

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCE BY DANIEL ELLSBERG

The Accident

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On the Fourth of July 1946, a hot afternoon on a flat straight road through the cornfields of Iowa, my father fell asleep at the wheel. He drove off the road long enough to hit a sidewall over a culvert that sheared off the right side of the car, killing my mother and sister.

My father's nose was broken and his forehead was cut. When a Highway Patrol cruiser arrived, he was wandering nearby the wreckage, bleeding and dazed. I was inside, in a coma from a concussion, with a gash on the left side of my forehead. I had been sitting on the floor of the back seat, on a suitcase covered with a blanket, my head just behind the driver's seat.

When the car crashed, my head was thrown against a metal fixture on the back of the seat, knocking me out and opening up a large triangular flap of skin on my forehead. My legs had been stretched out in front of me across the car and my right leg was broken just above the knee.

We were on a stretch of road between Davenport and Des Moines, Iowa, on our way from Detroit to Denver for a vacation with my mother's relatives. An ambulance took my father and me to a hospital in Davenport, where I stayed in a coma for thirty-six hours.

My half-brother Harry read about the accident the next morning on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press*. He took a plane to Chicago that afternoon and then a bus to Davenport. He said later that when he saw what was left of the car in a junkyard, the right side looked like steel wool. It was amazing that anyone had survived.

As a Christian Scientist, my father didn't want any medical attention for either of us. He didn't have anything done to his broken nose, and he wouldn't let the doctors set my broken knee or stitch up my forehead. He had a gash on his own cheek that he didn't want touched, but at one point when he drifted out of consciousness my brother told the doctors to go ahead and stitch him up. Harry says that Dad never forgave him for that.

When my mother's brother and sister arrived from Denver, they insisted that my leg be set, but by then it was somewhat crooked and had to be broken again to be set properly when I was moved to a hospital in Denver. The surgeon there, a knee specialist, told me that if it had never been set correctly my right leg would have been about an inch and a half shorter than my left. After I got off crutches, I didn't have trouble walking, but I could never again bend my right knee all the way.

Because my head wasn't stitched up till my uncle and aunt arrived, I was left with a large jagged U-shaped scar on my left forehead. I thought it looked interesting, so I didn't mind it.

Until recently, whenever anyone asked me how old I was when the accident happened, I would say "Fourteen". But I knew that there must be something wrong with that answer, so I eventually did a mental calculation. I knew that the accident happened a year after the war, and I was born in 1931. So I would correct my answer to fifteen.

Fourteen was the age of my sister, Gloria, at the time of the accident.

My father told the story of that day a number of times throughout the years. He recounted the fact that all that morning Gloria had been sitting up front in the passenger seat next to him. Both of us wanted to sit there, because you could look out the window and it was more comfortable than sitting on the suitcases on the floor in back. It was supposed to be my turn to take the passenger seat in the afternoon, after lunch.

Mother had packed a picnic lunch and we ate it in a little park in the middle of a small town on our way from Davenport to Des Moines. It was

very hot and dry, there were white walls and a statue looking out on a little square surrounded by stores. The park was just an enclosed stretch of grass between two intersecting streets at the center of town.

We ate sandwiches, sitting on a patch of grass next to a stone bench. There were no other people there, or in the square. It was midday on the Fourth of July; the stores were closed and it's likely that everyone was at a celebration somewhere else.

In my dad's telling, after lunch we were packing up to go and Gloria ran back to the car first and got in the front seat. She refused to move, although it was my turn to sit there. She was determined to be there again. As Dad told it, she insisted, "I'm going to sit here if it kills me."

Dad's voice always started to break when he told that part. He would begin to cry, tears running down the sides of his nose and down his cheeks as he said, with his voice in a thin, cracking falsetto: "And it did kill her, too." Then he would break into sobs, gulping and choking, as he repeated, "It did kill her. She died, poor little girl..."

