So Many Lovely Lies: A Study of Irony in 7 Quotations, 2 ½ Suicides, and 1 Broken Heart

ANDREW GEYER

1. Except for music, everything is a lie, even solitude, even ecstasy.

Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran wrote those words in 1987 at the age of seventy-six. He spent his whole adult life—and his entire philosophical career—contemplating suicide, but died of natural causes at the age of eighty-four.

Life is irony.

As it turns out, much of my adult life has been a case study, testing whether Cioran's statement about music and about lies is as true in the world of Forms as it is in the world of Ideas. For the majority of that time, I was an unwitting lab rat—running through my maze each day, savoring the reward at the end of my path, blissfully unaware of the grand experiment in which I played such an integral, albeit unconscious, part. Only in the past six months has my role become purposeful. Considered. Conscious.

Ironically, the series of events that woke me up resulted in the death of my wife. The medical examiner ruled that her death was accidental, but I know otherwise.

2. Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

Haruki Murakami, the Japanese author and distance runner, wrote that, and I contemplate the distinction as I jog through the snow.

Is there a real-world difference between the two, I wonder—an otherness that does not involve the semantic acrobatics of Buddhism? The icy air in my lungs is painful. And because I haven't eaten in twelve hours, I am suffering hunger pangs. But how is the pain in my lungs different from the suffering in my belly? Or, for that matter, the blisters on my toes?

As I approach the intersection of Marlboro and South Boundary, and the red light of the rising sun glitters on the ice-crusted asphalt beneath my feet, only one thing is certain: I am about to put Murakami's philosophical statement to a real-world test.

It is a perfect morning for worldview-testing.

The great ice storm of 2014 pummeled Aiken, South Carolina, all through last night; and like the battered remnants of my previous life back in Tulsa, Oklahoma, South Boundary Avenue is in tatters. The power lines are down, the great limbs of the venerable old oaks are down, the wreckage is covered in snow and ice. The red sun rises like a bloodshot eye. And yet, "Clair de Lune" by Claude Debussy floats in all its delicate elegance through my ear buds and into my brain, and as I pass the Marlboro stop sign and start across South Boundary, instead of pausing to look both ways, I close my eyes and keep running.

"Please, please," I pray to Buddha, to Jesus, to whatever higher power might be glancing my way, "let today be the day."

The pain in my lungs and the suffering in my belly blend, in a perfect contrapuntal melody, with the Debussy in my brain and the poignant anticipation of blunt-force trauma that fills my soul. And I reach out to embrace the afterlife, or eternal darkness, whichever the case may be . . .

But finally, instead of the bone-crushing impact of an onrushing motor vehicle, I feel my feet crunch onto the mix of sand and snow on the far side of South Boundary. In the absence of a deus ex machina, I open my eyes. The rising sun brightens from bloodred into orange, from orange into yellow. And I continue on into the Aiken horse country and the emptiness of another day without Isabella.

3. Man does not control his own fate. The women in his life do that for him.

Groucho Marx, who was a master of irony, said that more than once. Groucho's actual given name was Julius, and all three of his marriages ended in divorce. I don't know whether Groucho ever contemplated suicide. But he did spend more

than a decade hosting the game show *You Bet Your Life*.

Like Groucho, my own given name is Julius. And I bet my life every morning at the intersection of Marlboro and South Boundary.

Unlike Groucho, I have had only one marriage. It ended when the SUV my wife was riding in flipped over the guardrail of the Wilson Avenue Bridge in Tulsa, plunged into the Arkansas River, and sank like a stone.

If this were a different kind of story, a tale of true love instead of tragic irony, I might go on for pages about my wife's eyes. They were the color of blue ice, with an interior light like the snow that falls onto a glacier, is compressed, then becomes a part of the floe. I might tell you about standing with my wife on the deck of a boat on Lago Argentino in southern Patagonia—Isabella was Argentinian—and looking back and forth between the Upsala Glacier and her irises, which were exactly the same heart-piercing shade of deep blue and every bit as luminous.

Instead, I have to tell you that my wife was not alone in the SUV when it flipped over the guardrail and plunged into the river. And I have to tell you that the man who died with my wife was in fact her lover, and had been for years—a fact I'd discovered only hours before.

