

Prologomena

There are some who presume so far on their wits that they think themselves capable of measuring the whole nature of things by their intellect, in that they esteem all things true which they see, and false which they see not. Accordingly, in order that man's mind might be freed from this presumption, and seek the truth humbly, it was necessary that certain things far surpassing his intellect should be proposed to man by God.

— St. Thomas Aquinas

We must begin with what is known.

— Aristotle

CHAPTER 1

My Volvo's windshield wipers slapped away spots of mid-March drizzle, chanting *shouldn't, shouldn't, shouldn't*. The traffic thinned, the road narrowed to two lanes, the sky turned gun-metal gray, and the Chicago music stations crackled away into static.

The patchwork fields of rural Illinois rolled away from the ditches in soft waves, with snow lying in stripes across the rows of cornstalk stubble, like a lathered but unshaven face. The rusted road signs became harder to read through the chilly mist. When I saw more cows than cars, I wondered if I'd taken a wrong turn. *To err is human, to forgive bovine*, I told myself, checking the cell phone. Was the signal too weak to reach anyplace civilized? Even if it could, I'd wait a long time for Triple-A to show up out here in the boonies if I had any trouble.

I imagined the operator saying, *We need a street address, sir*. There isn't one, I tell you; I'm in the middle of nowhere. *What is the nearest address, sir?* I'm near a barn with a faded Mail Pouch Chewing Tobacco ad. Community-college teachers can't afford a new car with a global positioning system or the monthly fee to have the service on a cell phone. *Even I have that, sir*. That's great; maybe it can tell you where I am. *Very funny, sir. The truck will still need a number*.

I glanced at the torn Triple-A map, draped on the passenger seat. The blue capillaries of county roads spidered out from the state roads' red arteries. The towns pimped the white page like blackheads on a freshman's face. A muscular pickup truck hissed past, spitting into my windshield. *Gun control means using both hands*, snickered the bumper sticker. Distracted, I ran over a dead raccoon, and the thump of it turned my stomach.

That's when a familiar heat arose in my chest and my breastbone pressed into my heart, crushing it. The double yellow lines in the

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road writhed like serpents. I slipped my foot off the gas, angled the wheel, and rolled to a stop in the gravel shoulder. Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. Focus on something. That sign up ahead — the one with the big red star.

It's not uncommon for gunshot victims, the doctor told me. Anxiety attacks can be a response to a stressful event: an act of violence, a job change, the loss of a spouse by divorce or death. Lucky me: I had all three. I was shot. I was on a Leave Of Absence from the college. And Peggy died when the leukemia came out of remission two years ago.

Breathe in, two, three. Breathe out, two, three. *Wait quietly. It will pass. You are not going to get lost. You are not going to die in this lonely place.*

The sky lightened. My breastbone released its grip. A pickup with a horse trailer whooshed by, and the Volvo shuddered. My heartbeat returned to a trot from a gallop. *You are going to be OK. Keep going. The roadkill and that bumper sticker set you off.*

Gun control means using both hands.

Indeed.

The sign ahead was for Red Star Gas, and I decided to swallow my city pride and ask for directions. The concrete was veined with cracks, and the weeds reached up from them like the hands of buried men clawing their way out. One pump, shrouded in silvery spider webs, was *out of service*. Discolored paint flaked off the building like scabs. A man with high Indian cheekbones and black hair spraying from a White Sox cap reached my window before I gathered the nerve to unbuckle my seatbelt and get out.

“Hey, meester?” He knocked at the window with a gold ring. *Tik tik*. “You want fill ’er up?”

His corn-colored teeth spread in a two-octave grin, and the dark eyebrows undulated like caterpillars. I checked the gauge, nodded and popped the gas-cap lock.

While he circled to the back, I shouldered open the door and swung my cane into position. The film instructor gave it to me in the hospital, and we joked that it should be called Citizen Cane. I dug

the rubber tip into the cement, gripped the brass head, and rehearsed how to get out. For six weeks after the hip surgery, my physical therapist Paula taught me in the transfer training how to sit up, how not to twist or cross my leg, since the pin was screwed in, not cemented. She said I'd be OK to drive after two months, provided I kept up with the treadmill, the isokinetic leg presses with ankle weights, and the balancing exercise where I walked through the rungs of a ladder laid on the floor. I'd been good about it all, so that I could retreat to my brother Dan's hunting cabin by mid-March and get started on the book I'd always wanted to write on Aristotle in peace and quiet. I just expected to do it during a sabbatical leave. Not like this.