This last detail about Gloria was the end of Dad's account of what led up to the accident. I heard it a number of times over the years, always the same way, so I remember it word for word:

"Adele was determined that we had to be in Denver by the sixth of July, because her brother Lou was giving a party on the seventh. A cocktail party, for Christ's sake! [After becoming Christian Scientists my father and mother never touched alcohol.] She wanted to meet all of Lou's friends. So we would have to be driving on the Fourth of July, and we'd have to leave the night before.

"I was chief structural engineer on the new *Philadelphia Inquirer* building. I was designing floors that would bear the weight of the heaviest rotogravure presses in the world, on an upper story. They called me at the last minute before I was going on vacation and said I had to get out there. I got hardly any sleep and I spent all my time at the site. When I got back from Philadelphia on the afternoon of the third, I was exhausted. I knew I couldn't go that night. We would just have to leave the next day. I needed to rest.

"But Adele said we had to go. There was no way we could get there in time for the party unless we got started that night. Then she asked me to help load the car. She was supposed to have had the car all loaded when I got back. But now she said I had to do it. July in Detroit, it was hotter than hell, I was exhausted from my trip, and I was lugging her sewing machine out to the car, trying to squeeze it in the trunk, laying suitcases down on the floor of the back seat so you kids would have a place to sit while she stretched out her legs on the back seat."

(I realize, as I write this, why she had to have her legs up on the seat: her varicose veins, which she never had treated by a doctor because she was a Christian Scientist. She needed the suppurating sores on her ankles elevated. That's why I was sitting on the floor, with my back to the left side of the car, instead of sitting beside her facing forward. Who knows, maybe that saved my life.)

"And there was another thing that was bothering me [he told me once, telling this story; he didn't always mention this part]. I called your mother on the phone from Philadelphia the night I got there, and she mentioned an old beau of hers who had called her from out of town, out of the blue. He wanted to have dinner with her sometime. Now, when your mother and I were going to get married, we made an agreement. I knew she'd had boyfriends, she was thirty years old, and I said I would never ask her about anyone before me and I didn't want to hear about any of them. We agreed that neither of us would ever bring up the past, or torment the other about our past private lives. So when she said this bozo's name, I thought to myself: Dolly, Dolly, you are breaking your promise. You swore you would never do this. You're doing this to get under my skin' So on the way back from Philadelphia I had had this on my mind, too. I was pretty blue.

"Well, it was worse than that. For some reason Adele had lost all her spirit that spring. She didn't seem to have any interest in life, all of a sudden. She didn't even have as much interest in your piano playing.

"She turned her attention more to the PTA at Glorias high school. She had just become president of that. But she didn't have much energy for anything. And she certainly didn't have any time or attention for me. As far as I could see, she had lost all interest in our marriage, in being married.

"Driving that night, and when I was on the road the next day, I was thinking she was going to leave me. I was driving her to Denver, and she was going to stay there, with her brother. Why was she taking her sewing machine with her? Going for a month in Denver, what did she need her sewing machine for? She was going to stay there. That's why she was so anxious to meet all Lou's friends, and why she had to make a good impression on them. She wanted Lou to want her to live there, to be his sister in charge of his socializing, just like her sister Bertha was Lou's secretary.

"So I was thinking to myself, I'm driving my family to Denver and they're all going to leave me. Okay, maybe I'll just drop them off at Lou's and turn around and drive right back myself. I didn't tell her what I was thinking.

"So finally that night we got going. Adele had it figured out. We were going to drive from Detroit to the shores of Lake Michigan, where we were going to sleep out on the beach. Some friend of hers had told her you could do that, camp on the sand. That was another wonderful thing. Your mother was supposed to have made motel reservations for us, but she forgot till too late, and it was impossible to find a motel vacancy the night before the Fourth of July. So she got this idea that we could sleep on the sand. We brought blankets for that.

"That night I didn't sleep a wink. I wasn't asleep for a minute. It got too cold, and the sand was cold under the blankets. After a while your mother and Gloria got into the car, and they were able to sleep. But I couldn't sleep at all."

