

Les Brady

Parts Unknown

ANTHONY BOURDAIN SITS CROSS-LEGGED on a carpeted floor, or kneels on hard-packed earth, or straddles a wicker chair, and gazes at laden platters, steam rising when he leans, eyes closed, ever nearer. His hair is shorter than in years past, more salt than pepper, and lines score his ruddy cheeks, but his puckish grin looks spry when he admires the food before him: *banh mi, tagine, pulpo, foie gras*. He's in Hanoi, Tangier, Mexico City, Manhattan. He's everywhere, every week, on any one of his television food and travel journals, his burnished baritone brandishing phrases both slashing and sly:

"Holy fuck, is this good!"

"You put *chicken* in a carbonara? It's an unforgivable sin against God."

"All vegetables are better with a little pork."

"There's a party in my tummy...so yummy, so yummy..."

So yummy in my tummy. Does that sound like someone on a path to suicide? No, it doesn't. And, yes, it does, but that's the point. Sometimes we show signs, and sometimes we don't. Or maybe we do, but no one's watching. Maybe they *are* watching, only not for what we're showing them, but for what they want to see; everyone seems to need a reason, even when there isn't one. If I couldn't find a reason behind Bourdain's suicide, I needed to find a sign.

My brother, Danny, was handsome, athletic, intelligent, with a dangerous alluring confidence you could hear in the timbre of his deep voice; he was twenty years my senior, which made him mythical to me. I admired his thick shock of black hair, the tan hue of his chiseled face, his wide, beaming smile; I loved when he called me "Squirt." I was about five when he made

it a priority to spend extra time with me. I remember riding in the passenger seat of his Hershey-brown VW Bug, grasping the little handle mounted to the dashboard for safety, just like he told me to.

He met Jeannie at a restaurant where she waited tables, and while my brother had no lack of female companionship (we'd often drop by one of his girlfriends' places where I'd watch TV while the two of them "visited"), there must have been something compelling about Jeannie aside from her silken brunette mane and enormous brown eyes. One night, my dad, after speaking jovially on the phone for a few minutes, handed me the receiver, and I listened to my brother's exuberant voice asking me to be the ring bearer at his wedding.

They were married about two years; they looked happy. I remember one conversation I had with Jeannie at an Easter Sunday barbecue: we talked about John Denver, whom I revered, how we'd all go see him in concert in L.A.

I'm told that one day Danny and Jeannie had a conversation about having a child, after which she walked into the rear of the house. Danny sat for a few moments until a piercing explosion made him jump and run to where Jeannie lay on the bathroom floor, blood pooling beneath her head.

Danny committed suicide slowly, like most of us do, with a bottle instead of a gun. He was on a fishing trip in western Oregon with his cousin, Mike. Danny had planned to abandon southern California for Coos Bay. But he lost control of his truck on I-5, just south of the Oregon border, was thrown from the cab and killed when struck by other vehicles. His autopsy report indicated a blood alcohol level of 0.45, almost six times the legal limit, a level that could have, by itself, killed him. Mike was a few minutes behind in another truck. Hadn't he watched Danny drink himself beyond oblivion?

Are we all that good at hiding our inner grief and self-loathing?

Hell yes, we are.

I have only ever attempted suicide in thought, though the act was always clear to me: I stare at the bottomless black of a beach-side cliff on a moonless night in high school; I aim for a spot on the gray concrete four floors below my college dorm window; I pick up the small silver revolver from my writing table, unload it, press the barrel to my temple and dry-fire. *How easy would this be? The trigger-pull is light.*

My parents and friends would grieve, of course. But those who knew me only casually or professionally might lament how well-composed I seemed, that even at 55 I appeared promising. That's my persona. It's not my person. I raise the distinction because I felt a similar dichotomy about Anthony Bourdain.

In a short article in *People* magazine on-line, Chef Andrew Zimmern reflected on his friendship with Bourdain, and the last conversation they had before his death: "He was telling me about pursuing my own happiness," Zimmern begins, "...that I deserved to be happy..." Bourdain was repaying him for having offered similar advice in times past, advice that had stuck. At least for a while.



