

“Sebastian Junger is one of the finest writers of our generation, and *In My Time of Dying* is a stunning book that comes as close as anything I’ve read in explaining what it means to be human.”

—JAMES PATTERSON

# IN MY TIME OF DYING

*HOW I CAME FACE-TO-FACE  
WITH THE IDEA OF  
AN AFTERLIFE*

SEBASTIAN  
JUNGER

## Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

---

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[\*\*CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP\*\*](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

IN MY TIME OF  
DYING

*How I Came Face-to-Face with  
the Idea of an Afterlife*

SEBASTIAN  
JUNGER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*This book is dedicated to my dear friends John Falk and Tim  
Hetherington, who set forth far too soon*

## PROLOGUE

### *We've Been Expecting You*

I had an Al Merrick Tri Fin and a brand-new 5-millimeter winter suit, and I squatted on the beach waxing my board and watching heavy January surf pound the outer bar. The sand was hard with ice and scattered with storm wrack—lobster traps, busted-up carpentry, buoys, nets, dead fish, and shrubs ripped out of the dunes on the storm tides. The temperature was in the twenties and a high-pressure system had scraped the world clear of clouds and delivered a stiff little northwest wind that held the peaks nicely and feathered them before they plunged forward. The waves were well over head high, which was nothing I hadn't surfed before, but that was in the summer; I had no idea that a winter swell broke very differently. There were clues, though: bottom sand getting sucked up the wave faces, turning them dirty beige, and trapped air rupturing out their back walls as they collapsed. It was late morning on a weekday in mid-January, and I was the only person on the beach. I stood up and stowed the board under my arm and waded into the water.

I had neoprene boots and hood, but the water was weirdly heavy; even smaller waves packed a punch. A nor'easter had passed offshore a day earlier and was sending back huge, perfect swells that broke with so much force, they left the water boiling almost until the next wave came through. I waited until a set swept over the bar and then pushed off and started digging for the horizon, hoping to get outside before more waves came in. I was in deep water between the bars, but the big sets closed out everything.

I made it outside and sat my board facing the sun and feeling the ocean shift and roll beneath me. The beach was barren and stripped by winter storms and looked very far away. A few times I tried paddling into waves, but they jacked up

and went concave so fast that I always pulled out, heart pounding. I didn't know that winter bars are steeper, which pitches waves forward more violently, and that cold water is denser and breaks with more force. The result is that winter waves are far more powerful and dangerous than the same-sized wave in the summer. And you can't hold your breath for nearly as long in cold water—twenty seconds, maybe thirty. The only way to avoid the power of a breaking wave is to get off your board and dive deep, but depending on the water temperature, you might not be able to hold your breath long enough for the turbulence to subside. I was thirty years old, I'd surfed this spot since I was eight, and it never crossed my mind that I could die here.

I had been out there half an hour when I saw a huge wave starting to shoal outside of the bar. It darkened as it came, advancing with the slow determination of something designed to kill you. More peaks were lined up behind it like the ranks of an advancing army. If the waves were starting to steepen that far out, they were true monsters, and I didn't know whether to paddle like crazy and try to get over them before they broke or just stay put and take my beating. I stopped paddling and sat on my board to calm myself before they hit. On the lead wave came, towering, reaching, and finally detonating right in front of me—the worst possible place. I was beyond all human intervention. I took one last breath, slipped off my board, and dove for the bottom.

The force was so shocking that I caught myself thinking, *There must be some mistake*. My board leash snapped immediately. Vortices heaved me up, changed their mind, drove me down, somersaulted me, stripped off my hood, stuffed my wetsuit full of sand, and thrashed me with what felt like actual malice. I had no idea which way was up, which was a problem because I ran out of air almost immediately. Ordinarily, the hydraulics of even a large wave dissipate in a few seconds, but this was different—it went on and on. The wave wanted me and was going to keep thrashing me in the darkness until I finally gave up and breathed in.

