

The Immigrant

From the sofa I see the cup handle of the Maxwell House sign, just warming up as the sun drops behind it. High clouds are drawn into lavender wisps, and through them the planes circle Newark. Thirty stories below, the cars are inaudible, hidden beneath the abandoned ruins of the elevated West Side Highway. There's a lone jogger in the middle of it, with a Walkman clipped to his waistband, running over patches of wild grass pushing up through the concrete. The aluminum windows are pitted, and they cover the entire west wall of the apartment, a mingy frame on a fading diorama.

The piano over my shoulder rolls under Don's fingers, leading his voice, and then following it. At first it's somebody else's song, one he has made his, slower, and sadder. Then it's a song he's working on, a one-sided conversation, sung right at me. I'm eavesdropping, because he's asking me to. He's singing about sailing to the New World, and leaving the old one behind. Everything is a lullaby, as I lie in the fading light with my eyes closed, bathed in his perfect, dark tenor, never once guessing it would lead where it did, to the Land of the Permanently Brokenhearted.

There's a point when your story stops being yours, at least at the moment of its telling. Mine stopped being mine way before that, in 1981, when the first person to love me back started showing signs of immunosuppression, before AIDS even had its name. There was no test for it. We had to requisition drugs

directly from the Centers for Disease Control for the pneumonia he never made it past. By 1984, Don was dead.

The first time I took him to meet my folks, Don spiked a fever. It was a night he'd barely remember, and one I haven't forgotten. The next day I asked my mother what she thought, but it was nothing like the mother-son exchange most of us hope for. Instead, it was the kind you grow up with when your mom's a research biochemist, more of a consultation. I told her about the unrelenting sinusitis, the endless string of ear infections, the unexplained dermatological episodes, and of course, the fevers that came in the night and were gone the next day.

"There's something wrong with his immune system," she said. The windows may have rattled.

The first time we took Don to the hospital, he couldn't breathe and had a fever of 103. He had no admitting doctor, so the ambulance took us to Bellevue. They put him in the back of the ER, behind a thin curtain, shaking with fever. Over the oxygen mask his eyes brimmed with fear, begging us not to leave him there. His sister and I waited there all night, too far away to do any good, too terrified to leave. They finally found a bed for him, but there would be no doctor until morning.

Days went by before the orderlies would even enter the room, and it was only after I threatened them. They left his food in the hall, wearing masks and gloves while they did, and never returned for the trays. There was blood under the bed from the previous patient. We brought in supplies and cleaned the room ourselves.

They told us, finally, that he had AIDS, but I refused to believe it. We should monitor him, they said; they'd treat his symptoms as they arose, but they couldn't even say what those might be. When he could breathe on his own again, they sent him home with us. Dazed, we rode the elevator down, and the orderly held up his hand to prevent anyone else from getting on with us. People parted in our path.

The pneumonia returned. His first hospital stay was so harrowing, Don insisted he be taken this time to the safety of the suburbs, closer to his family. He eventually responded to the Pentamidine, but he was much weaker. The doctor was empathetic, but it was clear he was in over his head. “It’s not a death sentence,” he told me, but I got the feeling he wasn’t really talking about Don.

The last time he went in, they barraged him with tests, all of them futile. Before Don was moved to the ICU, I spent the night with him in his room. I held his hand while he spasmed and gasped, but he had no idea I was even there. The night was terrible, and long. Over and over, I called the nurses in, even though it was clear there was nothing to be done. He rallied the next morning and we all assembled there, to say goodbye without really knowing it. “It’s too much pressure,” he told me, after everyone left. It was the last time I ever saw him.

They say weddings are when a couple’s lives begin. Maybe. But they start all over with our deaths. We say “till death do us part” to testify to our devotion. Unless you’re the one dying, everyone knows devotion lasts much longer than that. We cement our love when we marry the living. But we remarry the dead, and our love is then chiseled in stone. We become linked for eternity. Before I lost Don, I misread the Italian widow wearing black her whole life no matter how long her spouse has been gone. Now I see the wisdom in it. They wear black to remind themselves, and everybody else, what a broken heart looks like. Jews are far more baroque about this. We take all four seasons to drown in our loss before moving on. Then we try to forget, but don’t, leaving family and friends to remember for us, while they pretend not to. I can’t say why we make this elaborate pact, to walk away from our heartsickness when no one really plans to. But I worry that’s exactly what I did. I wish I had just worn black all these years, clearing a path for my pain. Don’s death was too much for me, so I eventually put it aside. But those who know me know I’ve never recovered from it. Those who know me can see the black dress.

