

# When You Can't Breathe and God Sends You Air

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My story begins the Tuesday before Thanksgiving in 2003. It was, as you surely can't remember but as I personally will never forget, a cold, blustery day in New York. I was at work when the phone rang. (My partner and I owned our first three auto glass repair shops at the time, but the main office was still in the Little Neck store. That was the first one we opened and that's where I was when the phone rang.) One of the secretaries answered, listened for a moment, then handed me the phone. Not knowing to whom I was speaking, I merely said my name. The police officer on the other end of the line introduced himself, then told me that Laura had been in an accident. The ambulance had just left, he said. He hoped she'd be fine. I jotted down the details, then jumped in the car and was at the hospital fewer than twenty minutes later. I don't know what I was thinking as I walked through the automatic doors that led directly into the North Shore E.R., but I realized the news wasn't going to be good when I said my name at the front desk and the nurse responded by looking away as she lifted the telephone to her ear, then pressed a few numbers, then said my name—nothing else, just my name—into the receiver. A moment later, two doctors appeared. One—it's funny how you remember stuff like this—one was a short, chubby Indian-looking guy with a mole on his cheek and the other was a tall black guy with an unusually pointy goatee. They both looked unhappy.

There wasn't much to tell. Laura had parked her car on Northern Boulevard near Little Neck Road and had just gotten out when she was hit by a passing car that was careening out of control. They tried to save her, but they were unsuccessful. My wife of three years and one month, they said, was dead. (They didn't refer to Laura as "my *pregnant* wife due to give birth to our first child in six and a half months," but I didn't hold it against them. How could they have known?) A police officer was waiting to answer my further questions. They were, they said, very sorry for my loss.

I signed some papers, then went home. I called my in-laws, then each of Laura's four siblings. I planned the funeral. I bought a grave. (We were both thirty-two years old when

Laura died. What kind of thirty-two-year-olds own cemetery plots?) I met with the rabbi. The funeral came and went. I sat on my mourning stool and endured a week's worth of visits. Laura's family—stiff, unfriendly Episcopalians from Gloucester, Massachusetts, who hadn't ever really made their peace with her conversion or, worse, with the fact that she appeared truly to have embraced her new faith and not just undergone the procedure as a favor to me—had duly showed up at the funeral and continued on to the cemetery, but from there they went directly home. It seemed odd, but not entirely unpleasant, to think that I could conceivably never hear from them again. In the end, they did phone a few times. But *only* a few times and *only* during the two or three months after Laura's death. For one thing, my mother-in-law wanted to get back her own mother's pearls, an attractive triple-strand which she had given to Laura years earlier. I told her to stop by anytime. Eventually, they stopped calling. I did too. If anything, I was relieved. It's been years. And the best part is that my mother-in-law never did show up for her damn pearls either. Maybe there were irritated that I let them wait until the rabbi mentioned it in his eulogy to find out that Laura had been pregnant.

They arrested the driver a few days after the accident. (Some passer-by had had the presence of mind to write down the letters and two of the numbers on his license plate.) Possessed solely of a learner's permit, my wife's accidental murderer turned out to be all of seventeen years old. Perhaps imagining that it would explain his reckless driving, the young idiot told the police officers who arrested him that he and some friends had cut school to have a few beers in one of their homes. I suppose I should have been deeply interested in his fate, but I found myself strangely disengaged from his story and the details of his now blighted future. He had been arrested. Either he'd plead guilty or he wouldn't. One way or the other he'd be convicted, then sent to some facility for young offenders, then released. Or maybe he'd be tried as an adult. But Laura would still be gone forever, and that was the only part of the story that mattered to me.

My mother died when I was in high school, but my dad is around and he was great. He ran the *shiva*, scurrying around all day to make sure the coffee pots were topped off and that there was more than enough sugar in the sugar bowl and cream in the creamer. He's had a girlfriend for years, a lumberjack of a woman named Anne who before all this happened had always kept her distance from me. But now she too got into the act, coming to the house every single day and tidying up, cooking some meals, making herself genuinely helpful. I was grateful. But mostly I felt hollow. Not so much sad as empty. Bereft. Lonely in a way that I still can't quite express clearly in words. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything. I

sat on my stool and drank coffee and numbly listened to people going on about whatever it was they were talking about. I nodded now and then, made some vague effort to look interested. But I was a thousand miles away in some private space I couldn't name accurately or, to speak honestly, even really at all. Mostly I wanted to get back to work and perhaps find some comfort in familiar routines.

