

ISO Cooling Blue

*Adventures of a competitive
blood pressure enthusiast*

Colin Fleming

I had some inkling that purchasing a home blood pressure kit

might not be the best idea for me. There was a chance, I felt, that the entire endeavor could devolve into some horrible Poe-like misadventure, set in my bathroom with me clad in my nighttime uniform of blue Red Sox shorts and ripped black T-shirt from the Slaughtered Lamb pub in Greenwich Village.

I got used to taking my blood pressure back when I was married. We'd be out on Massachusetts' North Shore, having a Saturday jaunt around Cape Ann, as bucolic a place as I've ever been to. A Cape Ann town like Rockport, where I lived for a time, and where we had a house I am always trying to get back, consistently tops lists of the most scenic New England towns, with lobster traps stacked in the locals' front yards, and glens and meadows (once used for the drying out of fishing nets) and wild turkeys and that smell of salt and seaweed in the air like smelling salts for the soul, a commingling of iodine sourced from Mother Nature's own medicine cabinet, and that bravura robustness one imagines dominates the atmosphere of Neptune's very own man cave. (I don't know why I picture him having one, lined with harpoons on the wall, bottles on the shelves with messages in them, and various editions of *Moby-Dick*, but I do.)

I like the sea. It relaxes me, insofar as I can relax, which, I came to discover, I really can't, at least to date. But we'd do our drive, stop off at some cove to scramble over rocks and hunt for urchin skeletons and razor clam shells, and work in some errands, too. Like a trip to the CVS.

First, I'd wander the aisles—at Christmastime, check out the Rankin-Bass decorations. There would be Rudolph commiserating, in toy statue form, with Hermey the elf, and I'd stand alongside them, but I knew what I was up to.

I'm someone who is frequently up to something. Which isn't to say I'm dishonest. I don't know that someone can be more fulsomely committed to something they believe in, and doing what they think is

the right thing, even when it costs them money, say, or an opportunity, or adds loads more work to a quest in life whose specifics really don't matter here, but let's just say I do what I do twenty hours a day, seven days a week. It's a slog. It's also not working. But more on that later.

So when I'm doing one thing, I'm doing God knows how many others at once. Sometimes, there are good things. I can be talking to someone, be totally present, hell, I can be on NPR doing a segment that a million people will hear, and in my head I'm writing a story, planning a pitch, thinking about what I need to listen to, read, watch; how many miles I still have to walk that particular week to get up to my minimum goal of fifty. I'll crack the whip internally, thinking you need to work harder, you need to work longer, all of that. All of this is going on as I'm having a friendly chat over a beer watching the Patriots game, or sitting at the symphony counting out the measures of a Mozart piano sonata.

CVS-wise, the thing I was up to was trying to trick myself into some mental zone of ease, because I was eventually going to wend my way to the back, where the blood pressure machine was, sit in the chair, and try to get a bang-up score. I was in my mid-thirties when I started doing this. I hadn't been to a doctor since I was eighteen. Terrified. Like how people get terrified of Casper in those old cartoons.

I'd sit in the chair of the blood pressure machine, which I started to term "riding it," like it was a mechanical bull and I an urban cowboy or something, put my hand in the cuff, press the button, and good bloody fuck: some horrible, horrible number would come up. 180/120, say.

By then I'd be thinking everyone at the CVS is looking at me, the Reaper is fast advancing (this thought always seemed to produce a quick look towards the greetings card aisle, as if the Reaper would have need of a condolence card in the very act of taking you out; like he had a conscience, and felt bad about wielding the scythe on you), and I must try again. And, of course, my numbers would go up.

I could do this for a good twenty minutes. My wife would come over, she'd say, nah, it's fine, don't worry about it, and I'd be think-

ing, what the hell is up with her? This should trouble her somewhat. This ain't no 120/80. Which is where you want to be. There was never a word of "hmmm, we should get you looked at, honey." Just denial, I guess, which I helped along, by dint of being so scared I couldn't do what a normal person would do and handle the problem.

I didn't do anything. I just let my blood pressure issues ride. Tried to tell myself it was white coat syndrome, my terror of doctors, medical situations, all of that.

