Eros vs. Logos

DAVID ZEPP LASH

On July 15, 2011 I was diagnosed with a stage IV “double hit” Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a type of blood cancer. After three months of intensive chemotherapy and a subsequent stem-cell transplant, I was in remission.

This past summer, a 22-year-old college graduate named Pat reached out to me. All cancer stories are painful to hear, but Pat seemed to have an especially unfortunate time. For six months he was mistreated. When he was correctly diagnosed, he needed to start a much more aggressive chemotherapy regimen. This is a perfect example of kicking someone while they’re down.

Similar to me, he was told he needed a stem-cell transplant. Like most patients in this situation, he wanted to hear from a patient on the other side of the procedure.

We had a few lengthy conversations over the phone throughout the summer, but we never had the chance to meet in person. In early September, I received a phone call after two weeks of not hearing from him. His body was failing and he told me he didn’t know who else to call. I know we both felt the situation. Pat died in early September with a great deal of potential. I’m not just being clichéd; he had a gift to inspire and the intelligence to be accepted into Columbia, Harvard, and Stanford Law.

The “why me” question is one that I’m sure Pat thought of even if never spoken. At first I thought it was a selfish question to ask, but
then I thought of my family and friends. Why is this happening to them? The anger would boil as I would ask, “Who is to blame?”

I kept landing on God. It was a hard subject to avoid as everyone was praying for me and speaking of the afterlife. This only intensified the question, “Who is to blame?” Is it myself or God? Well, I did not do anything morally or ethically wrong to deserve cancer...so God must be at fault. One day, however, I finally realized there doesn’t have to be blame.

What is seven billion minus one?
I guess it depends on who you ask
An actuary? Dr. Misdiagnosis? A mother?

Two million hands paired for prayer
Is twenty-two years a man's fair share?
Was it something I had done
I was a good brother, a friend, a son

Dear mystery man,
I'm not asking now,
I'm moving you straight to where I live,
And I live at the center of the surface of a sphere.

What is seven billion minus one?
A bit more logical with you gone.
Sincerely, Patrick
March 1990-September 2012
There is Passion, There is Not Love

JOSEPH BOLT

The two of them met as co-panelists at a graduate economics forum in upstate New York. Theirs was the first event on the schedule, an early-morning affair no one bothered to attend. The third member of their panel, who should have been driving down from the University of Ottawa, was a no-show. They waited ten or fifteen minutes, until finally a PhD candidate from SUNY-Binghamton acting as their moderator cleared his throat and mumbled his opening remarks to a parlor full of empty chairs.

Afterward Nate Walker and Maddie Hausman complimented each other’s research and smiled courteously, but there was no masking their disappointment. She had come from the London School of Economics, he from UCLA Econ. They had arrived fully prepared to act as formal young economists, to speak about theory and practice, possibilities and hard truths. Yet the mood was perfunctory and complacent, oddly self-congratulatory. While lingering near the podium, they were reminded by three separate facilitators of the free coffee and pastries.

Even the Decker Mansion, where the forum was being held, was little more than an unassuming house, mansion-like only because it was flanked by pillars from which hung a small vinyl banner: THOROUGHFARES & BYWAYS—ECON IN THE 21ST C. Though the house was tucked into a residential neighborhood, cars and tractor-trailers could be heard rumbling along a nearby expressway.

As more attendees arrived and claimed their nametags, Nate
and Maddie passed through panels uninterested, serving as mere spectators. They sat fatigued through that evening’s keynote address, a pedantic assessment of international utilitarianism from an out-of-date Benthamite. The whole day, in fact, had been pedantic—tedious and impersonal. So when Nate suggested he and Maddie blow off the social hour, she reached out and held him by the elbow, and she said, “Yes—anywhere but here, I’m drying up in here.” They both had rooms at the Fairfield, on the same floor actually, and they retreated to the hotel bar.

The bar, Air, was ostentatiously ultra-modern, everything sleek and glossy, formed of stainless steel and lacquered maple. Maddie, demure in the British manner, held her pinot grigio with both hands and listened as Nate lamented their misfortune of being slotted in the first panel. “It’s a bum deal,” he said, “like anyone arrives on time.” He rested his elbows on the high-top table, wiped the sweat from his glass of scotch and soda.