For Jews of my clan, memory is complicated, knotted, as it is, so tightly to survival. Sure, we're fixated on memory, just like everyone else, but memory of a very particular kind, one detached from a sense of place. Once you realize your village can be burned to the ground, you stop believing in place. No one remembers where my grandmother was born, because she refused to remember it herself. But none of us ever forgot why Lena left. She told me she fled the pogroms, long before I could even know what they were, and unless telling me they threw rocks at the Cossacks signified longing, her recounting was sapped of nostalgia. There was no trace of pleasure in it, anywhere. For her, memory was a lesson, not a luxury. After all, there would be no home for me to go back to, no survivors, no clan. They were gone, all of them, with no one to plant a commemorative tree in the town square. There was no town square. There was no town. My ancestral home is the genetic cellular memory of the meaning of cruelty.

Since we don't count on place, memory is what is left for us, memory without mooring. That's the secret we guard, that there is a special blend of memory that is Jewish. It is memory as the act of witnessing, of training the eye to look through a story rather than at it. Witnessing is the acknowledgment of what we do to one another, rather than what happened. Witnessing ignores the ship and studies what rides in the wake of it. It is the glow at the horizon, after the sun has left it and no one is looking anymore. Witnessing is the underbelly of memory. It also happens to be the utter gist of history. It is the entire human point.

And this is where you find me, peering out through an intricate mix. My Jew bears witness and pretends to forget, but my Italian widow just won't. I act like I've forgotten, but I haven't, because forgetting is the final price of the hardened heart, the sad cost of coping with the worst of what we get to see.

I refuse.

Perhaps I'm about to, but if I find it hard to describe why I loved Don so deeply, it's harder still to explain why that might be. Like everyone else, I suppose, I simply expected love to come to me, whether or not I was ready for it. But it came to me long after I'd already decided it was a myth. Luckily, love is strongest when it's a surprise, and although I was far from a teenager, I fell in love as if I were. I realize now I was too old to have done it, but I worshipped everything about him.

You might say Don was funny looking, though I certainly didn't think so, and if he was, it never mattered. Everyone was drawn to him anyway. His ears would've made perfect coffee mug handles, and his front teeth might be the first things you notice. He was short, but I saw it as sturdy. He had a long face and I used to say he had a bean-shaped nose, though it looked nothing like a bean. His eyes were obsidian, so you could see the entire world bouncing off them, and they turned to half-moons when he was amused, which was most of the time. When he smiled, his mouth was shaped like a gull about to land, and when he sang, it became a tall oval. I'd never met anyone who spoke with his hands that much. If he mimicked someone—which he did with precision—his face turned into a rubber mask. Don was profoundly funny, as only a depressive can be, and he was the first person to ever make me guffaw.

He was painfully empathetic, and saw himself in the flaws of every stranger. He was tireless when it came to big themes, but still noticed everything, and surrendered freely to his curiosity about what was under the surface. If you showed him your coat, he grabbed to see the lining. His appetite for the least obvious thing extended beyond his hunger for every genre of experimental performance and art to quixotic fixations on spirituality and the remotest expressions of human frailty. He was charismatic if you noticed him casually, and compelling if you paid him the slightest attention. Don was the perfect fit for someone who was looking for a limitless sense of connection, and loving him meant submitting to an all-consuming eddy of magic and sadness.

For me, Don was perfect.

After he was diagnosed, I was sworn to secrecy about it. He asked me not to tell anyone, and until it was too late, I didn't. I went through it alone, though that wasn't as hard as it sounds. I had persuaded myself he wasn't dying. We decided, or I'd convinced us, that we could easily have a long life together and should proceed as if we would. We should each do what we had set out to, I maintained, so when we sat in our rocking chairs, we wouldn't blame each other for the things we gave up. Don got a manager and continued to record and perform, even after he'd gotten too fragile for it. And I decided to continue traveling for work, the part of my job I hated most. More than ever, I hated leaving him, even though I'd made the case that I should. So I left and never really went anywhere, because there is only travel in this world, travel, and no escape.

Don, who'd never been anywhere but LA, was obsessed with ocean voyages. I can't say why for sure, but he was. It was the romance, he said, but I think it was really the long goodbye from the high railing, the slow-motion decisiveness of it, and the surrender to uncertainty. It is freedom from the past if you need it to be, and second chances. But it can also mean irrevocable despair, the kind that waits on the horizon without your knowing it, and that you sail to but never quite choose.

Before its facelift, when it was close to demolition, Don insisted we visit Ellis Island, which he could see from his window during the many hours he surveyed the harbor as he wrote. The tour group was small, and the place was so littered, the guide asked us to stick close. There were papers thrown everywhere, and broken boards with nails. Some of the floors were split through to the ones below, and a hard light streamed in through bare windows. There was nothing there, really. Just rubble, and the stories he told us.