Years passed. Alex and I were good. We opened four more shops, one in Brooklyn and three in Nassau County. Business was great. Everybody has a car. Every car has windows and, more to the crucial point, a windshield. Most people are afraid to drive around with damaged windshields and insurance companies almost never give anyone a hard time about fixing or replacing cracked glass, which makes it extremely easy to sell potential clients on the idea of having a busted windshield repaired professionally. But I was lonely. I signed up for J-date, but never logged on. I went to some singles' parties at Alex's synagogue, but never stayed more than half an hour. I said I was ready to meet someone, but I never actually did anything that could conceivably *lead* to meeting anyone. And when people occasionally offered to fix me up with some specific woman they met somewhere whom they thought I'd enjoy getting to know, I'd thank them profusely, take the number, and never call. I suppose I wasn't ready. And then, one day, I somehow was.

I heard that there was a kind of support group forming at the Jewish Y that was being pitched specifically at young widows and widowers. At first, it sounded almost ghoulish. I needed to be with other miserable people? But then I rethought the matter and decided differently. Part of my problem, I realized, was precisely that no one got it, that no one my age seemed to understand what it means to bury part of yourself in the ground, to take your own heart and put it in a box and dig a hole and shovel so much dirt on top of it that you don't expect ever to see it again, much less again to feel it beating. I knew other people who had lost their spouses, obviously. My own father was a widower. But my experience felt unique, or at least too different from my dad's and his widowed friends'—all of them in their sixties and seventies—for me to expect to learn much from hanging around with them. But the idea of an actual group of people my own age who had also lost their husbands and wives—the more I thought about it, the more it appealed. So I signed up. Even more amazingly, even to me, I actually showed up.

I met Rachel within ten minutes of arriving. She had long red hair tied back into a pony tail and was wearing a pair of jeans and a green t-shirt. She looked great. And she was friendly too, inviting me to sit with her when the meeting was called to order. One thing led to another. We agreed to come back the following week. And then I asked if she'd have dinner

with me and she agreed to that as well. Within a few months, we were seeing each other two or three times a week.

Rachel's story was similar to mine in some ways, but also very different. Amazingly, it turned out that I had actually known her husband. I didn't really know him well, but he was exactly my age—Rachel was two years younger—and we had gone to the same high school and been in some of the same classes. He—his name was Robert Rosenfeld—was one of those irritating people who excels both in academics *and* in sports. I knew him because everybody knew him. And he was handsome too, and tall. He was a Westinghouse scholar and a National Merit finalist. And he was on the varsity baseball team. We weren't exactly friends—we were, to speak more accurately, barely acquaintances—but we did know each other. Once or twice, we walked part of the way home together. I hadn't known what happened to him after Yale—the whole school knew that he had had to choose between Yale and Princeton—but now I found out. He had been diagnosed with leukemia in his senior year but had responded well to treatment and then stayed long enough in remission to marry, to complete medical school, to become a father, and to finish most of his residency before he began finally to succumb to his disease. For a long while it seemed that he was going to beat the disease, but in the end he lost his battle with cancer—Rachel actually said that, by the way, that he had “lost his battle”—and died the day before his and Rachel's fourth wedding anniversary. And that too had happened in 2003, just a few months before Laura's accident.

I hadn't ever met Robert's parents. Why would I have? But Rachel mentioned them many times to me, always stressing how kind they were and how devoted, how they never forgot her birthday, how they always invited her over for the holidays in the fall or in the spring for one of the Pesach seders, how they never came by unannounced and invariably arrived with generous gifts for her and for Carl, their only grandchild, when she would invite them over for a meal or for some coffee and dessert. Robert had been their only child, Rachel their only daughter-in-law. They hoped, they said over and over, that she would find happiness, that she would remarry. They *wanted* her to remarry someday, to find a dad for little Carl, to have more children, to move forward with her life. But then they'd begin to cry and then Rachel would cry and eventually they just stopped talking about the future in a way that was obviously too painful for any of them to bear. Was the unfortunate coincidence that both of us, Carl's father and myself, had the same name not at least slightly obviated by the fact that no one ever called him anything but Robert and no one, not even my dad, ever called me

anything but Bob or, when I was much younger, Bobby? Would I have appeared less to be stepping into his shoes if we *hadn't* shared a name?

