

The Day We All Fell Down

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

I woke in the early morning of February 20, 2025, with a feeling of dread. Our president had just called Zelensky a dictator and claimed Ukraine started the war with Russia, not the other way around. I tried box breathing and reciting all the US states in alphabetical order. Still, I couldn't get back to sleep, so I finished reading *James* by Percival Everett instead. A harrowing and darkly humorous reimaging of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel reminded me of rascals in our past. Of course, we have scoundrels in the present, too. It's hard to avoid them. I learn about their shenanigans 24/7 on the radio, TV, and the internet.

Eventually, I dropped off and slept fitfully until my alarm woke me to a chill Utah morning. I wasn't feeling too perky. After twenty minutes of stomach cramps, I was heading back to our bed when everything went black. I slumped to the ground. This is only the second time I'd fainted in seventy years. For a while, I lay senseless in my red flannel pajamas next to our collie-poodle, Lizzie. She was coiled like a doughnut on her cushion. When I came to, she nudged me with her wet leather nose, amused that I had joined her on the floor.

My husband shuffled in and asked, "Should I call someone?" His Parkinson's makes it hard for him to sleep, and he'd been up since dawn.

"No, I'll just rest a little longer." It was surprisingly comfortable on the carpet.

When I roused myself, Steven was heading my way. He has a tendency to tilt forward on his toes when pushing his walker as if he is leaning into gale-force winds. He'd tucked an aluminum glass into the zippered pouch under his walker. His kindness, along with a long drink of cold water, revived me. I showed no signs of an infection, suffered no weird allergies, had no changes in medication, was not a victim of irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease. The news was making me sick.

Steven and I watch PBS in the evening. I also get regular updates from the *New York Times* website. When a “Breaking News” alert pops up on my phone, I tentatively tap the app, wondering what has been broken besides our alliances, our commitment to the truth, and our faith in our government. Is manufactured mistrust an aberration or our new abnormal?

This constant monitoring of the news seems necessary as the country has gone from one bizarre newsflash to another. Anything might happen: a zombie invasion, a cataclysmic natural disaster like 37,000 acres in Los Angeles burning because of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” policies, or our president exchanging a metaphorical friendship bracelet with Vladimir Putin. Only two of the three inconceivable things I’ve listed actually happened. Corrupted public language, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are eating our brains, so the invasion of the undead may already be underway.

The American free press has always had its own slants, twists, and contortions. Decades ago, differing points of view came from many directions and special interests were numerous enough that the reader and listener had to sift, sort, and verify information to determine what was really happening. Still, in the 1960s and 1970s, Walter Cronkite was almost universally considered the most trusted man in America. Who can we trust now? These days, most of us get our news through echo chambers on politicized social networking websites, and the mainstream media are increasingly cozy with the economic and political powers they are supposed to be watchdogging. So, I panic, I complain, I wake in the middle of the night with stomach cramps, and I donate not nearly enough money in support of our teetering democracy. Recently, the headlines have been so exhausting that I can only tolerate them in comedic form and in small soundbites. Steven and I watch YouTube reruns of Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, and sometimes *Saturday Night Live* over lunch. My sanity is precarious, and I am stepping back from the malicious mayhem coming at me through a firehose.

The second person to fall on February 20 was our thirty-five-year-old autistic son. Andrew lives in the basement apartment of our old Tudor house in Salt Lake City. He is good company, keeps his apartment clean, enjoys decorating, and is better at programming our Roombas than I am. Andrew's office chair lost one of its rolling casters

when we moved to the Yalecrest neighborhood in 2021. We relocated to Salt Lake City from Arizona, where my husband taught philosophy, and I worked at an autism research center. For a year, we were busy remodeling our house and replacing our carport, which was also at risk of falling down. And there were so many other little things that needed doing that Andrew learned to sit on a slant.

He finally used the money he earned as a grocery store courtesy clerk to buy a new chair. It snowed all day so we hauled his broken chair through deep white drifts to the curb. Andrew, sturdy and determined, was walking backward, and just when I said, "Be careful," he slipped and landed on his behind.

"You pushed me," he said.

I was surprised by his accusation. "You fell because of gravity and an icy sidewalk." But in case I'd nudged him just a little, I added, "If I did, that wasn't my intention."

"Well, even manslaughter isn't intentional," He can be dramatic.

That made me laugh. Andrew is unintentionally funny.

Between his part-time job, keeping track of his finances, coordinating his healthcare, paying his taxes, sending the family almost daily reviews of movies and TV shows he recommends, and monitoring our news intake, Andrew is ALMOST independent. His brothers are kind and will always be there for him. But he will need their friendship more than any practical support, and I worry about how everyone will manage the ALMOST bits.

The third person to nearly fall on February 20 was my husband. He sometimes feels and looks like the Tin Woodman from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Steven's heart is just the right size, but his dopamine levels are unreliable, and he often freezes mid-stride, like Nick Chopper did when his oil can was empty. In the past, my husband's vibe, energy, spirit, and aura were a testament to optimism. And he made baldness look like an achievement, something to be perfected. But Parkinson's has stiffened his face and when I look down on the top of his head while I'm shaving a few stray hairs, there are two semicircular scars, like frozen smiles, where burr holes were made to access his brain and insert deep brain stimulation leads.

I stay close by. While watching a *rerun of Bob's Burgers*, Steven stood to stretch his legs and swayed dangerously. I grabbed his arm and pulled him back onto the couch. This doesn't sound like a nice thing to do, but he thanked me at the time. He says "Thank you" a lot.