“I wouldn’t think so,” Maddie replied. “What were you hoping for, an audience in rapture?” Her complexion was fair; she had just the vaguest freckles, and her auburn hair, side-swept across her widow’s peak, curled loosely at her shoulders. “Think of this now as holiday—a paid holiday, since you’re probably here on some type of fellowship.”

“That’s true,” he said.

“So am I. Then be glad, because at least now we haven’t any obligations, no one to spot our absence.”

Nate raised his hand for another drink. He sat back in his chair, gazing off at a collage of overlapping rings made from bent neon lights. “You know, I’ve been through London,” he said. “Got lost on the tube, spent a couple days in the galleries.” He explained that after graduating
from Elon University—where he had run hurdles and pledged Kappa Sig—he moved to the Glamorgan region of south Wales, near Cardiff, from where his ancestors could be traced.

"We share some geography," Maddie told him. "If you went by train you passed through Bristol." That's where she had grown up, where her family still lived. "And Elon—in North Carolina? I thought your accent was familiar." She told him she had worked two summers at a YMCA camp in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina.

"I'm from the Triad," Nate said. "I grew up in Stokes County." He leaned over the table and grinned. "I wonder the statistical probability you and I have crossed paths before."

"Oh please," Maddie said, tucking a loose curl behind her ear.
"Fuck that." She tilted her head disapprovingly, as if pouring over his scholarly pose.

"Sorry, you're right." He loosened the knot of his tie. "But it's a strange coincidence."

She leaned in toward him. "The past might be coincidence. But this weekend could be the fulfillment of it—maybe we'd call that destiny." It sounded ridiculous, plain ridiculous, and she immediately blushed. Destiny was schoolgirlish. "Either way," she said, "it's urgent."

Soon Maddie fell drowsy with wine and jet lag, and she apologized that she would have to retire early. Outside her room she turned her cheek to be kissed, a simple Briticism which Nate found entirely thrilling. They held each other's eyes for a moment. Then they parted silently, making no plans but knowing something was understood.

The next day they lunched at a nearby bistro. Knowing that tomorrow they would return to lives led elsewhere, already they felt
time slipping away. And whatever it was that had been understood
now became more evident: it was evident in the way Nate held her
eyes as he folded his cuffs up along his sleeves, evident in the way
Maddie spoke while sweeping her hands across the table as though she
was pulling him forward. It was most evident when she told him she
was skipping the afternoon panels—"Because who cares about that
anymore, anyway?"—to return to the hotel and have a catnap. Leaving
the bistro they agreed to make a brief appearance at that night's closing
ceremony, and they agreed that tomorrow morning they would share a
cab to the airport. It was understood.

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Now in Nate's room the only light comes from between the
curtains, tracing a narrow line across the carpet to the hotel bedding
cumpled at the foot of the mattress. Over Maddie's shoulder Nate
squints to focus on the digits of the alarm clock. It's three. Sunday
morning. They lay atop the tangled coversheet, pressed against one
another, skin on skin.

He tells her it's too late to sleep now, that they'll be worse off if
they do. She says she has a long flight, she'll sleep then.

So keep me awake. Tell me a story, she says. About the Welsh
valleys. Can you believe I've never been? Tell me about them, keep me
awake.

What do you want to hear? he asks. He straightens his back and
lengthens himself along the mattress. The side of Maddie's face presses
against his chest, and she curls a leg around him.

What do you remember?

Nate thinks of when he first arrived in Cardiff. He thinks of the
outcroppings and poplars as seen from the train, blurring against the
mist of the plastic window. On his first trip up to Pontypridd, where
in time he would rent a sleeping room, the vale was gold and orange
against the falling sun. Beside the railway was a clear and shallow
river, the Afon Taf. Its bed was lined with cobbles, and the water
courting over them lent a rapid, entrancing quality. At points the Taf
meandered out of view to reveal vacant fields and spare corpses, their
limbs and leaves sagging.

I remember it was late autumn, he says to Maddie. It began
snowing soon after I arrived.