The ideal man bears the accidents of life with dignity and grace, making the best of circumstances, Aristotle reminded me.

I levered out.

"You Chicago, eh?" the leathery attendant called.

He aimed the gas pump at me like a pistol.

"Yes," I replied.

"All the way out here?"

"Visiting relatives."

"Yeah, sure." He lowered the nozzle, pumped gas and pointed at Citizen Cane. "What's wrong with the leg, *señor*?"

"I was shot. In December."

The eyebrows turned into Mexican jumping beans. "*Ay, caramba,*" he said with a whistle. "An accident, no?"

"A college girl with a touchy 9 millimeter in her purse. She pulled it on a rival in a hallway catfight over a boy. I broke it up and —"

When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of Peggy. Is this what it feels like to die, not in pain, really — the shock prevented that — but in wide-eyed surprise, that it should come so soon and so stupidly? Once the second shot shattered the head of my right femur where it forms step in the acetabular groove of the pelvis and I dropped to the tiles with my blood fanning across the floor, I wished Peggy could have gone like this, not by having her blood poisoned by leukemia, draining her life away.

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“¿Señor? Then wha’ happen?”

“Well, I got in the way, that’s all,” I concluded.

“Anyone else hurt?”

I shrugged. “Just me. Some guys have all the luck.”

“So you are here to see the healer, eh?”

I squinted at him. “The what?”

“The healer in River Falls? You know, for the leg.”

“I’m going to River Falls,” I conceded. “But I’m not going to see any —”

“Ees OK,” the man said with a cackle. “I talk to a dozen people like you today who are lost. The only reason people from Chicago are on this road is to find him. I hope, *señor*, you have made your motel reservations.”

“I’m staying in my brother’s hunting cabin in Tall Pines Park.”

“That is good, very good,” the man said with a wag of his head, “for there are no rooms for twenty miles around.”

The Tall Pines Park sign, peppered with buckshot, appeared three miles from the town turn-off, just as the gas-station man had told me. The cartoon raccoon on the park billboard told me the fire danger was LOW today. It did not say the danger was high for raccoons.

I decided to find Dan’s cabin first, and then check in with the resident managers. The car crunched on the sand-and-cinder road past their permanent trailer, its aluminum awning festooned with red and green plastic lanterns. A golden light glowed inside. A country-craft sign out front with crossed fishing poles bid “Welcome. Beth and Hadley Berger.” White wooden arrows nailed to a post directed “Cabins left, camping right.” I found the cul-de-sac for the three-season cabins and rolled to a stop at #3, the farthest one. The others looked vacant, as one might expect.

No one will be there ’til Memorial Day, Reed, Dan had assured me. *You can write and do your exercises without no one botherin’ ya. Just what you need.*

“I dunno, Danny,” I had hesitated. “It’s the middle of nowhere and —”

C'mon, you crybaby, he said, whacking my head lightly with a rolled-up newspaper. *It's downstate Illinois, not Africa. What are you afraid of?*

Fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil, Aristotle whispered.

I shoved open the car door, grasped Citizen Cane, and swung out my legs with help from my cupped hand. The bracing air sent a shiver through me, but it felt good after the nervous drive. I pressed out with my elbows on the doorframe. The goose-down vest rustled on the steel. Once upright, I held my breath. No pain. If it ached, I could take some aspirin without any bad interaction with the anxiety meds.

I dug in my vest pocket for the skeleton key with Dan's Mack Truck bulldog key chain. Just as Dan said, I faced only a single step up to the porch and front door. The therapist told me stairs would be tricky for a long time. I chipped away some ice-crystals from the lock and then fit the key inside. It clicked. The door creaked open. Too easily, I thought. There'll be a draft.