Life did some things, though. It fell apart. The specifics don't matter here. But eventually there was no wife, no house, no one, really, but me, a dude who really didn't want to live anymore, but wanted to overturn that feeling anyway. Call it the will to live paradox. So after my life fell apart, I found myself walking twenty miles a day, sometimes, and up to 100 a week, my way of trying to get back into the world of those who wished to live. I hadn't taken my blood pressure in the year since my life became a shadowbox of nightmares, but one day, on one of my epic ambles, I walked into a Rite Aid, thought, "screw this, I don't want to live anymore anyway. What you got for me, blood pressure machine?"

I am certain that victory yelps, peppered with expletives—I probably said something along the lines of "suck it bad blood pressure! Look at that score, motherfucker!"—are not commonplace in a Rite Aid, but what can I say, I was excited when I saw that 134/84. Not what you want, strictly speaking, but ballpark to where you'd like your blood pressure to be. The daily temptation to do myself in remained, but there was that pang, that life jolt, that brings with it feelings we all feel, but maybe don't articulate very often. That notion of, "this could be okay, this could be a start, you could look back on this later and be so grateful you got a little verve in your day to keep yourself going."

After that, every Sunday, before I went to Durgin Park, the Revolutionary War bar in Boston where I'd sit for a few hours as part of my weekly routine with the friends I had made there once my life had fallen apart, I'd go to the Rite Aid and ride the blood pressure

machine. I could be there an hour, until I got 120/80 or lower. Then I wanted something lower, still. For I was becoming, you might say, a competitive blood pressure enthusiast.

Sundays meant a clean start. New week. I'd write more than ever. Maybe get somewhere. I'd live the life, health-wise, of a monk. Not so much as a single beer. The past would leave me alone; or, that failing, I'd outrun it, kick through the scrim of time and explode into my future. Sunday meant the Rite Aid, too. I took photos of my best scores, in case I had to go to the doctor or a hospital, where my numbers would surely be astronomical, but then I could say, "fear not, I'm mostly just scared out of my mind, here's a score from yesterday, look at that, 110/73. Nice, right? One sexy ass systolic, eh, gang? Juice me!"

So it went, until one dire Sunday. I turned up at the Rite Aid as they were opening the doors, to the normal quizzical looks from the staff. I never bought anything there, save some Fisherman's Friend, a kind of lozenge, and that made me feel bad. Bought a lot of those lozenges, though. Was sucking on one when I discovered that the BP machine was gone. I hoped, for some weeks, it was being serviced, which also caused me to worry that my sterling scores were a result of miscalibration. But my ride returned no more. I had a friend call the pharmacy, even. She confirmed that Bettina—yes, I did name her—would not be back.

This took me on a tour of the pharmacies of the greater Boston area, as I searched for my next partner in BP bliss, but there was none to be found. I had a tip from a friend who was traveling that they had some at Logan airport, so I took a ride out there on the Blue Line, only to discover that the blood pressure machines were on the other side of the gate, and you needed a boarding pass to get to them, something maybe an eccentric millionaire might have considered, but as the highlight of my life at that point was a trip to the Coinstar at the supermarket, I merely laughed one of those "fucking hell"

cackles you do when you're laughing just to yourself, and resolved to do something I knew might have unfortunate consequences: I was going to buy a home blood pressure kit from the CVS. Sixty bucks.

Your arm had to be at a certain height to get a proper reading, and the only place in the cluttered box I live in where that was possible was in the bathroom, if I moved everything between the sink and the toilet and sort of wedged myself in and propped my arm up by the faucet. To my great relief, my initial scores were fine, and I didn't take my BP more than once a week, at most. Well, that's misleading. Every time I'd sit down to take it, my score would be high. But if I started at 160/92, say, I knew I was in good shape, and eventually I'd get the score I wanted from my blood pressure machine, which I named Circe (what can I say, life had gotten grim, and when life is grim if you don't find the occasional way to laugh, you're as done as done gets).

With each reading you'd get a number for your pulse and a color-coded grade. You want your pulse to be between 60 and 100. If you've just run, you can go up to 180 or whatever, but your resting pulse is what matters. When I was right, I was in the 70s, sometimes even the 60s. My stresses, though, were endless. I felt that feeling a lot that you used to get when the teacher was handing back the test which determined if you passed the class or not. Fifty times a day, I bet.

