Look Where You Are Going Not Where You Have Been



Steven J Dines

"A hauntingly beautiful collection..."
Ray Cluley, award-winning author of *Probably Monsters*

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This book is dedicated to all those
with absent fathers.
Look where you are going
not where you have been...

Pendulum

Swing, says the pendulum.

This was supposed to be my life story. Instead, it's a tale unfinished, like a son stuck forever in a tilted uterus or some shy performer cowering in the wings with eternal stage fright. But my son arrived—to die, aged nine—following an arduous thirty-hour labour that came to nothing. In the end: ventouse. They sucked him right out of my aforementioned tilt with a bruised shoulder and a head like a football or an alien or an alien football, misshapen as the thoughts that would come to form inside it, that never did get the chance to become *shapen*, like your thoughts or…like your thoughts.

First we need to go back. I am writing this in stream of consciousness. Connected moments recorded in a continuous flow, one word, one sentence leading naturally to the next. Reducing my life to this.

This sentence.

My obstetrician looked like Steve Buscemi.

But we need to go further back than that. The pendulum swings over the same old ground every time to reach the beginning, to reach the end.

Back.

I went into labour while watching the HBO series, *Boardwalk Empire*. March 2011 that was. My waters broke, soaked the couch cushions, and to this day the season remains unwatched. Just one odd association in a story littered with them, you'll find.

Back. Let the pendulum swing all the way to the left.

Waiting. Sickness. Waiting. Cravings. Waiting. Sickness.

Peeing on sticks. A factory of sticks. Until you find the one, the golden ticket after you have already been to the factory so many fucking

times.

Sex with Ellis, lots of sex. A factory of sex.

"Let's try for a baby," I said.

That was 2010. We were in a children's play park just off Venice Beach. I was twenty-three, Obama was in the White House, Katy Perry in the charts, telling us about *California Gurls* even though she was not singing about me. Ellis and I sat on the swings, two adults trying to recapture something, listening to the chains creak under the weight of our years.

"I've been thinking about killing myself," he said. "I'm so depressed. I hate my job. I hate this place. Let's go someplace else, Milly. Let's get out of here... I need to talk to you about something."

It's funny how, thinking back, Ellis starts with the line about wanting to die, just comes right out with it. Which is different to how it actually played out; the opposite, in fact. He took his time to tell me. Really built up to that shit. But as the pendulum swings back it all looks and sounds and feels so different: you pull the bandage from the wound before the wound is made. It makes it easier somehow. The scabs shrink, disappear, leave the smile of a fresh cut before the blade moves up and across your forearm to close the skin and leave behind the soft, perfect paleness of a blank page. Which is why I never liked tattoos much, because you're writing a story that can never be unwritten. Who wants that?

The sleeve unrolls down my arm.

And I get to *un*hate myself for wanting a child. It's like the tide slipping away from the shore and leaving me with the tiny, broken shells of my life gathered in the crook of my arm. Walking backwards, I get to place them back into their depressions in the sand. Lay them out across a stretch of empty beach.

"I want a baby."

Then I sit on the sand and wiggle my painted-blued toes as I stare down the retreating waves.

Let's stop here awhile. Let the pendulum hang for a moment. Let the forces exchange, one become another. Besides, there is no point going any further back than this. There is only the empty air of my life leading up to that day, aged twenty three on the sand. The pendulum can only go so far back before it stops to protect itself. Force it any farther (strange how farther sounds like father, right?) and something breaks. So let's stop awhile and let the waves stop with us. A perfect pause.

Calm.

Silence.

No friction, no drag.

Silence.

Calm.

Unpause, and the surf rolls toward me, waves rushing in like a bunch of fists at first but losing their power, their hatred, until they are fingers crawling ever-so-timidly across the sand toward the wriggling paintedness of my toes. All froth and foam and not a chance of undertow to drag me down.

"I want a baby."