He tells her how in the mornings the footpaths and refuse bins
appeared brushed over with frost. About how it snowed in the valley
and laid fringes atop the far-off peaks. Sometimes it fell in large
heavy flakes, sometimes hard stinging sleet, and in Cardiff, where the
people dropped their cigarettes stubs and spat green and red upon the
pavement, it warmed to rain. More than anything Nate recalls the
rain.

One weekend he rode a series of trains and buses to the edge of
Glynnneath, where he entered a forestland reserve called the Brecon
Beacons. He'd read about it in a travel pamphlet, and his only plan
that day was to walk, breathe deeply and observe. A drizzle had begun.

In the Beacons he joined a stony trail enclosed by conifers and
loose boulders. The drizzle dampened his jacket and seeped up the cuffs
of his pant legs; it turned the trail muddy. Cautious to keep his footing,
Nate walked a long time staring only at the ground. Finally he came
to a limestone cliff face and heard the trickling of a nearby coulee. He
left the trail, kicked through some bracken and stepped onto a spit
extending over rolling pool. Closer now the trickle had become a roar;
he looked up to see a waterfall five meters wide unspooling like a sheet of fabric.

Nate tracked the cliff face until he found an incline he could manage; he climbed upward using large rocks as footholds, grasping branches and roots for balance. At a plateau he cut back to where the waterfall cascaded, where he had an open view of treetops and hilly contours, of open fields green with clover and wildgrass. The land before him seemed unspoiled and untouched, vast and conquerable. He felt like a tribesman first surveying a new world, the rain puddling around him and carving rivulets through the mud.

Maddie breathes out her nose, almost tickling Nate’s chest. He looks down to see her eyes shut. The hotel room is still.

Are you sleeping? he whispers.

Where’s this going?

I’m telling you. Listen.

The way back is always quicker because it’s no longer new. Soon he emerged from the Beacons, the waterlogged trail giving way to concrete footpath. The last bus had passed. Although he knew the railway station was somewhere below in the valley, he was lost.

He entered Glymphath following a ring of floodlights—a car park, he thought, where someone could provide him directions. The rain by then had subsided and streetlights threw misty circles onto the pavement. He went down a residential lane and when the road ended found himself unexpectedly at an amphitheater, where below him was a rugby pitch on which two teams ran circles, formed and abandoned line-outs, dove into mauls—all illuminated by that ring of hazy floodlights. Few spectators were there, but the match was official:
players hit the mud facefirst, threw shoulders into their opponents, lunged forward with the ball despite men hanging from their waists; a referee looped around the heaving scrum, angling for a more reliable view; touch judges hustled behind the play, occasionally whipping their flags toward the sky.

Nate wasn’t thinking of getting home, wherever that was. He can’t remember what he was thinking. He just stood and watched. Although he didn’t understand the intricacies or intentions, he recognized the back-and-forth momentum of the match, and he sensed symmetry in its violence.

Quiet fills the hotel room, so Nate shifts his weight. That’s it, he says. There’s more walking and a train ride, and me laid up with a head cold for three days, but that’s pretty much it.

That’s what you remember? Sounds beautiful, all right.

I tried. You can’t summarize beauty. There’s no emotion in summary.

Try again, I’ll listen.

No. We don’t have much time left.

No. Maddie’s eyelashes flick over his collarbone. Then she rolls away from him and says, Will you listen to me now? I know nature like the valleys. When I was by the Blue Ridge Mountains, where you’re from.

Okay, tell me.

Maddie slides up the mattress and sits against the headboard. Nate hands her a pillow, which she props beneath her back.

She was twenty-two or twenty-three then, she tells him. It seems like a long time ago. She remembers each week leading her cabin of
teenage girls on morning hikes up the Sauratown Mountain. Close your eyes and imagine its old-growth trees uprooted, dewy spiderwebs, a brook running underground and reemerging thirty yards later. One landmark, she recalls, was where the trail turned along a quartzite ridge near the summit, and you could look out over the treetops onto flatlands below, much as Nate has described only minutes earlier.

Instead of vistas, though, she tells him about the outsiders from her cabin, the youngest or the heaviest or the first to have acne. She can remember the faces and many of the names. Each week on the morning hikes there would be one girl who just didn’t believe she could continue: the incline was too steep, the rest of the cabin walked too quickly. Let’s rest, Maddie would tell the girl, allowing her co-counselor to hike ahead with the rest of the cabin. My legs ache and I’ve seen it before. We won’t miss anything if we rest.