The trip over was terrible, the guide said. People borrowed the fare, or traded everything for it, often leaving nothing for food. Families might be scattered at the dock before they even boarded, with no recourse. Parents were forced to send their children on alone, or to leave them and promise to

come back for them. Steerage was rough and the deck was cold. The sea could be nauseating, so you might not want to eat, and if you did, there might be nothing for you. After weeks of these hardships the immigrants disembarked on the island, disoriented. If they stumbled or wove, the immigration officers noticed it. If they were confused by the questions in this brand-new language, or they hesitated to answer, the back of their coats would be chalked with a code, often without their knowing it, sometimes with no interview at all. Their destiny was marked there and they'd be separated into holding cells, only to be sent back.

After that visit Don became even more preoccupied with the dispossessed, and it turned up in his writing in the form of an operatic song cycle, the last music he would ever write, an ode to the displaced. He saw himself in the immigrant, and I came to see it myself. I fought admitting it, but he and I were being chased from our homes and forced out to sea. There at the dock AIDS was separating us, from our friends and our families, and as we got nearer to the other shore, from each other as well.

It surprised me every time, but Don knew the schedule of the *Queen Elizabeth II (QEII)* by heart. If it worked out that way, everything would come to a halt and we'd watch it set sail from his window, with plates on our laps. Once, when we couldn't make it home in time, he made us run to the river to catch its departure. We stood on the banks of the abandoned West Side, close enough for me to see how big it was, big as a floating skyscraper. I can't tell you how much it frightened me. Many are fascinated by the sea, feel safe in it, and find water soothing. I panic when I wash my face. The ocean terrifies me, even watching it on film. I find it nightmarish, the ceaselessness, the enormity, the crushing power of it, and its irrational cruelty. But when I glanced over at him, I felt the electricity of his yearning. We stood there in silence, craning our necks, both tearing up, but for completely different reasons.

On its world cruise the *QEII* has long stretches of ocean voyage when the passengers are ship-bound. The liner books lecturers to distract the stir

crazy. After Don's first hospitalization, I was recommended to speak onboard. Without missing a beat, I said no. Thank you, I said, I can't be in the middle of the ocean. You can bring a guest, was the reply. Thanks, I said, but it's out of the question, and I hung up.

After I put the phone down, I flushed, as if I'd had a narrow brush with death. Then, almost as quickly, I realized Don was the one confronting it. He was wasting, and weak. His hair was falling out, and he had a Herpes sore on his lip that never went away. We'd be trapped out at sea if he got any worse. But he might die at home and never sleep in its vastness. He was sick, maybe too sick to travel. But he might also be too sick not to. And then I thought he would never forgive me for what I'd just done. I might never forgive myself. A half hour later I called back.

Don was euphoric. I was scared. Scared of everything that lay ahead, scared of the sea and of what might happen out in the middle of it. But I shared none of that with him. Don's death was a subject we kept to ourselves, or I did anyway. If he tried to talk about it, I wouldn't let him. I was too young to face it, and I needed him to live. But now I know that holding off death is like putting on a girdle. The pounds don't go anywhere; you're simply moving them somewhere else. I'm ashamed that I fought it, sharing the truest meanings of my journey with Don, but I agreed to confront my terror of the sea for him. I kept it all to myself, and decided the sea might free him.

He'd never been out of the country, so I stood in line for hours with him for his passport. He bought Japanese language books and studied them diligently. On the *QEII*, dinner would be formal every night, and I bought him a shaving kit and cufflinks and shirts and a cheap tux. I splurged on fancy cummerbunds and good bow ties, and we practiced tying them on each other.

"Just like *Brideshead Revisited*," Don insisted, and I went along with it. "It will be so glamorous," he kept repeating. I went along with that as well, but I knew we weren't taking the cruise like the other passengers. I was working on it. We could never afford it, or the time off to do it. I was a hired hand, just

like the rest of the crew. But we learned to tie real bow ties as if we were gentry.

The *Brideshead* fantasy evaporated as soon as I walked into the ship's entry lounge, which had more in common with Raquel Welch's *Fantastic Voyage*. The seating was white and circular, and sunken. The hall carpets clashed where they collided with each other, and the ceilings were extremely low. It looked like a high-end sixties drug den. This is going to be a long two weeks, I thought. But Don's delight was overpowering. He was hilarious and made fun of everything. He became best friends with our hall porter, and our waiters, and every dowager he crossed paths with. People adored him, and I was reminded why.