The musty cabin looked spare but suitable, decorated in Early St. Vincent DePaul. A rocker with alligatored black paint flanked a stone fireplace. Freshly chopped wood filled a metal bucket beside it. Bless Dan's heart. And it was all one floor; no loft, second floor, or basement to think about, and I'd obviously never need to visit the insulated crawl space. The dread of descending even a few steps sent me into a spin. I still couldn't "find my leg" as the therapist put it. And when the meds made me drowsy, the balance problem worsened.

I elbowed the door shut against the moaning wind. The calico window curtains fluttered. The plank floor squeaked. I checked the narrow kitchen — tested the light switch, the sink, the stove. All on, just as Dan promised he'd do when he passed through on the way to Iowa in his 18-wheeler.

When the second-hand Frigidaire hummed into life, I remembered how Dan said everything would be stocked and ready: cold dark beer, brie, dill pickles and sauerkraut, chocolates and red wine. What a kidder. He knew that anything fermented or pickled, anything with

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tyramine — and it was a long list — could react with the MAO Inhibitors and burst a blood vessel in my brain. It was the main reason most people stayed away from MAOIs when choosing anxiety meds. They preferred the mild dizziness or diarrhea of SSIs like Prozac or Zoloft to the extremely vigilant diet of MAOIs. No one wanted to die from eating a chocolate bon-bon or black out from drinking a glass of Beaujolais.

Most people can't handle MAOIs, the doctor said. They can cause more problems than they solve.

They worked a miracle for me.

I opened the fridge — bottled water, white bread, deli chicken slices, tuna and a brand-name baloney. Dan figured either the chicken, fish, or the baloney would be safe. Processed meats were iffy; I'd have to consult my list of forbidden foods before I made a sandwich. The cabinets were full of chicken soup — no doubt Dan had seen it served to me in the hospital. In the lower cabinets, I recognized the pots and frying pans from our Boy Scout days together, the kind that fit inside each other and the frying pan handle screwed down to hold the kit together. *So this is where they went. I thought we'd lost them.*

I shuffled to the small bedroom, where I tested the rail Dan nailed to the bed frame. The yard-sale dresser drawers stuck a little. I picked up the Princess phone. Dead. Guess he figured I had the cell, so why bother getting it reconnected.

Back in the parlor, I noticed the cherry desk — or was it a sewing table? It was chipped and speckled with white paint, as though it had spent time in a rural garage as a workbench. It still had the price on one of its graceful legs, marked with felt pen on yellow masking tape. Dan got a good deal. I brushed away some dust and cobwebs, set up the laptop, and loaded a CD of Strauss's "Waltz in C Major" for a serene background. I certainly wasn't going to dance to it.

It was while using the facilities that I first heard it — a scraping noise in the walls. At first I thought it might be a tree branch rubbing the cabin in the wind, or a squirrel at the window. The scratching and shuffle moved across the wall behind the pine paneling. Bits of wood

and plaster crumbled behind it. Silence. I listened. The scratching started again, little claws on drywall, crawling. My flesh crawled with it. I hadn't noticed any droppings in the kitchen, but I figured the cabin had chipmunks, shrews, mice — or worse, bats — living in the wall. I tapped it with the cane. Crumbs of plaster tumbled, and the scratching stopped. Something would have to be done about this. I'd have to keep the kitchen extra clean. *Ye gods, did they come out from the walls at night?* I could set up traps around the bed and try not to step on one in the morning.

I pulled on my Chicago Cubs ear-band and gloves, checked for the key in my vest, seized Citizen Cane, and scuffed outside. I'd already had one anxiety episode today; no need to dwell on the image of little blood-sucker vampires in the walls and have another attack so soon.

The walk to the manager's trailer in the cold air did me some good. I took my time, nose down to watch for ruts and the potholes where thin ice glittered like cellophane. The burr oaks raised their gnarly arms to the slate sky. Soaring honey locust trees swayed, the Norway spruces swished. Patches of snow hid in hollows from the oncoming Spring. A tang of applewood smoke incensed the air, the managers' woodstove, I presumed. I looked forward to sitting by a blazing fireplace myself. I might have to ask for some matches. I had quit smoking my pipe when Peggy was first diagnosed with the cancer.

An RV the size of a small bus entered the park and rumbled down the right fork toward the camping area. The silver-haired driver waved.