The color grade is where I'd sometimes look first. If your BP was confoundingly high, there would be this deep red atomic band, like some signal that the Martians were about to wage warfare. Get a high but not super screwed-up score and you got this somewhat acidic looking orange, like if the sun was dehydrated and took a piss. Below that was a warning yellow. Not too bad, this one. In fact, if you got 120/80, you got the yellow. That's what a hard grader Circe was! She'd give you the yellow even if you were 120/60. My goal was to sit in my bathroom until I got that most pleasing of BP machine color grades: the pooling, soothing waters of cooling blue, an aquamarine I imagined to be some coloristic play on the way the

sun would hit the water in Rockport on those July afternoons when I would stand on a cliff called the Headlands looking out over the town and the harbor, next stop England.

“Shall we go off in search of cooling blue,” I’d ask myself, trying to instill some jocularly into my lonely life, post-ten mile walk, before I began the next fifteen hours of formal work. I’d see online ads for romance that read “ISO smart Jewish guy,” and I learned that ISO was text shorthand for “in search of,” so “ISO Cooling Blue” became another refrain.

We went along through the rest of my thirties, Circe and myself, and we were more or less cool, until I turned forty, in September of 2015.

Shortly before Halloween, I gave up drinking entirely. For too many years I had drunk too much. I never became inebriated, I could simply put it away. Prodigiously. But it wasn’t good, and I stopped. A day or two after doing so, I felt a chill come over me. I took some Theraflu. I was worked up, worried, and, despite it being the middle of the week, I called upon Circe.

I’d never seen my blood pressure that high. It was so high I’ve since tried to repress the score in my mind. The top number might have been over 200. By now, my heart was out of the gate. Racing, pounding. For some time I had worried that I was going to die at forty. My life had just gone like that.

Earlier in 2015, I had been engaged. When I met this person, and she came to learn my history, with my singular divorce, she said, “I’m worried that if I hurt you I’ll kill you.”

This person I was engaged to was damaged. I tried to help. I was there for three o’clock in the morning phone conversations after three days of silence, when she was drunk again. I gave much, got little back, and tried to accept, for the time being, that depression can just waylay a person, and this person I loved deeply was waylaid in the extreme.

Still, I wasn’t counting on an exact reprise of what my ex-wife had done. But that happened. To the letter. I was thinking of Iago,

a lot, with what this entity did, and how Coleridge claimed he was a figure of “motiveless malignity.” That is, dude had no reason to do what he did, nothing to gain, personally. Just did it because he could. I was also thinking of that Dylan song, “She’s Your Lover Now,” with its simple inquiry, “Why didn’t you just leave me if you didn’t want to stay?” Just go, in other words. Don’t dance about in the broken bodies of the car crash, sticking around for a while imploring the bodies to reassemble themselves and get up and help you, and then vanish, sprite-style, the moment one does.

That night of my highest BP score ever, I thought would be my last. I had said to my friend John, my best mate of twenty years, “this makes sense, this is how it would go. I tried so hard for so long, I got nowhere, I had the divorce, now this other love-based disaster, and you know it’s true, John, you know it wouldn’t be shocking if I was dead one day at forty. It fits the narrative. I mean, who could be surprised?” My sister had died the year before. My father died when I was twenty-five. I regularly received death threats for work. There were people who hunted me down on the web and who threatened my family, too, for such is the age. And my heart, simply, was broken as well. I thought of Poe, Van Gogh, and their lives and how they died and when. Just made sense to me.

I felt like I was leaving my body. Like my skin could no longer contain the *me-ness* of me. I was popping out. Exploding out. I unlocked the door so people could get in and find me. When I told my friend the bartender at Durgin Park about this, he said, “what, so no one would have to break the door-jamb? You nut.”

I wrote the access code for the computer on a piece of paper in the hope that my friends and family would save my work, and try and get all of it out there if I wasn’t around. I wasn’t sanguine. I could see my computer on a curb, which would have been like I never existed, with my story—and it is some story, I’d say, if you’re up for reading a shitload of emails—lost for good. Then I got in my bed, its sheets stained with Popsicle juice because I had been sleep-walking and annihilating several each night, such that in the morn-

ing I could look on the floor of my rat's nest and count the sticks. I thought, well, I wasn't alive before I was born, and that was cool, that was better than this, I'll take that again.

And then one last thought, to whomever, or whatever, these things are directed, before I fell asleep.

Finish me.

Awaking the next day, I concluded that it was pretty stupid to have gone to bed in that situation. My less-than-brilliant next plan was to spend the day in bed, for the first time in decades, "relaxing," drinking lots of fluid. I took my BP, and was getting scores in the 140s/upper 80s. Better, anyway. The next day, I opted for a test run. I had on a T-shirt, long-sleeve shirt, and sweatshirt, thinking it was cold out, and barreled out the door for an especially brisk ten mile walk.

