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SPECIAL TOPICS IN
CALAMITY PHYSICS

a novel...



MARISHA PESSL



CALAMITY

Physics



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Marisha Pessl



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

Dad always said a person must have a magnificent reason for writing out his or her Life Story and expecting anyone to read it.

“Unless your name is something along the lines of Mozart, Matisse, Churchill, Che Guevara or Bond—*James* Bond—you best spend your free time finger painting or playing shuffleboard, for no one, with the exception of your flabby-armed mother with stiff hair and a mashed-potato way of looking at you, will want to hear the particulars of your pitiable existence, which doubtlessly will end as it began—with a wheeze.”

Given such rigid parameters, I always assumed I wouldn't have *my* Magnificent Reason until I was at least seventy, with liver spots, rheumatism, wit as quick as a carving knife, a squat stucco house in Avignon (where I could be found eating 365 different cheeses), a lover twenty years my junior who worked in the fields (I don't know what kind of fields—any kind that were gold and frothy) and, with any luck, a small triumph of science or

philosophy to my name. And yet the decision—no, the grave necessity—to take pen to paper and write about my childhood—most critically, the year it unstitched like a snagged sweater—came much sooner than I ever imagined.

It began with simple sleeplessness. It had been almost a year since I'd found Hannah dead, and I thought I'd managed to erase all traces of that night within myself, much in the way Henry Higgins with his relentless elocution exercises had scrubbed away Eliza's Cockney accent.

I was wrong.

By the end of January, I again found myself awake in the dead of night, the hall hushed, dark, spiky shadows crouching in the edges of the ceiling. I had nothing and no one to my name but a few fat, smug textbooks like *Introduction to Astrophysics* and sad, silent James Dean gazing down at me where he was trapped in black and white and taped to the back of our door. I'd stare back at him through the smudged darkness, and see, in microscopic detail, Hannah Schneider.

She hung three feet above the ground by an orange electrical extension cord. Her tongue—bloated, the cherry pink of a kitchen sponge—slumped from her mouth. Her eyes looked like acorns, or dull pennies, or two black buttons off an overcoat kids might stick into the face of a snowman, and they saw nothing. Or else that was the problem, they'd seen *everything*; J. B. Tower wrote that the moment before death is "seeing everything that has ever existed all at once" (though I wondered how he knew this, as he was in the prime of life when he wrote *Mortality*). And her shoelaces—an entire treatise could be written on those shoelaces—they were crimson, symmetrical, tied in perfect double knots.

Still, being an inveterate optimist ("Van Meers are natural idealists and affirmative freethinkers," noted Dad), I hoped lurid wakefulness might be a phase I'd quickly grow out of, a fad of some kind, like poodle skirts or having a pet rock, but then, one night early in February as I read *The Aeneid*, my roommate, Soo-Jin, mentioned without looking up from her *Organic Chemistry* textbook that some of the freshmen on our hall were planning to crash an off-campus party at some doctor of philosophy's but I wasn't invited because I was considered more than a little "bleak" in demeanor: "Especially in the morning when you're on your way to Intro to '60s Counterculture and the New Left. You look so, like, *afflicted*."

This, of course, was only Soo-Jin talking (Soo-Jin whose face employed the same countenance for both Anger and Elation). I did my best to wave away this remark, as if it were nothing more than an unpleasant odor coming off a beaker or test tube, but then I *did* start to notice all kinds of unquestionably bleak things. For example, when Bethany brought people into her room for a Friday night Audrey Hepburn marathon, I was distinctly aware, at the end of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, unlike the other girls sitting on pillows chain-smoking with tears in their eyes, I actually found myself hoping Holly *didn't* find Cat. No, if I was completely honest with myself, I realized I wanted Cat to stay lost and abandoned, mewling and shivering all by its Cat self in those splintery crates in that awful Tin Pan Alleyway, which from the rate of that Hollywood downpour would be submerged under the Pacific Ocean in less than an hour. (This I disguised, of course, smiling gaily when George Peppard feverishly grasped Audrey feverishly grasping Cat who no longer looked like a cat but a drowned squirrel. I believe I even uttered one of

those girly, high-pitched “Ewws,” in perfect harmony with Bethany’s sighs.)

And that wasn’t the end of it. A couple of days later, I was in American Biography, led by our Teaching Assistant, Glenn Oakley, with his cornbread complexion and habit of swallowing right in the middle of a word. He was discussing Gertrude Stein’s deathbed.

“So what is the answer, Gertrude?” Glenn quoted in his pretentious whisper, his left hand up as if holding an invisible parasol, pinky outstretched. (He resembled Alice B. Toklas with that specter-mustache.) “Well, Alice, what is the quest-gurgh-tion?”

I stifled a yawn, happened to glance down at my notebook and saw, in horror, I’d absentmindedly been scribbling in strange loopy cursive a very disturbing word: good-bye. On its own it was breathy and harmless, sure, but I’d happened to scrawl it like some heartbroken lunatic at least forty times down the entire margin of the page—a little bit on the *preceding* page too.