I jump up and start combing the beach for shells or anything precious. At first, I pick up the prettiest shells, the smoothest ones, the most-perfect, but soon I am gladly picking up whatever I can find, seeking reassurance from the thing taking shape in the crook of my arm: my shell baby. But then I get spooked and lift my arm and with this foolish notion of having a child with Ellis I let it all fall to the ground like a bunch of collapsing bones. I hate myself for even thinking it, but then those are the ideas that tend to stick sometimes: the ones with barbs.

The sleeve rolls up my arm.

I have locked myself in the bathroom of our Venice Beach apartment. Ellis is in the bedroom playing Xbox, streaming to his building fanbase as he yells his frustration at his teammates and the television screen. The sound of the surf reaches me through the open window, a lulling effect, drowning Ellis. You step outside yourself to remember how daddy used to say it was all your fault. Mommy leaving? Your fault. Losing his job? Your fault. His being stuck in the house, looking after some kid? His kid, *your* fault. Meanwhile, Ellis rages and curses at the TV screen as you make a fist and take the cuts.

"I need to talk to you about something... Let's get out of here. Let's go someplace else, Milly. I hate this place. I hate my job. I'm so depressed. I've been thinking about killing myself."

I had sensed he was building up to something; maybe not that but something. Walking through Venice with Ellis, he took my hand and led me into some children's play park and sat me on a swing. And I was five-years-old again with my father, begging him to stop pushing the swing so hard and him laughing at my fear. He never hit me but maybe he liked to see me cry. Daddy. Ellis. Daddy with his pushing, Ellis with that way of his, how he built himself up to telling me something big,

little pushes of words at first, then harder and harder until the chains went slack and it became less of a swing and more of a series of falls.

"Let's have a baby," I say.

Sex with Ellis, lots of sex. A factory of sex. Peeing on sticks. A factory of sticks. Until you find the one, the golden ticket after you've already been to the factory so many fucking times.

Sickness. Waiting. Cravings. Waiting. Sickness. Waiting.

My waters break during the seventh episode of season one of *Boardwalk Empire*. Right there on the couch in our Venice Beach apartment.

You're in labour but you decide there is time to take a shower and shave your legs while Ellis goes insane with panic. But you've got this.

Don't panic, he says, panicked.

So cute, his male ignorance.

There *are* some things you love about him.

Hospital labour ward. Pushing for hours. A Buscemi-lookalike obstetrician, a theater with a line of doctors and students observing your distended vagina, and Buscemi peering over the stubborn roundness of your belly, those piercing blue eyes of his tightening with concern. Between the doctors, the nurses, the student doctors, you have never seen so many furrowed brows. Suction, suction, suction, before finally the head, the trapped shoulder come loose, pop loose, and a child is born.

Your child.

Your fault.

Equilibrium.

Staring at his misshapen head, Ellis says, "I think there's something wrong with it."

He actually says those words.

I get as far as thinking *maybe something* isn't *right*, before I consign it to exhaustion and the fear of becoming a new mother. But maybe Ellis senses something that I cannot. That happiness is merely dancing in the cemetery. Flossing on someone else's grave.

"Maybe there's something wrong with *you*," I tell him.

Swing, says the pendulum.

Swing, says the axe.

Ellis does not argue but begins to let his absences speak on his behalf. Plugs himself into his fanbase and unplugs himself from us. And when he leaves, when he finally builds himself up to telling me he is leaving, the silence that remains feels like the sum total of all the

arguments we've never had.

So infuriating, his male ignorance.

Jack is a good boy. Too good. Maybe that should be the loudest alarm bell but he is my firstborn and so my only point of reference.

As a baby there are tears but not a lot.

At two, three, four years old, there are words but, again, not a lot.

In kindergarten, he plays on his own in the sandpit or finds a quiet spot and builds towers with wooden blocks. Not towers, not really: they are Jenga blocks stacked end to end on top of each other, thin, frail structures with weak foundations, destined to fall when they reach a certain height.

I see nothing wrong with it. He builds those towers higher than anyone else in his class, and that makes mommy proud. But I mistake ambition and drive for what is really Jack's simple need for order, structure, repetition.

I start to become more...erratic, which is a soft way of saying I am a fucking mess. I miss Ellis, I hate Ellis, I miss Ellis. Back and forth.

Son of a bitch.