When I am really busting ass, I can walk ten miles in two hours. That's what I did, but I hadn't expected the weather to be so warm. I was sweating all over myself, way over-dressed. Got a coffee rather than a water. When I got home, I set off for a three mile run, but pulled up after only a mile. That's unusual for me, but if I'm too hot and under-hydrated, it can happen. I sat down for a while, then came home to check my BP.

Amazingly, I had the lowest score I'd ever gotten on a first read: 123/80. This made no sense to me. But my pulse. My God, my pulse. I'd never come close to anything like this. I was at 130. I looked this up on the computer, learning that when you hit 130, as a resting pulse, you have something called tachycardia going on. You don't want to have tachycardia going on. I hoped maybe it was Circe acting up, and I was sufficiently panicked that I went to the CVS and bought Circe II, who confirmed the metrics of her predecessor.

Now my BP was all over the place. 88/75, 119/63. My pulse would not come down. I told John. He is also scared of doctors. He told me it was time to go to the emergency room. I texted my mom to say I was heading over to Massachusetts General Hospital. It is a mile from here. I was going to walk over. Because walking is what

I do. And if I was having a heart attack, and wasn't coming home again, I was at least going to go out with what I knew, with my standby, and that was putting one foot in front of the other, on pavement.

I walked up to the woman who checks you in at the MGH ER and told her why I was there. She asked if I had chest pains. I said no. I felt, actually, like I usually felt.

A nurse came out and took me into a room for an EKG. I was sweating. The little patches of tape wouldn't adhere to my chest.

"They don't like hair or sweat," she said. "Are you nervous right now?"

I told her I was so scared. The results came out.

"You're not about to have a heart attack. But your heart is going a little fast."

They sent me to the waiting room. I texted John, who had sent ten texts of his own. They all revolved around a theme.

"You are not going to die. You are fine. It is stress."

I was in the waiting room for forty-five minutes. I had brought a book, William Sloane's 1937 effort at cosmic horror, *To Walk the Night*. They called my name and a nurse walked with me down a corridor to the standard ER, depositing me in a room where two doctors, a man in his fifties and a woman in her early thirties, joined me fifteen minutes later. They told me they would run tests. For my thyroid, for starters. I asked if the Reaper was drawing near.

The woman doctor said that the wiring of my heart appeared fine. Something else was making it beat faster. After which the man chimed in by saying the Reaper wouldn't be pulling up for another thirty, forty, or fifty years. I responded with a "bloody hell man, this is your bedside manner?" They laughed. I'm generally good for one solid chuckle with each hospital visit.

The tests turned up nothing. An IV was stuck in my left arm, but wouldn't take on account of the blood vessels being constricted, so a vein was opened up in my right. Saline fluid dripped into me for quite a while. Then I had a phosphorus tablet. The doctors had

said that if you drank a lot, and then stopped, you could have these symptoms.

Six hours after I got there, they signed me out. I had been dehydrated, and I hoped it was a combo of that and the non-drinking thing. I stopped at the Whole Foods on the way home to pick up a little treat for actually having gone to the doctor. My hair was long, because I had grown it out, something I had taken to doing, almost as a ritual, after my life had fallen apart back in 2012. I had bandages on both arms, a medical bracelet on my wrist. The cashier asked me if all had gone well, I said, yes, I think so. I got my haircut the next day, completely shorn. Martinet. The holidays were approaching. Enough of this shit, I thought. Motherfuck, enough. I was going to break free of the past.

For five weeks, I went at it pretty good. I didn't run, because I was too scared. I walked, though. I visited with Circe, and I remained off the drink. Got me some nice BP scores. True, the doctors had told me the readings for your vitals weren't really called "scores," but they seemed more amenable when I told them the competitive blood pressure enthusiast bit.

I did most things right as the year approached its end. I went to a lot of events from Halloween through the opening of the Christmas season. Hockey games, football games. A BU student production of *A Taste of Honey*. A Chopin program. The first hurling match at Fenway since 1954. A high school Thanksgiving contest at the old ballpark. A showing of *Rudolph* at the Brattle in Cambridge. A screening of *Nosferatu* at Symphony Hall with live accompaniment from the Pops. A Handel and Haydn Society 200th anniversary concert at King's Chapel. A staging of *Trumpet of the Swan*. I hit up, even more than usual, the museums I'm a member at: The Museum of Fine Art in Boston, the Harvard Art Museums on the other side of the river, the Cape Ann Museum up in Gloucester, adjacent to Rockport, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem.

