

Not for the Last Time

by [Ed Davis](#) (December 2020)



Self-Portrait in Orange Jacket, Egon Schiele, 1913

One.

God, I don't want to do this, Joe thinks again what he has been thinking all day. He is stretched out on his back, a large pillow pushed under his head. At his sides his hands lie motionless, palms pinned tight to the carpet of her living room floor, nailed there by his nerves.

Breathe deeply, slowly, she says. Feel the breath as it enters your body. Let it fill you with warmth. Now release the breath, but hold the warmth. The warmth is yours.

He tries to inhale slowly, with control, but the air seems to jerk into his lungs. He tries again, and tries to picture the air as he draws it in. Nothing.

Breathe.

Another breath, and a vision begins to form. The air becomes branches spreading down through his chest, like the limbs of a valley oak, dry and warm.

Two.

I don't want to do this, he thinks again, grasping for any solid thought to sustain him. But he can't find one, and feels himself begin to slip.

Let the warmth filter through you. See it as a white light radiating outward from the center of your body. The light moves through your arms, your legs. Your hands and feet glow with the light. Your eyes are closed but they see the light, and it is gentle on them, and it relieves your pain.

Is that what this is about? he asks himself. The relief of pain? He hasn't thought of it that way. The sessions themselves have been anything but painless. How many weeks have he and Trish been coming now? He tries to recall the

specific date they started, not because it is important but because he wants the distraction. Instead of the date, he remembers the first session itself.

Trish had suggested it. Their brokerage business was spiraling into bankruptcy, and Trish had assured him that they were both supposed to feel *something* about it, other than irritation at the inconvenience. That something, he was coming to learn, was pain.

Had there been relief? Not yet.

He remembers the session when he told Trish about his affair. He remembers the way she lunged across the room at him, and the barrage of her childlike slaps and punches on his face and head. He feels the pain in each glancing blow, greater than her force.

Trish will be here with him again next week.

But tonight he asked to come alone.

Three.

Oh, God.

Where are you?

"Where am I?" he echoes, but it isn't a real question and he knows she knows it. He has told her what he wants to talk about, yet he can't keep himself from evading.

"When?" he stalls.

When doesn't matter. Start with where.

"Where? All right," he says. As he speaks, his hands rise up off the floor as if under their own power. He feels them begin to tremble. "All right . . ." The hands no longer seem to be his, but he forces them toward his head somehow and pushes the spread fingers back through his hair. "All right, I

see myself in . . .”

Don't see yourself. Be there.

“Be there . . .” He can already see it clearly—the blue paint on the walls, the black and green linoleum, the blue Formica-topped table with the chrome legs and the leaf that always sticks when they put it in to stretch the table for Christmas and Thanksgiving. The details as sharp as they’d been thirty years earlier. But can he go there? “I’ll try . . .” If he looks up he can see the pattern of potato splatters on the ceiling above the stove from when the pressure cooker blew up that summer. “I’ll try . . .” and his stepdad had painted the ceiling not long after, but his mom hadn’t scrubbed it very well, so the splatter marks still showed through.

Where are you?

“I’m in the kitchen.” He is standing in the living room doorway looking into the little, crowded kitchen of the house on Huntly Street.

You're in the kitchen.

“Yes,” he says, astonished at the excitement he hears in his own voice. “I’m in the kitchen. I really am.”

Who is there with you?

“Who?” He looks around. “My stepbrother, Jim, and two of his friends—Evan and Bill. They’re doing something by the kitchen sink, and laughing. I want to see what they’re laughing about.”

Your parents aren't there?

“No, they’re gone someplace with my brother, Butch. But my stepbrother, Jim, is almost sixteen, and I stay with him all the time. I’m seven, so I even stay by myself, only I

like it better when Jim's there too."

You like Jim.

"Yeah, I guess I do. He teases me a lot, but I like him."

Teases you how?