I remember that night clearly. I was lying outside next to my father, on top of a blanket and under another one, looking up at the stars. It was a clear night and we were on the shore of Lake Michigan, far from any lights or smog. The sky was filled with stars. I had never seen so many stars in my life. And every few minutes, one of them would streak across the sky. It was a night of falling stars, all night. I would drift to sleep, my eyes would blur and close, and then they would open again later and see another bright star fall.

"When we got going the next morning after breakfast -your mother had at least remembered to pack some food for breakfast and lunch - I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep going. It was hotter than hell by the middle of the morning, and the road got flat and straight. We were going through cornfields, endless fields, all the same. It would have been hard to keep my eyes focused even if I had had some sleep, and I hadn't.

"So I said to Adele, 'We're just going to have to look for a motel and stop. They'll have vacancies during the day, even if it is the Fourth of July. I have to get some sleep.' She said no, that was impossible. We had a tight schedule, if we were going to get to Denver on time, and we had to keep it.

"We weren't running into any motels anyway. But I was getting more and more tired. It was getting hard to keep my eyes open. Finally I said, 'Okay, I'll just have to pull over and nap for a while.'

"And she said, 'We don't have time for that. We won't get there in time for the party if we stop.'"

"I said, 'Then you'll have to take over the driving, while I sleep in the car.' She said no, she wouldn't do that. She had said from the beginning that she wasn't going to do any driving, I would have to do it all. She had to be fresh when she got to Denver, for the party.

He drove on. Just after our picnic lunch, his eyes closed on the road to Des Moines, and the right wheels went off the pavement onto gravel. That woke him up, and he remembers seeing Gloria looking up at him with a puzzled look on her face, as if to ask what was wrong. He tried to get the car back on the highway, but the rough edge of the pavement tore out the inside of the right rear tire, as the highway patrol concluded afterward. The wheels couldn't get back onto the asphalt before the right side of the car plowed into a concrete sidewall that was flush with the highway, above a culvert.

A day and a half after the accident, I woke up in a white hospital room. Everything was white, the bed I was on, the bandages on my legs, the walls, the light. It must have been the middle of the night; I had been in a coma for thirty-six hours, but there were doctors and nurses in white around my bed. It was like an operating room. Perhaps they were putting my leg in traction.

Someone said, "You've been in an accident. You're lucky to be alive. Your father is okay." I asked about my mother and sister. Someone told me they were dead.

An untoward thought came into my mind -I will explain it below- but I said nothing. A nurse said, "You're a brave boy." Then I lost consciousness again.

My aunt visited me in the hospital a month after the accident, and I asked her if she had just arrived. She was astonished and said she had been talking to me nearly every day for the past month. That turned out to be true for other visitors, none of whom I could remember at all. The memories of those first weeks in the hospital didn't come back over the course of the rest of the summer. In fact, they never have.

My memory is continuous from that time on, and for the years and hours up to the crash, but there is a thirty-day gap of near-total amnesia.

Life commenced again, in the hospital and later in school and college and the rest of my life. Yet, for reasons I could not explain, I had no particular thoughts about my mother or sister. No tears about the accident, then or ever, no sadness, no anguish, no sorrow either for them or for myself, for what I had lost. My mother, who had been the polestar of my life for fifteen years, vanished from my thoughts from one day (with a memory gap of a month) to the next.

For several decades I felt, from time to time, slightly uneasy about my total lack of conscious sorrow about the accident and absence of longing memories for the dead. My lack of feeling seemed odd, puzzling, not to be admitted. Whenever I thought of it, which was not often, I felt slightly ashamed, before I would push the thought away.

I didn't want others to be aware of my lack of sadness. I knew they might react to it much more strongly than I did, and I couldn't explain and justify it. I was sure that people -especially those who knew about my piano training- would interpret my absence of mourning as a memory of bitterness toward my mother, hostility, as if I hadn't loved her, and she hadn't loved me. I knew that that was the opposite of the truth.

But I never regretted the lack of suffering, I was grateful for it. I enjoyed the feeling I did have, which, even in the hospital and all the more when I was released, was ... free.

