

# *Excerpt from* The Beautiful Miscellaneous

*~Prologue~*

1.

As far as near-death experiences go, mine was a disappointment. No bright whirring tunnel or silver-blue mist, just a wave of white noise, a low-set squall coming from an unknown source. I was gone for ninety seconds and spent the next two weeks in a coma. I sometimes imagine the moment when my miniature death ended and the coma began. I picture it like emerging from a bath in absolute darkness.

I woke in a hospital room during the last week of July 1987. I was seventeen and it was the middle of the night. A series of machines stood around my bed, emitting a pale, luminous green. I stared at a heart monitor, mesmerized by the scintilla of my pulse moving across the screen. Tiny drops of clear liquid hovered, then fell inside an IV bag. Voices—muffled and indistinguishable—carried in from a corridor. I felt unable to call out. I lay there quietly, looking up at the ceiling, and waited for someone to confirm that I was back among the living.

2.

My parents wanted a genius. My father had achieved a measure of fame in particle physics for his experiments with the quark, and my mother came from an old New England family of clergy and museum curators, men prone to loftiness. Together they waited out my early, unexceptional years, hoping for an epiphany.

When I was nine years old, in the winter of 1979, my father and I drove to Manitoba to watch a solar eclipse. He was hoping this would mark a whole

new era for me. On the nighttime drive up from Wisconsin, we passed farms banked in snow and entire prairies of ice. My father talked about the great eclipses of the past, of the one in 1970 when he saw the yellow tail of a comet revealed as the Mid-Atlantic states were shot with half-light. His face was cast with the soft light of the dash and his tangled beard—a cross between a northern woodcutter’s and a German philosopher’s—appeared to be glowing. He talked in bursts and then fell quiet for fifteen-minute stretches. Each time, it felt like we were passing out of the ice flats and into enormous valleys of silence.

As we crossed into Canada from North Dakota, my father listed the benefits of a summer eclipse. “Birds stop singing and go to roost. Flower blossoms close. Honeybees stop flying.” He’d been drinking coffee straight from the thermos and his breath smelled bitter. The word honey smelled the worst, and I pretended to look out my window to get away from it. “Nature thinks it’s naptime, Nathan. What you might call an astral power nap,” he said. In the dimness of the front seat his small, neat teeth appeared from behind his beard and formed a tight smile. I thought he was going to laugh but then he deadpanned, “Duration will be two minutes and forty-nine seconds.”

“That’s not very long,” I said.

He took his pale, thin hand from the stainless steel thermos and gestured through the dark interior with a flattened palm. “In physics that’s an eternity.” He positioned his hands on the steering wheel at exactly ten and three o’clock but continued to stare at me, waiting, I think, for me to agree that three minutes is really a massive spool of time. I started to nod, but he was already tapping the wheel in a caffeinated sort of way. He switched on the radio and found a hiss of static. “The truth is, Nathan, time is fluid. Do you hear that static?”

“Yeah.”

“Ten percent of it is due to residual microwaves from the Big Bang. It’s all still happening from that one singularity.” Now he shook his head, a little incredulous. That my father didn’t know how to speak to children was widely known in our Wisconsin hometown. I once found him on our front lawn, deep into a rant with the paperboy about parabolic motion.

Although my father was an atheist, this trip was a pilgrimage for him. We were driving through the night to see something that would last less than a Top 40 song. But I was also undergoing a test. My father believed that greatness began with a purifying moment—an awakening. He told me that Einstein, as a convalescing boy, was given a compass and this forever changed his view of the world. It made him want to know the hidden mechanics of the universe. My father had been searching for good omens and epiphanies for a while now—a cosmic champagne bottle to smash over the prow of my youth.

At eight o’clock in the morning, we parked the Oldsmobile on a plowed blacktop and waited for the spectacle. We watched the moon drift toward the rising sun. Vast snowfields, scattered with box elders and limestone boulders, extended before us. There were pockets of bluish shadow spread across the snow. A few brain-shaped clouds plodded north toward the arctic, but otherwise the day was clear. We stayed inside the car with the engine running, trying to keep warm. The heater breathed noisily through the dash, filling the air with a mechanical stutter.