4. The imagination is the only thing worth a damn.

The poet Hart Crane wrote those words. He committed suicide by leaping from the deck of the steamer *Orizaba* into the Caribbean Sea. He had just left the cabin of his lover, who was also the wife of his best friend.

Since the death of my own wife, and the series of revelations that preceded it, I've spent a lot of time imagining. Instead of the man she died with, who also happened to be my best friend, I imagine that it is my own naked body intertwined with the pale and lithe body of my wife—the body of an avid runner, although classical piano was her first passion—the throes of our lovemaking so intense as we speed across the bridge that we lose control of the Honda Pilot and literally take flight, spinning wildly through the air until the moment of impact with the water.

Unlike my wife, the body of the poet Hart Crane was never recovered.

But like Isabella, he must've died by drowning. Again and again, I imagine smashing through the surface, the white-hot shock of impact fading as I sink deeper and deeper into the grip of the suffocating dark.

If this were a different kind of story, I might share with you the details of the afternoon my wife and I spent at Iguazú Falls, on the Argentinian side at Puerto Iguazú. It was our honeymoon. Isabella wore a loose-fitting white dress, short and sheer, and the wind—heavy with mist from the cataract—gusted up, billowing the dress around her thighs, her waist, her perfect breasts. I might describe to you the way the fabric became transparent as it clung to her skin, the way the sight of Isabella made me feel so completely alive and in love that I wanted to celebrate our honeymoon forever.

But this is not a story about celebrating life. It's about trying to find the courage to die.

5. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John the Evangelist, who was the only one of the twelve Apostles not to have been killed for his faith, wrote that. Like John, I believe that words have the power to create and to destroy. Also like John, I am living out the end of my life in exile.

Unlike John, I do not reside on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Instead, I've come to the city of Aiken in the state of South Carolina. The Atlantic Ocean is hours away. But as was the case with the Book of Revelation, and the Fourth Gospel, I am writing a tale of betrayal and its consequences for both the living and the dead.

Words created the life my wife and I shared back in Tulsa. My words, in a way, since I owned every book in Twice-Told Tales—the best used, rare, and collectible bookshop in the state of Oklahoma—and I made my living selling them. Online mostly, to collectors, although walk-ins were always welcome. I had decided that the best thing a failed poet can do is sell the words of his betters, and it was a good enough life. But lonely. Loveless, except for the passion in the lines of the masters, pressed into the volumes of poetry that took up an entire wall of my store.

That is, until Isabella walked in.

Night after night, in dreams, I relive the icy December morning when she first jingled the string of antique sleigh bells on the front door. Red-haired. Pale-skinned. Exquisite. Her eyes the most intense shade of blue I'd ever seen, and that I had no name for—she had not yet taken me to visit the Upsala Glacier—

except *mesmeric* as she stepped up to the counter and transfixed me with her stare.

Could you recommend for me a book of poetry?" she asked, without a greeting and in a lilting Latin American accent whose country of origin I couldn't place.

Instead of answering, or asking, I recited "Body of a Woman" by Pablo Neruda. In English, unfortunately—I had not yet learned to make love in Spanish—and then I gave her as a gift the book it came from: *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Although Neruda wrote the words, and W.S. Merwin translated them, it was I who presented them to Isabella as though they had been created for her alone.

It was the beginning, and she was my Word made flesh.

I closed the shop and discovered over espresso at the coffee bar across the street that her name was Isabella, that she was a concert pianist and a professor in the School of Music at the University of Tulsa, that she was from Mendoza in the Andean foothills and her father made wine. Much later, after dinner at Mahogany Prime—Tulsa's best surf and turf—she played Suite Bergamasque for me on the grand piano in her living room. We were sharing a second bottle of Argentinian Malbec from her family vineyard, and although it was Debussy who wrote the music, based on a poem by Verlaine, it was Isabella who performed the "Clair de Lune" movement as though it had been summoned from the void in that moment and divided from the darkness to haunt my dreams until the end of time.