Zimmern concluded that Bourdain “was just a symphony of a human being.” A symphony so varied in dynamics that he could give life-affirming counsel to a friend while feeling so broken that he was lost to his own advice. I doubt anyone would compare me to a symphony, but I’m affable, consistent, reliable: maybe a short sonata.

That’s my persona, through which I complete tasks for people at work, reassure my parents that I’m happy and content, entertain creative writing students in my classroom. I’m not lying, mind you; I’m working with what I’ve got, like a good actor. My person—who I am to myself—feels far less satisfying, convincing, and entertaining. Just a guy with a job, who’s sometimes afraid to get out of bed to go to that job. I hide my person inside my persona.

I think that’s what Anthony Bourdain did, too.

If I commit suicide, many will ask what “It” was that pushed me over the edge; to most, personal grief must be about some terrible, tangible thing. That’s how people who don’t suffer (or understand) depression rationalize someone taking their own life. And why some show little sympathy to well-off celebrities, like Bourdain, who do.

A friend I spoke to the day after Bourdain’s suicide scoffed: “What did *he* have to be depressed about?”

The assumption is that if you’re successful, you’re happy, or at least content, with enough money to supplement whatever degree of satisfaction you lack. If that were the case, Bourdain should have been a poster boy. In 2016 he told *Biography*, “At the age of 44, I was standing in kitchens, not knowing what it was like to go to sleep without being in mortal terror. I was in horrible, endless, irrevocable debt. I had no health insurance. I didn’t pay my taxes. I couldn’t pay my rent.” Then he wrote a tell-all article about the covert sex-and-drug-laced culture of the restaurant industry and sent the essay blindly to *The New Yorker*, which bought it. Then came the book deal that brought *Kitchen Confidential*. In a relatively short time, Bourdain went from waking terror to best-seller; then he was in love, raising a child, and working what many would consider the best fucking job in the world.

My dad grew up the youngest of nine in a tiny rural mining town—no gas or electricity, and an outhouse—in the midst of the Great Depression; my stepmother grew up in Second World War Germany, where she watched the Nazis deport her father and murder her mother. They’d each lost a spouse to cancer before they met in their 40s. Now, there’s some baggage you could stay depressed about, right? Yet I have known no two more ebullient people in my life. Today they are 87 and 93. They sing in church choir, belong to social organizations; they travel (at least before Covid shut them indoors); they write; they go swing dancing on Sundays. They express life so fully it almost overwhelms me. Dad calls about once a week, and I sometimes avoid him because I know he’s going to ask, “what are you doing for excitement” or how my social life is, and I sense he worries when I have nothing particular to report. Sometimes I just make things up.

But why *would* I commit suicide? I live quite comfortably. I do mostly what I want, when I want. I am responsible for no one but myself. I hold an MFA in Creative Writing. I’ve

published short fiction, taught college, worked as a freelance editor, and will continue to do some satisfying combination of all three, I hope, for the rest of my life.

Yet depression often paralyzes me from doing any of those joyful things.

My friend, JoLani, whom I’ve known since 8th grade, once asked me, “What does it feel like to be depressed?” I thought she was joking at first.

“For me, it’s a combination of anxiety, fear, and exhaustion.”

“But,” she countered immediately, “afraid of *what*? Anxious about *what*? Exhausted from...?”

It surprised me how many people I spoke to insisted that Bourdain’s suicide *had* to be about something. Many don’t understand that capital-D-Depression isn’t about a “what.”

You can feel devastated about something that happens to you, and circumstances do drive people to take their own lives. We see it all the time: the LGBTQ kid, rejected by friends or family or both; the cab driver whose income is decimated by Uber; the school shooting survivors who finally succumb to the guilt. These incidents are terrible, and because of their tangible nature, they elicit empathy from those who’ve suffered, sympathy from others who haven’t.

Depression is like a back injury. You explain it to your boss, why you can’t sit in the office chair or pick up that 35-pound box. She nods in skeptical concern because she sees no bandage, no blood, no wound, only you looking like you usually do but for your abbreviated gait and pinched face. I use the analogy of a back injury because I had one many years ago. I was on disability for six months, time I spent mostly lying on the floor because that was the least painful position I could manage. When I came back to my job, co-workers whispered about why I hadn’t “done more during my time off,” as if I’d frittered away a sabbatical.