"Like right now. I can see that his Levi's are unbuttoned, and he's got a water glass, and he's peeing into it. Evan and Bill are laughing so much they can hardly stand up, and Jim is trying not to laugh too hard or he'll pee on his hands. It really is funny to watch.

"Jim gets the glass full, and now he's really laughing—we all are. He turns around to dump it out in the sink, then looks over his shoulder at me and says, 'You think it's funny that I peed on my hands?' And I'm laughing too hard to answer, so I just nod my head. 'Okay then,' he says, 'I want to see *you* do something funny,' and he turns back towards me, and he's still holding the full glass. 'I want to see you drink it,' he says, and he puts the glass in my hand.

"I can feel how warm it is. I don't want to drink it, but he pushes it up to my mouth anyway—only now he's laughing so much that some of it splashes out onto my lips and I taste it."

You taste it.

"Yes...yes, only it isn't pee. It's lemon-flavored Kool-Aid that they've mixed with warm water in another glass and switched around to fool me. But I decide I'll fool them. I raise up the glass and drink it all."

What do Jim and his friends do?

"They stop laughing all of a sudden and look kind of scared, I guess because they think that *I* think I drank real

pee. But then I start to sing the jingle, '*Kool-Aid, Kool-Aid, tastes great, wish we had some, can't wait.*' Only I can hardly sing it because I'm laughing so much, and they start to laugh too.

"And Jim's friend Evan says, 'The kid caught you with your dick in the dirt that time, Jim boy,' And Bill says, 'Jesus, I think he really woulda drunk it . . . I mean for real.' Then Jim says, 'Nah, Joey knew we were foolin' all along, didn't you, Joey?'

"I'm still giggling too much to say anything, and I'm kind of embarrassed because Jim said that nice thing about me, so I just stand there.

"'Yeah, I can't hardly put anything over on Joey anymore,' Jim says. 'Maybe it's time we initiate him into the club.'

"The other guys nod their heads, only I see them looking at Jim like they don't know what he means. 'Joey,' Jim is saying to me now, but he's shooting sideways glances at Evan and Bill, 'if you want to be one of the guys, and we really want you to because you're such a good kid, there's just one thing you've gotta do.' He reaches down, unbuttons his Levi's again, and takes out his penis. 'You've got to suck my cock.'

"Evan starts laughing really loud, and Bill too, only his laugh sounds different than Evan's. I'm still laughing from the Kool-Aid joke, but Jim seems serious. 'I mean it,' he says. 'Suck my cock one time, and then you can be one of the guys. That's how you get into the club.'

"I say 'Cut it out, Jim,' and I'm not laughing so much anymore.

"'Give the kid a break, Jimbo,' I hear Evan saying. He has moved over by the back door, and he has turned half around

like he doesn't want to see.

"Jim is standing right in front of me. His penis is hanging down out of his open pants. Bill is standing next to him.

"Just kiss it," Jim says, and he moves a step closer. Bill steps closer too. 'Kiss it if you want to be one of the guys.'

"I'm staring at Jim's penis. I don't want to touch it, or kiss it, but I don't know why. 'It won't hurt you,' I hear Jim say. 'All the guys have done it.'

"I believe him.

"I bend my head forward. My lips are just inches away. I close my eyes and bend forward some more so I can get it over with.

"But something stops me—Jim's hands are on my head, pushing me back.

"Damn it, Joey, don't EVER do that," Jim yells, and I open my eyes. He's angry, and he looks scared. 'Don't you ever do that for *anybody*, you hear me? And if you ever tell about this, I'll beat the living shit out of you. It was just a joke. Didn't you know it was just a joke?'

"I feel myself begin to cry, but I try to hold back. 'I'm sorry,' I say, only he gets even angrier. 'I didn't mean to spoil it, Jim,' I say, but Jim and Evan and Bill are going outside now, and I'm really starting to cry.