To sail the ocean seems a long way to go to see a thing that already sits in your lap. Don loved the voyage, as I hoped he would, but sadness had also stowed away with him. The air was stinging on the Pacific that February in 1984, but he sat on deck all day in the blistering cold under layers of blankets and coats. He was frail everywhere else, but there he was resolute. Don stared out at the grey horizon through his blackout glasses, in the deafening winter wind. I love the cold, and I wanted desperately to sit with him, but I never lasted more than an hour. He might manage a smile, through his cracked, lilac lips, but then he'd turn his attention back to the dark, churning waters, flecked with whitecaps as solid as snow mounds. There were days it was like he was alone out at sea, adrift. I stared at the horizon because it was far less terrifying than the waters just over the railing. It was my bid for abstraction, and the only way I could come to terms with the fear of where we'd find ourselves. He focused on the horizon too, but all these years later I can only guess at what he saw when he looked at it.

At tea, he met a group of Japanese students and struck a bargain with them. Every day they traded language lessons. By the time we reached Yokohama, Don thought he had learned enough Japanese to manage, and with his musical ear, he actually had. While we were waiting for the notoriously mean Japanese customs to allow us to officially disembark, he decided

we should go on a day trip to a temple on the outskirts of the city, and he wanted to take the bus. We did, and managed pretty well until we got off. He could ask where the temple was and be understood, but neither of us had any idea what the answers meant. In no time at all we were lost.

All of us were lost, I should say. He'd befriended an elderly woman onboard. The trip was her husband's idea, but he hadn't lived to join her. She'd confided she didn't know why she came, and was sorry she had. Her husband always arranged for everything, she said, and she was afraid to leave the ship. Her loneliness broke Don's heart, and his empathy broke mine. He wanted to draw her out of it, and insisted she join us. She was reluctant, but Don had no regard for refusal.

He pulled this stranger close to him, as if she was family, and we wandered through the icy streets. She clutched him back, in her long, pleated silk dress. He made her put his black leg warmers underneath, and they bunched over her low, tan heels. His Peruvian gloves peeked out from the cuffs of her blonde mink coat, the ones he'd bought from a street vendor back home and had cut the fingers off of, and her pale, polished nails were blue in the cold. His hand-me-downs made her own frailties that much more apparent, but Don was frail himself, and the two may have shared much more than his clothing. Don was incapable of being covert, and who knows what he confided during our week onboard. In a way I never came to know, their bond may have been deeper than ours at that point.

I can't say who was happier—Don, on foreign soil with this surrogate grandmother, or me, totally lost in this strange city with him. I'd traveled a lot, but this was the first time I'd felt like an outsider. It wasn't because of the talking traffic lights or the building-sized LCDs. It wasn't the zero percent crime rate. It wasn't the shopkeeper who placed a pack of gum on the edge of a huge piece of wrapping paper, then folded it into a perfect parcel without one piece of tape and presented it to us as if it were a gemstone. It wasn't the street signs in letters I had no way to read.

It was because death and discovery were out walking with us. As his life was waning, Don was just exploring the world. I'd seen much of it, but understanding what love meant was still uncharted, and without realizing it, I'd just sailed the Pacific to begin saying goodbye to it. So there we were, freezing in Japan, being filled and emptied at the same time, and it made me feel like an alien. I was saying goodbye, and not just to Don, who would be dead by November. I was saying goodbye to the world as we knew it, unaware an entire generation was doing exactly the same thing. Everything was changing, never to be the same again, and I had no idea what it meant yet.

The immigrant knows that when you flee, you're hollowing out the past. A skeleton might remain, but life has vacated it. No words can breathe life back into what you've left behind, can depict how warm the lake water was, as warm as your palm when you cupped it, or the exact shade of chartreuse as the trees leafed in, and the way that color vibrated against the damp, black branches of spring. People nod politely when you try to describe the old country, but they have no way to know what you're telling them. So, eventually, you give up trying.

By the time I'd met the people this book is about—the activists and artists, the as-yet-unnamed queers, the stalwarts and outcasts and policy wonks, the intrepid, the ambushed, and the abandoned—I'd stopped talking about Don altogether. As Lena had with her town in Russia, I'd given it up. It seemed pointless. They were fighting for their lives, and I was afraid talking about him might pierce any hope they had. They never knew him, and I didn't know how to change that. But now, all these years later, I've finally figured out how.

This book is dedicated to the AIDS immigrant, wherever they may have landed, and to Don Paul Yowell.



Figure 1. *Silence = Death*, The Silence = Death Project, 1987, poster, offset lithography, $33\frac{1}{2} \times 22$ in.