I was free to do whatever I wanted, every hour, every day. ("It was air / And playing," writes Dylan Thomas, "lovely and watery / And fire green as grass:") It was wonderful. Everything, nearly everything, was fun. Interesting, pleasurable. Oh, there were the demands of schoolwork, but I liked the courses and loved the reading, it was easy to excel, I wanted to do what I was doing, nearly all of it. It was play.

It was uncomfortable in the hospital lying in bed all the time in a cast up to my waist, but nothing was demanded of me, I could read, practice magic tricks, learn scores, joke with visitors. But when I went back to school in the fall it was really no different, it was even better. I was on vacation, all the time.

At the same time I continued for years to have brief feelings of unease, of guilt, when I was doing something I liked at times when, in earlier years, I would have been practicing. As before, pleasures taken in time not spent practicing were guilty pleasures, though not less pleasurable for that. But at last the guilt wore away, along with the feeling that this freedom was something special, forbidden, self-indulgent, and all that was left was the wonderful freedom, the sense I was in command of my time and my life.

It seemed for a long while that this feeling of endless vacation, this happiness, might last for the rest of my life. It lasted a long time, most of

the next eighteen years I would say, till about the time my first wife asked for a divorce.

In 1982, at a seminar in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, under the direction of Robert Lifton and Erik Erikson, I was introduced to the work of Lifton and others on "survivor syndrome". This is a set of characteristics generally shared by those who have lost loved ones in a traumatic way, like those who lost relatives in the bombing of Hiroshima, or a major accident or natural disaster, especially when the survivors came close to dying in the same incident.

At the top of the list of these symptoms, I learned, is aborted grieving, an "inability to mourn", usually accompanied by some guilt or reticence about this very inability. Another is "paradoxical guilt" over surviving when others did not, an exaggerated or unfounded sense of responsibility for the tragedy. It's also called "survivor's guilt" and it often results in a determination to warn others against a similar fate. A lot of the specific descriptions sounded familiar to me; they put into a wholly new light some of the puzzles of my own experience.

This new understanding was highly relevant to a particular aspect of the story leading up to the accident. As I mentioned, sometimes when my father told the story, he would describe the ways my mother seemed depressed before the trip. She had lost interest in my piano, and just about everything else. He confessed to feeling afraid that she was planning to leave him in Denver. This is why, he surmised, she was in such a rush to get to her brother's cocktail party -to make inroads with his social circle there.

Was he right about her intentions? Who knows. But whether she was planning that or not, he thought she was. This perception must have made him either anguished or depressed -or perhaps both-- along with being totally exhausted. This was a dangerous state to be driving in.

And why was Mother acting so depressed, as he described her? Why was she so indifferent to her marriage, to her children, to my piano, to everything except getting to Denver in time to launch a new life with her brother?

It's impossible to know for sure. But this is what I thought when I heard Dad tell this part of the story: me, that's what caused her depression. I did it by giving up, by not resisting Kottler's verdict and pressing onward with my piano career.

My half-brother Harry would go on to recount to me his memory of the silent treatment I received from my mother the few times I tried to quit the piano, none of which I recall myself. Nonetheless, given these episodes, I must have grown up fearing --at least on a subconscious level- that if I told the truth about who I was and what I really wanted, Mother would have lost interest in me. Our relationship would be over, along with my piano career. And that would be like death.

And I wasn't wrong, it seems. When I finally did hear Kottler's judgment that I wasn't a pianist and I chose to accept it, one of us died inside. And it wasn't me. I was alive, alive and free at last from the pressures of the piano. But not for long. It came at a price: Mother's life. I began to draw a direct line between my failure as a pianist and the events that led to the accident. That was a debt that would have to be paid.

As I learned at Wellfleet, psychologists say all children who lose parents early feel survivor's guilt. They feel responsible for the tragedy, feeling that if they had acted better or been more worthy of love, they could have kept their parent around.

But not all children have such valid grounds for their feeling of guilt as I did. So it still seems reasonable to me, despite all the arguments I've heard that there's no real basis for it.