I stopped and saluted with the cane. Through my polite smile I thought: who in their right mind goes camping in a drippy and cold northern Illinois March? It can't just be the swell off-season rates. Of course, they were probably wondering the same thing: *Doris, lookie there — what's a cripple doing out here in the middle of March? Homer, honey, be nice: he's here to see that healer the Mexican gas-station man done told us about.*

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Shrugging off the thought, I tugged my collar up against the sharp wind. Hot soup, a snapping fire. That would fill the rest of the evening. I'd plan out the week. I'd write —

“Watch out, mister!”

I skipped aside by instinct. My hip flared. I sucked in my breath. Two bikes clattered by, with boys dressed in parkas and ski caps. They spun through the loose sand and pumped for the campground.

“Sorry, mister!” one called over his shoulder.

I gritted my teeth. I steadied myself and eyed the two boys pull wheelies and drop out of sight. Facing that way, I realized the smoke was coming from the campsites. And that smell: was someone grilling meat outdoors? In March? Odd. Must be a burger joint nearby, I guessed.

Just before I reached the worn path to the manager's trailer, the front door swung open. A portly woman in a puffy coat backed out the storm door, a large board under one arm, bending for the inner door to pull it shut. I offered to help.

“Oh dearie, you startled me,” she said, clutching the board. She smiled warmly, but instantly her eyes creased in worry. “You here for a campsite?”

“No, ma'am,” I replied. “I'm Reed Stubblefield — Dan's brother?”

“Oh, sure,” she said, eyebrows lifted with relief. She tucked some frosty hair back into her beret. “Danny told me all about you. The college teacher. Exceptin' he didn't say you were such a nice-looking man.”

“It's the cold,” I said. “It tightens my skin.”

She laughed. “But it don't stop you from blushin'.”

“Say,” I returned, trying to ignore the warmth in my cheeks, “do I need to register or something?”

“Nah,” she shooed with a flick of the wrist. “Just so's I know you're here. Sign out when you leave for good, that's all. How's the leg? Or the hip? Was it the hip?”

“The hip. Getting better. Should heal up fine, now that I'm here.”

“Oh, sure, dearie,” she said. “You come to the right place for that.” Her face pinked in the cold. “You need anything, you just holler. I got lots of wood, all cut up. Already put some inside for ya.”

“I saw it. Thanks so much.”

“Danny keeps the matches on the mantle,” she said. “There’s old newspapers and kindling behind that rocker. Oh! I’m Beth Berger. The manager here. Shoulda said so.”

“I figured.”

“Hadley’s gone to town to the Value Mart for a few things. They close at nine o’clock. Ya got time, too, if ya need something — milk or bread or cold beer or whatever.”

“I’m all right for now.”

“Suit yourself.” She shook off a chill. “Flurries, they say. Gonna be cold in the tents tonight. Too bad they can’t go to the motels — they’re all full. You stay warm, OK?” She shifted the board to the other arm and marched away toward the park entrance.

The sign said *Sorry — Camp Full*.

CHAPTER 2

River Falls (pop. 800) welcomes visitors with a totem pole of signs for the Lions and Kiwanis and local churches. Once across the Sinnissippi River Bridge, one meets the only stop light. River Street, the scenic tourist route, features two gas stations, a diner, a '50s-style drive-in (closed for the season), Ace Used Cars, and a Town and Country Insurance office. My company. I made a mental note to check on my disability insurance. When was the first check supposed to arrive? After sixty days? Was it ninety? What was the agent's name on the sign? Something de la Cruz. Sally Ann? Selena? *Should be in the phone book*, I thought. *I'll call later.*

The "business district," one block further on Main, looked a little like an abandoned Wild West movie set without the hitching posts. The angled parking was full of Chevy Silverados and Ford F-150 pickups and RVs with "disabled" plates. A tavern on every corner, with "Karaoke every Friday" signs and NASCAR banners advertising cheap domestics on tap. One had a faded "Welcome Hunters" banner that had never been removed. The bank looked updated with a single-lane drive-through. A Fix-It Hardware, a video rental place, a craft store, and Value Mart, alongside some boarded-up shops.