That’s what Depression feels like, and that’s what I think happened to Anthony Bourdain. Everyone around him equivocated. Everyone around him sympathized. And his agony remained.

Depression is a sourceless, omnipresent undertone of fear and sadness that may ebb but never fades. It colors my every thought, word, and deed; it killed Bourdain.

Our rational minds convince us that there *needs* to be a “what.” That makes sense. The initial media reactions to Bourdain’s death took this route: Was it his relationship? His health? His job? I often feel anxiety about *my* job; I dream about it restlessly. My boss is absent. I never think I’m doing well enough because no one tells me how I’m doing at all (unless, of course, I fuck something up). But when I finally get to the “what”—the event, the project, the person—that I was so worried about, it’s never more than I can handle; it’s never as scary as it felt. That’s not Depression; this level of anxiety is too easily assuaged.

What I can’t explain is why at other times I feel so burdened with the entirety of my rather comfortable life that I so badly want to end it.

I had a conversation with my Danish friend, Merle, about humor acting as a light blanket over personal sadness, what she called chidingly, “The American Way.”

“When I came to this country,” she said, “I was surprised to see a building with such a beautiful...front. What do you call that?”

“A ‘façade,’” I explained.

“Ah, yes. But behind this is just something drab, or falling apart. Americans are like that.”

I was tempted to suggest crumbling castles as the European foil to her American façade metaphor. Turns out Denmark’s suicide rate is historically high despite its lofty ranking in the “Happiest Countries in the World” survey. Still, it’s at least highly conflicted if not completely ironic that Americans—so deflective of death (the honor and glory we heap onto post-pubescent celebrities; the millions we spend on marginally effective youth-restoring supplements and salves)—can be killing themselves with such alarming regularity. Maybe our youth-obsessed culture helps prop that pretty façade, hiding the self-revulsion that seals our self-destruction.

According to the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention website, 44,965 people commit suicide in the United States every year. That’s an average of 123 people per day, and for every suicide, there are 25 attempts. The suicide rate among Americans ages 35 to 64 rose by 28 percent between 1999 and 2010, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That’s a whole lot of people trying to destroy themselves, though the most frequent suicides are middle-age white males, like Bourdain, like me.

There were numerous briefs published about Anthony Bourdain’s death, all seeking a “what.” PageSix.com published an article clumsily titled, “The Troubling Signs Leading up to Anthony Bourdain’s Suicide.” Sounds like they have the answers, doesn’t it? The article’s first assertion is that Bourdain not showing up for a scheduled dinner with Eric Ripert the night before “...was the first sign something was very wrong.” I hope they meant the first sign *that night*, but it’s a vaguely crafted sentence. Surely not showing up for dinner was the *last* sign that something was very wrong. The article highlights Ripert’s comment to Bourdain’s mother, Gladys, saying that her son “...had been in a dark mood these past couple days,” suggesting that something had gone *suddenly* wrong.

Articles asserted that Bourdain kept “a brutal work schedule” and had been “absolutely exhausted” before his death. These are just more misguided attributions of a “what” to his fatal Depression. I imagine that jetting about the world for work isn’t the most relaxing of commutes, but would it alone make you suicidal? Can you really feel so exhausted from filming your life’s passion in exotic locations—here, an idyllic French village—that you’re ready to strangle yourself to death, knowing that your best friend will have to find you?

Bourdain’s crooked grin should have shined next to any definition of “late bloomer.” What happened? The news gave us nothing but eulogies and homilies. But, my God: digging live geoducks at dawn in the Pacific Northwest and finishing them in a hot pan with butter, on the side a crisp Sauvignon Blanc... Cracking into the shell of a glistening *lechon*, a cold San Miguel in hand... Eyes wide, admiring a Sapporo soba master stretching yards-long noodles... And always such devotion in his observational tone. He had everything to live for.

Until he didn’t.

Look at Bourdain’s life circumstances and you’ll find that nothing relative to suicide makes sense. Except for one thing: there *is* no sense to it, because there is no sense behind Depression. Depression dissociates us from everything vital. I say “vital” specifically. It means, “absolutely necessary; essential.” Its root is Latin: *vita*, meaning “life.” Depression wrests what’s vital

from us, both metaphorically and actually. It leads some to the ultimate paradox: so many who seem to have everything enacting what most busy themselves denying; we will all die.