I went to Concord and walked the woods where Thoreau once strode. The weather always seemed to be warm, warmer than it normally was in New England autumn. In those Concord woods I sat on the forest floor and watched the leaves fall as a hairy woodpecker went about its bug-procuring business, some leaves becoming festooned in my hair.

I still wasn't running. I set out one day to do some Christmas shopping for my two-year-old nephew. He lives in Chicago, where the surviving members of my immediate family are. I walked to the MFA, and looked at the Christmas tree, beneath the Sargent murals, a favorite sight of a season that is now exceedingly difficult for me.

I felt clammy, which I hoped was a result of the warmth and having just walked seven miles. Later, back in the North End, where I live, I sat in a café, drinking a hot chocolate. There was this fluttering that appeared to be happening around my heart. An extra beat, then a roll, then a tickle. Arriving home, I called upon Circe.

I had exploded again. The blood pressure was out of control. But it was the pulse that did my head in. It started at 115. By the third read, a minute later, I was at 143.

This time, at the Charles MGH ER, the woman who checks you in, whose duties I thought were mostly clerical, immediately grabbed my wrist after I told her what my pulse had been. EKG again. No waiting room this time. Instead, I hear someone call out the word "Acute." That can't be good, I think. A nurse comes bombing out of some corridor with a wheelchair. I've just walked eight miles. I could have cried when I saw the thing.

"Do I have to?"

"It's policy, sir."

"Please. Can't I just walk?"

"Sorry."

New territory this time. Everyone in beds. They gave me a bag, told me to get out of my clothes, put a johnny on me, stuck an IV in one arm and hooked me up to a heart monitor with the other. The same

verdict, mostly, came back as the first time. Electrically, my heart was fine. Something else was doing this. The physician's assistant said that stress alone couldn't get one's pulse up that high.

I told John this after. "It is stress," he insisted, "the thing is, when someone says the word stress in this situation, they think it's like the businessman who was in the other day. They don't understand your life, and that we're talking historic amounts of stress. Stress that induces stress in people who just hear about it."

My cousin, who had recently moved to Chicago for a new job and was staying with my mom, found me a cardiologist, one considered the best in Boston. I made an appointment for two days later.

I took a cab over, I was so freaked out, even though this particular hospital was just three miles away. A nurse recorded my vitals before I met with the doctor. My pulse was 112. The doctor came in. He had me breathe as he listened with his stethoscope, then felt around in various places, legs included. Told me to get dressed as he looked at my two EKG results from the hospital and the new one his nurse had just done.

"This is very reassuring, actually," he began. "Take a seat. Let's talk about your life."

We spoke for thirty minutes. He took notes, asked detailed questions. Then he put the pad down.

"Look, Colin, you have a lot of stressors, any one of which would be more than enough to grind a person down. But you have about a dozen. You have death, death again, your career, death threats, divorce, having to produce so much every day, having to be on every day and create, a broken engagement, what sounds like an absurdly difficult job, and now you've given up drinking on top of all of that. Among other things. With that kind of pressure, yes, you could boost your pulse to 150, and it could stay there. I want to schedule a stress test. For your peace of mind, mostly. I'll get you on the treadmill, and I bet with how active you are I can get your pulse up to 180, and you'll see that you're fine."

“And if I’m not, you can try and do something so that the Reaper won’t close in?”

“Yes, if there is something, we can do things to keep the Reaper away. But you need to get your stress under control.”

In the meanwhile, before my stress test visit for the next week, he told me to do whatever I wished. “Run a marathon if you want.”

Over four days I covered sixty miles. I walked, I ran. Granted, I did the latter with my license in my pocket, in case I keeled over and needed ID either at the hospital or the morgue.

Before a stress test, there is an ultrasound of your heart. This

involves you laying in a stretcher on your side, in a most precise manner—they reposition you often—and a tech swabbing this foam-topped stick thing coated with blue gel over your heart region.

We’re doing this for fifteen minutes. Guy has this quizzical look on his face. We are not talking. You want to hear the tech whistling, maybe, humming a little tune, perhaps, like we’re all hunky dory here.