The words that destroyed our lives belonged to Isabella. I read them on her computer in the aftermath of a temper storm. I'd been sitting in our living room, sipping Malbec and indulging in my second greatest pleasure, which was watching and listening to my wife play piano—to *play* an instrument, in Spanish, is to *touch* it (a tocarlo); and when Isabella played the piano, she made love—when *boom!* the sheet music went flying. Isabella could explode without warning when she was struggling with a difficult piece. And as I gathered up the scattered pages of Brahms's "Piano Concerto Number 2 in B-flat Major," which she'd just flung at me on her way out the door, a series of unfamiliar notes sounded on her open laptop. I investigated.

What I discovered was my own personal apocalypse. Make no mistake: I died that day. Although somehow I find myself still breathing, inexplicably, half a continent away.

This being the kind of story that it is, I would gladly share with you the contents of the love letters I found on Isabella's laptop, in an email account I never knew she had. Addressed to a man I trusted, they stretched back for years. But the only thing that really matters, as I write this, is that the deeper I delved into the intimate details of the torrid love affair between my wife and another man—a man I'd introduced her to—the more the heat of their hunger for each other burned away my capacity for compassion. For conscience. Even for reason.

I lurched out of our house into the August heat, hauled a lug wrench from the toolbox in my old Ford truck, staggered six blocks to the restaurant that my now ex-best-friend owned near campus. And I loosened the lug nuts on the front passenger-side wheel of his Honda Pilot.

6. Love is the heart of everything. If it stops working, all the rest withers, becomes superfluous, unnecessary.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, who was the leading poet of the Russian Revolution, wrote those words in a letter to his lover, Lilya Brik. Lilya's husband, Osip, was Mayakovsky's publisher and friend. After a row with another married lover, Mayakovsky committed suicide by shooting himself in the heart.

Unlike the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, I do not possess the courage to point a loaded gun at myself, much less to pull the trigger. I don't even have the guts to leap from the deck of a ship like the poet Hart Crane. Indeed, as has been the case so far with suicide, it may be that my failure as a poet was really a failure of nerve.

But like Mayakovsky, I do possess an intimate appreciation for the meaning of the word *irony*.

So I get up every morning, run to the corner of Marlboro and South Boundary, and close my eyes. In the endless seconds while I float between life and death on the ethereal notes of "Clair de Lune," I relive the moment that I discovered Isabella had been in my ex-best-friend's Honda Pilot when the front passenger-side wheel buckled and the SUV flipped over the guardrail and sank to the bottom of the Arkansas River.

This is what I always see:

Evening is falling. I am staring out the window at the darkness enveloping Tulsa and trying not to feel. Then a cop walks into my bookshop. A female cop, I see, and as she approaches the counter, it comes to me that she is here to arrest me for vandalizing

the SUV of my ex-best-friend. Instead, she shows me a photograph of my wife and asks whether this was Isabella.

Was, she said. Even as a failed poet, I was familiar enough with the intricacies of the past tense in English to understand that Isabella had died. I don't remember what the cop said after that. What the words were.

But the photo:

The skin that was so pale in life is in death even more so, with the bluish tinge that comes from asphyxiation. Mercifully, someone has closed her eyes. There is a cut on her forehead and another on the bridge of her nose—from the dashboard? the windshield?—but both cuts are bloodless, so that they almost look drawn on.

I was struck dumb. Aphasic. Out of my mind.

I don't know how long. Instinctively, I walked over to the poetry wall. I pulled a pale yellow volume from the shelf and stared dumbly at the cover. A minute? An hour?

When I finally opened the book, I found a one-way bus ticket from Tulsa, OK to Aiken, SC. The ticket was like a key, unlocking my ability to understand words. Context. I realized that the ticket was a bookmark. The poem whose place it saved opened with the words *The lilacs wither in the Carolinas . . .*

The ticket, dated 17 August 1969, was long expired. Never used. I shut the book and read its title: *Harmonium*. I remember thinking about irony as I carried the book back to the counter and sat down.

7. All that is solid melts into air.

Karl Marx wrote that in 1848, in Chapter 1 of *The Communist Manifesto*, and revolutions broke out across Europe when people read it. For those readers who realized the full import of Marx's words, religion died.

The thing that died for me was love.

I suppose revolutions can either be about an ending, or a new beginning, depending on which side you're on. 161 years after Marx wrote them, I heard his words spoken aloud in Spanish by my wife. Although I didn't realize it at the time, her quotation marked the beginning of the end for my whole world.