We see him on the beach sometimes, taking time out from *Call of Duty*. Jack is oblivious to his sperm donor being out there (I call Ellis that because he is no father to Jack; where is *that* call of duty?). We will be walking along the boardwalk, watching the street performers, Jack alongside me with one of his Jenga blocks clutched in his hand, and then I'll spot Ellis sitting not so far out on the sand that he could not see us if he just lay down his guitar and turned his head. But he never does. He is usually with a different gamer girl every time: thin girls with big chests, bright hair, tattoos, piercings.

That used to be me, I think, except for the tattoos. Now my tits are deflated, the dye long washed out of my hair, the holes closed and healed over but for the scars. Still, it's hard to see different versions of yourself out there having fun.

Living.

We usually stop at Zelda's Delicatessen for mini-donuts, although on the days I see Ellis I cannot eat, so we get them to go and head back to our apartment where I sit on the couch and smoke a joint as Jack eats a cinnamon sugar and adds to his latest tower. Both of us chasing our high.

"Mom? What was the man playing?" he asks me one time. The *only* time.

"What man?"

"The guitar man on the sand," he says. "He had a pink girlfriend. She had drawings on her neck."

He means pink-*haired* and neck tattoos and holy shit he means Ellis. His—

"Why do you wanna know?" I ask, trying not to sound defensive but sounding precisely that.

"I liked it."

"So now what? You wanna meet him? You wanna meet the guitar man and, and—what?—become his friend?"

"No..."

"Then what do you want, Jack? Because I can tell you something: the guitar man doesn't want to meet *you*." I stop, put my head in my hands. "Sorry. I didn't mean... I'm, sorry. Okay?"

Jack nods but he looks hurt in the way he always looks hurt. Like he's just swallowed a hot chip and he's trying to hold it together.

One too many tokes for me, I'm afraid. Rolling the j, I had been thinking of Ms Neck Tattoo, about the naked branches reaching up from her collar, of the trunk down the centre of her back, of the roots perhaps spreading across the skinny white cheeks of her ass, of Ellis's hands foraging around in the dirt down there, foraging around in the moist, dark dirt... Really, I just want to forget what happened. To look forward to the undoing of it all; to the unsaying of every stupid, hurtful word.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Swing forward.

"What did they do to you?" I ask.

Jack, aged seven, with a bruise blooming under his right eye that told me they had done something if not the instrument by which they did it. He stood in the corner of our kitchen, a little boxer who has never thrown a punch. I drop to his eye level to try to make some kind of connection but his gaze traces the perimeter of my face as though it is too dangerous to venture any further in. He looks everywhere but *at* me, like I am off-limits or don't exist. He's just like his sperm donor, I think. But Jack can always look at the tower, at the top and the space he aches to fill with the next block, and it *is* an ache, a biological need for structure. And just for a moment I don't blame the bullies for wanting to hurt him. Maybe they only crave some kind of a reaction, like me.

I hate myself for writing those words. Good thing the pendulum keeps moving.

Let's leave it to talk about something else. Only, it's me talking while

you don't say a word in reply. You're just like him. Jack.

I can't catch a break it seems.

Have you ever watched a pendulum? You tend to take sides. To focus on one, either the left or the right, to get a feel for the swing—to see if it will go farther out or start losing its momentum. For me it tends to be the right, the end of the swing. But is it the end? We're taught to read words on a page from left to right, so maybe it's that early association. The right is the end. What if there is no end, though? What if the end is the right *and* the left and every point in-between?

Jack's favourite movie is *The Lion King*, but Sir Elton John had it all fucking wrong. Life is not a circle but an arc. A great, invisible blade, scything nearer and nearer to the centre of us. Our memories are its swing. Jack is not even his real name, you know.

Jack turns nine. I throw a party and nobody shows up, just Jack and his newest bruise. Venice, for all its oddballs and freaks, is no different from the rest of the world. When you have a child like Jack you get used to people's excuses. Hell, you make enough of them yourself. I hug him and say the other kids must have forgotten the date. He nods and retreats to his room. I can hear him in there, watching a gaming stream on his Xbox. I spent over two hundred on that thing for him to watch other people play.