What amazed me was how malevolent the whole thing seemed—*Me? Why do you want me?* I was young and had no idea the world killed people so casually. Oddly, I remembered that there was a pile of dirty dishes in my sink that someone was going to have to deal with. Files and notes for a book I hoped to write on my desk. Work clothes scattered across the floor. My parents lived a hundred miles

away, and I was essentially camping out in their summer house to write my book. It had no insulation, and the baseboard heaters were so wasteful and expensive that I almost never used them. I lived in quilted canvas work clothes and slept in a wool hat and sweater. On very cold nights, my drinking water froze. Virtually nothing bothered me. And now all of that seemed to be over.

As I slammed back and forth in the cement mixer hydraulics, I realized that my “vision”—a circle of gray light where I’d have been looking if my eyes were open—was starting to close down. Meanwhile, I could feel my throat starting to gag, which I knew would culminate in one last forced breath. I’d never come close to drowning before, but somehow my body knew everything. It knew what all the signs meant, what it would be forced to do, and how this would end.

The circle of light was down to a pinprick and the gagging in my throat was almost beyond countering. My thoughts had degenerated into a desperate *no, no, no*. And then I felt the awful hydraulics slacken—not by much, but enough to sense the buoyancy of my wetsuit. *That* way was up; if I could hold on a little longer, I’d survive. The wetsuit was rising. I gave a few kicks. I rose more. The world started to get lighter. Everything was turning green. Everything was turning white. I was in the foam. I was in the air. I was in the world.

And then I saw one more wave coming—just as big, just as malevolent. I breathed out, breathed in, and went back down.

---

When I was in my late twenties, I worked as a climber for tree companies. It was well paid, but I was told that if I did it for any length of time, I’d get hurt. Which I did. I’d hang a line fifty feet into a tree or spike the trunk with climbing irons and take the tree down in sections with a chainsaw. Often limbs or sections of trunk had to be rigged and lowered so that they didn’t damage the house or whatever was below. I could take a tree down in its own circumference. I could section out and lower every piece of a hundred-foot white pine so that it barely dented the lawn. I was terrified of heights but learned how to not look down; I just concentrated on what was in front of me and made sure my knots were tied. I was scared of falling but never of chainsaws, until I cut myself across the Achilles

tendon while up in a medium-sized elm. After that I wasn't scared of chainsaws, exactly, but I was a whole lot more careful with them.

I used a braided nylon line that tested at 6,000 pounds. To hold myself in place so that I could work, I used a knot called a climber's hitch that slid up and down but locked as soon as I loosened my grip. The carabiners were rated at around the same strength as the rope. Mighty forces, in other words, were at work keeping me alive eighty feet in the air with a running chainsaw.

The existential charm of tree work is that your fate is entirely in your hands. The stakes are high—your life—but as with chess, there are no random events. All the information you need to survive is right in front of you, and if you don't, it's because you made a mistake. That is not true of driving or air travel or combat or even crossing the street on a walk light. Gravity, momentum, friction, and the dynamics of weight at the end of a line are all available to be understood and managed. I forgot to lock the carabiner on my climbing line; *dumb, dumb, dumb*. I topped out a tree and it came back on me; unforgivable. When the top comes back on you—a bad cut, a gust of wind—the first thing it does is pinch your chainsaw bar. You've got to roll out of the way while holding on to the saw, which is still running, so that it doesn't get set in motion when the top finally comes off. It's doable, but you don't want to have to.

Once, I got a call from a woman who said a huge red oak had come crashing down at the bottom of her yard. She said she was doing dishes when she heard a cracking sound and looked up in time to watch it fall. Not a breath of wind that day. The trunk had been entirely hollowed out by ants, and if I'd been working in the tree at that moment, I'd have died. That is the only tree I've ever encountered where my life would have been in fate's hands, though I do know a guy who roped into a limb that had a hidden rot pocket that broke under his weight. He dropped the first ten feet of a fall that would have killed him and then jerked to a stop when the limb got jammed into a crotch on the way down. I asked what he did after he finished bouncing, and he said he climbed back up into the crown of the tree and went back to work.

Everyone has a relationship with death whether they want one or not; refusing to think about death is its own kind of relationship. When we hear about another person's death, we are hearing a version of our own death as well, and the pity we



feel is rooted in the hope that that kind of thing—the car accident, the drowning, the cancer—could never happen to us. It’s an enormously helpful illusion. Some people take the illusion even further by deliberately taking risks, as if beating the odds over and over gives them a kind of agency. It doesn’t, but it’s an odd quirk of neurology that when we are fighting the hardest to stay alive, we are hardly thinking about death at all. We’re too busy.