“Can anyone tell me what Ger-gulp-trude meant by such a statement? Blue? No? Could you stay with us please? What about you, Shilla?”

“It’s *obvious*. She was talking about the insufferable vacuity of subsistence.”

“Very good.”

It appeared, in spite of my concerted efforts to the contrary (I wore fuzzy sweaters in yellow and pink, fixed my hair into what I considered a very upbeat ponytail), I had started to twist into that very something I’d been afraid of, ever since all of it had happened. I was becoming Wooden and Warped (mere rest stops on the highway to Hopping Mad), the kind of person who, in middle age, winced at children, or deliberately raced into a dense

flock of pigeons minding their own business as they pecked at crumbs. Certainly, I'd always felt chills tiptoeing down my spine when I came across an eerily resonant newspaper headline or advertisement: "Steel Magnate Sudden Death at 50, Cardiac Arrest," "CAMPING EQUIPMENT LIQUIDATION SALE." But I always told myself that everyone—at least everyone fascinating—had a few scars. And scars didn't necessarily mean one couldn't be, say, more Katharine Hepburn than Captain Queeg when it came to overall outlook and demeanor, a little more Sandra Dee than Scrooge.

My gradual descent into grimdom might have continued unabated had it not been for a certain startling phone call one cold March afternoon. It was almost a year to the day after Hannah died.

"You," said Soo-Jin, barely turning from Diagram 2114.74 "Amino Acids and Peptides" to hand me the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's me. Your past."

I couldn't breathe. It was unmistakable—her low voice of sex and highways, equal parts Marilyn and Charles Kuralt, but it had changed. If once it had been sugared and crackly, now it was porridged, grueled.

"Don't worry," Jade said. "I'm not catching up with you." She laughed, a short *Ha* laugh, like a foot kicking a rock. "I no longer smoke," she announced, obviously quite proud of herself, and then she went on to explain that after St. Gallway she hadn't made it to college. Instead, due to her "troubles" she'd voluntarily admitted herself to a "Narnia kind of place" where people talked about their feelings and learned to watercolor fruit. Jade hinted excitedly that a "really huge rock star" had been in residence on *her* floor, the comparatively well-adjusted

third floor (“not as suicidal as the fourth or as manic as the second”) and they’d become “close,” but to reveal his name would be to forsake everything she’d learned during her ten-month “growth period” at Heathridge Park. (Jade now, I realized, saw herself as some sort of herbaceous vine or creeper.) One of the parameters of her “graduation,” she explained (she used this word, probably because it was preferable to “release”) was that she tie up Loose Ends.

I was a Loose End.

“So how are you?” she asked. “How’s life? Your dad?”

“He’s fantastic.”

“And Harvard?”

“Fine.”

“Well, that brings me to the purpose of the call, an apology, which I will not dodge or do unconvincingly,” she said officially, which made me sort of sad, because it sounded nothing at all like the Real Jade. The Jade I knew, as a rule, *always* dodged apology and, if forced, did it unconvincingly, but this was the Jade Vine (*Strongylodon macrobotrys*), a member of the *Leguminosae* family, distantly related to the humble garden pea.

“I’m sorry for the way I behaved. I know what happened had nothing to do with you. She just lost it, you know. People do that all the time and they always have their own reasons. Please accept my request for forgiveness.”

I thought about interrupting her with my little cliff-hanger, my about-face, my kick in the teeth, my *fine print*: “Actually, to be technical about the whole thing, uh . . .” But I couldn’t do it. Not only did I not have the courage, I didn’t see the point of telling her the truth—not now. Jade was blooming, after all, receiving ideal amounts of sun ex-

posure and water, displaying promising signs of reaching her maximum height of seventy feet, and would eventually expand via seeds, stem-cutting in the summer, layering in the spring, to overtake the entire side of a stone wall. My words would have the effect of a hundred-day drought.

The rest of the call was a fervid exchange of “so give me your e-mail,” and “let’s plan big reunions”—paper-doll pleasantness that did little to cover the fact we’d never see each other again and would rarely speak. I was aware as ever that she, and maybe the others too, would occasionally float over to me like pollen off a withered dandelion with news of sugarplum marriages, gooey divorces, moves to Florida, a new job in real estate, but there was nothing keeping them and they’d drift away as simply and randomly as they’d come.

Later that day, as Fate would have it, I had my “Greek and Roman Epic” lecture with Professor of the Humanities, Emeritus, Zolo Kydd. Students called Zolo “Rolo,” because, if only in stature and complexion, he happened to resemble that particular chewable chocolate caramel candy. He was short, tan and round, wore bright plaid Christmas pants regardless of the time of year, and his thick, yellow-white hair encrusted his shiny freckled forehead as if, ages ago, Hidden Valley Ranch salad dressing had been dribbled all over him. Customarily, by the end of Zolo’s lectures on “Gods and Godlessness” or “The Beginning and the End,” most students had nodded off; unlike Dad, Zolo had an anesthetizing delivery style, which had to do with his run-on sentences and tendency to repeat a certain word, usually a preposition or adjective, in a way that brought to mind a small green frog bouncing across lily pads.