"Jim and Evan have gone out the door, but Bill comes back. 'It's okay, Joey,' he says, and he smiles at me. 'Don't pay any attention to what your brother said. You didn't do anything wrong.' Bill reaches out and puts his hand on top of my head and kind of shakes it gently to make me stop crying. I smile at him and try to push the tears off my face with the

backs of my hands.

"Then he goes outside to be with the others.

"And I'm standing by myself, in the middle of the kitchen floor."

How do you feel?

"Sad. Confused. Lonely. I don't know. I don't understand what just happened."

And how do you feel now?

"Now?" Joe knows what she is asking. Seven-year-old Joey feels lonely, but how does thirty-six-year-old Joe feel? "I'm not sure," he says. He wants to add, "How am I *supposed* to feel?" but he doesn't because he doesn't think she'll like it, or let him get away with it. "I don't know. Maybe I'm a little relieved."

Do you want to go on?

He starts to reply, but pauses, realizing that she means it. He can stop here. In twenty minutes he can be home talking to Trish, or reading a book, or saying good night to the kids. They will still be awake if he hurries.

"I'll go on," he says. He *doesn't* want to, but he knows he must. And before she asks her next question, he already knows what his answer will be.

Where are you now?

"In the bathroom." His voice breaks as he says it, and before he knows what's happening, his eyes have filled with tears.

You're in the bathroom. Who is with you?

He begins to tell her, but his breathing is so ragged

he can't speak. The tears begin to flood down his face, and he tries to push them away with the backs of his hands. "Bill," he hears himself say. "Bill is with me."

Tell me about Bill.

"He's just a guy that hangs around with my brother. The other guys make fun of him a lot, but he hangs around anyway. He's nicer to me than Jim's other friends."

How is he nicer?

"I don't know. He talks to me, or says 'Hi.' Sometimes, when the other guys are being mean to him, he comes to see what I'm doing."

Do you like it when he does that?

"Yes, I like it."

Do you like Bill?

"I guess I like him."

And you're alone with him now?

"I'm alone with him. When I got home after school, nobody else was around, so I went out in the front yard to play with my cars. That's when I heard somebody say 'Hi, Joey,' and there was Bill walking up Huntly Street all by himself.

"He asked me if I wanted to do something fun . . . play a new game . . . and I said sure. He said it was a secret, and that we better go into the bathroom to do it."

Were you glad to see him?

"Yeah."

What does he say to you in the bathroom?

“He says, ‘Remember that night when you drank the pretend pee, and remember what you almost did after? I want you to do that with me. It’ll feel real good. You’ll like it.’

“‘But Jim told me I shouldn’t,’ I say. ‘He said it was just a joke. He’ll get real mad again.’

“‘You don’t have to tell Jim,’ Bill says. ‘It can be our secret, just you and me. Jim got mad because you figured out his joke about the pee. But I won’t get mad. And it’ll feel real good, Joey. Just try it.’”

How is Bill acting now?

“I can see that he’s kind of excited, and nervous. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t want anybody to know he’s being so friendly to a little kid. I guess I’m kind of excited too. I’ve never been alone with one of my brother’s friends like this before.

“‘You can sit down on the toilet,’ he says, and he puts the lid down for me. ‘That way you don’t have to bend over or anything.’

“I sit down on the toilet seat and watch as he unbuckles his belt. He doesn’t just open the buttons like Jim did. Instead, he pulls the front of his pants open and pushes them down around his knees. He pushes his underpants down too.

“His penis is in front of my face. It’s stiff, and sticking almost straight up. I’ve never seen a penis that looks like that.

“‘Close your eyes and kiss it,’ he says, and I close my eyes. I feel his hand on the back of my head, pulling me forward. My lips are against it. Bill starts to move it back and forth against my lips.

“‘Pretend it’s a Popsicle,’ Bill says, and his voice sounds funny to me. ‘I want you to suck it like a Popsicle.’