Dying is the most ordinary thing you will ever do but also the most radical. You will go from a living, conscious being to dust. Nothing in your life can possibly prepare you for such a transition. Like birth, dying has its own timetable and cannot be thwarted and so requires neither courage nor willingness, though both help enormously. Death annihilates us so completely that we might as well have not lived, but without death, the life we *did* live would be meaningless because it would never end. One of the core goals of life is survival; the other is meaning. In some ways, they are antithetical. Situations that have intense consequences are exceedingly meaningful—childbirth, combat, natural disasters—and safer situations are usually not. A round of golf is pleasant (or not) but has very little meaning because almost nothing is at stake. In that context, adrenaline junkies are actually “meaning junkies,” and danger seekers are actually “consequence seekers.” Because death is the ultimate consequence, it’s the ultimate reality that gives us meaning.

At 11:35 p.m. on October 3, 2021, a sixty-six-year-old woman named Ruth Hamilton of Golden, British Columbia, was woken up by a loud bang: a meteorite the size of a “large man’s fist” had crashed through her roof and come to a stop on the floral-print pillow next to her head. The meteor had been streaking through space for millions or billions of years. Its trajectory was non-random and mathematically predictable if you could know all the variables, which you couldn’t. Unlike tree work, they’re almost infinite. Hamilton’s survival came down to where she happened to lay her head. She spent the rest of the night sipping tea in an armchair and staring at the rock in her bed.

Combat reproduces that randomness extremely well. One day, I was leaning against some sandbags at a small American outpost in Afghanistan, and I felt some sand flick into the side of my face. Bullets travel roughly twice the speed of sound, so they arrive at their target well before the gunshots that fired them. The outpost

was usually attacked from over a quarter mile away, which takes sound waves more than a second to cover. After the sand hit my face, I just had time to think *What the hell was that?* before hearing the rattle and clatter of distant machinegun fire. I was almost hit by the first rounds of the first burst of an hourlong attack. Like Ruth Hamilton in British Columbia, a few inches closer and I would never have known anything.

A few days later, we came under fire while on a foot patrol. It was plunging fire from across the valley that was almost impossible to take cover from; I found myself trying to hide behind a mountain holly hardly thicker than my arm. Bits of leaves drifted down from bullets that were chopping through the foliage over our heads, and gouts of dust erupted around my feet: more randomness. I was in and out of combat for a year, and the randomness never stopped—I just couldn't let myself think about it.

Several years later, my friend and colleague from the Afghanistan deployment, British photographer Tim Hetherington, went off to cover the civil war in Libya. At the last moment, I had to pull out of the assignment, so Tim took a clandestine boat trip to the besieged city of Misrata on his own. He arrived in the morning and was in a firefight by noon. Two doomed enemy soldiers were trapped in a burning building dropping their last hand grenades down the stairwell. Tim went back to a journalist safe house a few miles from the front line and returned later in the afternoon, almost immediately getting hit by a single 81mm mortar from Gaddafi's troops. One fighter lost his legs. A British photographer staggered away holding his abdomen to keep his intestines in. An American photographer named Chris Hondros took a chunk of shrapnel through the back of his head that did not kill him instantly but rendered him brain dead and beyond hope. And Tim took a small piece of metal to his groin—small, but apparently big enough to sever an artery.

The dead and wounded were loaded into a pickup truck, and the driver raced for the Misrata hospital. Tim bled out in the back of the truck looking up at the blue Mediterranean sky. The last thing he said was "Please help me" to a Spanish journalist who was sitting next to him. Did Tim know he was dying? Was he scared? He had no pulse by the time they got him to the hospital. Nurses rushed him into the trauma bay and gave him chest compressions, but there was no

bringing him back. Because of Tim’s role documenting the war in Afghanistan, the US military made it clear that they would get his body out of Libya no matter what. Tim was buried in London on a fine spring day. The service was at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mayfair, and his closed casket rested on an ornate catafalque beneath the priest’s dais. One by one, Tim’s loved ones shuffled forward to pay their respects.