Instead, silence, and what I regarded as a grave expression. We were also in this strange hospital half-light, like the generators were beginning to fade. Then the sound effects came in, like the tech had flipped a switch for audio and, suddenly, you could hear the wet swooshing of my heart, all gurgle and garble and sounding, to me, fast as fuck. I’m hooked up to machines on both sides of me, and another IV is in my arm, but I’m thinking about saying, basically, enough, I’m out, screw this.

Then he says, very seriously—well, to my thinking—he needs to check on something. I’m then alone in the room, holding that pose—which I thought was for the best—for twenty minutes. Clearly there is something dire going on, they are talking about surgery or something, and I’m about to rip everything out and do a legger. And wouldn’t you know, because I am logged on cranberry juice, hibiscus tea, fat-free milk—all off the stuff I drink for my blood pressure—and peppermint tea, green tea, and now coconut water—for my

electrolytes—I have to piss. Badly. So much so that I call out. This is not going well.

No one comes, so now I’m wondering if I should try and wheel myself over to the sink and improvise, like being in my own perverse Beckett play. I was thinking maybe my ex-wife or ex-fiancee would walk in, thus finishing me off, *Twilight Zone*-style, for good.

Eventually, it is neither of the nurses who had been present at various times, nor the tech, who comes in, but the cardiologist of all people, who I thought would not be there. He greets me, all serious, with a “Colin, buddy, what’s wrong,” at which point I lost it and responded with “motherfuck. This can’t be good.”

“Nice to see you too.”

“I’m sorry. I am not at my best.”

The concern was that the joint thing where my veins connect to my heart was too big. Even though this was unlikely. More of the sonar shit. Turns out this is fine. Now it is time for the treadmill, and I am ready for this. O boy, I am ready for this. Control. Something I can control.

They tell me to go as long as I can, and most people go for six minutes, and some up to twelve. Anyone who knows me will know that it was at that point that I decided there was no way I was getting off that thing of my own volition. I like to compete. And while I suck at many things, there aren’t many people better at walking.

So I’m up there, shirt off, defiantly refusing to breathe through my mouth, hands clasped behind my back because now I’m pretending I’m Horatio Hornblower pacing his quarterdeck as he looks through the fog for a French frigate. (The shade in front of me being down helped.)

After ten minutes, I asked when the incline starts, and the nurse said the grade had been going up every thirty seconds, and added that most people are usually running by this point and I was weirdly good at this. She didn’t know I had just nearly pissed in her sink, but we all have different strengths. It is like Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride when I go to the doctor. When someone came into the room, I

checked to see who it was and I nearly shot myself off the back of the machine, prompting a nurse to say, “look straight ahead, cowboy,” a line I resolved to use for something in future.

Eventually, they said that’s enough, despite my protest that that’s no twenty miles, and it was back into the stretcher for more ultrasounding. They want a before and an after. Then they said I could leave and left me alone in the room again. I walked to the museum. Heard from my NPR producer, while I gazed at the Christmas tree, saying we were on for the latest segment, one on really bad old Christmas movies. Afterwards, I finally made my way back to my sty. Wrote something on the Beatles for *Rolling Stone*, and something on a letter Keats wrote at Christmastime for someone else. After which I made a decision for how I would spend the holiday.

I thought of calling it Operation Carry-The-Fuck-On, but terms only take you so far. You can call anything whatever you want, but in the end—which is to say, really, *during the during*, as I think of it, of your life—there is only “is.” Not this, not that, simply is. Is is is. The “this” and “that” are you trying to codify reality. But you can’t. You can do what you can for your own situation. Most people don’t. I think they acquiesce, call things other things which they are not. But part of my present day reality was my past, and it was keeping me from my future. Granted, if that past did not exist, I still don’t think I could have the future I want. Too much is out of my control. John tells me that there is little I am wrong about, but I could not be more so here. But doing the right thing is in my control. And I was going to do what, for me, fit that particular bill in the latest strange time of my life.

The day I left for Cape Ann, to spend a few days, including Christmas, alone at an inn in Rockport, I called John on my walk.

I was sitting in the Public Garden on the bench that all Bostonians know as the *Good Will Hunting* bench, as it’s the one that was used in the movie when Matt Damon and Robin Williams have their big heart-to-heart. I don’t normally sit on it, but I had just gotten

a coffee at the Dunkin' and I needed to put my gloves back on, so I took a seat.

