

PERSONAL HISTORY

THE DEATHS—AND LIVES—OF TWO SONS

The truth is that however I choose to express myself will not live up to the weight of these facts: Vincent died, and then James died.

By Yiyun Li

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“There is no good way to say this”—when the police arrive, they inevitably preface the bad news with that sentence, as though their presence is not ominous enough. The first time I heard the line, I already knew what was about to be conveyed. Nevertheless, I paid attention to how the news was delivered: the detective insisted that I take a seat first. I sat down at the dinner table, and he moved another chair to an appropriate distance and sat down himself. No doubt he was following protocol, and yet the sentence—“there is no good way to say this”—struck me as both accurate and effective. It must be a sentence that, though nearly a cliché, is not often used in daily conversation.

The second time, having guessed the news about to be delivered, I did not give the sentence a moment’s thought. I did not wait for the detective to ask me to sit down, either. I indicated a chair in the living room where my husband should sit and took the other chair. My heart began to feel that sensation for which there is no name. Call it aching, call it wrenching, call it shattering, but they are all wrong words, useless in their familiarity. This time, the four policemen stood.

There is no good way to state these facts, which must be acknowledged before I go on. My husband and I had two children and lost them both: Vincent in 2017, at sixteen, James in 2024, at nineteen. Both chose suicide, and both died not far from home; Vincent near Princeton Junction, James near Princeton Station.

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The detectives in charge of the two cases belonged to two agencies—one associated with Amtrak and the other with New Jersey Transit. These facts would explain the confusion of the New Jersey Transit detective when he told me, on his second visit last year, that he couldn’t locate Vincent’s record in the files. He had an uneasy demeanor, perhaps feeling defeated by his inability to find the file or feeling the discomfort of having to face us again. On his first visit, he did all he could to avoid any reference to suicide, repeating the words “we can’t say more at the moment” and “active investigation” and “the crime scene.” Despite his fumbling, I knew that James had died by suicide. I was the one to tell him that James’s brother had died of suicide near Princeton Junction a little over six years ago.

My friend Elizabeth, who had arrived from Austin, Texas, just in time to be with us for the New Jersey Transit detective’s scheduled visit, shook her head afterward. I then told her about the earlier detective, who, on his second visit, had said that he had worked for Amtrak for more than twenty years, and every time he visited a family after a case of suicide he would go home and hug his two children, even after they had

outgrown the age to be hugged. It's an awkward truth that I cannot help observing and noticing things even in the most terrible moments.

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It was the seventh day after James's death, and the New Jersey Transit detective was visiting to return James's backpack, just as the Amtrak detective had come back to return Vincent's phone. A case involving life and death never miraculously closes itself at the time of the pronounced death.

Objects don't die. Their journeys in this physical world, up to a certain point, are parallel to the trajectories of the humans to whom they belong. Then comes the moment when the separation happens. Vincent's phone became a phone; James's backpack, a backpack. They became objective objects, left behind in strangers' hands.

Few objects speak. The phone and the backpack were reticent, so they could do little to illuminate the last moments of my children's lives.

Many objects outlive people, this thought has often occurred to me—when I see in a museum an eighteenth-century pianoforte or a twelfth-century sword or a bowl from 500 B.C.E. All of Vincent's belongings and all of James's belongings have outlived them; not a single item has left our care. There are Vincent's many paintings hung around the house. There is James's collection of pocket watches on a shelf. Everywhere I turn in the house, there are objects: their meanings reside in the memories connected to them; the memories limn the voids, which cannot be filled by the objects.

Vincent's copy of "Les Misérables," with a bust of Victor Hugo placed on top of it; a circle of blue-and-white farm animals from Delft next to a cluster of origami animals that James folded; a giant stuffed lamb bought on a drive through west Ireland—which James named Marmalade and called his emotional-support animal during that prolonged trip (he often felt anxious when he had to leave home); a doorstep in the shape of a quietly amused elephant, bought in Kilkenny, which has been sitting next to his computer for years; another doorstep, an owl with a startled expression, which Vincent picked up in an Edinburgh shop for James; forty-seven stuffed penguins of all shapes and colors, from different cities and countries, sitting in the middle of which is a crystal penguin brought by one of Vincent's childhood friends to his memorial service.

To think our former state a happy dream:
From which awaked, the truth of what we are
Shows us but this: I am sworn brother, sweet,
To grim Necessity.

Sometimes, walking around the house, surrounded by the objects I study closely or only glance at, I recite Richard II's woeful words to myself. And yet I am not that dethroned king, our house is not a museum or a shrine, and our past is not merely a happy dream. I am not awakened, since I have stayed awake; I have been attentive and alert throughout all those years as the mother of my children. The necessity I face has no need of that adjective, "grim." Necessity—my necessity—is an extremity: any adjective is an irrelevance when it comes to extremity.

After the New Jersey Transit detective expressed his surprise at not being able to find Vincent's record, I only nodded, as though to say such things were expected: life is a muddle, bureaucratically, factually, metaphorically. I was eager for him to leave so that my husband and I could have the backpack to ourselves.

But sometimes—just sometimes—things make a little more sense upon revisiting. I wouldn't have solved that small mystery about the police agencies had I not started writing this for James. "The book for James"—for months I have been talking about it with my friends Brigid and Elizabeth, calling it "the book for James," just as once I was writing "the book for Vincent."

