# Fadings

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 PREFACE

WEDNESDAY, JULY 4, 2012

 Independence Day – our country’s, not mine. Is it a personal independence day when you lose your last parent? Maybe for some. Not me. Anyhow, that would have been last November 7. Not a day I’d ever celebrate. And now it’s 2012. But it wasn’t till Father’s Day that I finally got around to cleaning out Dad’s desk. That’s more than two weeks ago now.

 I didn’t start out thinking I’d get to his desk. No, I was worrying about how I was ever going to rebuild our savings for my son’s education. Next thing I knew I found myself sitting at my father’s desk. Not a big leap to figure out how that happened. After all, he was very good with monies and investments. Being an accountant and all. Unconsciously I hoped it would rub off. After a few projections that were pretty disheartening, I opened one of his desk drawers.

 What a surprise! I mean, judging by the surface of his desk – Father was a very punctilious man. Everything had a place. Very neat. Almost compulsive. Before his last years, when his memory was going, I don’t recall him ever misplacing anything. He knew where anything he owned was and where it belonged. Sharpened pencils and pens always in his little leather pen holder, a clean accounting note book page open in the middle of the desk, waiting for him when he sat down to work. His laptop, always open, attached to its external keyboard and monitor, off to the side, just so.

 You wouldn’t believe how much crap can be stored in a drawer. And his desk had seven drawers! I wonder if he ever cleaned them out. They were totally crammed with papers and stuff. I kept the supplies. I mean, who can’t use a few extra rolls of scotch tape, erasers and shit? But it was amazing how many old bills, useless clippings and expired business correspondence he kept. So I decided to clean out the desk.

 One drawer was stuffed with a ton of thank you letters from clients. How’d he saved their business, their marriage, pretty much whatever can be saved by being able to handle money carefully. Dad was a good accountant. Meeting him you’d know right away he was a dirt honest, direct, careful human being. I guess those are necessary properties for honorable success as an accountant.

 But the big unexpected was this diary in the desk’s bottom left drawer. I couldn’t believe Dad kept a diary. I read it that night. Anyone who holds it can tell it’s very fancy: thin, maroon leather bound, with old fashioned, Gold embossed, cursive “Writings!” on its spine and on the front cover. It has gold leaf on the page edges. And the paper is very fine.

 I love the feel of the leather cover. When I opened it, I was bowled over by the inscription. I had written it. It showed I’d given it to my father on his birthday, when I was 18. Of course, I don’t remember that. I lingered over my message. It had been slipped in the inside front cover, but here it is copied over:

 To my wonderful Dad on his 49th birthday! May writing on these blank pages help you turn the corner, have a better year and ease the pain of Mom’s
sudden departure. With all my love, Caleb.

He never did use the diary in the way I intended. Most of the pages of this skinny volume aren’t touched. So there’s be no harm in using some of the blank pages to write on. That’s why I am writing this short ‘preface’ now that I finished reading the diary. Still, it feels a bit weird: writing in his diary. Of course, the ‘preface’ is being written behind his entries where there are blank pages. In any case, I’m calling it a preface. Maybe when I’m done I’ll cut out these pages and place them in the front like a real prologue.

Anyhow, the big desk is now empty. I’m keeping it for Arthur. It’ll be a good graduation gift. One full of meaning, and anyhow, he’d love a handsome desk.

Well it’s off to bed. Denice is calling, and I’ve gotta work tomorrow. I’ll finish this another day.
FRIDAY, JULY 6, 2012

Maybe this is a bit compulsive, but I definitely need to finish my thoughts before calling it a night.

Dad’s entries surprised me. It was all so patterned. For example, the entries weren’t on random days. And he kept it up over a 30-year period! That was most of what he had left to live after I gave the diary present to him! Yet there are so few entries: four or five, depending on how you count them. And they are mainly focused on a single subject: my sister’s present to him. But you (whoever you are) can read it and judge for yourself.

