

vived the fire intact, brighter than ever. The Bainers would have the last laugh. Allaray reached around Jesus and fumbled for the flashlight that had occupied the hole in his back. "Still here!" she yelled down to the others. Allaray turned the flashlight on. She admired the display while descending the ladder, and then from the ground. And the Bainer kids ran around in the ash until their legs were black from it and they looked like legless floating ghosts against the dark mound of their former home. Beneath the lit face and eyes of Jesus, eerily affixed above them, they floated like transparent spirits. And then they piled in their RV and drove away, leaving the charred, but illuminated face of Jesus behind them.

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER



A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease

FROM *The New Yorker*

□ THE "SILENCE MARK" SIGNIFIES an absence of language, and there is at least one on every page of the story of my family life. Most often used in the conversations I have with my grandmother about her life in Europe during the war, and in conversations with my father about our family's history of heart disease — we have forty-one heart attacks between us, and counting — the silence mark is a staple of familial punctuation. Note the use of silence in the following brief exchange, when my father called me at college, the morning of his most recent angioplasty.

"Listen," he said, and then surrendered to a long pause, as if the pause were what I was supposed to listen to. "I'm sure everything's gonna be fine, but I just wanted to let you know —"

"I already know," I said.

"□"

"□"

"□"

"□"

"O.K.," he said.

"I'll talk to you tonight," I said, and I could hear, in the receiver, my own heartbeat.

He said, "Yup."

■ The “willed silence mark” signifies an intentional silence, the conversational equivalent of building a wall over which you can’t climb, through which you can’t see, against which you break the bones of your hands and wrists. I often inflict willed silences upon my mother when she asks about my relationships with girls. Perhaps this is because I never have *relationships* with girls — only *relations*. It depresses me to think that I’ve never had sex with anyone who really loved me. Sometimes I wonder if having sex with a girl who doesn’t love me is like felling a tree, alone, in a forest: No one hears about it; it didn’t happen.

?? The “insistent question mark” denotes one family member’s refusal to yield to a willed silence, as in this conversation with my mother.

“Are you dating at all?”

□

“But you’re seeing people, I’m sure. Right?”

□

“I don’t get it. Are you ashamed of the girl? Are you ashamed of me?”

■

“??”

! As it visually suggests, the “unxclamation point” is the opposite of an exclamation point; it indicates a whisper.

The best example of this usage occurred when I was a boy. My grandmother was driving me to a piano lesson, and the Volvo’s wipers only moved the rain around. She turned down the volume of the second side of the seventh tape of an audio version of *Shoah*, put her hand on my cheek, and said, “I hope that you never love anyone as much as I love you.”

Why was she whispering? We were the only ones who could hear.

!! Theoretically, the “extraunxclamation points” would be used to denote twice an unxclamation point, but in practice any whisper that quiet would not be heard. I take comfort in believing that

at least some of the silences in my life were really extraunxclamations.

!! The “extraexclamation points” are simply twice an exclamation point. I’ve never had a heated argument with any member of my family. We’ve never yelled at each other, or disagreed with any passion. In fact, I can’t even remember a difference of opinion. There are those who would say that this is unhealthy. But, since it is the case, there exists only one instance of extraexclamation points in our family history, and they were uttered by a stranger who was vying with my father for a parking space in front of the National Zoo.

“Give it up, fucker!!” he hollered at my father, in front of my mother, my brothers, and me.

“Well, I’m sorry,” my father said, pushing the bridge of his glasses up his nose, “but I think it’s rather obvious that we arrived at this space first. You see, we were approaching from —”

“Give . . . it . . . up . . . fucker!!”

“Well, it’s just that I think I’m in the right on this particu —”

“GIVE IT UP, FUCKER!!”

“Give it up, Dad;” I said, suffering a minor coronary event as my fingers clenched his seat’s headrest.

“Je-sus!” the man yelled, pounding his fist against the outside of his car door. “Giveitupfuckr!!”

Ultimately, my father gave it up, and we found a spot several blocks away. Before we got out, he pushed in the cigarette lighter, and we waited, in silence, as it got hot. When it popped out, he pushed it back in. “It’s never, ever worth it,” he said, turning back to us, his hand against his heart.