That earlier book arrived without any conscious planning. One night, I was reading an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel in which a character addresses her mother as "Mother dear." Mother dear—a phrase sounding archaic and yet ever lively and present—Vincent used to jokingly call me that when he wanted my attention. So the book arrived, opening with that phrase.

Vincent died at the end of September; by the end of November, the book was finished. Those who knew Vincent all said that he would have loved the book. He would have been proud and amused; he would have found fault with some of the sentences; he would have added a few adjectives and adverbs where I'd insisted on keeping sentences unadorned. The book, in which a mother and a dead child continue their conversation across the border of life and death, was as much written by Vincent as it was written for Vincent.

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But in life James resisted metaphor and evaded attention. If Hamlet and Bartleby could merge into a single being, James might have occupied that space with some comfort. (" 'Seems,' madam? Nay, it is; I know not 'seems' " and "I would prefer not to.")

Brigid, quoting the opening line of a novel I had written some years ago—"Posterity, take notice!"—explained to me my difficulty. James, Brigid said, was the antithesis of attention. It would be nearly impossible to write

for James, she said; it feels as though you have to learn a new alphabet before you can write anything this time.

Learning a new alphabet—for weeks and months I’ve held on to that notion. James was a different child than Vincent, and James’s death left us in a different place than Vincent’s had. And yet a new alphabet can only be symbolic, as I have but this old language to work with.

There is no good way to say this: words fall short.

Still, these two clichés speak an irrefutable truth. Anything I write for James is bound to be a partial failure. Sooner or later, there will come the moment when my understanding parts ways with his essence.

There is no good way to say this. Facts are the harshest and the hardest part of life, and yet facts, unalterable, bring with them some order and logic.

Fiction, as I’ve learned from writing it and reading it, tends to be about the inexplicable and the illogical. Sometimes my students complain about what they read in fiction—“I don’t believe this would happen in life” or “I don’t believe any parent would do that to their children.” What can I say to a young person who has strong convictions but a lack of imagination? Not much, really. The world, it seems to me, is governed by strong conviction, paltry imagination, and meagre understanding.

In eighth grade, Vincent quoted C. S. Lewis in his application to a highly selective prep school in California —“I fancy that most of those who think at all have done a great deal of their thinking in the first fourteen years”—and went on to catalogue the thinking he had done. Sometimes I give the Lewis quote to my undergraduates, and more than half of them express disbelief. When are you going to start thinking?—I try very hard not to ask the students, whose faces are cloudlessly young.

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I have no doubt that Vincent and James both did their share of thinking, which will remain a solace for me. And, yet, no one undertakes suicide unthinkingly.

A few weeks before Vincent’s death, we decided to purchase a house we all liked (we had just relocated that summer, from California to New Jersey). Vincent pointed out what would be his “suite”—a spacious bedroom, a bathroom, and a small study with a dormer window overlooking a tree, which appeared nondescript in the fall but would be blooming when spring came again: a dogwood tree.



"How relaxing a vacation can it be if we have to spend all our time pretending we're not Americans?"

Cartoon by William Haefeli



The suite could be separated, by shutting a door, from “the parents’ living quarters,” Vincent noted, a perfect setting for him. He also envisioned baking in the kitchen and helping me improve the garden, which did not look impressive: the couple who’d occupied the house before us, both economists, were not keen gardeners. Vincent died on the day we put down the deposit for the house. Deposit, death, in that order, four hours apart.

In this life of mine, which makes some fiction feel pale and feeble, there are other facts that I need to establish.

Vincent and James were born three years, four months, and six days apart. The gap between their deaths: six years, four months, and nineteen days. These numbers and dates are carved into my mind more deeply than they could be into stone, but they convey very little.

To travel from Princeton to New York City by train, we have the choice of departing from either Princeton Station or Princeton Junction. This is an astonishing fact, though minor in the scale of things. I don’t think that I’ve developed a preference between the two. I leave from one station or the other, depending on my schedule and also on how finicky the train service is on that day. My husband has a more consistent way of dealing with this small decision. So, at least in one specific aspect of life, he has certainty.

My feeling, not only about the departure stations but about almost everything in my life, is something else altogether. Call it a combination of keen attention and “a profound indifference” (borrowing Camus’s words), or a combination of intense emotion and an equally intense apathy. The fact is, there is no word for this state I’ve found myself in, in which lucidity and opacity are one and the same.

The day after James’s death, I said to Brigid, “One has to muddle through this life.”

That statement was not accurate. There was something stark and piercing in me that was much closer to clarity than to muddle, but calling it a muddle took less effort. It was as though I were averting my eyes from a mirror, which reflected my mind to me in such an unrelenting and sharp manner that I was startled by myself, frightened, even. By looking away, one could imagine a muddled image, vaguer, softer, less unsettling.

“But you’re not muddled,” Brigid said. For more than twenty years, she’s been the first reader of my writing, and she never lets a wrong word or a weak sentence slip past. “You’re the least muddled person at this moment.”

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True, my mind was not—and is not—muddled. Only, language is limited. So here’s Exhibit A: a new alphabet and a new vocabulary cannot be found to describe how I feel.

