the stars all at the same time.

It was one of these marathon drives that had started at three in the morning and gotten us to Niagara by noon. After the boat ride and a brief walk around the touristy, Canadian side of the

town, we were all exhausted. We wolfed down some sandwiches and chips and headed straight to bed.

We'd just turned out the lights when my father began to choke.

It's a horrible noise. I screamed that night, the first time I ever heard it. It sounds like the rasp of a dying animal, but instead of being slow and drawn-out it was terrifyingly fast, as if he had been running for a long time and suddenly stopped. When either my mother or I – I don't remember who – turned the light back on out of sheer human instinct, my father was clutching his chest as if it had betrayed him. It *was* betraying him – rising and falling at an alarming rate, seizing of its own volition. I looked at his convulsing body in horror and thought very clearly to myself, for the very first time, *my dad is going to die*.

Obviously I knew my parents were going to die eventually, in the practical sense that I knew everyone was going to die eventually. But I had never really *believed* that they would die. I'd never imagined a world without them, a world where my mother didn't make my favorite meal (spaghetti with the sauce on the side) at least twice a month, or where my father didn't repeatedly try and fail to get me to be interested in how electronics worked. That night I came to the startling realization that I could lose those precious things anytime, that I could lose them *right this second*, in fact, because here was my father asphyxiating right in front of me and there was nothing I could do besides have an extremely selfish existential crisis.

My mother, of course, had no such concerns about her own existence. She went straight into doctor mode, pulling him to his feet, thumping him on the back, and forcing water down his throat. By the time I had recovered from the shock of my parents' newfound mortality, my father's shuddering gasps for air had subsided into mild wheezes. Acid reflux, my mother said calmly – but when I glanced up at her she looked almost as shaken as I felt. My father already

had a history of heartburn, and eating right before bed had triggered an intense attack. Within twenty minutes he was back to his usual crabby self, stubbornly insisting that he was fine and just wanted to go back to sleep.

Twenty minutes. That was how short a time it could take to lose my father.

We did go back to sleep then, but I didn't sleep, not really. I was terrified that if I closed my eyes, even for a second, he would have another attack, or otherwise my mother would suffocate in the middle of a snore. If I closed my eyes, even for a second, I could lose them.

The next day we woke up and went about our sightseeing as planned, crossing back over the border to walk around the Niagara Falls State Park. As we slowly meandered around the carefully manicured bushes, one of the information placards caught my eye. "Daredevils of Niagara Falls," it read. Following the flashy headline was a list of all of the people who had willingly threw themselves over the falls – a few in barrels, some on jetskis, one with nothing but the clothes on his back – and either lived to tell the tale, or died to have someone else tell it for them.

The first person to ever survive the drop was a woman, Annie Taylor, in 1901. When she emerged from her airtight barrel, she expected to be greeted with the flash of cameras and the sound of reporters begging for an exclusive. But Annie Taylor died in poverty some time later, after spending years trying to garner fame for her feat.

"What are you looking at?" asked my father, coming up behind me to peer at the information sign with interest.

I murmured something noncommittally and quickly turned away. None of us had brought up the night before.

Close your eyes now and imagine Annie Taylor crouched in her barrel with nothing but the rush of water all around her. What was she thinking of in that moment when the bottom dropped out and she was sent careening over the side of the falls? Was she thinking about the fame and fortune she so desperately hoped for, or was she thinking that any second, she could die?

People die all the time. It's easy to write or say think something like that without realizing that *people* could mean people you *know*. People could mean me. It could mean you. Death is an unwanted guest knocking on the door of your house, and sometimes you don't even realize that it's outside until you've already let it in.

When Annie Taylor's barrel began its drop, she heard the knock on her door, and it sounded like a waterfall. There comes a time when everyone realizes once and for all that death is not just something that happens to other people. For Annie Taylor and I, those moments are intertwined, both sharing a backdrop made of mighty power and noise. Even now I can hear the roar of the Niagara echoing in my eardrums, and the gasping cry of my father trying so desperately to breathe.