

No Cure

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IN THE PAST I often went to an electronics store not far from the church of Santa Rita, to look for cables to connect old and new devices. VHS VCRs to digital TVs, DVD players of one generation to computers of another. For those of us who can't stand the thought of throwing away anything that hasn't yet burst into flames or uttered its final gasps, the technological progress of recent years has been exhausting. Though generally bumbling, my father was an engineer and knew a thing or two; he had even been a radio operator in the army during the war. I instead would walk into the store and feel the clerks looking at me with contempt and/or sympathy. I engaged in lengthy conversations with those men in gray lab coats, whether they were annoyed or patient or distracted, and most of the time I had no idea what we were talking about. We were talking, I think, about communications between distant eras, different worlds—difficult if not impossible connections.

A few years ago, in a piece entitled "Premonition," I wrote a lapidary phrase, which to me is perhaps the mother of all lapidary phrases, mainly because it's false (actually any lapidary or simply assertive phrase has always seemed false to me, or in any case prone to correction): *I don't intend to tell my family history*. Since that day, telling my family's story has become my greatest desire. It seems even then it was one of my greatest desires, but I wasn't aware of it or I didn't want to admit it or I didn't want to accept it. From the moment I wrote its opposite, I could no longer deny it. To more closely approximate the truth, I should have written: "Telling the story of my family is too complicated, and I'm afraid I might not be up to it, so I'd rather pretend I don't want to do it, although it is clear to everyone, even to those who don't know me, that my family is the subject I've circled around since I started writing." The lapidary phrase was a prelude to another thought (just as lapidary): *I'll try to make it short (lots of people have had a difficult childhood, and almost all of these have had one more difficult than mine, and there is nothing more tedious than other people's difficult childhoods, nothing more intolerable than the bellyaching of others)*. I meant that my family's story wasn't worth telling (even though I'd done nothing but that since the beginning, albeit behind the mask of fiction) because it wasn't dramatic or adventurous enough.

It was a story about an Italian couple after the war, about their happiness (early life) and their unhappiness (later life). What was exceptional about that? Nothing. Except that their unhappiness began shortly after my birth and this made me very unhappy. It also filled me with rancor, but while I

sometimes allow myself to be unhappy, and more rarely allow myself to nurture a healthy, just rancor against those who have been unjust towards me, I almost never allow myself to nurture a healthy, unjust rancor towards those who, unintentionally, have hurt me, and so I find it extremely complicated to manage rancor in general, which for me almost always takes the form of *unhealthy rancor*, be it just or unjust, because I let it simmer in private and emerge in unpredictable ways.

Then in "Premonition" I finally got to the point: *My father suffered from depression for thirty years (I don't wish to tell the story of my father, since I have done nothing but since I started writing). The official family version, as far as I could understand, was that he had no "real" reason to be depressed. We used to make these distinctions in our family (I think), that what went on in the mind was not "true" but what went on in the brain was: yes, we were thoroughgoing scientists.*

I wrote *family*, but I meant *my mother*. I wrote *we used to* but I meant *she used to*. My mother's authority was such that we went along with her without breathing a word. And it's true that the physical causes of an illness are also *real*. But you have to understand that when we (my mother) spoke about the real reasons, we (she) meant *existential*: related to the family or to work. And how could we have admitted that he had existential reasons to be unhappy? Existential reasons would have involved us. Any existential reason would have been an accusation against us ("Their complaints are really 'plaints,'" Freud says of melancholics). Believing solely in chemistry relieved us of responsibility; the explanation fully convinced us. It inhibited the destruction of *our* serotonin and made us feel better. It was an excellent psychotropic drug, even though its beneficial effects did not last long. Because the sense of guilt, which strict scientism had escorted to the door, officiously reentered through the window and relegated us to magical thinking. If our father had been struck by that chemical misfortune, perhaps we had deserved it. We must have done something bad.

We were therefore quite selective in believing in causality. When it came to neurons and neurotransmitters and enzymes and proteins, all well and good. But human reasons for unhappiness made us very suspicious. That's why my father had no *real* reasons. No reason would have been serious enough, no reason would have justified it. And lapidarily I don't intend to speculate on which hidden reasons for unhappiness my father might have harbored. No causality and no chronology of events. Chronologies in particular are extremely misleading. I learned that at home. Be wary of the simple

sequence of events: the words flow along the lines of a page, one after the other, and by association to one another give rise to magic by contact or contagion. No story is neutral.

But finding some meaning in it is a powerful source of relief, so why should I stop? Over time, contrary to all my misgivings, I began to construct a chronology, pretending that it was also a causal chain. Looking back through my father's journals, I had discovered, or thought I had discovered, a temporal link between his depression and my childhood asthma. And these were the connector cables that I fabricated with the imagination and patience of an amateur.