A few weeks after getting home from London, I found myself inhabiting a very different world from the one I’d left—dull, monochromatic, without much optimism or love. Against all logic I convinced myself that Tim’s death was my fault and that it should have been me and not him. Some days, I even caught myself thinking that *he* was the lucky one to have died; I was going to have to see my life through to the very end. Things unraveled quickly after that. My first marriage ended. My father died. The best man at my wedding rented a car, drove to a sporting goods store, bought a shotgun, and ended his life in a parking lot.

But the randomness that can kill you will also save you. One night I was in a crowded New York bar and glimpsed a woman who seemed inexplicably familiar. That was impossible—we’d never met—but I was overcome by the feeling I knew her. Later, she told me that she had experienced the same thing. We peered at each other in puzzlement and soon started talking. Her name was Barbara, she was a playwright and had a light Irish accent that came and went with the topic. Her father was fifty-three when she was born and had fought the entirety of World War Two on foot in Europe. He returned to become the mayor of his hometown and raise a family of twelve, of whom Barbara was the youngest.

We talked with a kind of shocked relief, as if we’d lost touch long ago and had finally run across each other again. Eventually we got married and had a little girl and then another little girl. We lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in an old house in the woods in Massachusetts. One day when my youngest daughter was two, I told her that I loved her and asked if she knew what the word meant. “Yes, Daddy,” she said. “Love means, *stay here.*”

Indeed. But I still had one more wave to get through.

There is an irrefutable (and unprovable) thought experiment that when people drown, they construct an elaborate fantasy of their future to insulate themselves from what is actually happening. The subjective experience of time supposedly breaks down so that they enjoy this fantasy as if it were just a continuation of the life that came before. Years after I almost drowned, the thought crossed my mind that maybe I was *still* drowning but didn't know it. Maybe my anoxic brain was just conjuring a fantasy that seemed to have taken place over decades but in fact was lasting only minutes or seconds.

The second wave was huge but somehow lacked the power of the first, and after a few seconds, I floated to the surface and began slowly stroking for the beach. I staggered out of the shore break and collapsed on the sand and lay staring at the sky. I was more or less where my body would have wound up if I'd drowned. How blue the sky; how white the clouds. *You almost never got to see clouds again*, I thought. *You almost never got to see anything*.

I lay on the frozen sand imagining myself dead: arms askew, mouth full of sand, eyes blank. Someone walking their dog might see me in my wetsuit and mistake me for a dead seal. My car was in the parking lot and my wallet was in the glove compartment; it wouldn't take long for the police to match me to my driver's license. The phone would ring at my parents' house and my mother would answer. At first, she wouldn't understand. Then she'd scream. Eventually she would call my father at work and he, too, would go from confusion to horror to shock.

The news would ripple out through the small group of people who loved me and the larger group of people who just knew me. My sister would fly home from England, where she lived, and she and my parents would let themselves into the unheated summer house to find the sink full of dishes and army blankets nailed over door openings to keep the heat in. A desk I'd built out of a sawhorse and a piece of plywood was piled with research on every topic I could think of related to death at sea: meteorology, oceanography, the physics of wave motion, ship stability, drowning. I was writing about a swordfishing boat that had gone down with six men off the Grand Banks in 1991 and wanted to reconstruct their last days and hours and minutes as closely as possible.

I didn't know any of the men, but through my research I'd gotten to know their siblings, their girlfriends, their mothers. The process eventually came to feel so intrusive and wrong that I started dreaming about them—that is to say, the men occasionally visited me while I slept. One dream was particularly vivid: I was walking along the beach where I surfed when I spotted them sitting in a circle in the sand. I hesitated because I was sure they were angry with me for writing the book, but they just waved me over to join them.

Don't worry, they seemed to be saying. We've been expecting you.

## WHAT

The pain in my abdomen arrived without fanfare one September morning when my eldest girl was two and a half and the household was busy with a rolling series of tasks that would never quite get done. The pain was a sudden burning below my sternum that made me stand up straight and push my fingers into my gut. It was different from any pain I'd ever known, and I inexplicably thought: *This is the kind of pain where you later find out you're going to die.* The pain came and went for months. It was both bearable and weirdly debilitating, sometimes making me sit down in a kind of sick heat. Like many people, I've ignored a lot of unpleasantness in my life—hernias, kidney stones, broken ribs, ruptured tendons, marathons, combat patrols, chainsaw wounds—and I ignored this as well.