Depression is the master override; there is no amount of money, title, or personal satisfaction that loosens its grip. What I still sought, though, were signs. Bourdain was a self-admitted former drug abuser; he made no secret that he drank, sometimes to excess. But what about his *person*—the hidden gears and circuits that made up who he was to himself—felt so broken that nothing about his remarkable life could deter the manner of its inevitable end?

In the Buenos Aires episode of *Parts Unknown*, Bourdain visits a psychotherapist, purportedly to highlight a regional proclivity—that seeking talk-therapy is a quasi-national pastime in Argentina (at least for those with the money to afford it).

The scene is dim and washed of color. Narrator Bourdain addresses us convivially, stating, “Meet Mariana, my therapist,” who sits with legs crossed, notepad poised, pensively tapping a pen to her closed lips, brown shoulder-length hair framing a pleasantly angular yet unsmiling face. Bourdain lies awkwardly on a too-short couch in the cramped office, making the entire setting feel dark and compressed. Short excerpts of the session intersperse throughout the remainder of the episode. In the course of those brief scenes, Anthony Bourdain admits that he is far from alright with himself, and those snippets reveal signs more prescient—and glaring—than any hypothetical “what” the media or anyone else tried to conjure as a tangible reason for his suicide.

“It’s crushingly lonely,” he admits to the therapist. “I travel over 200 days a year...” Sounds like a big “what,” doesn’t it? But capital-L-Loneliness is a direct subset of capital-D-Depression, and a far deeper feeling of isolation and abandonment than many realize. Yes, he might miss his woman and child, but has means to communicate with them anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection. Skype is not a hug, but it sure beats a postcard. Did the CNN corporate overlords demand that he travel unaccompanied? Hell no; he had at his command a small platoon.

He describes a recurring dream in which he wanders a labyrinthine hotel but can’t find the front desk to check out, and later in the same dream he is “trying to get home,” but “can’t quite remember where that is.”

“Are you alone [in the dream]?” the therapist asks.

“I’m alone, in this dream, yes.”

Isolation, solemnity; you’d think that someone like Bourdain could order up as much or as little as he wanted, seeming in total command of his circumstances, as he later admits, sitting with Mariana at the counter of an outdoor barbecue restaurant: “I do anything I want, go anywhere I want... That guy over there loading sausages onto the grill, *that’s* work. [What I do] is not so bad. I’ll make it.”

But his other admissions belie his snarky optimism and qualify the depth of his Loneliness. He admits, “I feel like Quasimodo, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, if he stayed in nice hotel suites with high thread-count sheets.” He softens the reference with humor—“high thread-count sheets”—to deflect its gravity, but identifying with Quasimodo confirms the abject degree of Bourdain’s Loneliness. Later he confides, still lingering on the Hunchback

image, “I feel like a freak, and I feel...isolated.” This is not I-miss-my-girlfriend-and-kid loneliness, but one deep and piercing tong of the Depression trident: isolation, anxiety, fear.

The Quasimodo reference stunned me. I’ve never read Victor Hugo’s novel, but when I was a fat nine-year-old, hunkered in the family room on a too-warm Saturday afternoon to avoid the scrutiny the outdoors brought me, I watched the 1939 film with Charles Laughton as the Hunchback. The entire movie left me with a lingering sadness and empathy for Quasimodo, but not until the final scene did my own emotion hit me with physical pain that I felt in my chest. I sobbed when Laughton’s character, having vanquished those who would have hanged his beloved Esmeralda and wrested them from sanctuary inside the cathedral, caresses the carved gargoyle atop the massive tower, his face twisting from elation to anguish, and wonders aloud, “Why was I not made of stone, like thee?”

That’s *exactly* the kind of freakishness I felt. I carried the feeling through junior high and high school, into college, well beyond the time in which I knew on the surface that I didn’t *look* or *sound* like a freak, but still felt a separateness, a not-belonging, that I could neither explain nor deny. And while I do a really good job of putting on a smile and sounding affable, to a certain extent I feel like that same freak today. I have always felt different. I have always felt apart. Alone doesn’t bother me. Apart does.