February 1968, first prescriptions for psychotropic drugs.

March, admission to the first clinic.

April, his return home.

May, my first asthma attack.

December, death of his mother, my grandmother.

January 1969, I begin allergy treatment.

July, my second asthma attack (after which they won't take me to the country in spring and summer anymore).

September, his admission to the second clinic.

November, his return home.

I had heard that allergies can have psychosomatic origins. I would have liked to believe that I brought on my asthma attacks to call attention to myself, to compete with my father for my mother's attentions; but I was not entirely convinced. It struck me, however, that the two events were radically separated in my memory, as if they belonged to two distant eras, as if they belonged to the story of two strangers. Foolishly, in my mind, I was certain that I had been ill *many years after* my father, since his illness dated back to a kind of prehistory. And it occurred to me (I have to say this for the sake of completeness) that someone may have manipulated my memory (it was not the first time the thought popped into my head), that someone may have rewritten the past for me, being careful to keep my father's medical history quite distinct from mine. And that the perpetrator of the manipulation may have been my mother. And so, a few years ago in early spring, I began to come to terms with the ridiculous, unjust violence of *that* rancor.

THE SCENE takes place in the car: my mother and I are returning home, we are on the Tangenziale, the ring road. My father has been admitted to a hospital in Orbassano, where a friend works (that's the reason we brought him there). He broke his femur falling in the garden, so it must have been a day in July of 1995. I spent the night in a chair at his bedside; his leg was in traction, they had to operate, and they gave us permission to stay overnight because yesterday he was very agitated. But he slept peacefully that night and I too managed to doze off; at one point I even rested my head at the foot of the bed, on the side where his good leg was, and waking up soon afterwards, I saw my father smiling at me serenely, a gentle, caring smile, the kind that only his grandchildren could wrest out of him at this point. I asked him how he felt. He didn't answer. His eyes were

closed, he was not awake. I had dreamed up that smile. The day before, the day he was admitted, I heard him raving deliriously for the first time. Not that he is the most lucid man in the world, but he never talks nonsense, he shows no signs of dementia. Yesterday, however, he insisted that he wanted to *go back upstairs*, at home, and he didn't understand why we were keeping him there, in that room with strangers, he wanted his own bed. It happens to the elderly when they undergo a trauma and find themselves in the hospital, they get disoriented and start to rave. All it took was a tranquilizer, a restful night, and this morning he's back to being depressed as usual: cranky, irritating, self-centered. And we're less concerned, because familiar situations are by definition reassuring.

In the car with my mother, the atmosphere is strange, as always when my father has a *real* health problem. It's an atmosphere of relief—we're happy for him, as if he had attained recognition, as if this ungrateful world had finally rewarded him. As the relief grows, the threshold of reserve is lowered. I don't know why it occurs to me to ask, "Wasn't it in Orbassano that he was hospitalized when we were little?" I ask it casually; we don't talk about certain things between us, and then too the depression, by now, is the lesser evil. Yet I feel the need to adopt a distracted tone to pose the question to my mother, as if I didn't want to arouse her suspicions; I have to pretend that the issue is not taboo. She claims she doesn't remember, there were two hospitals, and she doesn't think they were in Orbassano. She's not too familiar with the towns outside the city, she's never learned their names. I tell her that I recall one afternoon when we had been to see him. "Did it upset you?" she asks in alarm. "No, why?" I remember taking a walk along the edge of a newly plowed field. And I remember that my father didn't look ill; he was absent. (I don't tell her that I have another memory, I don't know if it was earlier or later, and in that one my father was *very* ill, I've never talked about it with anyone, and I don't intend to do so now). "Your father's illness," she says after a pause, "was melancholy." She shakes her head, tightens her lips, sighing, as if to say: that's how it was. And since I can see she's having a hard time and I'm having a hard time myself, and we've been having a hard time for two days, I leave her in peace and change the subject.

In "Premonition," ten years later, I wrote that I was glad that on that occasion my mother had used the word *melancholy*—I found it more precise and evocative than *depression*. And in fact my mother was precise and knew how to use words well, and by denying once and for all that her lifelong companion had reasons to be depressed, and denying as well that he suffered from so-called *endogenous depression*, caused (according to the current theory) by a lack of neurotransmitters such as serotonin (a theory that is also controversial), by refusing to use the word *depression* itself, she was affirming that her lifelong companion had been *born with a melancholic temperament*, and therefore, according to the teaching of the ancient physicians, from Hippocrates to Galen, black bile pre-

veiled in him over the other humors (yellow bile, phlegm, and blood). And so he had to be that way; that's how he was.