“‘But what if you pee in my mouth?’ I say, because I know I wouldn’t like that. ‘I don’t want you to pee in my mouth.’

“‘I promise I won’t pee in your mouth,’ he says. Then he puts the head of his penis against my lips and pushes it inside.

“He pushes it real deep. I start to choke, but he pulls it back, then he pushes it in again and I really start to choke. I think I must be throwing up because the inside of my mouth is wet all of a sudden, and my face is wet, and then Bill is wiping me off with a washcloth he’s got in his hand.

“‘Are you okay?’ he asks me. I can tell by his voice that he’s worried, and maybe even scared. ‘I’m sorry you got wet like that, but you’re okay, aren’t you?’ I nod my head, and I can see by the way he smiles that he’s really relieved.

“‘You and your friends play doctor sometimes, don’t you?’ he asks, and he pulls his pants back up but leaves them unbuttoned. I guess I must be blushing because he says, ‘It’s okay, everybody does it. I’ll bet you use Popsicle sticks to put up each other’s butts. That’s what I used to use with my friends.’

“I’m embarrassed that he knows about the Popsicle sticks, so I don’t say anything.

“‘The trouble with Popsicle sticks is that they leave splinters,’ he says, ‘so the next time you play doctor, use your weenie instead. That way, you don’t get splinters. I’ll show you.’

“He takes me by the hands and stands me up. I feel him undoing my pants, like my mom does sometimes when she’s getting me ready for bed and I’m too tired to undress myself. He hooks his thumbs inside my underpants and pulls them down along with my jeans.

“‘Turn around and hold onto the sink,’ he says, and I do it, but I have to shuffle so I don’t trip on my pants and fall. ‘It’s just like the Popsicle sticks,’ he says, ‘only without the splinters.’

“I hear his pants drop to the floor.

“He’s got his hands on my hips. I can feel the tip of his penis pushing against me. ‘Spread your legs apart,’ he says, and I try to but I can’t because my pants won’t let me. He reaches down and pulls one pant leg off over my shoe.

“I spread my legs.

“He pushes against me some more until he finds the entrance. He tries to push in. It hurts.

“‘I don’t think it can fit,’ I say, and I try not to show that it hurts because I don’t want to make him mad. ‘It’s a lot bigger than a Popsicle stick.’

“‘Bigger stuff comes out that hole all the time,’ he says. ‘It’ll fit. You just gotta relax, is all.’

“I don’t know what he means by relax, exactly, but I try to do it.

“And he pushes hard.

“And it goes in deep.

“And I scream.

“I try to jerk around and get free, but he holds me tight. I’m crying now, and screaming. He won’t stop. He pushes and pushes. I’m smashed up against the sink but he’s still pushing.

“I’m trapped.

“I can’t move.”

You can't move.

"No."

It hurts, and you don't like it.

"I hate it."

You want him to stop.

"Yes!"

Then tell him.

"Please stop."

Tell him again.

"Please, I want you to stop."

Does he hear you?

"Stop, goddamn it! STOP HURTING ME, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

What's he doing now?

"He's stopping. He's stopping . . . and he's disappearing."

Don't let him go yet.

"But I want to. I hate him."

Then tell him that.

"I don't know how."

Just say it.

"I hate you, Bill."

What else do you need to tell him?

"That he had no right . . . you had no right to do that to me, Bill, you bastard. I trusted you. I thought you were my friend. YOU HAD NO RIGHT!"

Does he hear you?

"He hears me."

Are you finished with him?

"Yes." It takes all of Joe's energy to say the word.

Then you can let him go.

"I will. He's going. I am so glad he's going. I don't ever want to see him again."

You don't have to. And you don't have to blame yourself anymore. I want you to say some things. I want you to say . . . it isn't my fault.

"It isn't my fault."

I didn't do anything wrong.

"I didn't do anything wrong."

I don't have to punish myself anymore.

"I don't have to punish myself anymore," Joe says, and he lets himself double over with the pain. He lets himself cry deeper and harder than he has ever cried before.