Bourdain’s deft reference to the very image of my own internal anguish suggested that his pain, like mine, generated over decades, not days, and the end that it brought him was more culmination than compulsion.

Mariana reiterates her first question at the session’s end: “What brought you here?”

“I’d like to be happy,” Bourdain says.

This is his honest answer, after which he equivocates and qualifies the admission, like fine-tuning a lie: “I’d like to be happy-*er*. I *should* be happy.”

He finally drops the evasion, though, maybe because the scene is wrapping, or he is weary of perpetuating his own denial: “I’d like to be able to look out the window and say, yeah, life is good.”

Mariana states more than asks, “And you don’t.”

Bourdain shakes his head and smirks: “Nah.”

He colors his responses in the therapy session with *voice*, that impactful quality of consistent cadence and tone that writers strive for. Some are born with it, some attain it over time, and in whatever manner he cultivated it, Bourdain had it. His voice provided him the ultimate evasion. You could interpret his responses as purposeful affect, his *schtick*, part of the show. But taken at face value his narrative sounds like a surface-level admission that he was on a collision course with himself. The episode aired in 2016. Why the hell didn’t someone say something then? Weren’t they paying attention? Didn’t anyone know him well enough to untangle what he was doing? Or was Bourdain’s own dismissive humor enough to deflect family, friend, and fan alike?

We loved him; his girlfriend loved him; his daughter loved him. But loving someone doesn’t necessarily extend to him loving himself. Why couldn’t Bourdain internalize the

love of his lady and child and admirers? Why did he—why do *I*—still feel like a misshapen hunchback, ashamed and apart?

Bourdain affirmed to his therapist, “I tell stories for a living. I write books. I make television...A reasonable person does not believe that you are so interesting that people will watch you on television. I think this is evidence of a narcissistic personality disorder.”

The therapist’s response to his assertion is not aired. But what might it have been? If she didn’t simply listen and acknowledge his self-perception but actually tried to suggest an alternate, would Bourdain have considered it, or merely shrugged it off, disdaining behind his tough, jocular veneer?

Whatever Bourdain’s reaction, I wonder if he ever considered that doing something really important, something larger than one’s self, requires a level of narcissism. Who else would hold public office, manage a multi-national corporation, become a world-touring concert musician, lead a global mission to end hunger, if not a person who believed in their capacity to fulfill these roles? Maybe Bourdain would have scoffed at the comparison, but *Parts Unknown* was the culminating evolution of his storytelling—growing from food and travel shows to explorations that unveiled the cultural intimacies of global locales. The series’ focus had far more to do with people and history and building understanding, or at least empathy, than it did with finding interesting things to eat. Sounds like a pretty important job to me.

It may not have quelled Bourdain’s Depression or thwarted his suicide, but I wonder what difference it would have made if he’d have appreciated the distinction between narcissism and embracing a passion. He knew what he was good at; he wrote his book—and *everyone* read it—and his rewards flowed freely for doing so.

What if our most basic pursuit *is* our vital passion, letting us tap into an equally vital motivation: a reason to go on. Would appreciating my assertion of self-acceptance—or realizing it at all—have ebbled Bourdain’s Depression? If he’d had a foil to his self-diagnosed narcissism, would he have realized that not only what he strove for was positive, but even life-saving? I guess it doesn’t matter now. But it could have.

There is reason and cohesion to the universe, and our consciousness possesses an eternal validity. Matter is never destroyed but only transformed. You were a good chef, Tony, but you were a great storyteller. I’m sure you’ve transformed in some satisfying, maybe even magnificent, way.

At least, I hope you have.

No skill I possess has ever moved me as much as putting words onto a page and organizing them for others to read. Writing is the only thing I’ve ever wanted acknowledgement for, because of all the things I can do, it is by far the most difficult. I sing Handel and Mozart; I play Beethoven; I make one hell of a spaghetti *carbonara*; but none of those things matter to me as much as writing; nothing else has ever felt as important. And I have always had the time to write.

I figure I’d better take advantage of that luxury until it’s time to go.