It occurred to me recently that Dad's frequent story -about Gloria's insistence about sitting in the front seat-- may have a more complicated subtext, especially for me as a young man.

As I mentioned, Dad always quoted Gloria as saying, "I'm going to sit in this seat even if it kills me!" And then Dad would always say, in a high-pitched voice through his tears, "And it did kill her, too. She died, poor little girl."

On the one hand, it was a dramatic and horrifying story, and it was easy to see why it would break him up. On the other hand, Dad was a good storyteller, and he may have just made up her saying that. He always invented dialogue that improved the drama, and he came to believe his own creations. Of course, it was a fact that she was sitting up front that afternoon in the "death seat" next to the driver, and that I would have wanted a turn to sit there.

I had no memory of it one way or the other. But in repeatedly telling me that it had been my turn after lunch, it seems to me now, he was describing another accident -that Gloria was sitting there instead of me when the car crashed. He was pretty close to saying, "You were supposed to die, not Gloria. It was your turn. She took it."

Was that what he was crying about? Would he have cared as much if I had died instead of her? Would he have broken up the same way if he was telling the story to Gloria instead, in the wake of my death? Probably. I guess I would like to think so.

I do know that from the time of the accident onward, a thought that used to recur to me at odd times was "I owe a life." Just that: a thought in my head, not a voice. No context, no why. I didn't know where it came from, and I don't even remember connecting it with the accident. It wasn't clear what it meant to owe a life. But it was a kind of free-floating command, an obligation. It told me: at some point, I must pay my debt. But how did you do that? As I'd later learn at the Wellfleet retreat, this type of logic is consistent with, and characteristic of, survivor's syndrome.

I know that after the accident I never expected to live long. I had the feeling that I was on borrowed time. I figured I had a few good years ahead, free years, and I should enjoy them.

This brings us to the untoward thought I had when I woke up from the coma in the hospital, thirty-six hours after the accident. This is my only memory between the accident and the end of my amnesia a month later. When a hospital staff member told me that my mother and sister were dead, the thought that came into my mind was:

"Now I won't have to be a pianist."

The fact is that I was already no longer fated to be a pianist at the time of the accident; that life sentence had been lifted two months earlier, by Mischa Kottler. What was this thought doing in my head, then, at that moment?

After Kottler delivered the bad news to me and Mother, I still kept practicing, more or less at the same rate, though not eight full hours on Saturdays. I did end up taking some lessons with Kottler, with the understanding that they were for my pleasure, not for a serious career. But absent any chance of my becoming a concert pianist, my mother was indifferent to these lessons. I think I chose to take them so as not to embarrass Mother by quitting piano abruptly. In the back of my mind, I fully expected to quit when I went off to college in a few years.

It turned out that I quit sooner than that. Starting right after the accident- -except for an intense music theory class my freshman year at Harvard, which I almost failed-- I never touched the piano again for the next twenty-five years. And even after that, I played only sporadically.

Once I quoted my strange, sole thought upon learning of my mother's death - "Now I won't have to be a pianist" - to a close friend. She later told it to the *Time* journalists writing their cover story on me while Patricia and I were putting out the Pentagon Papers. Readers understandably reacted to the quotation, especially when it was repeated in the *New York Times Magazine* in a hyped and horribly garbled context, with shivers.

Now, as I write this, I'm listening to a CD of David Helfgott playing the Rachmaninov Third Piano Concerto. In the next track, I know from the program notes, Helfgott will play a piece I have not heard for fifty years, Rachmaninov's "Prelude in C Sharp Minor, Op. 3, No. 2" "The Bells of Moscow," people call it.

I used to hear it all the time in my childhood; it was the most played piece in our household. It was my mother's favorite piece, and she always played it sooner or later when she sat down at the piano, in those rare moments when I wasn't practicing. Sometimes she would perform it for company. She did it wonderfully, with strength and bravura. We never got tired of it.

I never learned it. I tried once, but it was too hard, and I didn't try long.

It was her piece anyway.

