

Blackout

Neither my wife nor my son thought much, if anything, about the bug bite he discovered on his abdomen. After all, it was summer, the air was pulsing with insects, and he'd mown two lawns that day. Nor was my wife worried that he'd fallen asleep in the middle of the afternoon; he and his best friend had stayed up late the night before, and we both knew that sleep deprivation plus physical exertion led naturally to passing out. The next morning, though, I woke him up to say that he would need to help me with some errands and that I was going to start mowing our own lawn, and that I'd check back with him in a little bit, only to find half an hour later that he was in the tub. "You're taking a bath?" I said. "Yeah," he replied, in his low baritone, "I don't feel that good." I returned to the lawn. Later, I found him sitting on the living room couch. He pulled up his shirt to show me a rash orbiting the aforementioned bite: an inflammation that resembled an oblong bull's eye. "Mom's leaving work to take me to Velocity Care," he said. "I think I might have Lyme disease." I immediately thought about the friend of a friend whose daughter's life had been wrecked by this same illness, and how she'd subsequently fallen behind at school and ultimately failed to gain acceptance to the university—a public one with a high admittance rate—where she'd always dreamed of going to college. I thought about another story I'd heard about a grown man who'd contracted the disease and who now paid biweekly visits to a doctor who administered "bee venom therapy," which involved a medical professional gripping a live bee with a set of tweezers and holding its stinger to the flesh of the man's back, a process that might be repeated with a series of bees, up to forty times per session. I looked up "Lyme disease" on my phone. If treated early, I discovered, a person could expect a reasonably short recovery; untreated, the effects could be severe and might include, according to the Global Lyme Alliance, "arthritis in joints or near the point of infection; severe headaches or migraine; vertigo; dizziness; migrating pains that come and go in joints/tendons; stiff, aching neck; sleep disturbances, insomnia; disturbances in heart rhythm; mental fogging;" and "concentration issues." It was an frightening catalogue of maladies, but I consoled myself by acknowledging that my son's condition—in its earliest stage, I supposed—would be easily treatable. I went about my day, which involved visiting a local sporting goods store in a failed attempt to locate a rain fly I imagined our family might need for the tent we planned to use the next weekend during a camping trip to Grayson Highlands State Park, home of the highest peak in Virginia, as well as treeless, tundra-like meadows where wild ponies graze and giant rocks jut at angles from the earth and from whose backs hikers can view a seemingly endless string

of blue ridges towering above green valleys. I made a trip to my office, where I ate my lunch—leftover spaghetti, which I'd sprinkled with feta cheese and the teaspoon of bacon from shrimp and grits the night before, and stored in a plastic ice cream container with a twist-off top. I wrote a few sentences in a notebook, texted with a friend, a middle-aged man like me, who was singing the virtues of Adderall. I left the office, mowed the rest of the lawn, and drove to a bar downtown, where, with a graduate student who was spending his summer writing stories in longhand while driving a forklift, we watched the U. S. women's soccer team beat Sweden, 2-0. Upon returning home, my wife informed me that our son had seemed fine that afternoon, had possessed enough energy to play basketball with a visiting friend, but now, once again, claimed not to be feeling so great; also, he felt hot to the touch. She asked me if I might go to the store to buy a thermometer and—after claiming that I was absolutely sure that we had one, and looking in multiple drawers in the house, scrabbling through iPhone charger cords and coupons and nails and tubes of various ointments and old birthday cards—I retrieved one from the local CVS. My son's temperature was 102. At my wife's request I called Velocity Care, which my wife now referred to as "Velocity Scare," since, earlier that day, one of the facility's physicians had, after assessing our son's possible condition, expressed a frightening degree of alarm—an anxiety that our pharmacist, a young man whose shop had been independently owned by the same family for three generations and was busy filling a prescription for doxycycline, had later claimed was unfounded. On the phone, a nurse said that if my son were to get a headache or if he were to complain about pain or if his fever continued to rise, that we should take him to the emergency room; if not, then we could wait until the appointment my wife had scheduled the next day with his pediatrician. That night, I agreed to sleep on the downstairs couch; should my son awake in the night, I could attend to his needs, keep tabs on his temperature. My wife went upstairs to finish watching a show on Netflix, and I fired up the PS4 to play Marvel's *Spider-Man*, the gameplay of which largely involved directing my avatar to defeat various goons using a combination of web bombs, trip mines, electric webs, kicks, and punches—a childish pursuit, no doubt, and one that I might well have been ashamed of, were the playing of this game not the exact thing my brain, which has been conditioned by the Internet over the last two decades to crave immersive and constant change, could be now said to relish. My son slept through the night. I woke early to the rustling of his rising. He said he felt okay. "Gonna go get some ice," he said. Stairs creaked as he climbed them. Cubes clattered loudly inside a bin within the freezer drawer, a sound that was followed by the quick and heavy footsteps of his mother, who, I knew, would want to check on him. She followed him downstairs. He banged into the metal gate we