The next day, Steven and I visited the wellness gym located in the basement of the University of Utah's dental building. This facility is designed for people with Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, post-stroke, and other mobility challenges. Partners attend at a discount. A student volunteer takes our blood pressure, checks our oxygen level with a pulse oximeter, and always asks the same questions. "How do you feel on a scale of one to ten? Have you fallen? Have you been in the hospital? Have there been any changes in your medications?" I know these questions by heart, so I abbreviate my responses even before she asks: "Nine, no, no, no." Yes, I fainted the day before, but it was no big deal compared to what the guy in the wheelchair wearing a "miles for myelin" t-shirt is dealing with. Once, earlier this year when hurried and distracted, I responded to those questions with, "Nine, one, one, one," and got a lot of unwanted attention. In my subconscious, I knew we were in an existential emergency. We watch three televisions while working out. One is set to CNN, another to Fox News, and the third is usually on a house-flipping show. Everyone is friendly, and we all get along. Regardless of the station we watch, we all need this class.

On Sunday, during the weekly call with our kids and their partners, Steven's voice sounds like it is coming through a radio with finicky controls. Parkinson's has lowered the volume of his voice, so everyone is attentive in their little Zoom boxes. "Two women helped me walk down the hallway at our exercise class. One plays volleyball for the university, and the other is in the army." He takes a deep, steadying breath. "Even when they hold my gait belt, I feel shaky, so I asked the volleyball player. 'Are you sure you can hold me up?' She said, 'Don't worry, we could hold you up even if you were 400 pounds.'" Steven smiles, which looks a bit like a grimace because of his dyskinesia. "So, if I fall, they've dropped me on purpose." We all laugh, delighted with this humble witticism, so typical of him.

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Zelensky, my husband, and my son have some things in common. They all need a little extra help, but this has been hard to come by. Culpability is implied. Zelensky isn't grateful enough for the military aid we've provided since Russia's invasion in 2022, and just how much in "raw earth" minerals is he willing to pay for our continued support? "America First" has turned the world into our private Amazon Warehouse.

People with Parkinson's and autism have their own issues. They have been exposed to the wrong things, have the wrong genes, were born at the wrong time, have the wrong insurance, and definitely have the wrong image. Because everything seems so wrong, we fluctuate between empathy and irritation. We can't seem to figure out how to provide adequate services and a meaningful safety net. The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has slashed the budget for the National Institute of Health, including significant cuts in autism and Parkinson's research. I propose a better mission for DOGE: Do Only Good Every Day.

According to the embattled media, there are two Americas. In one, a rogue president divides, demoralizes, dismantles, and exacts retribution on critics, including news outlets, law firms, political adversaries, the judiciary, and universities. In the other America, a gutsy president is doing whatever it takes to Make America Great Again. It is not unlike the television news channels than are omnipresent at our wellness gym, each station focused on its own distortions and excesses. Between these two Americas I worry we have lost something we truly need: our values and humanity, qualities that make this country truly great.

Over the holidays, my middle son and I were cleaning the kitchen. As a scientist, he takes pride in arranging dirty pots and pans in the dishwasher for optimal cleaning. We'd caught up on family gossip, so he asked, "How are YOU doing, Mom?"

"I'm good," I said, then added without hesitating, "I'm going to live forever." This surprised me as much as it did my son, and it made him smile, which I like to do. What I meant to say was, "I need to live forever." I hope to be around for my husband and son as long as they need me. We don't love each other perfectly, but most of the time, we love each other as well as we can. And we're doing okay. Andrew is no longer sitting on

a slant, and thanks to our exercise class three times a week, Steven and I are getting stronger. What modest dreamers we have become.

Even our pooch, Lizzie, who reads the news from every bush and tree in our leafy neighborhood, is frail. She is my lovely Velcro dog, but at fourteen, her spine and hips are sharp under her silvering, red coat, and she is missing twenty teeth. So, in addition to everything else, I have an old dog to fuss over. Some days, my shoulders creak, my skeleton shrinks, and my knees buckle. It was inevitable that I ended up on the floor when the weight of our faltering democracy was added to my other caregiving responsibilities. I'm just lucky Steven was there to help me get back up. I'm grateful Andrew helps care for his father, Steven watches out for our son, and Lizzie calms us all down.

History can be an antidote to dogma. It's time we step back and gain some perspective. Lincoln was a contemporary of the fictional, enslaved James, whom I was reading about in the middle of the night on February 20. He knew firsthand how awful we can be. Yet he cultivated hope, perhaps by choice, understanding that it was good politics. In his first Inaugural address, he said, "The mystic chords of memory...will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely, they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Nothing is certain, but if we find our feet, our voices, and our wings, we may yet be able to save, maintain in good repair, and improve what was so marvelously constructed to begin with.

Liberty is an animating cause, and protecting our ailing republic is a shared responsibility. The deterioration of our political culture is alarming, but as long as there is one upright woman, as long as there is one compassionate man, hope, which is the one thing left to us in difficult times, may also be contagious. Some of us will use our imagination to design and build welcoming structures that improve the lives of the people who enter them. There is an attentiveness, a daily goodness, and practical morality in the role of caregiver and good citizen.



Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in LA and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. She worked as a FNP in autism research and is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. In 2023, Sharman was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards and has published creative non-fiction in bioStories and Adelaide Literary Magazine. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.