Laura died in the fall of 2003. I met Rachel in the spring of 2007. By the end of the year, we were fixtures in each other's lives and the time had clearly come to meet each other's families. I went first, inviting her to my dad's house for a Friday night dinner. It went well. Anne was there and Dad invited his sister and brother-in-law and their son and his wife and baby, so the house was full and the spotlight didn't shine too exclusively on Rachel. We both considered the evening a success. And then it was Rachel's turn. She invited me to join her at her parents' home for Thanksgiving. That too went well, although Rachel's parents were very quiet and hardly spoke in the course of the entire evening. And then she invited me to her place for one of the nights of Chanukah because, she explained, she also wanted me to meet her "other" parents, by whom she meant the elder Rosenfelds, the late Robert's parents. That thought stopped me in my tracks. She wanted me to enjoy an evening with the parents of the man whose place in her life I was devoting all my energy to attempting to replace? Was that really a good idea? Wouldn't they resent me? Or hate me? Or at least find the whole situation awkward and unpleasant? And what would they make of the way Carl was beginning to relate to me almost as a dad, or at least as a kind of potential stepdad? Wasn't that going to be intensely painful for them to see?

Rachel had her answers ready. They were, she said, lovely people. They had suffered the most unimaginable of all tragedies, the loss of an only child. Despite their own misery, they had it in them to wish the best for their daughter-in-law—she *never* said "former daughter-in-law"—and to understand, and even to say out loud, that they understood that the best thing for her would be to remarry and to have with whomever she was going to marry the kind of happy family life she might otherwise have had with their Robert. And they wanted only the best for little Carl, which they acknowledged meant having a father figure in his life. They had been only kind and loving to her, Rachel reminded me. And they were also very generous, including financially. She couldn't bear the thought of them thinking that she had any intention of shutting them out of her life now that she had, to use her own words, "found somebody." It all made sense. It was beyond noble, her desire to repay kindness with kindness. And she wasn't really asking too much of me, I told myself, just that I spend an evening with people she described as good-natured and friendly, and that I let them see how fortunate she was to have found me. And what was I supposed to do when she put it like that, argue with her? The die was cast. I would have dinner at Rachel's on the third night of Chanukah and in attendance were also going to be my girlfriend's late husband's parents. I

asked if she could at least invite a few others to make the whole evening less intense, but she declined, saying it was going to be weird enough for the Rosenfelds as the plan stood without them having to deal with their emotions in the presence of other people. I suppose that made sense. I agreed to that part as well. It wasn't, I told myself, going to be such a big deal, just an opportunity to be kind to people who had only been kind, and endlessly so, to the woman I was dating and with whom I had long since acknowledged I had fallen in love.

A week before the dinner, Rachel phoned to tell me that her (former) mother-in-law had called and asked what kind of books I liked, or what kind of music. They were, Mrs. Rosenfeld had said, bringing Chanukah gifts for Rachel and for Carl and thought it would be unfriendly, perhaps even rude, for them not also to have something for me. I found the whole concept a little strange, but I more or less saw their point. I too had planned to bring gifts for Rachel and little Carl, who had had his sixth birthday only a month or so earlier, and now I realized they had only been kindly giving me the heads-up so I would not be embarrassed by their generosity and could have some small gift for them that would serve as a reasonable complement to the one they apparently were intent on offering to me. Eric Clapton had just published his memoirs, so I chose that for my gift. Rachel told me the Rosenfelds liked spy novels and mysteries, so I bought them the new James Patterson.

The dinner went reasonably well. There were some tears, but more or less everything went as we had all hoped it would. The latkes, served with home-made applesauce and brisket and bottles of cold beer, were very good. The presents were all perfect. I got the Clapton book and was pleased. The Rosenfelds professed to love the James Patterson. Little Carl was thrilled with his gifts too, as was Rachel with hers. By the time I left, I couldn't even recall why I had been so ill at ease about the evening. Rachel's former in-laws were good people, decent people. They loved their grandson and they clearly loved his mother. Was that a bad thing? I told myself I had been nervous about nothing.

The weeks passed. From time to time Rachel mentioned that she had had lunch with her mother-in-law, or that both Rosenfelds had come by to babysit Carl while she had to stay late at work. She was, of course, eager to know whether I could make my peace with the elder Rosenfelds remaining part of her life even if she and I became a permanent item. What could I say? They were Carl's grandparents. They were friendly and generous. They were also charting a path into the future that they couldn't possibly have imagined was going to be theirs to chart, yet they were doing so gracefully and charitably. I told Rachel that I was fine with the concept: if she and I ended up together permanently I could not only live with the

Rosenfelds being part of our lives but I welcomed the role they seemed so eager to play in Carl's life. Why not?