We only spoke for a couple minutes. I was supposed to be taking my blood pressure once a week, so that the cardiologist could get an idea of where I normally was, in terms of my scores. I hadn't done this. I was too scared. Whenever I thought about pulling out Circe, I'd feel my anxiety ramp up, and I saw no point in going back to the ER with a pulse of 150 just to be hooked up to an IV and sent home seven hours later.

"Look," he said, "all I care about is you breaking through. It's not the work that is ever going to be the issue, it is the naval blockade in the harbor. How to get to the open ocean. The open ocean is where you belong." He told me he loved me. I told him I loved him. He opined that the Patriots couldn't possibly win it all this year, I replied that I thought they would, we wished each other the best of the season, and with that I was off to a place I have always loved so much, where my life had fallen apart, and which I wish to return to so badly.

I took the train up at night. I liked looking out the window at the lighthouses off in the distance as other people dozed or read. Checking into the Linden Inn, I put my bag in my room, which had a stocking on the door. Solitary Christmases have been my norm since 2012. They are easier for me. Supremely hard, but easier than they would be otherwise. Just like going to the ER is hard, but I do better when I am there alone. I don't know why. Something in me—my survival skills—runs best when I must look solely within myself to pull through.

Ten minutes later I'm back on the train, having had a panic attack. I got off in Gloucester, the next town down the line, also on Cape Ann. Gloucester is far more urban, for all of its natural beauty, and hardscrabble. It's the town in *The Perfect Storm*. For a long time, when I could not return to Rockport because of the pain, Gloucester became my purgatory, a place I could go to that was close, but not too close, my holding pattern venue until, I figured, I

was able to return to what I viewed as Paradise. Mil-fucking-tonian.

I gathered myself for a few hours, reading in a bar on the water, then headed back to Rockport. I watched college football bowl games on TV and read some Dickens. The next morning, on December 24, I set out on a run. I went along the harbor, down a stretch called Bearskin Neck, around this old fishing shack known as Motif #1—supposedly the most painted structure in the country—and out onto the Headlands, the cliffs that overlook both the town and the harbor, and back again, running up a sandy hill on which is situated an eighteenth-century graveyard overhanging the sea where I had once stood with my ex-fiancee and she had extended her hand and taken a joint selfie of our beaming faces.

The day was gray, the air clotted with brine, mist from the clouds, mist from the sea. It all mixes with your sweat and you're several kinds of wet, but good wet.

Back in front of the inn, I stood and took off my long-sleeved shirt, steam coming off me in my T-shirt. Being a loser, I imagined I was an NFL player in a playoff game, when a woman called out to me.

"My hound dog has developed a fascination with you." She and the dog were on the other side of the road behind a hedge elevated a few feet above the street.

I replied that he probably didn't see many people outside at that time of the morning.

"It's not a running town," she said, and then told me a few things about it and her own life. She had two boys. One had special needs. They bought their house in 2011.

The dog—a rescue dog—was trying to figure out how to alight from the hedge. The woman started to tell me about places to visit. By now we had exchanged names. She asked if I was staying at the inn with my family.

Millbrook Pond, which has a streaming running from it, is down a short slope behind her house. I listened for a second to the rushing water. Then I told her I used to live here, and had also gotten a house in 2011. I had gone through a bad divorce, and other bad

things since, and because I was spending Christmas alone, for the time being, I had come here to face some things.

“You look like a man trying to put your soul back together,” she said. The hound finally broke through. Jumped down the ledge, and I held him—or rather he busied himself in much excited jumping against me—until she could come around and collect him.

We were both in the street now. “I don’t want to intrude,” she said, “because you’re here to do what you need to do, but when you see our tree in the window, lit up at night, know you’re not alone. Really, Colin, you’re not.”

And then we said goodbye.

A few minutes later I was back out on the Headlands. Not for some romantic reason—I had locked myself out of my room and the innkeepers weren’t up yet. I thought of how my friend the Durgin Park bartender had told me, recently, to give up, that I had had my chance and to keep trying would be a form of insanity. I thought of the Robert Mitchum film *Out of the Past*, and how he’s always going off to a café in Mexico called La Mar Azul, as his past, present, and future begin to blur together. I thought of the remarks that John and other friends had made. I heard the waves break, I watched the white water fly through the warm Christmas Eve air. I looked, as I always do, inside myself. I thought of next moves, the new year, doing what you know is right no matter what, and all manner of blue and blues. Blue. Blue some more. Blue, blue.

And blue.

