

## Coda

Sebastian knew better than anyone that diseases could be fought, that the seemingly incurable could in fact be cured, that the idea that one should never give up the fight was more than just an empty platitude. After all, his entire celebrated career had been spent pursuing cures for the “incurable.” He’d burst onto the scientific scene at the age of twenty by pioneering a procedure to swap batteries for devices such as pacemakers for subcutaneous chips that naturally harvested the body’s own thermal energy. Then, at twenty-two, he’d developed a nanotube pathogen test that could detect proteins responsible for liver disease. And then there was his cause célèbre: the waterless toilet—solar-powered, self-cleaning, and capable of converting human waste into fertilizer—which to this day continued to efficiently hum in disparate, far-flung corners of the globe, sparing thousands of lives annually from diseases due to poor sanitation conditions. Thus, Sebastian would reasonably be one of the last to surrender the fight to any disease.

Accordingly, when he received his own bleak diagnosis, Sebastian’s scientist instincts kicked into high gear. But soon enough the combination of the disease’s mortality rate and its own progression in his body became too much to ignore. Despite Sebastian’s initial work—the twenty hour days reading, consulting, testing, researching—the disease progressed unalloyed and indifferent to his efforts or hopes. His next inclination would have been to keep at the work so that he might allay the suffering of future victims of the disease, but instead he decided to ultimately surrender, tip his hat, and determine to live out his remaining days—estimated at three to six months—as fully as he was capable. In the end, he was also a person with a preternaturally begrudging admiration for the cellular mutation rapidly ravaging his body.

To that end, despite feeling crummy from the medications, he kept his invitation to the World Conference on Medical and Biological Engineering, taking place that year in Bogota. If for no other reason, he’d never been to Colombia and with his impending personal demise, he felt liberated from pressure to return home immediately after the conference ended. Instead, he would stay and, so long as he was able, travel a bit around the country, see what he could see, add some last novel experiences to a life that, while far too short at forty-nine years, had been a fulfilling and interesting life, after all.

His work had taken him to more than fifty countries around the world—though he had to concede, with a fair amount of regret—he’d rarely seen much of these countries apart from whatever city he found himself: Reykjavik, Brussels, Bangkok, Cairo, Stockholm . . .

And so on this trip, he would not only see Bogota, but then would get a short flight to Medellin, and from there make his way by van four hours east to Puerto Triunfo, home of Hacienda Napoles, where the drug kingpin Pablo Escobar once lived.

It was not something he generally admitted to, his lifelong fascination with Escobar. It was not admiration. That would require papering over the enormous destruction Escobar had wrought: the millions of lives wrecked through drug addiction, the internecine drug wars in Colombia that resulted in more than 50,000 dead. For a man who had dedicated his life to saving people, Sebastian’s interest in Escobar was an intellectual, even an anthropological, one—what to make of such an outsize figure, a walking contradiction, a person who seemed to embody the entire spectrum of humanity in his five foot six inch frame: from loving family man and hero to the poor and downtrodden, to ice-water killer—and often both in one day. And so Sebastian would visit Escobar’s old compound. But he would do so for reasons well beyond Escobar himself. No, he had something else, something more sweeping, in mind.

The conference in Bogota was fine, but Sebastian's sapped energy level led him to skip several panels in favor of the hotel room bed. But, as had been the case in the previous week, his body ping-ponged between severe fatigue and something that felt almost normal—though, if he was honest with himself, he had more or less forgotten what “normal” felt like, having been replaced by a new normal of wildly vacillating feelings. At the conference's end, he felt physically terrible. But there was for Sebastian a sort of affirmation in that—it was the breakdown of his body that caused the lethargy and the waves of crushing headache and nausea. It was no longer the medicine fighting, unsuccessfully, against this evil inside him, this haywired breakdown that told his own body to attack itself. He had the previous week given up his “fight medicine,” as his doctors called it, and was taking only palliative pills—pain killers, anti-nauseas—meant to stave off or, at the least, minimize the symptoms that came from giving up the fight, and he was elated to discover that he felt fairly well as he stepped onto the plane for the one-hour flight to Medellin.

Sebastian gulped down a few more pills, including a sedative, as he stepped into the van for the ride from Medellin out to Puerto Triunfo. He wished to sleep, but the guy who crammed himself into the seat next to Sebastian started in right away: “They don't talk about Escobar at this place, you know. They don't like the association. To Colombians, and especially Colombians in this area, Escobar was responsible for an extraordinary amount of violence and an attendant lack of economic investment. This area wants tourists, and Escobar is the draw—still some kind of folk hero to the rest of the world, to people who weren't in the path of his personal tornado—but they don't want to talk about him. Unless there's pesos involved, of course.”