The Mart was a hybrid of pharmacy and Five-and-Dime, with bargain bins by the entry, and steel shelves stocked with housewares, home remedies, greeting cards, gifts, and cosmetics. A "sportsmen's corner" featured a rack of fishing poles and a locked glass case of lures and ammo. I noted the office-supplies aisle: notebook paper, index cards, pens. You could spend a little more here, but save a trip to Sterling or Freeport.

I noticed the camping gear on my way to the glass-paneled pharmacy counter in the back, passing a family of Hispanics. Farm

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workers, I supposed, given the straw Western hats, denim jackets, and rough hands. A gaunt Anglo man leaning on a walker dropped two propane bottles into his basket. There weren't many bottles left on the shelf. I almost bumped into an old woman in a wheelchair rounding a corner. "Pardon me," I said. She adjusted the nose-tubes connected to the mounted oxygen tank and straightened the stems in her lap. A man on crutches passed me and said good morning.

I was third in line and should have brought a book. I usually do. I might have taken one from the table there, but they were all romances and westerns — prescription fiction. The magazines were all about cars and outdoor sports. No *Harpers* or *New Yorkers* here. Not even a *National Geographic*.

The pharmacist worked alone. Looking over his glasses, he explained the dosage and cautions to the first customer, a gouty woman in her forties, with braces on her thick, blotchy legs. A diabetic, perhaps. The next customer, a rail-thin man with a nervous squint, had a problem with his insurance card. The pharmacist — Cliff Barnes, by the framed license — pecked at his computer and told the man to check back later. The man grumped.

I clutched. I thought I'd cleared this, but what if he wouldn't take it after all? I should have used the mail service, but —

"Yes, next?" the blue-frosted druggist called.

I hobbled forward, gave my name. "I called about the Nardil."

"Oh, yes," Barnes replied. He ran his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair, just beginning to recede. "I don't get much call for MAOIs any more."

Did he have to say it aloud? He fished through a basket labeled "call orders." The basket was full. "Simpson, Stowe — here." Several brochures were stapled to the bag.

"Now, you know about these, right?" he said, pulling a pencil from behind his ear and tapping the brochures with the eraser end. "This can make you feel sluggish, especially in the morning when your blood pressure is low. Wiggle your feet and move a little before you get up. Here's a list of foods high in tyramine you can't have or you'll

get ‘The Cheese Reaction,’ a spike in your blood pressure. Very high, very fast. Very bad. You know all this already, right?”

I’d been nodding the whole time. “Yes, I’ve been careful.”

“A baloney sandwich won’t kill you, but you’ll get a headache you won’t forget.”

Good thing I passed on Dan’s lunch in the fridge.

“The ProCardin is in here, too. That’s the antidote in case someone slips some Chianti in the spaghetti sauce or soy sauce in the burger for flavor and you didn’t know. You have to take it within five minutes of symptoms. Massive headache in the frontal lobes, sore neck, rapid breathing, chest pain, the sweats, fainting — you know you ate something you shouldn’t have.”

“I’m on bread and water,” I assured him.

“As long as it isn’t banana bread or raisin bread,” he retorted, all business. “And if you catch a cold, given the season, stay away from antihistamines or cough suppressants that have dextromethorphan — you know, Tussins and anything with ‘DM’ on it. Those are the main things; there’s more. It’s all explained in here. Any questions?”

“I think I’ve got chipmunks in my cabin walls,” I said. *Or rats. Or bats.* “Do you have something here to get rid of them?”

He peered at me over the glasses. “Chipmunks? Hmm. Could be mice, maybe shrews,” he said. “Been a problem lately with so much corn in the elevators going for ethanol production. Try the honey-flavored rat poison in aisle 2. Comes in soft blocks you break off and put along the walls. Oh — any pets, kids?”

“No.”

“It’s strong stuff. Wear rubber gloves. Anything else?”

“Rubber gloves.”

“Aisle 4, housewares.” He handed me the bag. “Pay up front. And go easy on that. If you take more than the label says, you’ll hallucinate. God knows we have enough visions of the Virgin Mary around here.”

“Pardon me?”

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“Aren’t you here to see him, too, like everyone else? I mean, you being an out-of-towner, with the cane and all?”

“See who?”

“Father Ray. The Bleeder. Well, the healer. You know — the priest with the stigmata.”