It was when Rachel and I became engaged that the weirdness began in earnest. The Rosenfelds came for a Friday night dinner and had not only a toy for Carl and a gorgeous bouquet of flowers for Rachel, but also a pair of silver cufflinks for me. They had, they said, seen them for sale somewhere and thought I would like them. I *did* like them and it seemed unimaginable to refuse to accept them, so I thanked them and promised to wear them the next time I wore a shirt with French cuffs. (To complete the *mitzvah*, I went out the following week and bought two such shirts and then wore one of them the next time Rachel had us all over for dinner.) It seemed excessive, at least a little, but I told myself they were only trying to signal to me the degree to which they were truly willing to accept me into their lives. And the cuff links really were beautiful.

A few weeks later, a boxed set of twenty-five of Clapton's albums, all remastered and accompanied by a beautifully illustrated volume about the artist's life and music, arrived at my home. I told myself that it was I who had opened the door in the first place by mentioning my deep love of the man's music, that they were only trying to make me feel welcome in their world by stepping gently and generously into mine. And it was, actually, a *great* set of disks, one that included not only all the best of the Yardbirds' records *and* all of Cream and the Blind Faith album, but also the full set of Derek and the Dominos' CDs *and* a healthy sample of the great man's solo work including *Slowhand* and *Pilgrim*, my personal favorites. It was an extravagant gift. I went online to see what it cost and almost fell over when I saw the price; I phoned Rachel and asked what she thought I should do, but her response—that I should send a thank-you note and enjoy the music—left me feeling intensely ill at ease.

The trickle of gifts turned into a flood. Tickets to Broadway shows for Rachel and me to enjoy. A portrait—in a silver frame, no less—of Rachel and Baby Carl that had clearly been cropped to remove Robert Rosenfeld from his former stance at his wife's side. (Creepy beyond words was the fact that I could still see part of his disembodied left hand resting on Rachel's right shoulder. But creepier still was the way the photographer's error more or less mirrored the way he was only mostly absent in death from his family's life.) A set of roller skates that happened to be precisely my size—they must have asked Rachel—that came a few days after a dinner at which I had mentioned in passing that in-line skating looked like fun. (I had meant that it looked like the kids in the park who used skates like that looked like they were having fun, not that it would be fun for someone my age to undertake a sport

clearly meant for teenagers.) And then there arrived one day at my front door a box containing the late Robert's apparently extensive collection of rock star t-shirts. He hadn't ever taken them from his parents' home, the accompanying note explained, but his mom and dad thought they would fit me nicely. And why should they go to waste?

It was the t-shirts that put me over the top. I weighed my options, considering whether it would be more kind or more evasive to leave Rachel out of this. I knew where the Rosenfelds lived. (I hadn't ever been inside their home, but I had picked Carl up there a few times.) So all I really had to do was to drive over, park in front, ring the bell, and ask politely for them to stop sending me stuff. But what was going to be my reason for rejecting their presents? I had long since fallen in love with Rachel and that was clearly going to mean *also* having the Rosenfelds in my life. It seemed crazy to risk alienating them. It made no sense to make Rachel choose between them and me. (For one thing, I wasn't yet confident enough to be entirely certain what her choice would be.) Still, I knew I had to act. And I knew I had to act alone. Did Rachel know about the t-shirts? I had no idea.

I drove over. I parked. It was drizzling and cold and I felt foolish, but not foolish enough to get back in the car and go home to try on some of Robert's t-shirts and enjoy communing with him through his old clothes. I approached the front door and rang the bell.

"Who is it?" I could hear Ruth Rosenfeld's voice from behind the door.

"Robert," I answered without a moment's thought. Was I crazy? I mean, I *was*—I *am*—Robert. But I'm always and only called Bob. Their *son*—their *late* son, the one whose place in his wife's and child's lives I was poised to take—was the one called Robert in this story. I knew that. How could I have *not* known it? And yet when Mrs. Rosenfeld asked her entirely normal question, I answered idiotically with the one name that should never have passed, of all the lips in the world, mine.

The door opened instantly. Did she really expect her Robert to be standing there? If she did, she recovered almost instantly and then politely asked me in. Was she curious why I had come? If she was, she certainly didn't show it.

I was ushered into the kitchen where, Mrs. Rosenfeld said, she had just put on a pot of coffee. There were freshly baked cookies on a tin baking sheet cooling on the counter. She appeared to have been expecting guests, but when I asked if I had come at a bad time she said that, no, I hadn't, that she had been hoping for some company. Bill Rosenfeld, she said, was

playing golf. (In the rain? I said nothing, just nodded.) She was all alone, hoping someone would stop by. And, she said with a smile, here I was coming to her rescue!