My father pulled back his shirtsleeve and looked at his watch. I could see his spindly wrist and the bald patch he’d scratched on his arm. “Almost showtime,” he said. What he meant by that was an hour of sitting in the cold car watching the moon inch-crawl toward the sun. We hadn’t eaten since Minnesota, and I would have, in those sixty minutes, traded a total solar eclipse for as little as three Fig Newtons. Finally, the moon arced into the solar halo and a small bite appeared at the western edge of the sun. My father

retrieved our safety glasses from the glove compartment and we put them on. The light began to change—the deep blue shadows on the snowfields blurred and lightened; narrow bands of light shifted through the bare maple crowns. Everything dappled.

“The shifting light is caused by the sun shining across jagged lunar valleys,” my father said.

“I wish we hadn’t forgotten the hot chocolate,” I said.

He reached for his door.

I said, “Can I stay in here and watch things? Because I think I can see better if the wind isn’t in my eyes.”

He looked at me, O-mouthed and appalled. With his oversize safety glasses he was a parody of a blind man. “Watch things? This isn’t fireworks in somebody’s backyard. This is celestial. This is very big. A big, celestial moment. Now exit the vehicle.”

He turned and opened his car door, stepped out onto the road, and began wandering in the direction of the eclipse. I followed his tall, gangly figure and we began hauling across the fields, snow skirting his knees and my thighs. The air was damp and cut with pine sap. “It looks like incinerating glass,” my father said as he slowed, his head craned upward. I had no idea what incinerating glass might look like, but I imagined it was very bright. Through the safety glasses everything seemed a little flat and brown. We stood perfectly still. A tiny sliver of light remained, a sunburst cresting from behind the dark disk of the moon. We watched it blink, then disappear. Darkness flooded everything. A row of pine trees became an inky, amorphous silhouette. I could hear the deep, slow metronome of my father’s breathing. He had the stilled countenance of a man in prayer.

When the moon fully blocked the sun, the darkness seemed something between dusk and night. My hands were jammed into my pockets and my breath smoked in front of me. Some of the brighter stars had appeared and the great slow clouds had darkened. In that cindery pall, the facade of the moon cold and white, I could believe we were watching the end of the world. After the eclipse, a ribbon of sunlight streamed into view, the sun's corona dimmed, and northern daylight blasted in all directions, as if someone had lifted a veil. My father took off his glasses and squinted his tea-brown eyes against the sudden brightness.

"That was it, Nathan," he said.

"What?" I whispered.

"Your epiphany and such like."

A long silence.

Finally, I figured things were completed out on the snowfield, so I turned for the car.

"It's a brand-new day," he said. "We'll drive into town and get some breakfast to celebrate."

"We didn't have dinner last night," I said. There was a hint of anger in my voice, and it was somehow amplified by the rising wind.

My father clapped me around the shoulders and attempted a sympathetic laugh. But then he looked off into the white distance and said slowly, "That was the world's shortest day. So, it's breakfast at dawn. Buttermilk pancakes for our young Copernicus."

He tromped toward the road and I followed. We got in the car and I cranked

the heater. I was shivering and I tried to exaggerate it by chattering my teeth. It was a statement of protest: a call for food and shelter. Of course, my father didn't notice. We drove through a series of towns where they sold venison jerky and pork chops but no pancakes. Finally, we gave up and I bought a box of stale Ritz crackers from a general store and we drove on. The Oldsmobile Omega passed through the snowy backcountry, now cloaked in dusk, and my father rambled about the special properties of light, about how there is no such thing as emptiness, about how charged particles can manifest out of the voids of space. The idea of matter appearing in a vacuum seemed to hold certainty for him that we would someday find my gift. We passed log cabins set back from the road, hunting shacks nestled in the woods; occasionally I'd see the buttery light from a window and wonder about these people's lives, about what they did up here in the dead of winter and what they might be speaking about during my father's scientific monologue. I tried to follow what he was saying but I found myself staring into the woods, looking for lighted windows and other signs of normal life.