Though I wouldn’t call myself a sworn sibling to grim necessity, necessity has nevertheless been in everything I do since James’s death. Gone are the days when I could afford some degree of automatic living in everyday life: shoes slipped on thoughtlessly (the pair of sneakers that used to be next to my shoes are in a different place now); a local detour taken without conscious thought (this road would lead to the corner where I last said goodbye to James); a quick stop at the university cafeteria (where my colleague and friend Ed and I both hid our faces when James, who was a freshman at Princeton, walked past one day; he didn’t notice us).

Necessity dictates that attention should be given to all details in this after-time: everything is relevant, everything has weight, and everything leads to a moment in the past, which becomes a memory, which in turn becomes a narrative. When a line of coral-colored hyacinths called Gipsy Queen bloomed next to the garden fence in March, I reminded myself, every time I walked past, to slow down and study them. James was the one who loved this particular hyacinth; I used to prefer Delft Blue.

Necessity also dictates that all the details should be noticed and filed away without any excessive feeling. After Vincent died, I read and reread “Grief Lessons,” a collection of Euripides’ plays translated by Anne

Carson, and Constance's monologue in Shakespeare's "King John" after she loses young Arthur, who was robbed of his throne and then his life. Those ancient Greeks sing their grief at the highest pitch, which, as Carson points out, is rage. Their grief and their rage are nearly untranslatable, as though feelings in extremity can only be physical sensations—the language assails one with a blind and blunt force. Constance, when chastised by Cardinal Pandulph for her lack of composure ("Lady, you utter madness and not sorrow"), retorts:

I am not mad: this hair I tear is mine;
My name is Constance: I was Geoffrey's wife:
Young Arthur is my son, and he is lost.
I am not mad; I would to heaven I were,
For then, 'tis like I should forget myself.
O, if I could, what grief should I forget!
Preach some philosophy to make me mad,
And thou shalt be canonized, cardinal.
For, being not mad but sensible of grief,
My reasonable part produces reason
How I may be delivered of these woes,
And teaches me to kill or hang myself.
If I were mad, I should forget my son,
Or madly think a babe of clouts were he.
I am not mad. Too well, too well I feel
The different plague of each calamity.

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The ancient Greeks and Constance might have said something I could not find words for after Vincent died, and yet this statement is not entirely accurate. Those mothers in the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies voiced their sorrows at a higher pitch than mine. I did not lose my words, and I was not at a loss for words when Vincent died. I wrote a book for him.

I also, on one occasion, wept. A few weeks after Vincent's death, Brigid and I went to see a production of "King Lear" in New York. By the time Lear finished his howling monologue, I was weeping; I went on weeping after we left the theatre, sitting on the edge of a stone planter, in the center of which a small tree was shedding its last leaves. When I stopped crying, I said to Brigid, "There's no surprise left for me. No one will ever be able to surprise me after Vincent."

How one misspeaks, and how one misspeaks in extremity. James surprised me more than Vincent did, but this time I know not to make any statement of finality.

This time, rereading Euripides and Shakespeare, I have a different reaction: make Constance's words a hundred times shriller, make those Greek mothers' cries a hundred times more piercing, and then I would say, This is close to how I could express myself, too; only, I would prefer not to.

The truth is that however I choose to express myself will not live up to the weight of these facts: Vincent died, and then James died; through writing, I was able to conjure up a Vincent in the book written for him, but I will not be able to do this for James—I cannot conjure him up in any manner.

When Vincent was alive, we talked and we argued (sometimes affectionately and sometimes contentiously). It was only natural that our endless talking in life would extend itself to where reasons end, where across the border of life and death words retain their vivacity. The book for Vincent was published as fiction because it could be called only that: no dead child has ever come back to have an argument with his mother.

Two years after Vincent died, his friend Joy visited us and told me that she had read the book. "It's so uncanny," she said. "All those things he said in the book were just the things he would've said. When I was reading it, I thought, Vincent is back!" She laughed and then burst into tears.

Vincent had many good friends, and many, when he died, said things along the lines that they would always remember him. Joy, however, uncannily prescient at sixteen, expressed her fear that, as years went by, she would not be able to remember Vincent as clearly as she wanted.

At least I'd given Joy a book to go by, I thought then.

I once edited a few adjectives out of Vincent's writing when he was in sixth grade, which led him to protest: "Adjectives and adverbs are my guilty pleasure!"

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James loved languages, though he was not a verbal child. He had been uncharacteristically talkative with Vincent, but with the rest of the world he had preferred silence. That silence became more pronounced after Vincent died.

The summer before James went to college, he confessed that he had done little in his senior year of high school besides reading five major works of Wittgenstein. I started to read “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” on James’s recommendation. A few weeks later, I told him that I had difficulty grasping what I was reading.

“Oh,” he replied. A single word that could mean, Not surprising, or, How could you not understand Wittgenstein, or, I don’t know what I can do to help you, or, simply, Read on. This morning, I reread the preface to “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,” which opens with this paragraph: “This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a text-book. Its object would be attained if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it afforded pleasure.”

It’s a solace to know that James found philosophical pleasure in language, different from the pleasure Vincent got from language—which was poetic, musical, and sensual.