~ Placed at the end of a sentence, the “pedal point” signifies a thought that dissolves into a suggestive silence. The pedal point is distinguished from the ellipsis and the dash in that the thought it follows is neither incomplete nor interrupted but an outstretched hand. My younger brother uses these a lot with me, probably because he, of all the members of my family, is the one most capable of telling me what he needs to tell me without hav-

ing to say it. Or, rather, he's the one whose words I'm most convinced I don't need to hear. Very often he will say, "Jonathan~" and I will say, "I know."

A few weeks ago, he was having problems with his heart. A visit to his university's health center to check out some chest pains became a trip to the emergency room became a week in the intensive care unit. As it turns out, he's been having one long heart attack for the last six years. "It's nowhere near as bad as it sounds," the doctor told my parents, "but it's definitely something we want to take care of."

I called my brother that night and told him that he shouldn't worry. He said, "I know. But that doesn't mean there's nothing to worry about~"

"I know~" I said.

"I know~" he said.

"I~"

"I~"

"□"

Does my little brother have relationships with girls? I don't know.

↓ Another commonly employed familial punctuation mark, the "low point," is used either in place — or for accentuation at the end — of such phrases as "This is terrible," "This is irremediable," "It couldn't possibly be worse."

"It's good to have somebody, Jonathan. It's necessary."

"□"

"It pains me to think of you alone."

"■↓"

"??↓"

Interestingly, low points always come in pairs in my family. That is, the acknowledgment of whatever is terrible and irremediable becomes itself something terrible and irremediable — and often worse than the original referent. For example, my sadness makes my mother sadder than the cause of my sadness does. ☹

course, her sadness then makes me sad. Thus is created a "low-point chain": ↓↓↓↓...∞.

❄ The "snowflake" is used at the end of a unique familial phrase — that is, any sequence of words that has never, in the history of our family life, been assembled as such. For example, "I didn't die in the Holocaust, but all of my siblings did, so where does that leave me?❄" Or, "My heart is no good, and I'm afraid of dying, and I'm also afraid of saying I love you.❄"

☺ The "corroboration mark" is more or less what it looks like. But it would be a mistake to think that it simply stands in place of "I agree," or even "Yes." Witness the subtle usage in this dialogue between my mother and my father:

"Could you add orange juice to the grocery list, but remember to get the kind with reduced acid. Also some cottage cheese. And that bacon-substitute stuff. And a few Yahrzeit candles."

"☺"

"The car needs gas. I need tampons."

"☺"

"Is Jonathan dating anyone? I'm not prying, but I'm very interested."

"☺"

My father has suffered twenty-two heart attacks — more than the rest of us combined. Once, in a moment of frankness after his nineteenth, he told me that his marriage to my mother had been successful because he had become a yes man early on.



"We've only had one fight," he said. "It was in our first week of marriage. I realized that it's never, ever worth it."

My father and I were pulling weeds one afternoon a few weeks ago. He was disobeying his cardiologist's order not to pull weeds. The problem, the doctor says, is not the physical exertion but the emotional stress that weeding inflicts on my father. He has dreams of weeds sprouting from his body, of having to pull them, at the roots, from his chest. He has also been told not to watch Orioles games and not to think about the current administration.

As we weeded, my father made a joke about how my older brother, who, barring a fatal heart attack, was to get married in a few weeks, had already become a yes man. Hearing this felt like having an elephant sit on my chest — my brother, whom I loved more than I loved myself, was surrendering.

“Your grandfather was a yes man,” my father added, on his knees, his fingers pushing into the earth, “and your children will be yes men.”

I’ve been thinking about that conversation ever since, and I’ve come to understand — with a straining heart — that I, too, am becoming a yes man, and that, like my father’s and my brother’s, my surrender has little to do with the people I say yes to, or with the existence of questions at all. It has to do with a fear of dying, with rehearsal and preparation.

  The “severed web” is a Barely Tolerable Substitute, whose meaning approximates “I love you,” and which can be used in place of “I love you.” Other Barely Tolerable Substitutes include, but are not limited to:

- |←, which approximates “I love you.”
- ∅□, which approximates “I love you.”
- ⊙, which approximates “I love you.”
- ×→, which approximates “I love you.”