She and the girl would sit upon a boulder or a fallen tree. These days were quiet, humid but cool beneath the mountain foliage. The girl would apologize for having to stop, embarrassed and fearful of judgment, but after a moment Maddie would interrupt to ask the girl’s favorite books, her siblings, her pets back home. Then she would ask if they should continue up the mountain or sit awhile longer. They always sat longer.

Returning down the trails they collected gum wrappers and water bottles and batteries. Who leaves this garbage? the girl would ask. People like us, Maddie said. We’re the only ones on this trail. It’s camp-only. The girl would hang her head until Maddie suggested there might be some great auditor, and if so we would do well to collect more rubbish than we drop.
Her youngest campers, she recalls, might be only six years old—too young for the Sauratown Mountain. She would lead them instead on an easier hike to an area called the Crystal Mine, which in truth was merely a patch of dirt and rock amidst a grove of evergreens. It wasn’t a mine in the strict sense of the word, not like a burrow or tunnel. If it had recently rained, the Crystal Mine was simply a patch of orangeish mud.

We call that putting a pig in a dress, Nate says, like calling a normal old house the Decker Mansion.

You’re listening.

Her campers would dig through the mud until their fingernails were half-moons of dirt. Scattered in the ground were slivers of white quartz, clouded and impure, and smaller than the busted rim of a glass pop bottle. Yet her campers treated the search like a treasure hunt, as if some fugitive had abandoned his spoils there a hundred years earlier. To them the little fragments of quartz held the value of diamonds.

There are no diamonds in those mountains.

How can you be sure?

I grew up there. I’d know.

Says the man with no imagination.

Sorry. Go on.

Even the smallest fleck of quartz would send each girl running to Maddie, who would bulge her eyes in awe. She’d tell them to drop the crystals into their empty water bottles for safekeeping. How much is this worth? a girl might ask. Maddie would respond, To be honest you couldn’t sell it. It’s worth something as a memory, when years from now you’ll find it at the bottom of a drawer, having long since forgotten it. The girls said they would never forget.
So much living packed into those single weeks, Maddie remembers. Her campers found it entirely impossible to be cool, to remain unaffected by even the smallest of adventures. Everything was new to them. And to Maddie, who lifeguards her campers at the lake, held their hands at the flagpole, told stories after lights out, Friday afternoons could be desperately empty once her girls returned to their families and their real homes. She cried the first couple weeks. Then she grew accustomed to the loss, which in time was no longer a loss but rather a transition. Yet sweeping beneath the bunks some weekends she would find a water bottle or two rattling with quartz, and she would keep it and return it to the Crystal Mine, burying it deep into the mud.

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She whispers that she’ll be gone only a minute, stands, and disappears into the bathroom. The far corner of the room goes bright before the door softly closes, muting the light and the buzz from the fan.

Nate lies on his back and does not look to the clock; he guesses it's nearly four. Soon he and Maddie will ride to the airport, lug their shoulder bags down the terminal, and wait, tired, until they board separate flights. Whoever flies last will see the other off, they'll embrace briefly, and that will be the end. Though it's entirely possible, Nate thinks, that they could meet again. It's possible he could travel to London and they would ride to the seaside resorts or the Lake District, heeding only the clock of the railway timetable. Or she could visit Los Angeles and he would drive them to the beaches and up north to the redwood forests. From there they could weigh job offers and he'll try and convince her of the opportunities stateside, and of the scope of
the land: the ocean and mountains, the plains and glacial lakes, the
salt flats, more mountains, a new ocean. Or she could convince him of
England or someplace else. It doesn’t matter to him: he longs for new
vistas, he wants to move.

But it’s late, he knows. It’s the hour in which skepticism gives way
to blind romance. It’s the hour for hazy, wishful plans that by daylight
ring fragile and ill advised. Truly, what time it is now he and Maddie
have that, and if they meet again—by chance, not by design—he
might believe there’s such thing as destiny or a puppetmaster, yet
he knows that passion crashes in waves, nearly drowning you, only
to diminish and in time disappear. In weeks he could scorn his own
naïveté, ashamed he’d even speculated on a future together. He could,
he knows. Love her. But that’s a nighttime thought, intangible and,
like dew, evaporating in the harsh daylight. Certainly she feels the
same. There are possibilities, but he’ll say nothing unless she says it
first.