I want you to imagine that you are floating, she says, when she knows he can hear her. Imagine that you are in the air, floating gently and comfortably above the house on Huntly Street. Hover over it, glide from place to place, and see what your life there was like. See the good things and the bad things. See them for what they are. Can you see the house?

"Yes, very clearly," Joe says, and he is looking down

at the huge weeping willow tree spread out over the pea gravel driveway. Its long, supple branches with their waxy leaves would hang all the way to the ground if his stepdad didn't cut them back every few months and make a tunnel for the car to drive through.

Tell me about what you see.

"I see the butterfly tree in the backyard. I see the tree fort behind the garage. I see the side gate over to Pop and Sarah's house next door.

"I see the tunnels we dug in the field out back. I see the patch of bamboo next to the fence. In the living room I see the big TV cabinet with the little black and white screen.

"I see the water fights out on Huntly Street on hot nights in the summer, and the bicycle races, and the coasters we made to go down the big hill.

"I see hamburgers . . . wrapped in orange wax paper . . . that my mom brought home for dinner. I see afternoon light on the dusty hardwood floor. I see Venetian blinds."

Do you see yourself?

"I see myself going to sleep every night in my parents' bed, but waking up on the couch every morning. I see myself waiting by the back door for my stepdad to come home from work. I see all of us sitting at the dinner table."

Is there anything wrong about what you see?

"No."

Is there anything bad about it?

"Some things. Not many."

Did you like living in the house on Huntly Street?

"I liked it," Joe says, and he is surprised at how hard it is to utter the words. "I liked it very much."

Then let yourself like it. Let yourself remember the good parts and the bad. Give yourself back your childhood. You deserve it.

"I'm not sure I can."

I think you already have.

And I think we've gone far enough today. I'm going to count backwards from three. As I count, I want you to feel your body growing light and free, all the tension gone, and the strain, and the hurt.

The muscles in Joe's neck and shoulders begin to tremble, not from the load they are carrying but from the release of it, like the legs of a distance runner who has stumbled across the finish line with nothing left.

You are floating, unattached, unconcerned, yet very refreshed, and very aware of everything that is around you. I'll count backwards, and when I say 'One,' I want you to open your eyes and be here with me.

Three.

"No." Joe feels the tears again—feels the weight returning and the finish line receding—but he doesn't care. "I don't want to come back, not yet."

Is there something you need to do, or someone you need to see?

"I don't want to leave Joey," Joe says, and he knows how it must sound, but he doesn't care. "I miss him so much. I can't just leave him like that."

Go talk to him then. Where is he?

“He’s in the front yard. There is a little concrete curb under the hedge by the lawn, and it’s just the right size to use as a highway for his cars. Joey is the only one who knows about it.”

Walk up to him. Say hello.

“I can’t.”

Try it.

Joe sees himself standing out on Huntly Street at the end of the driveway. He steps onto the pea gravel and feels it crunch under his shoes. He walks onto the lawn and feels his feet drag through the long, tangled grass that still needs mowing, just as it always did. The birch tree is right in the middle of the yard, and he can see the big limb that he could only reach if he stood on his toes and stretched. As he walks by it, he sees that the limb barely comes to his shoulder.

And down by the hedge, at the far side of the lawn, he sees the back of a little boy.

“Hi . . . Joey.” Joe hears himself mouth the words.

And the boy turns around.

And the boy is him.

“Hi,” Joey says. “Who are you? My mom and my stepdad aren’t home, if that’s who you’re looking for. But my stepbrother, Jim, should be here pretty quick. You can wait for him if you want to.”

“Thanks,” Joe says, “but I came to see you, Joey.”

“Me? How come?”

“I wanted to see if you were doing okay. I wanted to see if everything was all right.”