My younger daughter was born a couple of months later, and the Covid epidemic began a couple of months after that. My eldest daughter, Xana, was not in school yet, so we were able to leave New York City and move to a remote property on Cape Cod. Our house was built in 1800 and sat at the end of a dead-end dirt road surrounded by pine forests owned by the federal government. Part of it was an organic farm run by friends who also lived on the property. We cut firewood and seasoned it and split it and chased coyotes and foxes from the chicken coops and traded food and cleared trees that came down across the roads when storms blew through.

The winter was mild, and spring was cold and endless, and June came with its heat and southwest winds that raised an afternoon chop on the bay and covered the puddles and windowsills with bright green pollen. Because of Covid, Xana knew no other children; the human race was mostly composed of my wife and me and the couples who lived on the farm and a family with two teenage girls up the road. One day Xana and I walked out to the paved road to make chalk drawings and then returned the following morning to see if they survived a rainstorm that had rattled through that night. No trace of her efforts remained.

“The rain wouldn’t do that if it saw how beautiful they were,” Xana said. *That’s the problem*, I thought: we have no idea whether the universe even notices us, much less cares. Later, when I tried to understand why I ignored six months of abdominal pain, the only answer I could come up with was that I had fallen for an adult version of my daughter’s hopes. *Surely the universe doesn’t wipe out good people for no reason*, I thought. *Surely the universe doesn’t wipe out the fathers of young children*.

Then very early one morning, just as details of the world were emerging outside the bedroom window, I was wrenched from sleep by a dream of my wife and daughters sobbing and holding each other while I hovered oddly over their heads, unable to communicate with them. I screamed and waved, but they had no idea I was there. I was somehow made to understand that I’d died and couldn’t comfort them because I’d already crossed over; they were forever beyond my reach. Not only that, but I’d died because I hadn’t taken my life seriously. “*You could have been doing anything—even playing chess—but instead you chose to die*,” was how a voice explained it to me. I’d been careless, and now it was too late.

I woke up engulfed in anguish and shame. A gray light was coming through the windows, and I could make out the faces of my wife and daughters next to me. We slept together on a large floor pad, and most nights, Xana was between Barbara and me. Six-month-old Angela was on her other side. I hadn’t crossed over after all; I was still in bed with my family. I slid my arm under Xana, who rolled toward me instinctively in her sleep and put her head on my shoulder. I felt the interstellar emptiness of death slowly getting replaced by human warmth and touch. Eventually, children start providing reassurance to their parents rather than the other way around, and for me, that moment arrived one June morning at age fifty-eight, just as it was getting light.

---

My own father was born and raised in Europe but immigrated to the United States after the German Army invaded France, where he and his family were living. He was half Jewish on his father’s side, and though he rejected any kind of ethnic identity, he began using his Jewish middle name in America to flush out the bigots. My father, Miguel, arrived at the port of Baltimore at age eighteen on a

Portuguese cork freighter named the *São Tomé*. He made his way through the arrivals hall and was interviewed by an immigration official who asked what he was going to do with his life. My father said that he wanted to be a physicist, to which the official said, “Well then, you must go to MIT, in Boston. My son is there, and it’s the best school in the country.”

My father had never heard of MIT but did know about Harvard, which was his preferred choice. And he would have gone there except that—according to him—the admissions director said his test scores were so high that Harvard would let him in even though they’d “reached their quota of Jews.” My father nodded, walked out, and enrolled at MIT.

My father was a scientist who didn’t believe in anything that he couldn’t measure and test. (Which, as he’d point out, isn’t actually belief.) He brought Enlightenment-era rationality to the benign superstitions of my mother, who adhered to a hopeful slew of Eastern wisdom: energies, chakras, past lives, and dead friends visiting in the form of owls or crows. When my mother got cancer in her fifties, she announced that she would treat it exclusively with macrobiotics and yoga. My father asked if there were any medical studies supporting the idea that uterine cancer could be cured through diet, and she angrily accused him of being “too rational”—in other words, not respecting her beliefs. He said he would leave the marriage if she didn’t get treatment, and they settled on a compromise of surgery but no chemotherapy—which, to her surgeon’s surprise, she survived.