Maddie returns wrapped in a bath towel and stands at the foot of
the bed. Against the darkness Nate cannot distinguish her features. He
is tired, and for a moment he has forgotten her face.

How old do you think I am? she asks.

He folds a pillow underneath his head. About the same as me, I’d
guess.

Do you think I’m older or younger?

I don’t know. Exactly the same, how’s that for an answer? Exactly
the same, in years and experience.

There on the mattress his knees are raised, his fingers laced over
his stomach. To Maddie he seems self-possessed, even resistant. And
for an instant she hates him, hates the hotel room—regrets nothing but wishes this now meant more to her. She wants it to. But the present moment—it gains significance only when viewed as history, when seen as part of a larger narrative. She wants to be hopeful, but as an economist she manages her hopefulness with prudence, avoiding its production if it promises only despair. She resists unchecked emotion yet yields to the immediacy of touch. Now she leans forward and sweeps Nate's legs, drops the hotel towel and slides herself onto the mattress.

She sits on his thighs and says, I'll guess we're within six months. Feel this, she says, I'll tell you how old I am. She reaches out and taps a forefinger against his breastbone. That's one, she says, one year. She taps his breastbone again. Two years, got it? And she bounces her finger in rhythm with his heartbeat, tapping gently for the early years. She whispers, Are you counting?

He nods. He rests his hands above her knees, and the taps relax him, resonate in his chest. At ten or so, twelve, the taps become more powerful, they seem to echo through the room. She soon loses the rhythm of his pulse, and by twenty, twenty-five, she is pounding, striking his breast with the blade of her fingertips. Then she concludes, tapping lightly once more and resting her hand flat against his chest.

Did you count? she asks.
I was counting.
And?
And we're the about the same. I think so.
Maybe I was only curious, she says. Maybe it doesn't matter.
She lowers herself onto him and he draws his legs up the mattress,
bowing his knees outward. He moves inside her but not as firmly as
before. She pulls the doubled-over pillow from beneath his head so
he can arch his back. They are tired and it takes effort—although it
hasn’t been long, they must work to rediscover each other’s bodies. She
circles her hips above him, rises up, then settles onto his lap.

Afterward dust and ash flicker in the column of light from between
the curtains. The room is silent save for Nate’s measured, open-mouth
breaths. They lie, for how long they are unsure, but it’s early now, not
late. And they are each exhausted, less from the physical exertion than
from the depth of the night, the stealth of the morning.

I want to move, she says.

Nate turns his body tighter against hers. Say where.

I’m on a wet spot.

He retreats to the other side of the mattress, which he finds rigid
and cold. Maddie glances the alarm clock and says, It’s half past four,
how much time do we have?

Not enough to sleep. An hour till the cab’s here.

One more, then.

We don’t have time, he says. I don’t have the energy.

A story. We have all the time.

We don’t have any time, he tells her. We never did.

Don’t sleep now—I won’t and you can’t. One more story. Make
this one about the city.

I can’t. There’s nothing. I temped in an office. I got lost in crowds.
That’s not what I choose to remember.

Tell me anyway. Tell me about a crowd. You have to—this is what
we do to stay awake.
Okay, a crowd. At the train station.

It wasn’t long, he tells her, before the trains were no longer romantic and foreign. He rode them each day into Cardiff, when in the mornings the cars were choked with sluggish commuters, so little room that unfolding a newspaper seemed a great intrusion of space, and in the evenings, when people jostled for sitting room and the air hung stagnant and oppressive.

There was one evening when a dense fog had clogged the air around Cardiff Central Station. He recalls reaching the platform just after the northbound train had departed, the fog so thick he couldn’t see the tracks ten meters away. In that moment all was quiet, eerily so. When normally might be a mother scolding her child or a teenager yelling into his mobile phone, now was only the click of a hard-soled shoe, the whoosh of polyester. The waiting commuters were reduced to outlines, silhouettes against the fog, voices disembodied and unidentifiable.