It’s an impossible task to write for James. It will have to be done through thinking, rather than through feeling; that is how I will reach for an approximation of understanding him. Or of not understanding him—just as I might spend my days reading Wittgenstein, not knowing whether I’ve got anything right.

A few months before James’s death, he told me that he had been rereading “*Caligula*,” a play by Camus, “a bit obsessively.” He had watched several productions of the play on the internet, including two in English, one in Japanese, and one in Spanish.

I had not read the play. I asked him whether I should, knowing already that I would. He said yes. The next time I saw him—he was living in the dorms at Princeton then, and would sometimes visit on Saturdays for his favorite meal, my husband’s steak dinner—I told him that I was affected by a line in it: “Men die; and they are not happy.”

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James, in his usual understated manner, nodded with a gentle smile. (That smile, along with his quiet demeanor, was what his friends, classmates, and professors would remember in their letters to us and would mention to the reporters at one of the student newspapers who put together a stunningly beautiful tribute to him.)

“How does one ever recover from that line?” I asked James. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it for days.”

“It’s quite compelling,” he said.

Men die; and they are not happy. Half of the line is a fact; the other half, a conjecture. There is no cause-and-effect emphasized: Do men die because they are not happy, or are they not happy because they have to die someday? The two statements, existing together, are like two hands kept close, barely touching or with their fingers intertwined.

After James’s death, I found a picture I had taken when he was in kindergarten. One day, when I went to pick him up, he was wearing a sign that he had written out in large print, no doubt exasperated by grownups asking him why he wasn’t talking or telling him that he must talk:

IM NOt TaLKING Becuase I DON’t WaNT TO!

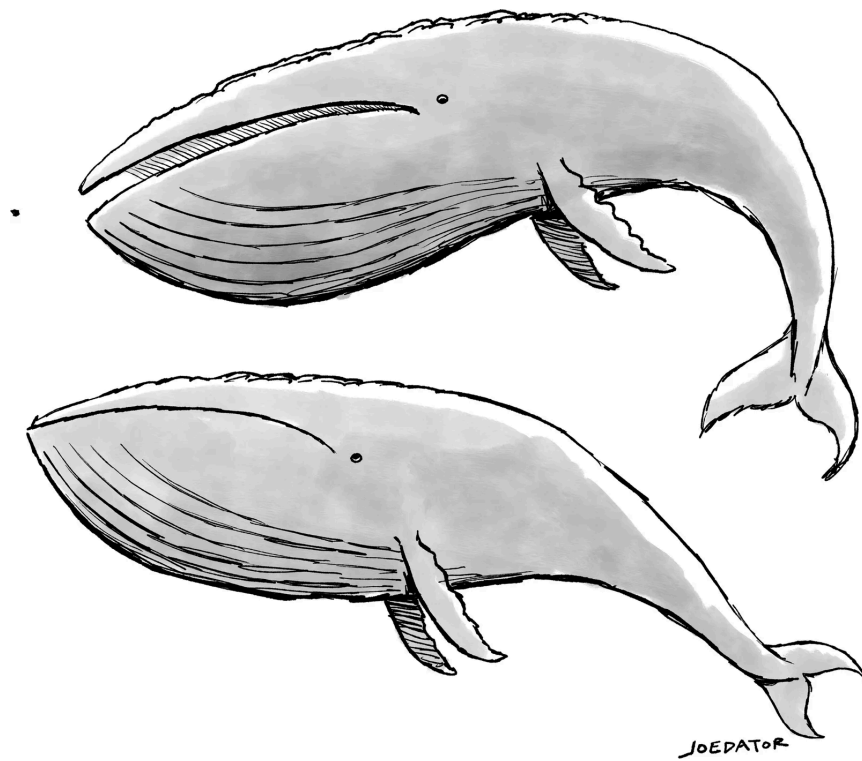
My husband, referring to the picture recently, commented that, as a family, what the four of us shared was our belief in, and our respect for, free will.

I thought for a moment and replied that, despite our not knowing enough of James’s thinking, what we could be certain of was this: he knew that we would respect his decision to take his own life, and he trusted that we would endure his death, for we had endured his brother’s death.

“Believe me when I say that I shall be all right. In the same strictly truthful sense that it’s true that the two angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. No fancy, no frill. Not symbolically, not mystically. Just all right.” Richard Quin, from Rebecca West’s “The Saga of the Century Trilogy,” says this to his family before going to France during the Great War, to be instantly killed, still a teen-ager.

“Just all right”—these words have been on my mind the past few months. Richard Quin shall be all right because he is crossing the English Channel to meet death, which requires nothing more of him than simply his being—being gone from this physical world, being remembered, being all right.

And yet, for those who go on living, few can afford simply to be, and very few can be all right. The border between “all right” and “all wrong,” like the border between life and death, is not solid. In recent months, I have replied to friends’ queries with this line: “Our life is never going to be all right again, but we are doing all right.”



"Do you want the last piece of plankton? I'm stuffed."