Sebastian just smiled and nodded.

The man continued: “You know about his hippos, yeah? You know how people say that animals are more afraid of you than you are of them, that they would prefer you leave them alone to anything else? Not true of the hippopotamus. It will charge at you and trample you without a second's thought. They look like cartoon characters, but they are some means sob's. I love that.”

Yes, the hippos. These days, perhaps even more than Escobar, it was the hippos that drew the visitors. And it was the hippos that were the draw for Sebastian, too. He smiled and thought, as he often did, of Joanna and her love of hippos: the time she had missed a day of school because for her birthday her parents had driven her to the Philadelphia Zoo where they got her a behind-the-scenes confab with a juvenile hippo. “We were able to feed it and touch it. It was all rubbery-feeling. I gave it lettuce and it chomped on it. The hippo was just, like, a year old. They don't let you near the big ones.” This she told to a circle of friends at the school lunch table. They mostly just stared at her with bemusement or indifference. It was obvious that she was the only one who gave a damn and it was obvious, too, that she either didn't pick up on their lack of interest or simply didn't care, lost as she was in the recollection, doing that thing that she did that drove Sebastian wild: the way she would absentmindedly play with her left earlobe when she was talking dreamily. What kind of crazy person was she, that she could get that way over a year-old hippo? Sebastian loved her.

Though at this point they no longer hung out. This was middle school and the days of play dates were gone. He still thought about her endlessly—but from a distance. She still smiled at him, waved, said hello, but these were passing encounters.

As the van made its way over bone-rattling potholes, and the seatmate yammered on, Sebastian floated away: they were still quite young, and Joanna took Sebastian up to her room. This in itself was an incredible experience, like being admitted to some inner sanctum that had

been off-limits to all but a small elite: the inner working of the Forbidden City or the Kremlin or some such. No, not that, not in this case; instead, a princess's castle, a womb, heaven.

This was Joanna Benson's bedroom, after all. It was where she went to sleep—the bed was right there!—it was where she woke in the morning. The pale blue woolly knotted rug that sat on the floor is where she put her feet first thing in the morning, reestablishing her place in the world while she yawned and stretched her arms to the sky. The lavender dresser in the corner is where she retrieved her clothes. Sebastian was nine years old at this time and so his thoughts were not lascivious. Instead, there was wonder: pure and simple and as innocent as could be. And so very quickly his head went from these thoughts—Joanna's routine movements in this room—to being overtaken by the obvious: the hippopotamus theme. They were *everywhere*. The plush chair in the corner: two small feet and wide arms around the edges, enclosing the seat, goofy hippo head with two tiny white teeth on either side of its mouth. And of course the ears: those tiny tufted, ridiculous ears. The wicker trash can with hippo head at the top. An enormous stuffed hippo standing sentinel near her closet. And of course the menagerie of hippos scattered throughout the room: the figurines on her dresser, the stuffies on her bed, spilling to the floor and overtaking a basket for the purpose.

Sebastian had a female cousin, five years older than he, and he could remember the horses—dozens of them—that decorated her room in various incarnations. That seemed natural, a thing many young females engaged in; there was something about girls and horses. But hippopotamuses? Actually, *was it hippopotami?* he asked himself.

“Why do you have all these hippos?” Sebastian asked.

Joanna shrugged her shoulders. “I don't know. I just love 'em.” Then she flung herself on her bed and scooped up one of the bigger hippo stuffies into her arms.

The rest of that day consisted of the standard play routines young children engage in. There was no overt mention of the hippos again, but Sebastian couldn't escape them: they gaped at him from every corner, their eyes stitched on or glued in or painted, but in every case sunken in their oversized faces and ponderous jaws. It unnerved him somewhat, to be amidst such a singularity of theme. How could anyone have such a deep and abiding love of any one thing, let alone a singular animal within the almost limitless range of options?

But when it came to Joanna, the peculiarities of her and what she was interested in expanded to meet the outsized proportions commensurate with Sebastian's fascination of her. So if Joanna had an obsession with hippos, then hippos must have been God's greatest creation, no matter how absurd an idea when considering a hippo against, say, the majesty of a white tiger or a Eurasian lynx or a macaw.