Though it was overdue, the next train hadn’t yet arrived. Those on the platform became impatient—bumping shoulders and bristling, muttering curses. They were restless and fatigued, wanting home or whatever they knew as comfort. But something had happened down the line; the digital placard read only MECH. FAILURE.

Isn’t someone going to tell us? Nate overheard from a nearby cluster of women. They whispered sharply among themselves. I’m not waiting, one woman said. No—I’ll ask.

She went to the northbound edge of the platform and eavesdropped over two policemen in their reflective yellow vests. Eventually she squeezed back through the crowd, coming into
focus like an apparition. Woman pushed down at Queen Street, she whispered to the others. Accident, of course. They've stopped everything to clean up after her.

Someone pushed? one repeated. On the tracks?

Hear a name? asked another.

Penny, I heard them say.

Then the women were quiet. At last one said, Oh, I don't know a

Penny.

In short time the tracks rumbled with an arriving train and the crowd pushed forward. A policeman yelled for calm, shouting stay behind the yellow stripe. The three women lingered, until finally one said, Come on then, no use waiting. Meanwhile Nate had overtaken them and pushed his way through the train doors, which could hardly shut for the mass of commuters. And those at the stairs of the platform came through the fog to wait.

Maddie says nothing. She has nothing to say.

Finally she turns over and looks at the clock. She slides down to the foot of the mattress, picks the towel from the floor and stands.

We have to go quickly, Nate says, raising himself by his elbows.

Why such a hurry? Maddie says. She looks down to the clumped bedspread and to Nate, the tangled coversheet at his waist. Above him, framed against the wall, is an old-town painting dimmed by a patina of bronze. It seems to depict a scene on a cobblestoned avenue, in which a woman with a parasol loops arms with a man wearing a houndstooth waistcoat. Beyond them are steeples and a halcyon sky. Children kick a leather ball in the street, and someone's linens dry on a cord stretched between opposing rowhouses. The image, if Maddie sees it correctly, strikes her as antiquated and insincere.
She crosses to the window and peers outside. It's October in upstate New York, darkened and still. Frost has coated the windshields in the hotel parking lot. It looks cold, she whispers. Soon the city will rustle into motion, alarms softly buzzing and windows lighting from the inside. The earliest risers will drag their feet across carpet, splash water in their bathroom sinks, drip their coffee through filters, and they won't think of those who haven't yet slept, those who cannot rest.

She reaches for the study table and clicks the lamp. She untucks the towel from the side of her breast and tosses it onto the mattress. Then she slips into the gray blouse and cardigan she had worn to last night's closing ceremony. Nate pulls the towel around his waist and stands.

He feels her cold fingertips along his waist. They look at each other's faces, but their eyes are still adjusting to the light. She turns her cheek to be kissed. Neither speaks, she leaves the room, and Nate stands there only briefly before he looks to the clock and hurries into the shower.

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Soon they will sit in the backseat of the cab, their knees pressed together over the floorboard console. The driver, a man of vague East African descent, will turn the heat vents uncomfortably high, reddening their cheeks. Maddie will reach out and wrap her hand over Nate's. It will seem the right thing to do, a gesture of comity, a consolation.

Where do you connect? he'll ask.
JFK, Reykjavik, Heathrow. You?
He will stare blankly through his side window.
I've forgotten just now.

As she grows more tired, her grip over his hand will loosen. The cab will cross first the Chenango and follow it until the road turns and parallels the Susquehanna.

Rivers never intersect. They only join.

He will look to Maddie, but the click of the tires will rock her to near-sleep. Her chin will drop against her chest. He could move tighter against her, he will think, so she would find his shoulder. But he won’t.

Instead he’ll look away to the Susquehanna, that wide and dirty river. Believing he knows it intimately, in truth he’ll be unaware even of its name. Steam will rise and spill over its banks, flooding the land with mist so thick Nate will believe you could run into it and be slowed, so thick you could cut stairs in it with a cattail and ascend until it dissipates and gives way to the black sky, turning blue just then with the sunrise.

He will close his eyes. The bumps of the road will lead him to dreaming. The cab will move forward, carrying them to the concrete and steel and the noise of the airport.