And yet, on this particular afternoon, my heart was in my throat. I hung on his every word.

"Came across a-a-a funny little editorial the other day about Homer," Zolo was saying, frowning down at the lectern and sniffing. (Zolo sniffed when he was nervous, when he'd made the brave decision to leave the safe bank of his lecture notes and drift away on a shaky digression.) "It was in a small journal, I encourage all of you to take a look at it in the library, the-the-the little-known *Classic Epic and Modern America*. Winter volume, I believe. It turns out, a year ago, a couple of wacko Greek and Latinists like myself wanted to conduct an experiment on the power of the epic. They arranged to give copies of *The Odyssey* to-to-to a hundred of the most hardened criminals at a maximum-security prison—Riverbend, I think it was—and would you know it, twenty of the convicts read the thing cover to cover, and three of them sat down and wrote their own epic tales. One is going to be published next year by Oxford University Press. The article discussed epic poetry as a very viable means to reform the-the-the deadliest offenders in the world. It-it appears, funnily enough, there's something within it that lessens the rage, the-the stress, pain, brings about, even to those who are far, far, gone, a sense of *hope*—because there's an absence in this day and age of real heroism. Where *are* the noble heroes? The great deeds? Where are the gods, the muses, the warriors? Where is ancient Rome? Well, they have to-to-to be somewhere, don't they, because, according to Plutarch, history repeats itself. If only we'd have the nerve to look for it in-in ourselves, it just-it just might—"

I don't know what came over me.

Maybe it was Zolo's perspiring face, festively reflecting the overhead fluorescents like a river reflecting carnival

light, or the way he gripped the podium as if without it he'd collapse into a pile of brightly colored laundry—direct contrast to Dad's posture on any stage or raised platform. Dad, as he expounded upon Third-World Reform (or whatever he *felt* like expounding upon; Dad was neither intimidated by, nor nervy around, the Verbal Foray on-the-Fly or the Apropos Excursion), always stood without the slightest slouch or sway. ("While lecturing, I always imagine myself a Doric column on the Parthenon," he said.)

Without thinking, I stood up, my heart heaving against my ribs. Zolo stopped midsentence and he, as well as the three hundred drowsy students in the lecture hall, stared at me as I, head down, hacked through backpacks, outstretched legs, overcoats, sneakers and textbooks to get to the nearest aisle. I lurched toward the double EXIT doors.

"There goes Achilles," Zolo quipped into the microphone. There were a few tired laughs.

I ran back to the dorm. I sat down at my desk, laid out a three-inch stack of white paper and hastily began to scrawl this Introduction, which originally started with what happened to Charles, after he'd broken his leg in three places and had been rescued by the National Guard. Supposedly he'd been in such pain he couldn't stop shouting, "God help me!" over and over again. Charles had a terrifying voice when he was upset, and I couldn't help but think those words had minds of their own, floating up like helium balloons through the sterile halls of the Burns County Hospital, all the way to the Maternity Ward, so every child entering the world that morning heard his screams.

Of course, "Once upon a time there was a beautiful,

sad little boy named Charles” wasn’t exactly fair. Charles was St. Gallway’s dreamboat, its Doctor Zhivago, its *Destry Rides Again*. He was the gold-limbed kid Fitzgerald would’ve picked out of the senior class photo and described with sun-soaked words like “patrician” and “of eternal reassurance.” Charles would fiercely object to my beginning any story with his moment of indignity.

Again I was at a standstill (I wondered how those hard-edged convicts had managed, against the odds and with such flair, to conquer the Blank Page), yet just as I threw those crumpled pages into the trash can under Einstein (miserably held hostage on the wall next to Soo-Jin’s ill-conceived “To Do or Not to Do” bulletin board), I suddenly remembered something Dad once said back in Enid, Oklahoma. He was paging through a remarkably attractive course catalogue for the University of Utah at Rockwell, which, if memory serves, had just offered him a visiting professorship.

“There is nothing more arresting than a disciplined course of instruction,” he said abruptly.

I must have rolled my eyes or grimaced, because he shook his head, stood up and shoved the thing—an impressive two inches thick—into my hands.

“I’m serious. Is there anything more glorious than a professor? Forget about his molding the minds, the future of a nation—a dubious assertion; there’s little you can do when they tend to emerge from the womb predestined for Grand Theft Auto Vice City. No. What I mean is, a professor is the only person on earth with the power to put a veritable frame around life—not the whole thing, *God* no—simply a fragment of it, a small *wedge*. He organizes the unorganizable. Nimble partitions it into modern and postmodern, renaissance, baroque, primitivism, imperial-