So you know my father was an accountant. And good accountants are, by nature conservative and careful. My sister and I always experienced his caution when we asked him for money. Not that my father was stingy – not at all: he was generous. But he was careful, keeping book on family expenditures. And he was private. Like me. He didn’t like to talk about personal things – especially when they bothered and hurt. That could be wrong. Maybe it wasn’t that he didn’t like talking about those things. Maybe he couldn’t do it. No matter what, this diary is a window to the part of him that otherwise was hidden from me and others who were close to him.

But at another level, this diary reflects how he kept book on things. Maybe that’s to be expected of an accountant. But here he is not keeping book on money. Certainly not. No, its an accounting of things much more personal. Perhaps it started off as an accounting of some very personal feelings. But it seems to turn into an accounting of memory.

Dad loved his work. He was made for it. And to be happy an accountant must enjoy math. He certainly did. It runs in the family: both Anne and I like math too. We used to do math puzzles. I don’t know about Mom. But the three of us would often do math puzzles at breakfast. The fastest to solve it got a high five. It was a cold day in June when either of us beat Dad. But it did happen from time to time. I remember one time I won, and later in the day Anne asked how I did it. I was embarrassed but honest: told her I’d seen the puzzle in a magazine. She teased me for what must have been a month.

But time goes on. Anne and I grew up. Those days are nothing but memories now. Just a few months ago they were memories I shared with my father. And maybe I’ll be able to share them again with Anne. But now he’s gone. During those last years I seemed to share fewer and fewer threads with him – even when we discussed my childhood. Memories aren’t like things. They are different. They fade.

I think of fading (see his third entry) as a function of time. If fading were a kinder function, it would have a gentle slope and end asymptotic to some comfortable or moderate loss. Dad might have celebrated a fading of memory of that sort. It might have mitigated the sudden pains Mom, and then later, Anne, inflicted.

But I can’t imagine he expected fadings to be like that. Once Mom left, Dad became more pessimistic. He no longer thought his world was benign. Perhaps that’s why he created this weird diary, to keep his accounting, his balance between the bad and the benevolent.

In any case, I don’t know what to make of it. That’s why I decided to just add this preface and leave the rest as I found it, no changes. Well, maybe I’ll add some notes at the end. That’s because I was thinking of making some marginal notes - surely - in the form of footnotes, but that would change the flow of things. So I’ll save my remarks for the end.
I’m going to keep his diary now that I found it. But probably no one will read it. Well, I have no idea who might read it – or when. For that future reader, Mr. Hypothetical, I should add some quick notes about my father and sister. That would help any reader, even Arthur, or Denice, (or maybe even my sister!). That could put the diary in a clearer light for them. I’ll try to do it - something short - on Sunday.

**MY FATHER – SUNDAY, JULY 15, 2012**

Clifford Brunswick, born June 7, 1930. Died November 3, 2011. A child of the Depression. Maybe that’s why he ended up an accountant. He also ended up a great father. He always enjoyed playing with us as kids. Never raised his voice - well maybe that’s an exaggeration. But he had patience to spare, let me tell you.

We always ate together. Breakfast together in the kitchen - after Mom left. I remember he’d tuck his tie into his shirt so as to not stain it while eating. Weekdays, Dad wore suits and ties to work. If my memory is accurate, it wasn’t very different before Mom had left. I don’t remember any arguments or anything. Breakfast was rushed, but fun. He’d leave for work when we’d go to school.

Well maybe ‘fun’ is too positive. I liked breakfasts, but I’m not sure about Anne. She was always moody, especially after Mom left – she was in her early teens. That’s when she started doing drugs. I don’t think Dad knew. He never mentioned it to me. And I never told him. But once Mom was gone, Anne was always half ripped.

On weekends Dad would make us omelets or pancakes. Dinners were always eaten together too. We’d talk about casual things over our meals. Nothing too serious or personal. But, still, maybe Anne found all that togetherness too claustrophobic.

Dad worked pretty much by himself. He had a part time secretary. His office was small – just a couple of rented rooms above the stationary store, across the hall from the music school. He kept book for a lot of the small stores in Larchmont. It was a fancy suburb, but we didn’t live in one of its many big houses. We had an apartment. Maybe not so swish, but nice. My sister and I each had our own room. Dad had a corner work area in the master bedroom. He always called it his study. The desk took up most of it, but there was a half sized white file cabinet and he put up a shelf for the books he used. And certainly, after Mom left there was plenty of room. I remember Dad throwing out all her stuff. Clothing, books. Everything.

Summers before I went to college we’d take vacations in the Adirondacks. We’d rent a place on Long Lake. After I went to college, Dad didn’t take Anne on vacation. But Denice, Arthur and I restarted those Adirondack vacations after Dad moved down here. Dad loved it in the Adirondacks.

I wasn’t at home for very long after Mom left - only about three years. I moved out and got a shared basement apartment in Manhattan in the beginning of my sophomore year at CCNY. Still, I saw him a lot. Mainly weekends, not day to day. Anne was there with him though for almost 3 more years.

Anyhow, when I graduated I took that job with McKenzie Fabrics in Kensington and moved down here to the suburbs of D.C. After that Anne followed and went to the Corcoran in ‘82. Until he he retired, he then lived alone.

He retired in ’96, I asked him to come live with us. We built him his own room and bath. He left most all of his furniture up there in New York. Sold it. But, sure enough, he brought that big
desk. I don’t recall how we ever got it into his room. I’m going to have to figure out how we did that if I am going to get it out and give it to Arthur.

**MY SISTER – TUESDAY, JULY 29, 2012**

It’s much harder than I thought to scrape together time to write this. Anyhow, now about Anne. She always talked about wanting to be an artist. Mum painted too and always encouraged Anne. I think Anne suffered the most when Mum left. After Mum ducked out of our lives drugs got to be a big deal. Well, maybe it was big before and I just didn’t notice it; I can’t be sure.

If Dad and I are short, Anne was tall, like Mum. Dad said she looked just like Mum when Mum was young. Maybe five and a half feet. Almost my height. I wouldn’t call her a looker. I mean, she has those heavy eye brows that almost meet in the middle. And her legs aren’t shapely. And she wasn’t thin enough to be a beauty.

I mean, she wasn’t fat. Except, who knows what she looks like now? I haven’t seen her since sometime in ‘87. Not even heard a word since Christmas ‘96. For all I know, she’s now a famous artist under some new name. But Google her, you get nothing. I don’t even know if she’s married, had kids, or anything. Maybe she’s not even alive. I don’t like to think that.

The two of us were pretty close as kids, even after I went to college. If she’d just tell me where she is, she’d be the only family I’ve got outside of this house. We could go for walks together like we used to. I would have told her to quit the drugs, but she never listened to me. I wasn’t effective that way. She looked at me as some kind of nerd. That’s about the drugs. But the leaving? I can’t figure what went so wrong that she would just pick up and leave and then choose never even to communicate. Just like Mum. And that is after we promised each other we would never do that kind of thing. She did it anyhow. Damn her!

She went to a local school - SUNY Purchase. She studied art there before transferring to the Corcoran. Not that I saw her a lot down here. I’d invite her for dinner all the time. But she’d only accept once every couple of months. She’d often come stoned. If Dad came to town she’d join us for a few hours around a meal - then she’d be clean. But she got real private once she got to DC. Anne would often go up with me to Dad’s if I was going up for a holiday, but she’d never stay more than one night.

After she graduated, she took a temp job - so she’d have plenty of time for painting and making those twisty wire pieces. She’d hammer nails into wood and wrap the wire around them. They would be some form of abstract sculpture. Like the one in our hall near our bedroom. She’d sell that stuff in street fairs. When it was local, I’d bring her food, and warm soup to drink at her ‘tent.’ But when the fair wasn’t in the DC area, I wouldn’t go see her. After a few seasons of that, I didn’t see a lot of her. Then she left the area completely.

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That’s probably enough for you to understand what’s going on in the diary.
ENTRY 1 – THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 1979

Here I am. Today: 49. Starting a diary because my son Caleb gave me this beautiful diary book. Isn’t 49 sort of midstream? It’s the start of year 50. That’s sort of a jubilee year. Not that I feel so jubilant. How could I?

I mean, what to say? What to write? Should I start by saying where I am? Tell about my family? Larchmont, NY. I have two kids: Anne and Caleb. They are both loving and lovely. My wife, Susan, left me – I should say us – more than two years ago. Left me and the kids. She left the two children too. Without a word. A hell of a mother. That’s where I am.

None of us have any idea as to why she left, or where she went. She gave no warning. I had no idea that the family weighed her down so much that she had to leave. Still no word from her. No message – just that note the kids found in the kitchen:

I need to find my own life. I’m out of here. Don’t bother trying to find me. I’m not going to be found. I’ll contact you when I’m ready. Until then, good luck.

I keep it in my desk drawer - the one with all my personal notes. Most of the others are thank you’s, unlike Susan’s shocker. Hers still leaves me cold when I read it. How could she have done this to me? To us? Of course, they felt it was their fault. I try to help them through all those difficult feelings, but it is difficult.

I work at being there for them. I try to make up for her absence. I try to make our house a home – our family complete. It’s hard. A big challenge. I’ve got some new skills. I make mean burritos. And lamb chops, meat loaf. The kids like my chocolate cake, even if it comes from a Duncan Hines mix. They help a lot. Saturday morning we all spend an hour or two cleaning the apartment. I hope they aren’t doing badly. I don’t think they’re coming back. I don’t think they’ll ever see their mother again. If that’s a scary thought for me, and it is, for sure – it must be, frightening for them.

Still, today was great. They pulled out all the stops, went all out! What a birthday! Who would have expected it? It started when I got down to make breakfast. Caleb had already made blueberry pancakes. Anne squeezed fresh orange juice. I went off whistling happy birthday walking to work.

And then when I got home, there was still more to the celebration! Caleb gave me this fancy diary, and Anne gave me a painting. It’s one of hers. Very elaborate. And then a birthday cake. It’s not even a special year. Just my 49th.

I’ll keep this diary right on top of that goodbye note from Susan. If I only take this diary out when I write in it, I’ll never see her damn scribble again. Eventually, it will fade away. Paper disintegrates over time. Even gets eaten by book worms and mites. And a memory can’t last forever, that’s for sure.

But what should I write in my diary? Caleb hopes writing will reduce the pain of Susan’s departure. What do people write in diaries: what they did each day? What they feel? I’m not going to do that – write a list of ‘what I did’ or ‘what I feel.’ That’s plain foolish. I’ll have to give it some thought.

While I am here scribbling, however, I’m going to go back to that painting by Anne. It is surprisingly fabulous. She got that talent from her mother. I can’t even sketch a pear! But Anne
always had a pencil at hand. Sketched on everything. She’s good. I’ll hang it by my desk. It’s too late to continue this – almost midnight and tomorrow I do have to work. But I want to describe the painting before I sleep. I’ll be back after I prop it up so I can take a good look at it.

I’m back. Ready to take a close look and write about it.

THE PAINTING

It's big – maybe 3 feet long and 2 feet high. No frame. Acrylics. It’s a night time landscape. But the colors come through strongly. Mainly darker hues. The effect is poster-like.

In the center of the landscape is a surreal depiction of my actual desk - the one I am writing on right now, here at home. But in the painting, the desk is not in my study or even on a floor. Instead it is suspended in air, in a woods, at night. It is pictured from above, slightly to the left/back of the desk. It is an extraordinarily careful likeness - like photo realism. My red desk lamp sits there, on the right corner, lighting up the desk. Drawers to my desk are open.

Anne Marie’s got a lot of talent. I’ll say that’s a good thing her mother gave her.

Except for the lamp, a very bright moonlight illuminates the other things in the painting. Those two sources of unequal lighting have let her accent some of the colors and they seem extra bright against the subdued background lighting.

Here are some details: small animals of the forest are shown on the ground with hints of others in the trees, and behind bushes. There are squirrels and moles. Jesus, look at that: an ugly rat staring out at me with red eyes – right up front. Not nice, that little joke.

Anyhow, further back are larger animals: deer, elk, even a mountain lion glances at us from behind some shrubs. Off to the left is a tree with a branch at about the height of the painter’s point of view. On the branch there’s a monkey. It all looks peaceful, bucolic. Well, except for that rat – leering out at me. He bothers me. He seems to auger something nasty.

Oh, wait a minute! There are many more dark elements in the open drawers of my desk! She must have gone through my desk. I would never have thought she would have done that. That’s very disrespectful. Anne is exposing some very personal and hurtful things here. In that drawer center drawer she has painted ‘old photos’ with family scenes including her mother. And there, bottom left drawer, she painted a perfect miniature of Susan’s old bridal gown.

God, the frame between the drawers and the desk top! It’s not plain wood, she has painted friezes on it – with sculpted scenes of Susan and I exchanging wedding rings.

What’s going on? Why did she do this – for my birthday? It’s not nice at all. This is all too upsetting – I don’t think I will be able to sleep. I’m stopping here. I hope I see her painting differently tomorrow.

MORE – FRIDAY JUNE 8, 1979

Friday night and the kids are out - I guess that’s what to expect now that they’re older. Caleb’s got the car. I hope he doesn’t drink too much.

I’m back at my desk and am going to look at the painting again. I certainly tried to dismiss it from my mind today. I didn’t even glance at it when I pulled out this beautiful diary and came to the living room. But I ought to look at it and try to understand what Anne meant by giving me the painting. So - courage! Onward!
OK. The more I look, the more I see. There on top of the desk, behind some papers, she has painted a model of our yellow Mazda station wagon: it’s just like our old car – the one her mother took when she left. There’s even a suitcase ready to be thrown in its open back.

What’s that to the right of center of the desk, floating a bit above it? Anne’s painted a miniature of my head. And there’s a hint of blood on the desktop below my neck! She’s painted my eyes open.

There I am painted – or at least my head is painted – suspended in the air, with no body, looking off to the left, at a framed painting near the left edge of the painting. One macabre detail after another! The framed painting has a nude woman reclining on a divan. The whole thing reminds me of a painting by that guy Rousseau. I’ll bet it’s layout is a copy of that famous painting of his. Is the woman in that little painting supposed to be Anne Marie’s mother – or Anne Marie? Anne would never have known her mother as young as the woman she painted. But it sure looks like Susan. And for God’s sake, the painting is dangling from a branch on a rope using a hangman’s noose! From the branch with the monkey. The monkey is staring at my head, while scratching his crotch?

What the hell is going on in my daughter’s mind?

What did she think I would make of this? These must be my daughter’s nightmares – the detritus of our failed family, my failed marriage, the oedipal longings of a child, the imagined killing of the father? What is going on? It may be a beautiful painting, but my God, these details! So disturbing.

It’s 11:15 now. All day I was worried about that painting. What is Anne trying to say? Why’d she give it to me? What’s she trying to tell me? I mean, honestly, I try my best, every day. This just messes up my head, shakes up my understanding of the family.

I need to talk to Anne about this. Not right now. I need some distance from this - I have to get over the initial shock. Maybe if I hang the picture by my desk at home I could get used to it. That would give me a chance to get over the shock. Then I’ll have that conversation with Anne. In any case, I’ll wait until after her finals next week. That sort of conversation could be upsetting for her as well. There are all these lurid ideas. After I hear what she says, I’ll write here again.

But how am I to raise the issue? And what if I can’t start that conversation? Well then, I will revisit the diary anyhow. Certainly, some time in the next ten years (joke!). Of course, I’m not going to wait ten years. I’m going to have a chat with Anne about all this – soon – after next week. Then I’ll write again.
A few days ago a reminder popped up on my computer screen to comment on the painting and write about it in my diary. I opened the diary today and read that entry. Ten years old. Ten years ago I promised myself I would talk to Anne about that painting she gave me. I made those commitments. True, that was only a commitment to me. Reading my entry – a 10 year old joke – I had sworn I’d do it before today. The reminder popped up. I don’t remember putting in that reminder. Here it is ten years later.

I still haven’t talked to Anne. Indeed, seeing the reminder made me angry. The anger just grew inside me, erupted. I threw my yellow coffee cup against the wall. I don’t do that. I am not an angry sort of guy. But I’m angry with myself that I never had that conversation. Sure, you can blame me, but it’s not all my fault. Anne could have begun the conversation. Jesus, she made the painting. It was up on the wall, by my desk this whole time.

It’s now later. I had decided I was not going to write anything more. But I don’t know – I do have some things to say about Anne.

As I recall it, the painting was like a punch in the gut. After all I did to raise her, to give her a good start in life. I tried to be a good father. That painting was some kind of warning – things weren’t going well. I don’t blame myself.

I paid for college, I tried to make it a good home, a good family. Then Anne left for ‘God knows where’ almost two years ago – it was a lot like her mother. Now we rarely talk. True, I can call her – she has given me her unlisted number. I do sometimes. But she never calls me. Doesn’t call. Doesn’t write. Not even a card for my birthday today. I don’t even know where she lives.

Thank God I have a good relation with Caleb and his wife, Denice.

They called to wish me a happy birthday. It wasn’t any fancy birthday. Number 59. Starting my 60th. I mainly spent the day on the pharmacy’s tax problems. They haven’t kept good records of their non-prescription sales. That was my day’s headache! And it will be a big one if the IRS starts to look into it. But Herta brought me a small cake when she got back from lunch. She’d put in candles and sang happy birthday. Then the two of us blew out the candles before we got back to work. Chocolate. I liked it. I’m glad I hired her. She makes my life easier. Anyhow, that’s how I celebrated my birthday.

I was supposed to go out to eat with Jack. He had invited me but then he called to say he wasn’t feeling well and was going home. I played with the idea of going out alone, but I thought I’d get depressed. I came home, and what should pop up again – that reminder to write in the diary about her painting.

Well, I can tell you all about it. I know it well – it’s hanging right to my left on the wall. I stare at it all the time. It’s seared into my mind. It’s very existence asks interminable questions that demand answers. Mainly, why didn’t I ever talk to Anne about it? And why did she paint all those painful images? And give it to me on my birthday as a present? For God’s sake!

Right. I was going to ask her? Like Namath was going to say “Enough!” before playing that last game with the Bears?

That’s just not who I am.
Anne could have said, “Dad, let’s chat about this painting.” The kids know I’m not good about talking about problems. Especially when there’s also sex involved. That nude. The monkey grabbing his crotch. She could have brought it up.

Well, there was that one time when she tried. But only that once. Caleb had moved out and was living in the city. Anne was at home and studying at SUNY. We were having breakfast. Together as always. I was reading the paper since Anne never seemed to want to talk. But that one morning, as I recall, she asked about the painting.

“So Dad, you never told me if you liked that painting I gave you when I was in high school,” she said.

But how was I supposed to respond? I said something like, “Sure I like it. Hung it by my desk. See it every day. I wouldn’t have hung it if I didn’t think it was pretty.”

How lame! I should have ‘let’s talk about that painting. It gets me nervous.’ Or something. That’s what I wanted to. That’s what I meant to. But I couldn’t get it out. I was afraid to hear what lay behind the painting - what she would say. I mean, I had already waited a couple of years. Maybe more, even. And there were so many other things going on. I was worried about losing the Corner Store’s account. They were up for sale, and I wanted, really needed, to keep that account. I mean to pay for her college. I could have stayed a bit to chat. I should have. But I said I had to get to work, got up and left. It felt safer than talking.

Xx Now I’ve seen the painting so much I can write all about it by heart. Here, I’ll prove that now: without a glance at the painting. Here it is – all of it – from memory (absolutely without looking!):

Ok. The whole painting is a dark toned, surreal portrait of my desk. The desk is suspended in the air in the woods, in the moonlight. All in the style of Henri Rousseau. My red desk lamp is on and shines on the oak grain on the desktop. The grain is painted beautifully. My desk chair is not in the painting.

And here are the details – pretty much from left to right. On the far left, in the moonlight is a tall tree. One branch hangs over the desk. On the branch is a monkey. Hanging from the branch is a painting of a short divan or one cushioned love sit. The furniture is painted with an ivory colored wood frame and has dark green (velvet?) upholstery.

On top of the desk are some pictures, and a toy car. One of those pictures bothers me every time I look at the painting. It is of a teenager - and I can’t tell if it is meant to be a photo of Anne or her mother. I can’t seem to distinguish between them in those earlier years. The drawers of the desk are open. They display a messy, overflow of things – like pencils, rubber bands, envelopes.

There are lots of small animals in the forest, and even a big one hiding – a lion – behind the shrubs and trees.

So see? I do know the picture inside and out. Well, wait. I’ll check my memory - you know, just to make sure the books are balanced . . . . I think it is now about an hour later. Funny what I left out. That ‘toy car’ with Susan’s suitcase, my head, the nude. So many things. That’s troubling. There seems to be a story there, but I’m not sure I could tell it. And without talking to Anne, how would I ever know what’s in the picture? No wonder I didn’t remember it all.

And I don’t have a clue about other things – why she left, why she doesn’t stay in touch, and the
why of the gift of the painting. Maybe it’s genes. She’s a lot like Susan. They even look alike. But why wouldn’t she even tell me where she lives? Why doesn’t she call?

I’ll have to talk to Caleb about all this. Maybe I don’t want to hear what he’ll say? I had 10 years to talk about it all, damn it. Is that why I don’t start the conversation?

It all leaves me so isolated. I mean, it is my birthday. All these years since Susan left. I haven’t found anyone. I’d have liked someone at home who’d have wished me a happy birthday. A kiss. A hug. I’d have liked a telephone call from Anne Marie.
Entry 3 - Fadings - June 7, 1999

I am in my room at Caleb’s. He gave me a room. He brought my old desk and moved me down here about 3 years ago. I don’t sleep well down here. I used to sleep better.

Everyone has gone out. Caleb went to work. Denice is bringing Arthur to school. She wrote that in a note left by my breakfast plate. I have that note here now at my desk. I can’t keep straight where they leave things in their kitchen. So they put up little signs. They also put up notes with their telephone numbers. That’s so I can get their help if I need it.

Today they put out breakfast for me. I like eating breakfast alone. I need time alone. My calendar says it’s my birthday. It says I’m 69. Who would have thought I’d be here, in Maryland? But Caleb brought me down after I retired. It’s nice enough. The place is large enough. It’s cozy. I have a big room over his garage. Most days, I really enjoy having his family around me. It’s a comfort. But I am sure I left a lot behind.

I used to have books, a favorite chair. I lost them: the books, furniture. Just couldn’t bring a house full. Lost memories too. My mind has emptied a bit. Lost other things too. Don’t have that picture by Anne. My computer told me to comment on it today. How could I have lost such a big painting? I would never have thrown out a painting by my own daughter. But if I didn’t throw it out, how could it be missing? I should ask Caleb about it. But he won’t remember that painting after all these years.

It was strange to read a pop-up saying “Comment on Anne’s painting — and write in your diary.” I remember it was a big painting — she painted lots of animals in the woods. I hung it right by my desk. She gave it to me for my birthday.

I told Caleb there was a painting that we lost in the move. He said “No. I’ve got it, and just haven’t hung it up yet.” Then he hung this print by someone called Rousseau. It says Rousseau right on it. Not Anne Brunswick. It’s near my desk.

It does make me think of Anne’s painting though. That one got lost. They seem a lot alike, but they aren’t the same. This one’s got an elephant and two lions in the jungle. And there’s a beautiful woman on a couch off to the left. But why would I comment about this one? And how can I comment about the other one? I haven’t seen it in years. I can hardly recall it.

I really should ask Caleb about where it is. Maybe he remembers it. But after all these years. He might get angry at me.

It’s my birthday. I hope we have a celebration tonight. Maybe Caleb will get a cake. Or Denice. Arthur might make me a card. He could paint a picture on it for me. He’s quite the artist. Like Susan and Anne. Anne did that painting. I don’t really remember it.

But I remember Anne. She painted it. I don’t really remember how Anne looked. I mean outside of those photos when she was still a child. I haven’t seen her in a long time. I don’t really know why. She must have told me. I just can’t remember what she said. Or how she sounded. We spent years together after Caleb went to college. But that’s a very long time ago.

And now she’s disappeared — maybe she is with her mother. Susan that is.

I can’t even write down when we last talked. It seems like it’s been years – a very long time. Maybe I just forgot. I do that sometimes. But I don’t seem to know anything about her life.
anymore: where she lives, or anything. I wonder how many kids she has. How could I not know these things about my daughter? Is she happy? Is she well? Is she dead? What’s wrong with my mind? I’ll have to ask Caleb or Arthur. They’ll tell me.

Why don’t I know? Is it my fault? Was I a terrible father? Does she still paint? I don’t understand what happened. I tried to be a good father – there for her. I don’t think she ever told me anything was wrong. Did she ever said, “Hey, Dad, we’ve got a problem?” Did she ever say, “Dad, let’s talk?” I wish I knew.

I couldn’t call if I wanted to. I don’t know her number. She’s left me. Just like her mother. What did I do? Where did things go wrong? She’s simply gone. All those days together, and now nothing.

Just some few pictures on my desk. A growing black hole. That’s what there is.
ENTRY 4 – JUNE 7, 2009

Caleb came to my place today. He took me out for dinner. He said it was my birthday. Arthur – that’s his son – painted a portrait of Caleb and me with Arthur in it too. He painted it for me. Caleb brought it. I love it. I’ll put it on my desk. Father and Son. I didn’t know Arthur could paint. I also got a card from Denice. She’s Caleb’s wife.

My room here is comfortable but it is small. The lady at the desk says I can’t hang things on the walls.

I don’t understand some things. For example, where am I? It seems to be a nice hotel. But I don’t know how I pay for it. I don’t understand how I can afford to live here. I never have any money. I go for meals downstairs. No one asks me to pay.

Many of the people seem to know me. But I don’t know them. Today they even had a special birthday cake for me at lunch time and everyone sang ‘Happy Birthday.’

Caleb says I am losing my memories. Maybe he’s right. He asked me if I missed Anne. I’m not sure who Anne is. But I do miss my other child. She must have died. I can’t remember her name though. I told him so. He asks if I remember his mother. She must have also died a long time ago. So many people have gone, left completely without trace. Lost. I can’t even recall who they would be. Sometimes you find a crumb, left by someone – a letter or something. It’s like finding one sock. What good is it? Maybe if I could have my old friends and family members back.

I don’t understand what has happened to me. Or to those others who got lost.

For my birthday I told Caleb let’s walk. We got outside, but where’s the corner store? And my old office is gone. He said we weren’t in Larchmont. We are in Kensington. He said that’s in Maryland. I don’t remember going there.

The picture I have of my mind is a big closet where it’s too dark to find anything. I can feel around, but I can’t identify anything. I’m a stranger inhabiting a body with a mind whose thoughts I can’t translate.

The painting that caused my father so much grief?  It wasn’t lost.  My father’s initial description of it is very accurate.  The monstrous images gave him great anxiety.  I hid Anne’s painting when my father moved to my house in ‘96.  I thought it best.  Of course he should have talked to Anne about it.  Maybe that is even why she locked us out of her life back in the mid 90’s.  How would I know?  I also never really talked to her about how she felt when Mother left.  And we never talked about how Dad was doing after that.  She never showed me the painting before she gave it to him.  I wish she had.  I would have told her it was a nasty present: too much personal angst there.  But I never could talk to Dad about the painting after he got it.  Maybe I should have.

So when it was easy, I thought it best to substitute the poster of the Rousseau.  Dad didn’t even seem to notice.  He never told me he knew the poster wasn’t the painting by Anne.  So I didn’t talk about it either.  I only discovered that he had noticed my switch when I read it in this diary.