Now Helfgott is playing the prelude. I'm hearing it for the first time since she died, fifty-four years ago. It sounds familiar. It sounds like home. Tears come to my eyes and my face contorts as I listen.

But the triad of descending chords that starts it and is repeated over and over doesn't sound to me like bells, it never has. It sounds like what it always did to me: the footsteps of Death. Or of God. The last chord especially, the descending fifth, rings on the floor like the commanding knock of a stafi, a long scepter, in the grip of a God of Death.

I'm about to write what has stopped me from writing for most of a year. I realized this as I was in the shower a few moments ago, having started the new CD and left it on as I got into the shower. As I stood, hearing the music faintly and knowing what I was going to write, a line from Pablo Neruda came into my head. "Tonight I can write the saddest lines." Tears come, in the shower. Can I be crying at last, for my mother? "Tonight I can write the saddest lines. / I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too."

Sometimes? No, no, not just sometimes.

A psychoanalyst sat down to dinner with me in the early eighties at my request to talk about my life and help me understand it -not professionally, but as someone who believed in my work and wanted to help it. We had just met at a seminar on psychohistory that was still in progress. Her first question, as she was settling herself at the table, was "Tell me about your parents. What was your relation with your mother?"

"We were lovers."

She jumped. She was experienced, a dozen years older than me, but she wasn't expecting that. I was fifty-one at the time. I had never said it before.

I went on, "Not physically, of course, at all, but in every other way."

I don't think I had ever thought it before, certainly not at the time. When my mother was alive I hadn't had any other lovers, I didn't really know what the word meant. In two bouts of psychoanalysis I had never used these words, or anything like them. But in answering this question at this moment in my life it seemed the obvious way to put it.

What I had wanted most in the world was to make her smile, to make her laugh. I wanted her to hug me and say she was proud of me. I'm not sure whether she ever said that; she was very sparing with praise. She tended after a performance to tell me what parts needed more work, what I could do better next time. But she did hug me a lot, and tell me I was her darling boy and she loved me. I adored her, I cared only for her, and it seemed to me that she cared only about me, and my playing.

We were totally absorbed in each other, I told my analyst friend. She was preoccupied with my piano, but with me, too. She was interested in my thoughts and ideas, and she laughed at my jokes, though she was never one for saying anything funny herself.

My father would tell jokes often, which I have passed on to my sons. (When I do that, I warn them that they are fated to remember jokes their father told them and to tell them to their sons someday even though they don't think they are very funny.) But it was for my mother that I wanted to be funny, not my father. When I learned something interesting or had ideas, it was her I wanted to tell.

She often had headaches, her forehead would be furrowed as she read *Science and Health* or sewed, and I would go behind her and reach down with my thumbs and smooth out the two deep frown lines between her

eyes, and have her close her eyelids while I did it. Or I would do it from in front, smooth her forehead with my thumbs.

"And where was your father in all this?" the analyst asked.

"Nowhere. He was out of it." We were the real partners, she and I, there wasn't room for my father, or, it seemed to me, my sister either. He was off to the side, a little wistfully it seemed sometimes, but on the whole absorbed in his job. My sister was behind him, an afterthought, as I recalled. She wasn't a pianist. Mother and I were the pair.

My life revolved around her, and hers around me. Even when I went off to boarding school, hers was the only opinion of me that mattered; she was the one I wanted to achieve for.

This is who died, the person I lost, on the Fourth of July when I was fifteen. And -here is a mystery, this is what I couldn't bring myself to write over the past year, along with what I have just told-- this is the woman for whom, along with her daughter, my sister, I never grieved, not an hour or a tear, from the day they were killed.

When the Rachmaninov piece ends, I search on my shelves for a book of Nerudas poetry to check the line that came to me from "Tonight I Can Write."

Oh, now I'm crying for sure. Over these words, in which I find my feelings for Mother, my lost love. For the first time in more than fifty years, the first time in my life, it feels to me that I am crying over my mother's death, grieving. I'm crying for me, for the loss of my mother.

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