We did not go to church, obviously, so rationality had to provide the kind of reassurance that spirituality often does. It was entirely through my father’s eyes, then, that I understood my dream about dying. By his thinking, the dream was terrifying but obviously had no predictive value. How could it? Your body can’t understand problems in any cognitive sense, which is what your mind would need to make sense of the information. They are two separate operating systems: one has thoughts, the other has sensations. Otherwise, we wouldn’t need CT scans and MRIs to know what was wrong; we could just ask our bodies and tell the doctor what to fix.

Nevertheless, the dream unsettled me enough to tell Barbara about it. I was fifty-five when Xana was born, and I attributed the dream to my fear of dying while my children were young. By evening, the dream had passed from my mind,



and we all went to bed around nine o'clock. The windows were open, and the June air poured in until the surrounding forest was part of our bedroom, our dreams, our sleep. The shrieks of fisher cats sometimes woke us up, or coyotes baying over a kill, or strange chatterings that I was never able to identify. I had no nightmares but was woken—again at dawn—by a burning in my abdomen. It was lower down than usual and had an intensity that was new. After a while it went away, and I went back to sleep.

The date was June 16, 2020. My body had been heading toward this day my whole life.

The dirt road that leads to our house is deeply tracked and crowded with young oak and locust and pitch pine. The clay substrate holds water so that huge puddles form when it rains hard; you might drive three or four car lengths with water above the rocker panel. The driveway is several hundred yards long and ends at a garage and former horse barn with a 1931 penny embedded in its concrete floor. Next to that is a small post-and-beam cedar shake house that was originally built by the Hopkins family, whose ancestors arrived on the *Mayflower* in 1620. After the Great Depression, the Hopkins family sold the property to a socialist writer named Waldo Frank, who had been in the thick of some of the most prominent struggles of the century: the peace protests of World War One, the American labor strikes and, later on, the Cuban revolution. Frank's autobiography includes a photograph of him being greeted on the tarmac by Fidel Castro, who is in combat fatigues and carrying a Belgium-made FAL assault rifle. For decades, radicals of all sorts—communists, artists, homosexuals, opium smokers—had come to the woods of Truro and the narrow laneways of Provincetown to avoid federal scrutiny and lead their subversive lives. Frank died in 1967, and I bought the property from his son in 2000.

The fire chief told me to clear the underbrush back from the driveway so that his trucks could get through in case there was an emergency, and eventually a friend and I took our chainsaws and cleared a buffer all the way to the road. We left the slash where it fell but eventually the vegetation grew back, and for years I'd been telling myself to clear the road again. There is almost no cell service at the house, and the landline is so old that a hard rain will short it out for days, so a

passable road was particularly important. And for some reason, *that* morning I felt an overwhelming urgency to do the job.

I still had all my gear from my years as a climber for tree companies. I gassed my cruising saw and touched the chain up with a rattail and started down the driveway. It was unpleasant work in the heat with the mosquitos rising out of the puddles and locust thorns grabbing my pants and shirt, but by midafternoon it was done. I put the end of the bar on my boot toe and palmed the handle and looked back at my work. *Ringling Brothers could get in here if they had to*, I thought. The two teenage girls from up the road had come to babysit, which didn't happen often, so I could either go running or spend a rare afternoon with my wife. I walked back into the coolness of the house and suggested to Barbara that we take a few hours for ourselves. For some reason, I felt compelled to add, "It's such a beautiful day, and no one ever knows how many of these they have left."

Later, Barbara told me that what I'd said had briefly upset her because it suggested an attitude about life where you're constantly at risk of losing everything. But then she thought, *If he's right, I'll wish that this was how we spent our last day together* and agreed to take the rest of the afternoon off. None of this was normal: not the dream about dying, not the compulsion to clear the driveway, not the passing thought of mortality. Barbara whispered to one of the babysitters that we were leaving for a while, and we made sure the screen door didn't bang behind us as we slipped out of the house.