I had a speech all ready, but suddenly couldn't remember a single word of it. To stall for time, therefore, I took a sip of coffee. It was excellent too, strong and rich, and for a long moment I tried to gather my thoughts. Ruth stood up. But then she sat down at the table. She poured herself a cup of coffee, then failed to pick it up. Instead, she looked at me intensely, almost piercingly.

"I'm not a crazy person," she said.

"I don't think that."

"Yes," she said, "you do."

"I don't."

"You lost a wife."

I said nothing.

"And you lost a child."

"Not really. Not exactly." Rachel must have told the Rosenfelds about Laura being pregnant when she died.

"Do you know what it means to pray?"

My eyes must have widened. "To pray?"

"Not to *daven*. Not to *shuckle*. Not to go to *shul* and open a book and read along. To pray for something—to pray to God for something—that not only you can't have but that you know perfectly well you can't ever have. And to pray with all your heart for it anyway...." Her voice trailed off.

I looked into her eyes, expecting her to be on the verge of tears. But her eyes were dry. "I really do know what you mean," I said lamely.

"For a long time," she said calmly, "my sole comfort was in being crazy. I told myself that Robert would come back, that he would be reborn, that I would eventually see a baby somewhere and somehow *know* that that was my Robert come back to the world of the living. Then I moved on to an even stranger fantasy, no longer hoping so much that Robert

would be reborn as a baby poised to begin a new life but rather that he would re-appear in the world and resume *his* life by piggybacking along in someone *else's* life as a kind of ghostly addition to that other person's soul, what my own grandma used to call a *dybbuk*. No one but me would know, of course. No one would recognize him. But I would know it was him all the same and then I would be at peace. And then when you arrived and stepped into his life—you having the same name and being the same age and having gone to the same high school and reading to the same little boy and—pardon my French—sleeping at night in the same bed with the same woman...what else was I to think other than that God had finally answered my prayer?

Was that a rhetorical question? I couldn't decide, so I chose simply to nod my head slightly in assent. Besides, I did understand. What else *could* she have thought?

Ruth was not done speaking, however. "This went on for a long time," she explained. "And you were perfect! You were the right age. If you weren't as handsome as my Robert—please don't take offense—it was only because no one could be, not because you weren't nice enough looking on your own. You earned a good living. You seemed devoted to our Carl. And we truly did want Rachel eventually to remarry and to have a life! And so I prayed to God that I was right, that you were in some magical way both yourself and himself too, both your dad's Bob and also our Robert...and that the two of you—that sounds ridiculous, I know—that the one of you who was also the two of you would look after our grandson the way our own boy surely would have on his own had he lived."

I put down my coffee cup, not sure what to say.

"And now God has answered my prayer," she continued. "I feel at peace. My son is gone, but my grandson is alive and well and thriving...and he has a good guy watching over him—and believe me that I can tell what a good person you are—and my dearest daughter-in-law has someone in her life that she can trust and that I can trust too."

Suddenly, I found my voice. "You think that I'm Robert? Or that some part of me is? I have to tell you...."

Ruth broke into my sentence. "I know who you are," she said simply. "You are the man who brought me peace, who made me able to face the future. From you I learned what prayer actually is. Which is not at all what I thought—which was that you want something and pray for it and God gives it to you or doesn't give it to you."

“It’s not that?” I asked quietly.

“No,” she said, “it isn’t. It’s when you can’t breathe...and God sends you air. I knew you’d come, by the way.”

“You did?” She did?

“I knew the t-shirts would be too much, that you’d have to respond. I told myself I should just phone you and invite you over for this talk, but I needed to know that you—this will sound ridiculous, I know—I needed to know that you weren’t part of the fantasy, that you were on the outside, that you were the answer to my prayer and not part of the prayer itself. If I summoned you and you came, that would leave open the chance that you were just part of *my* fantasy world. I needed you to be yourself, to step aside from my own craziness, to show up on your own as a kind of visitor from the real world of non-crazy people...and to assert that you were not Robert, but that you were you. That, I can live with. I want to live with it too. The answer to my prayer is that I want you to be you so that Robert can rest in peace. But I needed you to ring the doorbell on your own, to drop in from the real world uninvited so I could be sure that I didn’t just make you up. This is all crazy, I know. I can’t even begin to imagine what you must be thinking. Does any of this make sense to you? I was suffocating and I prayed to God for air and He sent me you. Does that make any sense at all?

“A little bit, it does,” I said. And a little bit, it did.