"I'm okay," Joey says, "only I wish I had somebody to play with. One of my friends said he might come over after school, only I guess he forgot or something. Do I know you?" he asks, an expression of curious recognition on his face. "You kind of look like my real dad, only I haven't seen him in three years because he's back in Kansas City. He and my mom got a divorce. You aren't my dad, are you?"

"No, I'm not your dad," Joe says, "but I'm kind of a friend of his, and of your mom's too. I just wanted to check in on you, was all. And I wanted to tell you that I think you're a pretty good kid."

Are you talking to him?

"Yes."

Are you ready to say goodbye?

"Almost."

"I think I'm a pretty good kid too," Joey says, and he giggles at his joke. "Hey, do you want to play cars with me?"

"I'd love to sometime." Joe looks at the little metal car in Joey's hand, and he remembers when his grandma Olga gave it to him that summer, for no reason except that she thought he should have it. "I'd love to play with you, Joey, but it's time for me to go now."

Three.

"Okay," Joey says, "but maybe you can come back sometime. I could show you my tree fort. I built it myself."

"I'd like that."

Breathe deeply. Feel the breath make your body light and free.

"Joey, will you promise me something." Joe is kneeling

down, and he wants to take Joey in his arms, but he's afraid to. "Promise me . . ." he begins, but then he stops because the words aren't there. "I want to protect you," Joe says, "but I can't. I don't want you to be hurt, that's all."

"Don't worry," Joey says, and he looks quizzically at the car in his hand. "It's okay, really. I play with cars all the time. I'm real careful."

Two.

"That's not what I mean," Joe says. He wants to warn him, but how, and against what? "Things may happen to you . . . people may do things . . ."

If there is tension anywhere in your body, let it go. The tension might be anger. The tension might be regret. The tension might be fear. Let the tension go.

"Whatever happens," Joe knows his time is almost done, "remember that you are a good kid, and that people love you, and that you have to love yourself no matter what. Will you promise to remember that for me?"

"I'll remember," Joey says. "That's easy."

"Good," Joe says, and though he feels like he shouldn't, he reaches out and touches the boy's shoulder. "Good for you, Joey. You're gonna be all right."

"Sure I will."

Feel the tension leaving . . . leaving. It's almost all gone now. You're almost free of it for good.

"It's time for me to go," Joe says, and he stands up and brushes the grass from his pants.

"Okay, see ya," Joey says. "My friend Bill said he might come by anyway, if he didn't forget. He said he had a

new game he wanted us to play.”

“Oh God . . . Joey.”

“What? What is it?”

Joe bends down and sweeps the boy up in his arms. He can feel Joey clutch him around the neck. “I love you, Joey. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” He can hear Joey’s voice at his ear. He can feel Joey’s tears on his cheek. “I’m afraid, and I don’t know why. I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to go, but I can’t stay here. I can’t.”

“Will you come back and see me then? Promise that you will.”

“I promise.” Joe tightens his embrace on the boy, then begins to let him go. “Whenever you need me or want me . . . whenever you’re lonely or afraid . . . just think about me, Joey. I’ll come back for you. I will always come back for you.”

“Always?”

“Yes, I promise.” Joe feels Joey’s hands slip from his fingers.

“Okay. I guess I’ll be seeing you then,” Joey says. “Maybe next time we can play with my cars.”

“You bet.” Joe smiles. He fills himself with the sight of Joey—with the color of his hair, and the grass stains on his jeans, and the light that shines so pure in his young face.

“Goodbye, Joey,” he whispers to himself, not for the last time.

Then he closes his eyes...

One.

...and opens them.

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Ed Davis is the author of the novella *In All Things*, which Kirkus Reviews called “...powerful; beautifully written, well-observed and effective.” He produced and directed the documentary *Faces of Chidamoyo*. He is a runner, backpacker, and traveler, and has been to Zimbabwe, Peru, Tibet, Nepal, and soon Bhutan. His travel collection, *Road Stories*, has recently been an Amazon top ten best seller.

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