Cartoon by Joe Dator



Perhaps I should revise that statement about our belief in and our respect for free will. In the realm of being, yes, we have little regret about respecting our children's free will. But raising children is more than offering them the space to be; the world seems to care more about children's *doings* than about their *beings*. When Vincent was five, I thought of signing him up for a soccer club, and he informed me, with utter seriousness, that I would be doing that not for his happiness but because I wanted him to be just like the other children. I instantly gave up the idea. And yet how many parents can say with confidence, when it comes to their children's upbringing, that they have achieved a real understanding between being and doing?

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There was a moment that we used to talk about with laughter. In seventh grade, when we were living in Oakland, Vincent decided one morning that he would go to school in a dress, and went to our bedroom to

look for the perfect outfit. (I do not use the word “perfect” lightly: perfectionism was part of Vincent’s essence.)

My husband, with a worried look, kept offering him dark-colored dresses: This blue one? How about this black dress? This green one would look good on you.

Vincent, in his usual flamboyant manner, picked up a pink dress. “What’s the point of going to school in a dress if not a pink one?” he asked.

I explained to him that, as parents, it was natural for us to worry that a pink dress might lead to bullying by his schoolmates. Vincent laughed off my concern and said that, if there were idiots who dared tease him, that was all the more reason to wear pink. “Just so I can be in their face,” he said.

I was full of admiration for Vincent. I felt unease, too. We parents could only do so much for our children, to raise them to be bold and free, but the world outside this bubble we called our family was often not a kind place.

Around the same time, Vincent decided to walk home from school by himself. It was a two-mile walk to our house, up on the hill. Half of it was along a woodsy road just off the highway, with no sidewalks or houses on either side, and it was not the safest part of Oakland. I expressed my reservations, but Vincent was a stubborn child. He promised that he would stay alert; he would run fast, he said, if needed.

Vincent was proud of his androgynous looks: his long, shining black hair and his slender, cranelike physique. For two years, I lived in dread of that woodsy road, where cars drove without observing the speed limit. But a greater fear, which I never voiced to him, was that he might be abducted along that road: he might be mistaken for a pretty young girl, or there might be no mistake at all—he was a beautiful young boy.

Every semester, then and later, I would teach Grace Paley’s story “Friends,” and every time I would point out a particular passage to my students, though I doubt that many of them truly understood its weight. An older woman, reminiscing about her daughter’s death, says to her friends, “You know the night Abby died, when the police called me and told me? That was my first night’s sleep in two years. I *knew* where she was.”

For two years, Vincent walked with a tube of pepper spray clasped in his hand—which once led to James’s report that a classmate, having been told about Vincent’s pepper spray, thought that it was a condiment. That pepper spray is among the objects that have outlived Vincent. Sometimes I go into his room and look at it.

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What can parents do but give their children the space to be, and allow them to do what they need so that they can become more fully themselves?

And yet, despite the parents' efforts, and despite all the beings and doings that occur as the children grow, some among them die before their time.

Children die, and they are not happy.

And their parents can never know whether those children died because they were not happy, or whether they were not happy because they sensed, too early, that they must face their own deaths.

For six years before Vincent's death, I had lived with a dread that one day he might choose not to live. There were days of concern and nights of anxiety, and there were occasions for despair, but these feelings, I believed, were best kept under a calm surface. The prospect of a fire does not mean that one has to carry an extinguisher on one's back around the clock.

A few times, though, I did slip into Vincent's bedroom in the middle of the night, checking that he was still there. Seeing is believing, though only to a limited extent. For six years, I believed and disbelieved what I could not see at the time—but surely I was not alone in that? The ability to believe and disbelieve simultaneously seems a prerequisite for any parent. Is that rash a minor skin irritation or the first symptom of a deadly illness? Is a child's preference for playing alone a developmental stage or a sign of serious trouble? There are many ways for things to go wrong, and yet one's hope, always, is that somehow they will turn out all right in the end. "Just all right," we say to ourselves, out of blind courage, out of wishful thinking, both indispensable for a parent.

Should a mother rely on her intuition? What's the use of intuition in matters of life and death? A mother cannot sit in front of her child's bedroom all night long, a mother cannot follow a child's every step in life, just so that she can make sure that he remains alive. A mind too reliant on intuition might easily leave reality behind. What would happen then? One mother feeds a lethal concoction of drugs to her own child to protect him from life's threats. Another mother, plagued by postpartum depression, leaps out of the building with her infant. These stories in the news tend to be called tragedies, or even *senseless* tragedies, but only a careless writer would use those words so unthinkingly. Senseless? There is always some sense in a parent's intuitions. The real tragedy is not just death itself but also a mother's difficulty in knowing when to trust her intuition and when to let it go.



My most humiliating writing experience took place in fourth grade. For a school contest, instead of turning in a patriotic essay praising the glory and beauty of our mother China, I wrote a piece decrying the hypocrisy of such contests, and elaborating on the ugliness of life a child experienced while being forced to lie about it —“ugliness” was the word I used, more than once, in that essay.

The acts of writing the essay and of entering it in the contest were not done out of courage. I wasn’t brave; rather, I was ten, and I was feeling suicidal despair.

I recognized Vincent’s despair when he was in fourth grade; so did his teacher, who wrote me about the poems he turned in for schoolwork, which were astonishingly painful yet beautiful contemplations of life and death.