Sebastian had managed to fall asleep and only the sheering and sudden braking of the van jerked him awake. He stumbled off the air conditioned transport and was immediately by a blast, like walking into a yawning oven. It was absurdly, otherworldly hot, a cloak of humidity that proved relentless. He waded through the air and tried to get his bearings. But it was hard to catch up to the world around him; multicolored things flitted and darted. Monkeys swung wildly and hooted and one another. Weird sounds emanated from the surrounding jungle.

Trying to orient himself, he wandered away from the van, passing the Hacienda Napoles entrance, and toward a wide cleavage in the land. When he caught his first glimpse of the Magdalena River, it appeared like a spear, slicing down the heart of the jungle. Several caiman sunned on exposed logs. He knew that manatees swam there, too, and giant turtles, and a multitude of fish. But he was really only after one river creature, the apex of them all, so he turned back to the Hacienda and made his way to the entrance gate.

Sebastian felt his heart race when he saw the iconic blue and white arch with the small biplane on top, painted in its signature zebra stripes. This was the plane that ferried Escobar's first cocaine shipment and this arch had stood at the entrance back in Escobar's time. But once beyond that, his heart sank at the abomination the place had become: streaming artificial waterfalls, wild animals behind chain-link fences, kiosks selling cheap food and drink, squealing schoolchildren running amok. The place had been turned into a literal amusement park. He knew this before he came, and yet it didn't seem something so grossly commercial and unsophisticated could be real. But now that he saw it . . .

No matter. He would not be here long. He was close to what he came to do. For now, he figured, he'd at least check the place out a bit. He stumbled around, crestfallen at the hideousness of the blatant commerce, but did—he had to admit—feel a bit of sympathy upon hearing the park director explain to a camera crew, in from the States, that the whole idea of the place was to confiscate what Escobar had left behind, repurpose it as a major tourist attraction, and provide an economic engine for the area. Escobar's old bullfighting ring, for example, was now a brightly-colored educational center dedicated to African wildlife and culture.

Escobar had famously imported a menagerie of wild animals to his sprawling compound and allegedly had a soft spot for his hippos. When his world collapsed and he was murdered, authorities came and rounded up most of the animals, sending them to zoos and shelters. But they couldn't remove the hippos—too large, too unwieldy, too expensive, too dangerous. And so the hippos stayed, eventually using their prodigious roaming abilities to make their way several miles east and into the main branch of the Magdalena, where they bred and eventually became the preeminent resident megafauna, a species outpost far, far from their ancestral African homes. But an original group that hadn't strayed was still at Hacienda Nopales and was very much part of the show: penned into a lagoon, they wallowed, bellowed, opened their massive jaws—all for the delight of the paying tourists. Warning signs were posted all over—*Peligro! Presencia de Hipopotamos!*—along with a picture of an immense hippo with open jaws. But these signs worked at cross purposes; by nature they were warnings and certainly the photograph of the ponderous beast could convey the danger involved. And yet these were beasts that looked hopelessly comical and the pictures only confirmed the caricatures.

Sebastian followed the signs to the hippo lagoon and took them in: their wild combination of droll buffoonery and beastly strength, their massively rotund bodies, their wide muzzles, bedecked with whiskers, tapering to cowrie-shell nostrils, beady eyes, and tiny tufted ears. Their stubby legs and inane tails. They look ridiculous. Watching them, he understood Joanna's love of these animals and why she cuddled with furry representations of them each night in her bedroom. And yet in real life they were massive, and being in their presence, their brute raw strength and potential for destruction were palpable.

"Even though these animals spend the bulk of their lives in water, they do not actually swim," a guide was explaining to an assembled group. "If you have seen them moving through the water, they are in fact able to sort of glide and kick and move easily, but they aren't actually swimming. Their body shape does not allow it." The group stood in front of a fence overlooking the lagoon where a dozen hippos wallowed, only their heads above the water, ears flicking occasionally, some spraying water through their nostrils. Otherwise, they seemed quite content to simply stand there. In this way, they edged far more toward the ridiculous than the dangerous.

The guide continued: "They have a clear membrane over their eyes, which gives them the ability to see underwater. Likewise, they can make their nostrils airtight, which allows them to hold their breath for several minutes at a time. Most impressive about this mammal—"

The guide stopped himself, for at that moment one of the hippos opened its massive jaws and held, giving full view to its open mouth: pink and rubbery with spots of black, rippled and quivering. Two tall spiked teeth on the bottom and rows of smaller teeth across the top. The mouth stayed open but now the animal emitted low, guttural, “laughing” noises.