Waldo Frank had built a writing studio on the highest point on his property, and a trail led to it up a hill that was now covered in thick pine forests. When Frank built the studio, the hill was part of a great bearberry moorland that rolled southward from the Pamet River, and he would have been able to look up from his writing desk to see Cape Cod Bay and even the Plymouth headlands twenty miles away. The cabin had a curved roof like the hull of a lapstrake boat and a small chimney for a coal stove and a narrow plank bed. I pulled the door open, and we stepped into the cool, slightly rotted air of the old cabin. It was around five o'clock in the afternoon.

---

The human body has around ten pints of blood in it—or “units,” as doctors prefer. Women tend to have less blood than men and children have less blood than adults, but in all cases, a healthy person can lose around 15 percent of their blood without much effect. (Women commonly lose that much in childbirth.) At around 30 percent blood loss, though—three to four units—the body starts to go into compensatory shock to protect its vital organs. The heart rate increases to make up for low blood pressure, breathing gets faster and shallower, and capillaries and small blood vessels constrict to keep blood where it’s needed most, in the heart, lungs, and brain. If you push your fingertip into the skin of a healthy person, you will leave a white spot that refills with blood almost immediately. If you do the same to someone in compensatory shock, the white spot lingers, even if the person seems functional and clear-minded.

At 40 percent blood loss, the body starts to cross over into a state from which it cannot recover on its own. All organs need oxygen to function, including the heart, and if blood pressure drops too far, the heart can’t beat fast enough to maintain sufficient blood pressure for survival. At that point, the person goes from compensatory to hemorrhagic shock and actively starts dying. He or she may start shaking convulsively and slip in and out of consciousness. The person will be hallucinatory and delusional; in fact, they may have no idea they are dying. They may try to joke with the doctors or ask them why they look so worried. The brain, heart, and vital organs are not getting enough oxygen and are beginning to shut down, which accelerates a process of acid toxicity triggered by the initial shock of blood loss. Acidosis can kill people even though they received enough blood to keep their heart beating.

A person can die in two or three minutes if a major artery is severed or can hang on for hours if the blood loss is slower, as it was for me. Either way, without a massive blood transfusion—often delivered straight to the jugular—the patient will die. Forty percent blood loss could be likened to the “death zone” on Mount Everest, at 26,000 feet, where there is roughly one third the oxygen of sea level. Climbers stuck in the death zone have the same survival rate as people who lose half their blood outside the hospital, which is to say, zero.

Barbara and I spent an hour or so in Waldo Frank's cabin. Insects vibrated in the afternoon heat, and birds flustered in the treetops. A hawk rose shrieking on an afternoon thermal. And in that desultory place of ordinariness and safety a streak of pain filled my abdomen. It came out of nowhere and was immediately the only thing I could think about. The pain was worse than indigestion but did not feel *dangerous*—just very strange. I changed position to see if it would go away, and it didn't, so I tried to stand up. The floor reeled away from me as if I were standing on the deck of a ship, and I sat back down.

"How strange," I said. "I've never felt anything like this in my life."

Now my wife had a problem; there was no way to call for help, and I outweighed her by fifty pounds. She would have to get me out of the woods and back to the house on her own. I put my right arm over her shoulders, and she hooked her left arm around my waist, and we tried walking. I remember thinking that we were only minutes into this, and I already couldn't keep my feet; that couldn't be a good sign. While we shuffled down the trail, I tried to rule out problems. Heart attack? Probably not; I had no pain in my chest and none of the risk factors. Stroke? Probably not, either, for the same reasons. My mother had had diverticulitis; could my intestines have ruptured? That didn't sound too bad; I'd probably have an operation and be out of the hospital in a few days.

My mind slid around like a car on ice; as much as I tried, I couldn't stay in my lane. Months later, I asked Barbara what I had been like. "You were mumbling," she said. "You were not reassuring me because you knew something was wrong. You said, *I'm going to need help*. Your feet were still moving forward but your torso was completely leaned on me."

We finally made it out of the woods to the driveway, and Barbara opened the passenger side of the car and helped me onto the seat. It was the first time since we had left the cabin that she could look directly at my face. "There was something about the way you looked at me without seeing me," she told me. "And that's when I ran. I didn't know if you were going to die while I was running into the house; I didn't want you to be alone for a second."

I have a memory of Barbara saying she was going to get a glass of water and leaving at a run. I did not like the fact that she was running because it meant she was worried. Barbara found the babysitters playing on the floor with Xana and