used to keep closed before the dog died—or, rather, before we had her put down. I worried that, in the predawn light, he might also ram his toe into the brick hearth of the downstairs fireplace, as I'd done once, resulting in the loss, for a time, of a nail. My wife asked how he was feeling; he said his legs felt weird. Seconds later, my wife yelled my name. "Oh my God!" she screamed. "He's falling over!" I sprang from the couch, ran to his room, and turned on the light. He'd fallen backwards, into my wife's arms. His tumbler had dropped to the floor; water puddled around us. His skin had paled; his eyes had rolled back into head. I slid my arms beneath his, felt the dead weight of his body, wondered if he might be having a seizure, and instructed my wife to call 911. "Where's the phone?" she yelled. "What do you mean 'the phone'?" I yelled back. We hadn't had a landline for years. Cradling my son's neck with one arm, I let his slumped body slide to the floor. I hadn't held him like this in years, and he seemed suddenly and impossibly huge: long, meaty arms and legs, the result of a decade playing club soccer. I pressed a hand to his heart. I couldn't find a heartbeat. Couldn't even verify that he was breathing. There was, I feared, only one conclusion to draw: that this now six-foot-tall boy, whose entire life I had observed, from the very moment the crown of his head appeared between my wife's legs, and up to the night before, when he'd dutifully turned off his phone to get a decent night's rest, this miracle of a boy whose existence had not been planned and whose potential siblings—all four of them—had died in the same womb where he had been formed, whose eyes I had seen open for the first time, and whose idiosyncrasies I had, by means of various cameras, documented over the last sixteen-and-a-half years, a boy who had had grown from a curly-headed, fit-throwing maniac who often requested to see his mother's bellybutton and burst into tears whenever his friends left playdates without saying goodbye, and who had developed into a relatively subdued teenager who slurped cereal while scrolling through his social media feeds every morning, was dying—was dead, *had died*—right here, in my arms. In that moment, I entered the place that every parent refuses to imagine: the realization—so now very immediate, so palpably real—that my child might never wake again. The one thing that I could simply not let happen—the thing that I had known upon first meeting him and that I had to do everything in my power to prevent, from the moment I watched him take his first stuttering breaths—was happening. I repeated his name. "Stay with me," I said, lightly slapping his cheeks. And then, as if an invisible hand had reached down to activate his restart button, he opened his eyes. "I'm here," he mumbled. And thus, the nightmare—like the sudden light a raised shade allows to penetrate a darkened room—dissolved. Flooded with relief, I helped him to his feet and, despite his soaked underwear, led him to bed. Minutes later, a tall policeman arrived at our front door, his belt heavy with tools

and a chunky firearm, followed by a group of college-aged paramedics. An Asian man took my son's blood pressure. A young woman—"somebody's baby girl," my dad might've said—took my son's temperature, but confessed that the results might not be trustworthy, as the thermometer, in her opinion, did not work. *Note to self*, I thought, *buy good, high-end thermometer, donate to Blacksburg Rescue Squad*. My wife signed her name to a form signifying that we did not want our son driven to the emergency room. The team assured us they would return, if need be, and the officer instructed us that if we ended up needing to drive him to the hospital ourselves that we should call the police and let them know we were on our way; he couldn't condone the breaking of traffic laws, but since he too was a parent, he'd understand if we felt the need to exceed speed limits. As it turned out, we didn't make that trip to the hospital, though we did honor our son's appointment with a local pediatrician, who assured us he would be fine. Still, once the ordeal was over, I couldn't help but feel a lingering sense of bewildering dread, and eventually, I climbed aboard my bike and glided away, hoping that a ride might clear my head. It was a glorious day. I rode through the campus of the university where I teach and where, because it was summer, few students remained. I rode along the new stretch of our greenway—a boardwalk that wound through wetlands. But no matter how fast I pedaled, I couldn't flee the *what ifs*. Couldn't escape the image of my son as a curly-haired towhead sitting in his miniature Scooby Doo chair, holding a banana the length of his torso, and likely watching, as was his preference at that age, a Baby Mozart DVD. I can't look at those pictures anymore or watch the video of him eating an apple while wearing a swimming diaper on his head, answering my question, "How old are you?" repeatedly and with more emphasis every time I asked, with "God!" without missing the boy he once was, and I knew I'd lose my everloving mind were I to lose the boy that he now is. As I neared the top of a hill, I slid my phone from the side pocket of the yellow jersey I was wearing to take a photo of a puffy cloud floating majestically above a field of grass that the breeze had transformed into a swishing sea of amber waves. That's when I noticed the app with which I track the miles I travel, and thus the calories I burn on these rides of mine, not so much to compete with myself or keep close tabs on my so-called "development" as a cyclist, but to grant myself license to turn a deficit of between 800-1000 calories into an opportunity to indulge my appetite for food and drink. For some reason, despite the fact that I'd clearly remembered tapping the green "start" button, the app had failed to activate; I'd traveled at least ten miles already, but on my screen, the amount of burned calories remained at "0." Normally, I would've restarted the app again, if only to have a record of having completed a ride on this particular day, but I didn't. I wasn't necessarily riding in order to burn calories; I was riding to flee a

harrowing morning. Even so, I couldn't stop thinking about that zero: a hole, an egg, an ominously imperfect halo hovering inside my head. I'd believed the doctor when he promised that we would get to the bottom of my son's illness, but I also knew that even once the boy got better, I wouldn't be able to erase the image of his unconscious body when I'd thought he was dead; a gulf had yawned open and allowed me, for the briefest of moments, to commune with those parents who trudge daily through a grief I'd only briefly inhabited. Even so, a door had been unlocked to a room in my mind I could now visit, to reflect on the gifts fortune had bestowed upon me, and to remember that no matter how hot and bright life's radiant fulness seemed to burn, that it all might, like the flaming tip of a just struck match, be extinguished with a single blow, delivering us to the pitch black void from which we came and which waits, like an open mouth patiently waiting to be fed, for our inevitable return.