Jack falls asleep watching these streams. He goes to bed early but stays awake late most nights. He keeps the volume low, so it doesn't really bother me what he's doing. As long as he eats (he does) and finishes his homework (he does; he's good at math but reads like a robot—no expression in his voice) then I don't mind. A mother just wants her child to be happy, and Jack is, in sips: I can hear him giggling in his room sometimes. I can hear it now. Such a beautiful sound. An elixir of youth pressed from the petals of the world's rarest wallflower.

Three weeks after his ninth birthday, I hear the soft snores from his bedroom and creep inside to turn everything off. The gamer Jack has been watching, sillEboy, has paused the game (some cartoonish affair called *Fortnite*) and left his chair, possibly to take a toilet break. I don't think anything of it at the time but read that gamertag backwards or in a mirror and you'll see it, if you haven't already.

Go on.

And even when I did see it, I didn't stop it. You don't, do you? You let a thing like that continue to see where it might lead. Besides, I had my hands full trying to make Jack's school take the bullying seriously. They denied it was happening. Said he was misinterpreting things.

They all but said his diagnosis made him unreliable. And yet every week my boy had a new bruise somewhere on his body. *Someone* was beating on him but he would not give up the name.

There was no name.

There was no boy planting bruises on him to see what might grow. There was only ever Jack, just Jack, invisible Jack, alone with his tiny, angry fists.

Swing, says the pendulum.

Swing, says the axe.

Swing, says the little boy who can't take his father to task.

Here is the fight that led to Jack running away that night. Here is the exchange of words that led to him walking out the door.

There is no fight.

There are no words.

No name, no boy, no fight, no words.

Sometimes the momentum is already there, built up inside a situation, and you do not see it and you cannot stop it because you do not see it. You are looking the other way.

Swing.

Swing.

Swing.

Says the axe.

After we eat a late supper, leftovers from the restaurant I waitress at, Jack heads for his bedroom and settles in for another night of watching live stream video games. That night, he closes his door. He never closes his door. He closes it that night. I have seen that door open, seen that door closed a thousand times in my mind since, as the pendulum swings. It's like the bruises on his body that fade in and out of his skin, that crawl up, down, and all across his upper body and arms like some kind of weird insect train in a stop-motion movie. It's a little different every time without anything important ever really changing at all.

At eleven o'clock, Jack is in his room.

At eleven-thirty, he's gone.

At eleven thirty, *Ellis* is in Jack's bedroom, occupying the lower left-hand corner of his television screen. Ellis, sitting in a high-back racing chair, wearing a headset and mic, talking shit about the game he's playing on the rest of the screen to his two-thousand-plus audience. I turn up the volume, currently low because Jack doesn't like anything loud and maybe because he's trying to keep this thing a secret.

Ellis looks at someone off-camera. I hear a female's voice but cannot

make out her words.

"Is the little creep gone yet?" Ellis responds, laughing and shaking his head in disbelief.

"Yeah," the female says. "I think so."

"That was some crazy *shee-eet* right there," Ellis say, pausing the game. "Some creepy little bastard just showed up at my door! I know, right? How'd the son of a bitch find me so fast?" Ellis scans through some of the comments scrolling up the right side of the screen. "I know! I only gave out my general vicinity, man, and boom, some kid's knocking on my door, asking me to hang out! I mean, what the actual fuck?"

The comment stream is scrolling swiftly now, a few LOLs and a *Go fuck him up, sillEboy!* among other, more graphic encouragements. At the top right-hand corner of the screen, I see a comment from Jack's gamertag, Simba0326, one second before it is pushed out of sight. *Where do you live, sillE?*

Then Ellis looks off-camera and I watch his eyes widen at the same time as his mouth falls open. The blood drains from his face. I recognise that look from when I told him I was pregnant. The urge to run. The comments stream goes crazy, scrolling upscreen almost as fast as I can read it.

What is it, sillE?
Has the creep come back?
Tell him Halloween is five months away, bruh.
Everything okay, bro?
Talk to us.
What is it?
What's wrong?