I don’t know how many Barely Tolerable Substitutes there are, but often it feels as if they were everywhere, as if everything that is spoken and done — every “Yup,” “Okay,” and “I already know,” every weed pulled from the lawn, every sexual act — were just Barely Tolerable.

- ● Unlike the colon, which is used to mark a major division in
- ● a sentence, and to indicate that what follows is an elaboration, summation, implication, etc., of what precedes, the “reversible colon” is used when what appears on either side elaborates, summates, implicates, etc., what’s on the other side. In other words, the two halves of the sentence explain each other, as in the

cases of “Mother::Me,” and “Father::Death.” Here are some examples of reversible sentences:

My eyes water when I speak about my family::I don’t like to speak about my family.

I’ve never felt loved by anyone outside of my family::my persistent depression.

1938 to 1945::□.

Sex::yes.

My grandmother’s sadness::my mother’s sadness::my sadness::the sadness that will come after me.

To be Jewish::to be Jewish.

Heart disease::yes.

← Familial communication always has to do with failures to communicate. It is common that in the course of a conversation one of the participants will not hear something that the other has said. It is also quite common that one of the participants will not understand what the other has said. Somewhat less common is one participant’s saying something whose words the other understands completely but whose meaning is not understood at all. This can happen with very simple sentences, like “I hope that you never love anyone as much as I love you.”

But, in our best, least depressing moments, we *try* to understand what we have failed to understand. A “backup” is used: We start again at the beginning, we replay what was missed and make an effort to hear what was meant instead of what was said:

“It pains me to think of you alone.”

“← It pains me to think of me without any grandchildren to love.”

{ } A related set of marks, the “should-have brackets,” signify words that were not spoken but should have been, as in this dialogue with my father:

“Are you hearing static?”

“{I’m crying into the phone.}”

“Jonathan?”

“□”

"Jonathan~"

"■"

"??"

"I::not myself~"

"{A child's sadness is a parent's sadness.}"

"{A parent's sadness is a child's sadness.}"

"←"

"I'm probably just tired;"

"{I never told you this, because I thought it might hurt you, but in my dreams it was you. Not me. You were pulling the weeds from my chest.}"

"{I want to love and be loved.}"

"☺"

"☺"

"↓"

"↓"

"⊙"

"☺"

"□↔□↔□"

"↓"

"↓"

"▶◻◀"

"■ + ■ → ■"

"☺"

"? □"

"⊗ ⊗"

"◎ □ ♦ ● ◆ ○ □ ◆ ◎ ●"

"■"

"{I love you.}"

"{I love you, too. So much.}"

Of course, my sense of the should-have is unlikely to be the same as my brothers', or my mother's, or my father's. Sometimes — when I'm in the car, or having sex, or talking to one of them on the phone — I imagine their should-have versions. I sew them together into a new life, leaving out everything that actually happened and was said.

LISA GABRIELE



The Guide to Being a Groupie

FROM Nerve.com

BE A GIRL. Be born sad. Be from a big family, or be an only child. Either way, make sure your parents are distracted and overwhelmed. They should hate your moodiness and scoff at any discussion of fresh and freaky ways to wear your hair. Notice that as your parents' arguments, debt, and beer bottles pile up on the kitchen table at night, the volume on your radio dial rises. Through process of elimination, rock and roll, loud, is the only thing that drowns out the downstairs cacophony. You are twelve. You learn to stay out of the way of what's going to happen.

Don't panic when lyrics to songs by Van Halen, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, and Journey fill the space in your brain previously reserved for algebra problems, figure-skating schedules, and your dad's new phone number. Realize that you can memorize a song after hearing it only three times. Trace a Rush album cover onto the title page of your English composition binder. Ask your mom if you can take guitar lessons. She tells you to dry the dishes, and when you're done, to take the garbage out. Drag the flimsy bag over the gravel, check to see if any neighbors are around, then sing into the dark suburban sky. *She's just a small-town girl . . . She took the midnight train going anywhere . . .* Wonder if Steve Perry wrote that song after he peered behind your homemade curtains into the 3-bdr, 2-bath, crpt, frplc, wtw shag, split-level and watched you, alone at the kitchen table, illuminated by the light over the stove, waiting for the avocado phone to ring.