

On July 5, 1996, my daughter was struck mad. She was fifteen and her crack-up marked a turning point in both our lives. “I feel like I’m traveling and traveling with nowhere to go back to,” she said in a burst of lucidity while hurtling away toward some place I could not dream of or imagine. I wanted to grab her and bring her back, but there was no turning back. Suddenly every point of connection between us had vanished. It didn’t seem possible. She had learned to speak from me; she had heard her first stories from me. Indelible experiences, I thought. And yet from one day to the next we had become strangers.

My first impulse was to blame myself. Predictably, I tried to tally up the mistakes I had made, what I had failed to provide her, but they weren't enough to explain what had happened. Nothing was. Briefly, I placed my hope in the doctors, then realized that, beyond the relatively narrow clinical facts of her symptoms, they knew little more about her condition than I did. The underlying mechanisms of psychosis, I would discover, are as shrouded in mystery as they have ever been. And while this left little immediate hope for a cure, it pointed to broader secrets.

It's something of a sacrilege nowadays to speak of insanity as anything but the chemical brain disease that on one level it is. But there were moments with my daughter when I had the distressed sense of being in the presence of a rare force of nature, such as a great blizzard or flood: destructive, but in its way astounding too.

July 5th. I wake up
in our apartment on Bank Street, a top-floor tenement on one
of the more stately blocks in the West Village. The space next
to me in the bed is empty: Pat has gone out early, down to her
dance studio on Fulton Street, to balance the books, tie up
loose ends. We have been married for two years and our life
together is still emerging from under the weight of the sepa-
rate worlds each of us brought along.

What I brought, most palpably, was my teenage daughter
Sally, who, I'm a little surprised to discover, isn't home either.
It's eight o'clock and the day is already sticky and hot. Sun
bakes through the welted tar roof less than three feet above

her loft bed. The air conditioner blew our last spare fuse around midnight; Sally must have felt she had to bail out of here just to be able to breathe.

On the living room floor lie the remains of another one of her relentless nights: a cracked Walkman held together by masking tape; a half cup of cold coffee; and the clothbound volume of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, which she has been poring over for weeks with growing intensity. Flipping open the book at random I find a blinding crisscross of arrows, definitions, circled words. Sonnet 13 looks like a page from the Talmud, the margins crowded with so much commentary the original text is little more than a speck at the center.

Then there are the papers with Sally's own poems, composed of lines that come to her (so she informed me a few days ago) like birds flying in a window. I pick up one of these fallen birds:

*And when everything should be quiet
your fire fights to burn a river of sleep.
Why should the great breath of hell kiss
what you see, my love?*

Last night at around 2 A.M. she was perched on the corduroy couch writing in her notebook to the sound of Glenn Gould playing the Goldberg Variations in a continuous loop on her Walkman. I had come home late after celebrating the completion of yet another hack job in my capacity as a freelance writer: supplying the text for a two-hour video about the history of golf, a game I have never played.

"Aren't you tired?" I asked.

A vigorous shake of her head, a cease-and-desist hand gesture, while the other hand, the one with the pen in it, scuttled faster across the page. Stinging rudeness. But what I felt was a pang of nostalgia for that period in my own life when I did something similar with the poems of Hart Crane: looking up all those alien jazz-blown words, immersing myself in the sheer (and to me virtually meaningless) energy of his language. I hesitated in the living room doorway, watching her ignore me: her almond-shaped Galician eyes, her hair that doesn't grow from her head so much as shoot out of it in a wild amber burst, her hunger for language, for words.

These studious nights, I am convinced, are the release of frustrations that have been building in her since the day, almost nine years ago, when she entered first grade. It may be for the sake of symmetry that I think of that as the day Sally's childhood faded, like the frame in a silent movie where light shrinks to a pinprick at the center of the screen. But that was the way it seemed. She wasn't learning to read, but her difficulties went deeper. The alphabet was a cryptogram: *R* might as well have been a mouth of crooked teeth, *H* an upended chair. She had as much success reading *The Cat in the Hat* as she would a CAT scan. The trick of agreement, of shared meaning, upon which most human exchange is based was eluding her.

It pained me to see this submerged look come over her, as if she had lost her sense of joy. And yet the same words that her eyes could not decipher on the page, her tongue, freed from the fixed symbols of language, mastered with a deftness that allowed for puns, recitations, arguments, speeches, if she deigned to deliver them—all attesting to a bewilderingly sharp intelligence.

One day when I went to pick her up at school, the entrance was mobbed with reporters and news crews. A girl in Sally's class had been murdered by her father. With a jolt, the crime reawakened me to the fragility of my six-year-old daughter, the more so because the killer, Joel Steinberg, and I shared a rough physical resemblance. We were both Ashkenazi Jews—same coloring, same height, same glasses. Tribally, I felt implicated in this crime, guilty by affiliation. In the demonic way that once-unimaginable occurrences have of making their replication inevitable, I felt that Sally and I had been hurled into a new level of danger: in America, Tevye's great-grandchildren were murdering their daughters.