By the time I fumble with the remote and + the volume to max, Ellis has ripped off the headset, sprung out of the chair, and dropped the controller onto the floor. The game unpauses and the last thing I hear as I sprint from Jack's bedroom is Ellis somewhere behind me saying *no, no, no* in a small voice that is all but drowned out by the loud report of an automatic rifle filling Jack's bedroom.

I glance back to see the killcam tracking through Ellis's final, defenceless moments right up to the headshot that sprayed his brains.

I run from the apartment in my bare feet, leaving the door unlocked. Run down Canal Street, left onto North Venice Boulevard, right onto Dell Avenue—all the way to the Venice Canals. There is a lot of light down here and a lot of it is reflected in the still watercourse,

but darkness being a deluge and not a trickle, the night cannot be held back everywhere. There are pockets all along the lit canal paths where a boy can hide.

Where a boy can become lost.

I find Jack.

I lose Jack.

His real name isn't Jack.

I lied because his real name is all I have left. Because you pray that by using a different name it will lessen the pain somehow.

It doesn't.

Jack, Peter, Paul, George, Ringo, or John—it hurts just the same.

I find him hanging from a rope tied to a tree branch outside one of the small bungalows, hidden from the canal path by a row of tall hedges. He is still swinging. Swinging. Still. His feet tapping the tree bark. Tap. Tap. Tap.

I want to scream but I can't. We scream when they come into this world, we scream when they go out. But I am not ready to unbirth my son. Not yet. So, I look at the tree, the rope, his feet. And the tapping tells me there had been purchase there had he wanted it: a way back. Which makes it worse and then better and then worse and then nothing at all.

I turn to the front door of the house. Ms Neck Tattoo has her pretty little pink head buried in the chest and arms of a man crying as many tears as drops of sperm it took to make our boy. To be fair, he doesn't know Jack is his. But who wants to be fair? Nothing about this is fair. And that axe will swing at him later, soon, moments from now, and when it does, it won't *stop* swinging, just like the boy at the end of his rope.

Let's stop here awhile. Let the pendulum hang for a moment. Let the forces exchange, one becoming another. Besides, there is no point in going any further forward than here. There is only the empty air of my life from that day. The pendulum can go only so far before it stops to protect itself. Force it any farther (funny how farther sounds like father, right?) and something breaks. Let's stop awhile and let the world stop with us. A perfect pause.

You forgot that he died, didn't you? Our son. I realise I may have made it easy for you to forget by placing it in the middle of a sentence in the middle of the second paragraph—our parenthetical boy—but still: shame on you, Ellis. You put him there.

You made him parenthetical.

I can't forget.

I won't. And neither will you.

As gravity takes over, the pendulum starts to fall, to swing back to the left, and I am running backwards along the canal path, away, away, away from that house, that tree, towards Dell Avenue, North Venice Boulevard, Canal Street, my heartbeat slowing as the fear in my veins starts to subside.

I like this part. It reminds me of the Sea Dragon ride over at Pacific Park on Santa Monica Pier—because when that back swing starts, as much as you know where it is going, you cannot see anything until it is there in front of you, rushing away from you. Untouchable.

That is how I want this thing to be. How I want to be.

Untouchable.

I am looking forward to all of this being undone, to the rope untied from Jack's neck, to the bruises fading to the colour of a punch never thrown, to taking back the Xbox, to Jack's towers of blocks unbuilding themselves one Jenga brick at a time, like a city slipping back into the marshland, to Jack pushed back inside of me by the doctor that looks like Steve Buscemi, to my cervix closing, closing, like an iris that does not want to see, to taking back the sex with Ellis, all of the sex, the words that led up to it, the words I write here, now, all of it, every brick, sperm, and word gone.

I am looking forward to the undoing of everything for it all to be done again.

I don't want to learn a thing. Fuck lessons. Besides, you don't get a chance to change what has already happened. The swing is the swing is the swing. Just ask the pendulum, or the axe, or our son. I want to *un*live and live these same moments, these same blessings, these same mistakes, over and over and over again.

Until this pendulum stops.