My entry in the writing contest caused a scandal among the schoolteachers. I was called to a conference room to be greeted by six or seven teachers jeering and laughing at me. An older woman, a friend of my mother’s (my mother was also a teacher at the school), walked over and pinched my cheeks, first one and then the other, as an adult might do to an infant. She said, “You’re a good student. You’re not too ugly. You look like a child with some potential, but who would’ve thought that you could be so stupid as to write such nonsense?”

The only good thing that came out of this episode: I learned not to take reviews and criticism of my future work to heart. I should add that my mother was in the conference room that day and laughed and jeered along with her colleagues. But her wrath, when I got home from school that evening, was a story that I prefer not to remember.

When Vincent was around the same age, he asked, pointedly, “You understand suffering, and you write about suffering so well. Why did you give birth to us?” A question for which I never had a good answer.

All those books teaching parents how to take care of their children—the first year, the first eighteen months, the first five or ten years—none of them addresses this difficulty: for parents and for children, the border between reality and unreality is not always clearly marked.

What can a mother do, facing reality, facing unreality, but rely on her intuition while at the same time keeping her intuition at bay?

Intuitions are narratives. I have an intrinsic distrust of narratives, which are among the most misleading things in life. I have seen lives saved by narratives and lives derailed by narratives. That I’ve chosen to write narratives is an incongruity one has to acknowledge.

But intuitions are a tricky subset of narratives: incomplete, un-completable. I avoid putting my intuitions into words, which would be pinning a butterfly on a specimen board in order to claim the certainty of possession.

However, I did voice an intuition once. After Vincent died, Brigid reminded me that in a phone call, a few years earlier, I’d confessed to her that I would regard it as a triumph if I could see Vincent graduate high school. In the days immediately after his death, I had forgotten that conversation. When Brigid told me, I remembered that afternoon, making the call in my bedroom, hiding from the children because I was weeping.

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Vincent had seen me cry no more than two or three times in his life; James, precisely once, a few months after Vincent died. These are facts.

Vincent did not live long enough to graduate high school. James did. These, too, are facts.

But intuitions are not facts. Intuitions, with shape-shifting qualities akin to those of paranoias or fantasies, are not always defensible, rarely unassailable.

Three days after James's birth, while we waited for the elevator on the way out of the hospital, my husband placed the carrier on the floor and knelt down beside it, listening closely to detect the newborn's breathing. Two older women walked past and admired the sight. "Now that's a first-time dad," said one to the other. We were not first-time parents. Only, like many young parents, we were beset by fears. Babies breathe on their own, but sometimes they stop breathing on their own, too.

After Vincent's death, all those hows and whys and wherefores and what ifs, which I went through in my therapist's office and in my own head, often returned me to that phone call Brigid had reminded me of. "You knew it back then," she said.

And I was not the only one to have known it. My husband must have, too. And Vincent's therapist in California, who explained that Vincent was not a child who would take a few pills and call all his friends to announce that he was planning to kill himself. "You must be prepared," the therapist said on the phone. "If Vincent decided to do it, it would be so sudden that no one would expect it and no one could stop it."

I was not surprised when the therapist said that, just as I was not surprised when Vincent's fourth-grade teacher wrote to me about his poems. Vincent was my child; I knew—no, I felt—his despair and agitation.

I had parked the car by the roadside to pick up the therapist's call—he was returning a message I had left on his voice mail, not an emergency, not because of a crisis, but to talk about an ongoing dread. After the call, I went to pick James up from school, and later Vincent from track-and-field practice. Knowing that something may or may not happen does not exempt one from the tasks of living.

Intuitions are narratives about potentials, possibilities, alternatives. In that sense, intuitions are fiction, unless and until, confirmed by life, they become facts.

Those moments when intuitions remain unspoken and unspeakable are only part of life. There are other parts to be lived. A mother's job is to provide a framework for living: things to do, places to go, days that never fail to break, and nights that always fall.

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When we were living in California, every few months we would drive to a Berkeley music shop to choose a new batch of reeds for Vincent's oboe. The shop was called Forrests, and the first time James heard that we were going to Forrests, his five-year-old face looked anxious. "What if we got lost in the forests?" he asked, and it took Vincent and me a few seconds to understand his fear. Then we all laughed because life was good at that moment, and we were not going to be lost in the forests. (And yet who among us is ever safe? "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost"—even Dante did not pay attention to children's despair.)