“This is a sign of aggression. The hippopotamus is sending a clear warning signal. Those jaws are capable of snapping a boat in two. I have seen it happen. I have also seen hippos easily chew apart a crocodile.”

Perhaps. But still, despite the guide’s seriousness, it looked absurd. The hippo in question dragged its ponderous bulk out of the water and climbed up an embankment where it stopped and then emitted a massive amount of feces, which it spread with impressive efficiency by flicking its little nubby tufted tail back and forth like a windshield wiper. The resulting chunky spray easily covered twenty feet. It also resulted in a backside smeared as if the thing had used a mortar trowel.

“He is marking his territory,” the guide said. He delivered this pronouncement, as he did all the others he provided, in hushed, respectful tones. Despite that, much to his chagrin and increasing annoyance, the crowd was not absorbing his message and failed to internalize the awe and clear danger of this rotund animal. Obviously sensing this, the guide delivered the coup de grâce: “The hippopotamus is responsible for more human deaths than any other animal in Africa,” he said.

Not even a moment of respectful reflection. Instead:

“Good thing we’re not in Africa then,” one member of the group said. Everyone else chuckled. The guide did not even smile. Instead, his stern gaze suggested that he worried about the impertinence of this group—not only the smartass who had made the comment, but the others who had laughed. After a moment of deathly stare down, he repeated, “Hippos kill more people than any other animal in Africa. Never, ever get between them and the water. They are capable of running up to thirty kilometers an hour.” He took several steps back. “We will observe from a safe distance.”

Of course, they already were at a safe distance. Still, the group reluctantly retreated a few steps and Sebastian took this opportunity to wander away.

He left the park and walked again toward the Magdalena. He knew that multiple hippos lived in and around the river, though he saw none as he watched the lazy downstream drift. He walked some more, vacillating between waves of weakness and nausea, until he found a home near the river edge with a “Rentar” sign. Sebastian negotiated a room with ease.

The man who owned the house with the extra room smiled at him, revealing a bottom row of teeth with several gaping holes, and steered him to a cool, concrete-floor room in the back with a door that led to the outside. The owner opened that door and there, barely twenty feet away, Sebastian could see again the silvery ribbon of the Magdalena River.

“Hippos?” he asked, pointing to the river.

“Si, si,” the man nodded and then offered a few guttural calls, mimicking the beasts. He smiled widely and Sebastian noted the placement of his most prominent bottom teeth were similarly situated to the hippos’. It was perfect.

Dinner that evening was a potato soup. Sebastian gave his thanks and excused himself to his room. His bed was a raised platform in the corner with a thin blanket on top. He got the sense that someone regularly slept in that room, but accommodations had been made in favor of the unexpected boost of income. The man’s wife and what Sebastian guessed were his two grown sons also lived there. The two young men moved in and out during the day but hardly spoke, and

only one of them ate with the rest of the family. Sebastian crawled into bed, the sun barely having dipped below the horizon. He felt lousy, a feeling that seemed more and more to be a permanent condition. But he was accepting of that. It told him that his decision, and his timing, was right.

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He'd fallen asleep quickly, but then woke soon after and could not get back to sleep. He instead lay there listening to the sounds of the jungle at night: the cricks and calls and beeps and pulses. But some of that could have been in his head, he knew, his medicated brain throwing up synaptic misfirings. He knew everyone else in the house was asleep; he could hear snoring, at first ragged and then syncopated, as he walked outside.

Sebastian could see easily enough for the brightness of the moon. He moved to the water line, watching small eddies and ripples and marveling at the otherwise stillness and at the long sweep of events that had brought him here to this spot, an unlikely one for what would take place next. He thought back over his life: full, but not nearly long enough, that if he just had more time . . . alas. The desire to do more was a natural one, but a fruitless one as well, so he stopped that line of thinking. He thought with pride of the awards he won, how his efforts and inquiries had truly had an impact on the good of humanity. He could take great comfort in that.

But like any human being facing his mortality, there were holes and regrets as well, unavoidable. He thought of his mom and her devotion to him, how he hadn't gone to visit her grave frequently enough. But he knew he had been a good son during her life, and that was what mattered most. He was grateful she wouldn't see his premature demise.