I pushed through the news crush and found her standing in the middle of the throng holding a classmate's hand. A reporter had thrust a microphone at the girls, fishing for reactions. Sally's eyes rolled up at him. Her coat was on backward, her shoelaces untied. Her barrette was dangling uselessly from her hair like an insect that got caught there. I gathered up the girls and shoved a path through the crowd.

It was around this time that Sally's mother and I split up. We had met in high school and our divorce was like the overly delayed separation of twins: necessary and wrenching. After the upheaval of those months, Sally and I drew closer. I became her advocate, tediously defending her to her teachers, to other parents, to members of our own family flummoxed by the chasm that existed between the way Sally and most everyone else saw the world. Isn't this chasm the very place where imagination thrives? I argued. Isn't it the expression of her access to that sublime region of the mind where none of us matches up ever?

“You’re as bright as the rest of them,” I assured her. “Your intelligence is native, it’s inside you, just get through these years, life will change, you’ll see.”

And it did change. We traipsed to learning lab, to affordable specialists at a community center in Chelsea. Admitted to Special Ed., she studied rudimentary word sounds and numbers with the tenacity of a scholar trying to learn a lost language. She seemed to be fighting for capacities inside herself that would die if she failed to crack this code. She succeeded and, seizing on the confidence this inspired, was returned to “the mainstream,” a success of the system. Here the going got rough again, but my promise that sooner or later her dormant talents would spring to life had become credible.

And now it was happening! Bach, Shakespeare, the bubbling hieroglyph of her journals . . . If she’s up all night it’s because she’s savoring every minute of victory after the trials of those years.

I leave the apartment and head downstairs, five flights through a series of paint-gobbed halls that haven’t been mopped since anyone in the building can remember. July 5th. Independence Day weekend. The Village feels like a hotel whose most demanding guests have departed. Those of us left behind know who we are: the sideman, the proofreader, the lady in the straw hat with plastic grapes dripping from it who saves neighborhood dogs . . . With their owners on vacation, the burnished townhouses look comatose. Bank Street has succumbed to a state of slow-motion splendor.

I walk toward the coffee shop on Greenwich Avenue where Sally likes to hang out in the morning, then almost collide with her as she rounds our corner. She seems flushed, annoyed, and when I routinely ask her what her plans are she turns on me with a strangely violent look that catches me off guard.

“If you knew what was going through my mind, you wouldn’t ask that question. But you don’t have a clue. You don’t know anything about me. Do you, Father?”

She rears back her sandaled foot and kicks a nearby garbage can with such force its metal lid clangs to the ground. A neighbor from across the street raises his eyebrows as if to say, What have we here? Sally doesn’t seem to notice him or care. There’s something oddly kinetic about her presence, though she’s standing still, staring at me, her fists clenched at her side. Her heart-shaped face is so vivid it alarms me. It occurs to me, not for the first time, that I’m out of my depth with a daughter. I grew up one of five brothers in a demi-monde of half-wild boys. My father spent most of his life dealing scrap metal from a warehouse near the waterfront in Brooklyn. In our home the feminine side of the world was almost nonexistent.

When she goes to kick the can again, I place a hand on her shoulder to stop her. Irritably she shakes me off.

“Do I frighten you, Father?”

“Why would you frighten me?”

“You look afraid.”

She bites her lip so hard the blood goes out of it. Her arms are trembling. Why is she acting this way? And why does she keep calling me Father in this pressured, phony voice, as if delivering stage lines she has learned?

Our neighbor Lou approaches with her even-tempered sheepdog. A welcome sight. Lou's fondness for Sally dates back almost ten years, when she noticed her instinctive feeling for the vulnerable beings of this world. The more helpless a person, the more Sally poured out her heart to him, sitting with stroke and Alzheimers victims outside the Village Nursing Home, delivering a slice of pizza to the drunk sprawled on Seventh Avenue. Her strongest empathies were reserved for babies. An infant to Sally was an object of reverence. It was as if she understood how easily their lives could be shattered, in some watery moment before memory perhaps, when, on a molecular level, the temperament that determines fate is formed. Given the chance, she would hold a newborn in her arms for hours. It was an affinity I sometimes worried about, as if what she really saw in those babies was the key to some fugitive force in herself that she needed to hold onto and repair.

Lou would have none of that. "You know what *naches* is? Well, you have it in that girl. She's a giver, Michael. In a world of grabbers and shitheads, she gives."

Which is why Lou's behavior now is so disturbing. She waves to us from down the street, draws within ten feet and pulls up short. Catching an eyeful of Sally, she thrusts out her hands as if to ward off some evil spirit, yanks the leash on her sheepdog, and hurries away.

Her retreat leaves me dumbstruck. Yet Sally seems unfazed. Her normally warm chestnut eyes are shell-like and dark, as if they've been brushed over with lacquer. From lack of sleep, I assume.

I ask her if she's okay.

“I’m fine.”

And I think: Lou must have thought we were having an argument and didn’t want to intrude.

“Are you sure? Because you seem pretty tense. You haven’t been sleeping, and I’ve hardly seen you eat all week.”

“I’m fine.”

“Maybe you should take it easy tonight, lay off the Shakespeare for a while.”

She presses her lips together in an explosive clench and gives a shuddering nod.