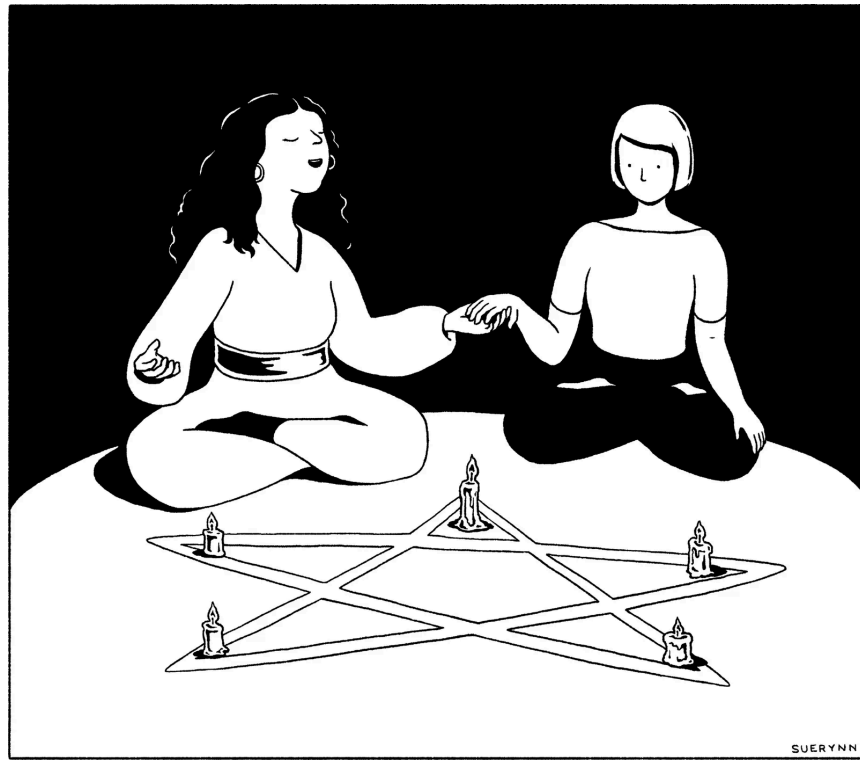
I once found a series of numbers in the Notes app on my phone and remembered that Vincent had been deep in a knitting project, calling out numbers for me to write down. What are these numbers, and in what format do I record them, I asked, and he told me just to write them down, as he would need me to read them back to him later. To this day, I do not know what they were for, but the numbers seem reasonable, saved in perpetuity on my phone.

For some years, there were three different meals to be cooked for every dinner: one for Vincent, one for James, and one for my husband and me. A mother of a classmate of James's told me that I must be crazy to go to those lengths, but I was not crazy—I simply understood the necessity of this task.

There were apples to be cored and then cut into geometrically and aesthetically pleasing slices. At a memorial service held by Vincent's old schoolmates in California, his friends brought slices of apples to share and reminisced about the apple slices in his lunchbox, cut with absolute symmetry. That fact, in the days after Vincent's death, seemed to have vanished from my memory, and I was glad it was saved from oblivion by his friends.

That apples must be sliced perfectly was an aesthetic need of Vincent's that I grasped and agreed with, just as, when I made pancakes for James, I would be sure to make each piece different, forming it like a letter not found in the English alphabet. One must strive to live beyond the letter "Z," and one must strive to go beyond one language. James would teach himself several: Welsh, German, Romanian, and Russian, on top of Spanish, Italian, and Japanese—the languages he took at school. His phone, I once found out by accident, was set to Lithuanian.

It seemed to me that to honor the sensitivity and peculiarity of my children—so that each could have as much space as possible to grow into his individual self—was the best I could do as a mother. Yes, I loved them, and I still love them, but more important than loving is understanding and respecting them, and this includes, more than anything else, understanding and respecting their choices to end their lives.



"He says he never texted you back because he had a lot going on."

Cartoon by Suerynn Lee



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Things to do, places to go, a framework for living is a framework for memory.

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James was given his first Gmail address at the age of three. After a quarrel with Vincent, he asked for my help in creating an e-mail account for himself. "Dear Vincent: You are a mini," James wrote, mistyping "meanie" as "mini," though observing the etiquette of proper correspondence. In those days, whenever I was out of town I would write a stack of cards ahead of time so that my husband could include a card on each day of my absence in James's lunchbox. All those cards were signed "Love, Mommy." Moments after Vincent received the e-mail, they reconciled, as Vincent was amused that James's "hate e-mail" ended with "Love, James."

My friend Edmund read me a poem he'd written recently, about three moments of happiness in his life. He said that somewhere he'd read that each person has only three real happy memories. Could that be true? Afterward, I started to record in my notebooks the moments I'd been happy with Vincent and James, and I quickly got past three.

If I train my mind on the happy moments, the framework for living seems sturdy enough. And yet it is not an indestructible shelter from catastrophes. A mother dedicating herself to the framework for living is like a shipbuilder building a vessel, not asking whether the voyage is to be through calm seas or tempests, not pondering whether there will be a tomorrow or not.

Seeing is believing, but a mother must restrain herself from *foreseeing*. To foresee is to give too much weight to intuition; foreseeing might be waving a white flag prematurely.

Vincent's death did not come as a complete surprise, but it was a never-healing wound. It was not, however, a wound inflicted by him or his decision. Once, at an event for a mental-health institute in Los Angeles, a psychiatrist interviewing me pressed, asking whether I felt any anger toward Vincent. He said he could detect no anger in the book I had written for Vincent. He told me that earlier in his career he'd lost a teen-age patient to suicide, and he could still feel lingering anger years later.

He is not the only person who has asked me about anger: the question must be relevant and legitimate, but anger is not a major or even a minor emotion in my life.

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I did not feel any anger when Vincent died—not at him, and not at life, either. But I did feel baffled and wounded by life. That a mother could do all things humanly possible and sensible for a child but still not keep him alive—this was the fact that I would have to live with, I thought, every single day, for the rest of my life. It was Vincent's death that made me begin to use that phrase, "every single day, for the rest of my life."