It was the twenty-ninth of December in the year 2009, a day I thought was perfect. I had just finished the greatest run of my life, a sixteen-mile fast loop through the snow in Tulsa, a tune-up for my first marathon. I'd been running along the Arkansas River when a flock of Canada geese startled up off the water,

circling around and above me through the snow that fell thick. The white snow swirled earthward, the geese whirled skyward in black and grey, and as I ran along in the vortex of their opposing motions, the planet itself seemed to slow. Time faded like my footprints in the snow, and I felt like I was running on air.

I reached the house, cold and wet and exhilarated. Breathlessly, I told Isabella about the geese and the snow and the running-on-air feeling. She warmed me by making love to me in her native tongue. But when we finished, she looked through me with those eyes like the icy Upsala Glacier and said, "Recuerda."

"Remember what?" I asked.

"Todo lo sólido," she said, "se desvanece en el aire."

At the time, I thought she was talking about my run. But three years and eight months later, as I stared at her open laptop, having worked my way back to the very first of the love letters my wife had written to the man I thought was my best friend, I did indeed remember: *All that is solid melts into air . . .*

The letter was dated 29 December, 2009. While I was running on air next to the Arkansas River, they began their affair.

Late in the evening of 16 August 2013—the day I drowned Isabella—I read from cover to cover the book of poems that I'd pulled from the shelf by instinct after discovering my crime. *Harmonium*, by Wallace Stevens, perhaps the most ironical twist in this tale of tragic irony.

A *harmonium* is a reed organ with a foot bellows: it has the keyboard of a piano, but it runs on air.

Having realized for myself the full import of Karl Marx's words, I have not much use for organized religion anymore. But fate is another matter. The day after Isabella's funeral, except for my books of poetry and a select few works of philosophy, I sold all that was mine to sell. All that was hers went to Isabella's family in Mendoza. I loaded the books, some clothes, and a few personal effects into my old blue Ford. Then I drove to Aiken, South Carolina, and bought the last house I will ever own.

I found it on Newberry Street, a two-story colonial fixer-upper built in 1887 with ten white columns on the front porch. The columns are of the Ionic order. The house has yellow siding and a red roof; the outbuilding in back, also yellow, has garage doors instead of columns and too much storage space for a man who came to South Carolina with his worldly belongings in the back of an old Ford truck. But there is a pharmacy two doors down, and a family medicenter on the

far side of the back fence. So if I work up the nerve to overdose on opioids from the pharmacy, and fail, help is across the fence.

I settled in, drank red wine, read poetry and philosophy. I found a liquor store called Harvard's that carried Isabella's family Malbec. I bought a laptop computer and installed Wi-Fi. I drank a lot more wine. But for the life of me, I couldn't work up the guts to do myself in.

Finally, after a couple of months of self-loathing, while I was reading an article on the web about suicide machines, a car roared past the house on Newberry Street. I glanced out the front window and saw the Ionic columns on the front porch, and the idea for my deus ex machina was born. Later that day, I bought a cell phone and ear buds, and learned how to put Debussy's "Clair de Lune" on an endless loop.

The next morning, I started writing and running again.

I couldn't run very far at first. But I kept pushing myself, jogging a little farther each day and looking for the perfect intersection. It couldn't be too busy, or I'd lose my nerve; but too empty would be a waste of time. I settled on Marlboro and South Boundary, and I learned how to run with closed eyes.

Every morning, very early, I open up the laptop and work on this tale of love and betrayal—of collateral damage, heartbreak, homicide. I keep trying to find the perfect form to fit my story. It feels like more than a confession, but less than a Greek tragedy. A tragic hero must be noble, after all, larger than life. A poet or a warrior or both. And of course, I am as incapable of verse as I am of suicide.

But rosy-fingered dawn is reaching into the front windows now, turning the Ionic columns into prison bars. The time has come again to put aside the laptop and pull on my running shoes. Perhaps, at long last, today will finally be the day.

But as I clip on my cell phone and send "Clair de Lune" looping endlessly through my ear buds, only one thing is certain: love dies, love dies, love dies.