His largest regret had nothing to do with his mother, nor anyone in his family. It was Joanna. Of course. It was always Joanna. She had been his constant mental companion, seemingly for his whole life. Every relationship he had he measured against not quite what he had with Joanna, for in reality he never had an actual relationship with her beyond what they'd shared as children. But there had been enough interaction between then and now, and enough time spent ruminating, and enough mental calculations on his end to have convinced himself long ago that she was, quite literally, the only person on the planet for him.

He had told her as much once. It was after his last trip to London, where he received the Euthenics Prize. He'd there had an innocuous flirtation with a woman, but just as something of consequence was about to take place, he found himself telling her all about Joanna. She had understood and encouraged Sebastian to reach out to Joanna when he returned home.

Brimming with confidence, he determined to finally tell her what was in his heart. They'd met at a diner, spending almost two hours catching up. It was only when she was about to leave did he finally spill it: "I love you," he told her. "I always have."

She reached over and put her hand on his. "I love you, too, Sebastian. You're the kindest person I have ever known."

"No, I don't think you understand what I'm saying to you," he said.

She looked away, her eyes, glowing with energy just moments earlier, now downcast, sad, tired.

"You know I'm going through a divorce," she said.

He nodded.

"I have no emotional energy left over for anyone, or anything, just now . . ." She trailed off. "Oh, Sebastian," she said, and began to cry.

He rubbed her hand for several long minutes until finally she announced that she was sorry, that she had to go. She promised to be in touch, “once the craziness has passed.” He received the diagnosis two days later.

He’d fallen asleep and it took a minute to remember where he was. Wet grass clung to the back of his head. A small rock had indented itself in his cheek. The moon had disappeared, subsumed by thick clouds. He lifted himself up, his head swimming, feeling faint and far away.

Then he heard the grunting, followed by ripples in the water. He moved toward the river, squinting, finally making out their hunched forms, the water rolling off their backs. He stepped closer and his feet fell out from beneath him. He plopped, hard, into the mud. Ponderous heads turned his way at the sound and the grunting grew louder, more insistent.

A wave of fear overtook him and, despite his intentions, despite what he had determined to do, he instinctually turned away from the river toward the house. But there was grunting coming from that direction, too.

It was the violence of the initial hit that surprised him. He could feel himself atop the animal, riding, somehow holding on, which no doubt enraged the animal more. The overall impression, apart from impeding liftoff, was of the wet. Soaking, gooey, intractable wetness. His hands kept slipping. Only the forward momentum kept him on top of the animal. Wet gooiness covered the eyes and nostrils and Sebastian couldn’t get good purchase, but still he held on.

But then he was off the animal, flying through the air in a burst, a moment that could not have lasted more than a second or two and yet felt like a skydive, a deep and intractable freefall; it felt, improbably, like freedom.

And then he landed with a great, violent thump. The air pushed out of his lungs and he struggled to inhale. He lay, taking it in, smiling, his ribs broken, his sternum crushed, air an elusive element, like he was sucking his life through a straw. Sebastian could hear the rasp and wheeze of himself, and yet he kept smiling. No better way to depart this earth. His plan had come to fruition, after all. Yes, there was pain. Yes, there was something like asphyxiation. But all of that was coming anyway, and its coming promised a hospital bed and attachment to tubes. Instead, Sebastian was lying on a muddy bank of the Magdalena River in Colombia, listening to grunting and the thudding hooves of several hippos scrambling to finish him off.

He kept his mind on Joanna, kept his head and thoughts firmly fixed on her, on the life they could have had, on the multiple fantastical imaginings, on Bexley and on what the three of them could have had together, on what he was certain Joanna would think when she heard the news that he was gone, that he had left this world under the heavy foot of a hippopotamus. And he kept smiling. He heard the refrain of that inane song resounding in his skull: “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas . . . Only a hippopotamus will do . . .” blurry, wavy, in and out, the words came. “Don’t want a doll, no dinky tinkertoy . . . I want a hippopotamus to play with and enjoy.”

A quick flash, though, like a stab: what if he had ruined her love for this animal? What if being ground to dust by her treasured hippo would thereafter forever sour her to this monstrous, comic-looking beast that she adored so much? Worse, what if she had long ago grown out of her obsession altogether and regarded her hippo-love as little more than a lost remnant of a bygone and silly childhood?

But no, he pushed this aside as the life leaked from him, as his cogent thoughts snapped and fizzled, as consciousness blurred around the edges like a ship stern in fog. No, this was no time for regret. He had made it, and it would end here—just as he planned.

How could she see this as anything other than it was?