Nearly ten more years had to go by for me to decide to inquire into where those legendary clinics were, how many times my father had been admitted there, and for how long. Nobody in the family remembered anything about it, but my father in his own way left clues. And in the journals I discovered that the first clinic had been in Viverone and the second in Piosasco (there was also a third clinic many years later, in Switzerland, but that one I remembered well). And when I went to look up where Piosasco was (I'm not too familiar with the towns outside the city), I realized that, on that afternoon in 1995, my mother and I were passing the point along the Tangenziale that, as the crow flies, is closest to Piosasco. But that had not been enough to refresh her memory (she'd been having a hard time).

In the Piosasco clinic, during that autumn of 1969, my father had worsened. Not only was he not improving, but he was getting worse. He did not want to leave there; he did not want to go home again. Piosasco was his magic mountain. My oldest sister recalls that my mother, after a month and a half, forced him to make them discharge him.

One day she took us to see him: me (seven years old) and my other sister (ten). We're walking beside a newly plowed field. It's the type of deep autumn plowing that scoops out and turns up huge clods, leaving them to slowly crumble along the furrows. They're called *slices* of earth and they look like near-perfect geometric solids; think of them as truncated rhombohedrons. The vertical side of the slice, cut by the colter or plow blade, gleams in the sunlight, shiny and polished like a marble surface, and the first thing I remember is this splendor of moist, mineral-rich earth, which I apparently notice for the first time in my life (and which I would like to ask someone to explain to me, if anyone were paying any attention to me—what happened to that field? why is the earth turned over that way? was it a giant mole, a bombing?). The second thing I remember is my father's apathy, the dullness of his features. I see him in three-quarters view, from behind, his head bowed forward, and as we walk I'm never able to catch up to him and pass him, I can never see his face. I trudge along the narrow track bordering the freshly plowed field, not knowing that it's a deep plowing. In a desperate attempt to get his attention, I tell him that Juventus won. He isn't aware that I have spoken to him. He answers my mother in monosyllables, but I can't hear what they're saying. He looks like a ghost, he looks like a sleepwalker, he is no longer of this world. Later he takes us to see his room. It contains a wardrobe, a bed, a nightstand. His empty suitcase on top of the wardrobe. The general impression is that he's not ill at all. I thought he was being treated, I thought he'd be in bed in his pajamas, and instead we find him up and about, fully dressed (even if he's not wearing a tie). There are no doctors, there are no medicines, it's not a hospital, it seems more like a hotel. I'm left

with a thought, which is not a precise memory, but a feeling: he doesn't care anything about us anymore. He wants to stay in that place for mysterious reasons, against my mother's wishes, even though our house is much nicer. And that's all there is to it.

In the journal: "November 11—3 P.M. Discharged from clinic—no cure." Like a sentence, a final verdict; he accepted it for the rest of his life.

Nevertheless he went back to work. For a couple of months, in the journals, the writing shrank until it became an almost illegible scribble.

At a certain point, a few months after learning the dates and location that were the setting for my memories, I became fearful that they might be superimpositions, inventions. Then I found out that, in the autumn of 1969, between September 29 and November 11, Juventus had played five games, tying one, losing three and, after changing coaches, winning one. The only victory was that of October 26, 2-1 at Inter, goals by Anastasi, Boninsegna, and own goal by Bedin. But we couldn't have gone to see him on the 26th, because I wouldn't have known the result. It must have been Saturday, November 1, All Saints Day, or Sunday, November 2, All Souls Day (the championship match skipped a Sunday). I thought they probably didn't listen to the radio in there, I wanted to give him some good news. And it was understandable, because in that pathetic season a win was an exception for Juventus. I wanted to give him some good news, but I chose the wrong topic; he didn't care much about football. Poor dumb kid, I should have thought of a better idea to get his attention. Maybe I had even prepared it, set the news aside waiting to bring it up.

Nevertheless the memory was real. I had truly been there, I'd been with them, I hadn't made it up. And knowing for sure that I hadn't made it all up, for me who had always been inclined to make up stories, was an enormous consolation for some reason. My mother had brought us with her that time, after a month of visiting him by herself, to convince him to come home. Probably, by arrangement with the neurologist, to give him a jolt (a terrible image that was used in our house). She had brought us to see him so that he would remember that he had a family and responsibilities; we were an admonition or *memento*. My mother had given in and temporarily lifted her policy of concealment and camouflage, the program of hush-up and manipulation, repression and denial. Desperate times call for desperate measures. She had drawn us into it—how angry, how reproachful she must have been (neither anger nor reproach the least bit visible) when she showed up before him with the children: *You see them? Do you see them? See how little they are, how much they need you?* And he, who would gladly have remained in that place for the rest of his days, feeling sorry for himself away from prying eyes, after a week had asked to go home. We'd been the last resort, and as a last resort we worked. No cure, however. □

(Translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel)