

WE

by Michael Landweber

CHAPTER ONE

The panic came on quickly, just as it always does. One moment, I am fine. Then it grips me and squeezes. Sometimes my upper arm, sometimes my gut, occasionally icy fingers clutching my throat. Always tight and angry.

Roger encouraged me to focus on the physical during an episode. That's what he called them. Episodes. I never let him use his clinical speak on me—except when I needed to cling to it. *You are not my analyst*, my favorite phrase. Except when he is.

He's gone now, though. Not gone gone, but gone enough. No longer my lover. Not here to help me.

Focus.

I tried to pinpoint where the fear held me. But it was elusive. I knew it was there. It had to be. The hyperventilation. The pounding heart. The wooziness. All the symptoms that I'd been taught to identify and then vanquish.

I found nothing.

And yet, clearly, panic.

I had experienced panic attacks before. Not infrequently. I even panicked in my dreams.

This had to be a dream.

Focus.

I stood in front of a refrigerator staring at a picture drawn by a child. An adult—certainly a teacher—had written “This is my family” at the top. In the bottom left corner, in the same teacher's hand, “Ben, age 3.”

Even without reading my name, I recognized the picture. It had graced our refrigerator door for nearly a decade before I finally pulled it down and stuffed it in the trash, long after it had lost all meaning and was merely a remnant of a time we had all forgotten.

A time when we were still a family.

But here it was, at eye level before me. There were my mother and father in their stick figure glory, with long and short hair respectively. I had drawn my father in a top hat and bow tie, though I had never seen him wear either. My older sister Sara stood next to my mother, just an eyebrow shorter but with the same burnt ochre hair. Then the two boys, me and Charles. Of course, my brother should have stood next to Sara, approximately the same height. That was his rightful place in the birth order. But that stick figure had two

unsteady letters written under it—M E. Charles was the tiny boy at the end of the line, a full three inches shorter than the rest of us. If I had been a prodigy, which of course I wasn't in any way, then maybe it could have been said that I was playing with perspective, drawing my brother as if he stood a football field behind us. But I had just made him short and me tall and usurped his rightful place as the middle child. Though to be honest, with seven years between us, I often felt as if Charles was the youngest child and I was of a different generation.

I had briefly forgotten the panic, distracted by the anachronistic picture that could not possibly still exist nearly thirty years after being sent to a landfill. Construction paper had to be biodegradable.

Whenever Roger told me to focus, he meant distract myself. It was true that sometimes a diversion would make the panic dissipate, without the usual need to complete some random task like turning on and off the lights or checking the stove or scrubbing that discoloration on the ceiling of our apartment. No, not *our* apartment anymore—*my* apartment.

The stain on the ceiling. The memory of it flowed through me, a torrent. It had to be removed, whatever it was. Leaking water from the apartment above, most likely. This attack had happened in the recent past. Yesterday, or maybe the day before—I couldn't quite recall. But it was clear in my memory that the panic had locked itself around my thighs, squeezing them so that I could feel the thumping of the blood pulsing through my femoral arteries. The tension did not start to ebb until I was up on that step stool, which was at least a foot too short for the task, rubber gloves on, Windex and toilet brush in hand, stretching for the corner of the living room ceiling, just out of reach. Reaching, then falling. Then, pain. Not like the panic. Actual searing pain in my head and neck and shoulders. I believed there was blood on the floor, but everything was upside down. There was no balance left in the world. It ended with the face of Mr. Colson, my next door neighbor, thank god we had traded keys, bending close, his lips moving, words, I heard a loud crash, they're coming, just relax. Then, hands grabbing me, something tight around my mouth and nose, rolling out of the apartment, sirens and lights. Then ... I don't know.

Here.

Focus.

A poodle-shaped magnet bonded the picture to the refrigerator just over three feet above the ground. I thought I was on my knees, but looking down, I found my feet stuffed into a pair of impossibly small Keds sneakers, lightly used and blindingly white. Someone had written BEN in thick black magic marker on the toes of each shoe, pointing up at me. My mother used to do that. I often wondered if she thought I might forget my own name.

My hands—void of hair, never scarred, unblemished, soft, with fingers like smooth marsh reeds—rose before me.

Those are not mine, I thought. This is not me.

I'd been taken to a hospital after the fall. I was now sure of that, though any details eluded me. They must have me pumped up on drugs. This had to be a hallucination. Because it did not feel like a dream. Not exactly. I was immersed. This felt vivid and real. Intense and uncomfortable.

I glanced up. Had I done that? I wasn't sure. Above me loomed the refrigerator, covered with more cheerful magnets and juvenile works of art collecting on it like barnacles. This was my old kitchen on Sycamore Street.

The urge arrived. *Remove everything from the front of the refrigerator. Now.* That was the task.

But my arms couldn't move. That wasn't right. They were not mine. My eyes closed. Wrong again. The eyes of this child closed. The refrigerator, the kitchen, the task—gone. I was grateful for the darkness. At least momentarily. Then, I realized that my eyes were in fact open. When my childhood kitchen disappeared, I no longer felt encased in the body of that child, but instead occupied myself again. The forty-year-old body all too familiar to me. But not in the hospital. Somewhere completely foreign—my first thought was that I was in a cave. The darkness was not complete. Shadows appeared, gradations of black. My eyes adjusted to this new place. I held my hands—they were my hands again—in front of my face. They were light, as was all of me, as if I was only a portion of my true self, incoherent. I struggled to rationalize my circumstances and failed. But the panic was blessedly gone. For now.

It was a cave. As the light filtered through, I could see that now. My back pressed into the wall behind me, which felt like foam, giving a little as I tensed. I was wrong, the panic was still with me, but quiet, as thoroughly confused as I was.

Focus.

I could sense that there were spaces beyond this place where I cowered. There was room to roam here and that scared me even more. I only wanted to sit still and wait for it to pass. This place was too full of possibility.

I felt the presence of others in the cave. Watching me, considering me. Two of them, one large and menacing, the other small and thoughtful. I was not alone. I saw nothing, yet was certain they were behind me. No, that wasn't possible—my back was against a wall.

I leapt to my feet, spinning around. Nothing there. Off to the side. What was that? It moved. *They* moved. I caught a glimpse of something in my peripheral vision. As I turned, dizzying myself, the things stayed just out of my sight. They were faster than I could ever be. My own rapid movement overwhelmed me. I tumbled over, landing hard, retching.

Not a dream or a hallucination or a vision or a memory. This felt more real than anything had for some time. All I wanted was for it to end.

Warm breath on the back of my neck. Something sniffed my hair in short pungent bursts. I tried to close my eyes and found that I couldn't.

“Lance! Oh god, it’s happening again.” The voice was alarmed, shrill. It echoed around me in the cave, but it came from somewhere outside it. “Binky, honey, can you hear me?”

That voice, so familiar, lost for so long.

“Calm down, Charlotte. Please.” A second voice, also known to me, deep and frustrated. It spoke again, in a tone that was different but no less angry. “Benedict. Answer your mother’s question.”

The eyes opened again—the eyes of that child. Relief swept over me. I was ecstatic to be out of that cave and back in the kitchen. Yet, even then, in those first few moments, I was starting to suspect that I existed in both places simultaneously, that the two could not be separated from each other. But I chose to focus on what I could see, adjusting again from dark to light.

I needed to stay calm, to ride out this trip. I wished Roger was here to tell me to focus. But I was alone.

CHAPTER TWO

Gentle, firm hands took me by the elbows and turned me away from the refrigerator. I now faced into the kitchen. They stood before me. Their words sounded clearer, crisper than any I had heard in years. And now I realized that everything around me indeed existed. My parents—yes, they were my parents—breathed, she with a shallowness that betrayed the tears threatening to surface and he with a steadiness that signified profound detachment. Her polyester pants rustled like dead leaves as she crouched before me. His teeth clicked.

“Binky? Binky, come on, honey.”

And there she was, my mother, kneeling down to my height, the features of her face so sharp that they cut my eyes. His eyes. Our eyes. My mother’s sadness drowned me, filled me, cut off all air. I wanted to breathe, but these tiny little lungs in this tiny little body could not possibly sustain me. I could hardly find the air they drew in, despite their best efforts. I had never seen a face as clearly as this one before me, and the reality of it shredded my memories of my mother. I wanted to howl in pain at the loss. For twenty years, I had imagined her old and wrinkled, as she should have been to me, when in truth this woman was young, and the last time I had seen her, a decade later, she had still been young. I had betrayed myself, allowing my imagination to age her.

But here she was. Her hand reached for my cheek. I knew when it touched me I would implode, matter negated by anti-matter, that I would cease to exist. And I was right, for as her fingers brushed my skin, I felt my cells dissolve, the skin, the muscle, the marrow, all rendered insubstantial by her mere existence.

My father’s voice startled me with its force.

“That’s enough. He’s fine.”

He towered over me, blocking out the sun. I was overwhelmed by the need for his approval. It terrified me that his reassurance that everything was okay somehow rendered the situation horribly wrong.

These thoughts pulled me out of the depths where my mother's love sustained me and deposited me on the shore where I was fully exposed to the deadly elements of my father's expectations and disappointments.

My reaction made no sense. These people held no power over me. Not anymore. It frustrated Roger to no end when he tried to get me to talk about my family.

"They're dead to me," I would say.

And he would respond, "Family never leaves you," countering my petulance with a Hallmark platitude.

Of course, he was wrong. My family had left. One at a time and each in their own way.

I forced my mind to recall my father as an old man. The last time I had seen him, just before I ended up in the hospital, he had been bent and desperate and gray. I gave him money and sent him on his way. He was no threat to me. My father was a failure. That is the man I knew. I tried to take pleasure in having bested him at his own profession. He toiled away at the base of the ladder at his small town law firm, while I excelled at corporate law in Manhattan, my task-oriented nature perfectly suited to those massive cases. But I never could gloat; it was too tiring.

But now there was another man, a different father, in front of me, teeth clicking, waiting for me to do something. Tensed, I could feel the danger in the combination of his strength and my weakness. I reminded myself that he was a timid man. There was no threat here. But I cowered before his animus. Until my mother took my hand.

"Come on, Binky," she said. "We've got to go soon."

In her grasp, my fingers warmed from within as if my knuckles were tiny glowing coals. I wanted to walk with her, but I could not move. I was aware of how light I was. My feet were rooted to the ground. I feared that if I took a step, I would float away from her, a lost balloon disappearing forever into the suburban blue sky that matched the wallpaper. I figured I was one hundred and fifty pounds lighter in this kitchen than I was in that hospital bed. I willed my limbs and torso to fill with the molten lead that had congealed inside my body over the decades, the concrete that had set in my adult bones and tethered me to those starched sheets.

And then I was flying. My fears—my hopes—had been realized. Gravity had no hold on me.

My mother had lifted me into her arms and pressed me to her chest. I fit perfectly there, my face peering over her shoulder as she carried me from the kitchen.

“Charlotte,” my father called after her. “We weren’t going to carry him anymore.”

“We’re late,” she said.

Up here at the appropriate height, I could see him for who he was. Tears clouded my eyes.

I realized that everything I felt was truer and deeper than it would ever be again. The emotions wrapped around me like a series of blankets, each one not a part of me, but affecting my perception of the world. I was not in control.

Even through the salty film, I could see perfectly. No need for contacts or glasses anymore. Words embroidered on the wall—“This hearth is a home”—and on the cereal boxes on the table—“Fortified for your goodness”—were legible from any distance. Things remembered—a dish here, a glass there—and things forgotten—the stand-up mixer. It was only as my eyes skittered around the room that I saw my brother sitting at the kitchen table, a pile of toast in front of him. Charles watched me leave the room in the arms of our mother. He brushed a strand of jet black hair, so different from the rest of ours, off his forehead, scratched at his acne-scarred cheeks, lifted a piece of jam slathered toast toward his braces-encrusted teeth and locked me in an angry glare.

But I didn’t care. I was flying. My mother carried me only a few feet to the hall bathroom. I never wanted her to put me down. But she did.

“Brush your teeth now. Just like we practiced. Up and down. Left and right. Inside and out.”

She smiled at me and I shattered anew.

I must get a handle on my emotions, I thought. I must control myself. If this is real, I must be able to take control.

The bathroom was yellow with tiny shells lining the wallpaper trim. The soap dish was also shell-shaped as were the decorative soaps, five scallops in a jumble. The only thing that clashed in this bathroom was a neon blue toothbrush I assumed was mine. But instead of the toothbrush, Binky took a soap and placed it on the ledge behind the sink. Then, a second and a third, all in a perfect row, neatly fanning out toward the mirror. My mother noticed when he went for the

fourth.

“You don’t need to do that,” she said. “You need to brush.”

I heard the footsteps in the hall. My father lingered there and she went out to talk to him. The water crashed out of the tap like a waterfall. I tried to hear my parents’ conversation, struggling to make out the words. The bristles of the toothbrush scraping enamel sounded like a hurricane blowing through a subdivision, splintering everything in its path.

“We have an appointment next week.” My father’s voice.

“I know. Just call and see if we can move it up.”

“Why can’t you call?” he said.

“It’s hard at the store. You’ve got—”

“Time?” Irritation rising. “Like I have nothing to do?”

“I know you’re working,” she said. “Just . . . can you call? Please.”

I spit into the sink and watched the foaminess of the toothpaste dissolve into the water. I could hear the bubbles pop and fizz. I could feel them die.

Roger had colleagues who worked with children. At dinner parties, they always said that their clients felt things differently than adults. I never believed them. Until now.

The toothpaste gel coated my tongue, like a thick layer of Vaseline.

“Fine,” he said, “I’ll call. Where’s the number?”

“Dr. Millard’s card is tacked to the board,” she said. She knew he knew where the number was and he knew she knew. “Right next to the calendar.”

I considered myself in the mirror. It was me. Me *then*. I had seen pictures of my young self, but I always had trouble associating them with myself as an adult. I understood what I looked like at that age, but none of my memories involve looking in the mirror.

My own thinness alarmed me. Although I don’t think I wanted them to, my twig-like fingers ran over my bony chest, scaling over the jut of my collarbone to come to rest on the shoulder blade that strained against my skin. There was so little of me—so little to me. No wonder my parents sounded worried.

But the concern was unfounded. I ran a palm over my arm and felt the tautness, the give. My limbs all swiveled within their joints easily, without pain, well oiled and smooth. The heart that beat within me, steady and firm, was as of yet unclogged by time and cholesterol. There was no weariness in my muscles, no deterioration in my liver. Not yet. Despite my apparent frailty, I

felt nothing but health in my being. And youth. I watched my lips stretch outward into a smile and it carried me away as surely as the arms of my mother.

The soaps ... Quickly, those little fingers snatched the last two and spaced them perfectly in line with the others.

Creaks on the floorboards over my head. Gentle thuds on the stairs. Someone was coming down.

Sara.

I ran from the bathroom. Past my mother, who I realized had been standing in the hallway, watching me. I heard Sara's voice.

"Bye, Mom, Dad. See you later!"

"What about breakfast?" my father called from the kitchen.

I was too late. I caught only a glimpse of her ponytail and her pink fingernails as she pulled the door shut behind her. Continuing my momentum, I bounded into the living room, delighted at my ability to launch myself into the air toward the couch, coming to a stop after two bounces on the cushions. I peered out the window as Sara got into Xavier Pascal's car. I touched the glass, unconcerned about fingerprints, and was seized by the feeling that I would never see her again.

Where am I? When am I?

Suddenly, nothing was more important.

Outside everything was green. There were flowers. I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. But I was going to school. Late spring, early summer. All of those clues mattered. The picture on the refrigerator. The work of a three-year-old. But I am too big. Not that young.

Xavier's car pulled away from the curb, ferrying my sister off to school. Had he dated Sara when I was six?

No. He dated Sara when I was seven. I had to be five or even six, anything but seven.

That would make it 1977. The year that three boys, ranging from seventeen to twenty-one years of age, raped my sister on a clear Thursday night. The oldest assailant was Ezekiel Pascal, Xavier's older brother. Sara called them X and Z. She joked that they needed a sister named Yolanda. X, Y, Z—that would be perfect.

Frozen there on the couch, I heard her say it again and I saw her face light up, that face I missed so desperately. I had let her walk out the door.

I felt the bile rise into my esophagus. *I don't belong here. I can't be here. Not again. Not*

here. Not now.

My head jerked around and I again suspected that I was not in control of this body. There was someone else. We looked at the foyer, and I remembered the night they'd brought her home.

There was a little lip at the threshold of our front door—who knew if it was an architectural quirk or the work of a lousy contractor? But we all trained ourselves to step higher when coming inside. That night, Sara tripped as she entered the house. The cop behind her, a squat woman with bristly hair, grabbed her arm to keep her steady then followed her into the foyer. At first, sitting up on my perch at the top of the stairs, I thought the cop had pushed her. It was hardly a memorable moment except to a child of seven who knew his sister would normally never forget about that ridge at the front door. I had seen Sara distracted, but this was different. She had become a stranger here, in her own house, in her own skin.

There were two cops present that night. Once Sara and the policewoman had cleared the threshold, the second cop—an angry-looking man, middle-aged and no doubt thinking of his own daughter—blocked the doorway itself. There was no sound save for the clipped breathing of my mother, trying to quell a panic attack. The words had already been spoken. The cops had called ahead to let my parents know that they were en route with their broken daughter. There would be more words, once they all sat down in the living room, as the four adults tried to coax my struck-mute sister to tell her horrible story. But I was not there to listen to all that. I only saw the silence.