After Vincent's death, there were excruciating days, days of numbness, days of contentment and days of melancholy, days of reading and writing and days of not being able to read or write, days of holding on upside down (like the bat in Marianne Moore's poem) and days of holding on right side up. But in all those days, where one is obliged to live ("Where can we live but days?" in Philip Larkin's words), there remained that thought: every single day, for the rest of my life, I will be thinking of Vincent.

I had not lived with the same dread for James when he was alive. My parental anxiety about him was largely about his future. Then, one day, he walked out of the world in the same way that Vincent did.

“There is no good way to say this. We’re very sorry for your loss.” The police came and then left swiftly, as though they were actors coming onstage to deliver their lines and, having done so, exiting right away.

I texted Brigid and then texted my therapist, telling them that James had died by suicide. Later, they both told me their initial reactions, which were similar.

“I knew every one of those words in the message, but I didn’t understand what the words meant, put together,” Brigid said. Half an hour before I sent that text to her, I had been on the phone with her, and James had been mentioned in our lighthearted conversation.

My therapist said that when he read the message his first thought was that “it made no sense, it made no sense at all.”

James died on a Friday, and the Saturday before that was the last time Brigid had seen him (the last time for us, too). He was home from college for a meal on New Year’s Day of the lunar calendar, and Brigid noticed his good spirits and his composure. A week or two before his death, my therapist had asked me (not for the first time) whether I worried about James feeling suicidal, and I had enough confidence to say that, even though one could never say no to that possibility with certainty, I didn’t really think that he was suicidal.

So much for a mother’s intuition.

And yet one wonders, in retrospect, what prompted the conversation about the probability or improbability of James feeling suicidal, which had been a recurring topic in the therapist’s office. Was it intuition or paranoia that led to the discussion shortly before James died—a premonition I couldn’t explain? It doesn’t matter, as the facts remain irrefutable: I did not anticipate that James would choose suicide; I did not detect any sign. For six years before Vincent’s death, I lived in dread that he would. For the six years between the two boys’ deaths, James, too, was pondering suicide—Vincent’s, and then, at some point, his own. I did not know when that shift happened; I did not even think that shift would happen, as I worried only about James’s life, not about his death.

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Two months after Vincent died, James asked for my copy of “Anna Karenina.” I hesitated, although I had never worried about what my children were reading. They were both precocious readers, and I let them explore all the literature available to them. I asked James, who was then in seventh grade, whether he knew that at the end of “Anna Karenina” Anna committed suicide. He said yes. I then asked him whether he wanted to read the novel because of that, and he only smiled his gentle smile.

I gave the book to him, and it became one of the books we talked about on and off for the next few years. Tolstoy’s characters are easily vexed, or maybe Russians are easily vexed, he told me a few days into his reading. That the words “vex” and “vexation” appear often in the text is an observation I will always remember and treasure. James saw himself in Levin, as I had expected, but I did point out that Levin was often vexed though he—James—was rarely vexed. He adored Kitty; he was fond of Anna’s brother, Stiva (because he was immoral *and* genuine); and he found Vronsky the most complex character in the novel. What about Anna, I said, and James thought for a while, then said that Anna brought tragedies onto herself *and then* complained about them. I now wish that I had asked him which he had found more troubling: that she brought tragedies onto herself or that she complained. We did not discuss her suicide.

I reread “Anna Karenina” recently. I had forgotten that, before Anna’s suicide, there is Vronsky’s attempt. He shoots himself, impulsively and perhaps not entirely wholeheartedly, out of desperate love for Anna. Overshadowed by Anna’s death, this episode had somehow retreated from my memory. I wish I had discussed this with James. A few weeks before his death, he told me that he was reading “The Myth of Sisyphus,” by Camus, and I said that I’d read the book, too, when I was in college. After that conversation, I turned to its opening pages: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

Did I have a fleeting thought that I should have checked in with James to see if he felt suicidal? I can’t answer that question now, because on this side of death no answer can be trusted.

When we dropped James off at his dorm after that last dinner with us, I asked him what he was reading, and he replied that he was rereading “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Then he stepped out of the car and raised a hand. James was a person of few words and even fewer gestures. That raised hand, like that versatile single word “oh” in his conversation, could mean many things: hello, or goodbye, or leave me alone, or thank you, or simply a reply to the words I said when he stepped out of the car, “I love you, James.”

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Through their entire lives, at every school drop-off, every time they were leaving for a party or a playdate, every time I was leaving for a trip, and with each exchange of text, the last thing I said to Vincent and James was inevitably “I love you.”

No matter how long we get to parent our children, there are only limited numbers of “I love you”s we can say to them. That, too, is a fact. ♦

This is drawn from “[Things in Nature Merely Grow](#).”

Published in the print edition of the [March 31, 2025](#), issue, with the headline “A Matter of Facts.”

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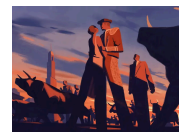


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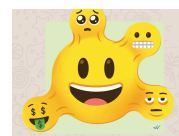


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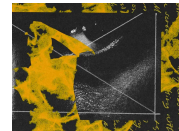


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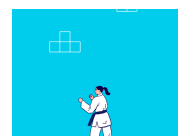


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