

CHAPTER 2

Keeping the Secret

In early 2016, I drove past the big-box stores flanking LA's Sepulveda Boulevard and turned into the parking lot of a giant glass cube of an office building. It was one of those nondescript human hives, found in the suburbs of most American cities, where assorted professionals drone away from nine to five: transportation lawyers, loan processors, architects, orthodontists, and—most relevant to me that afternoon—psychiatrists.

I knocked on a door, and a late-middle-aged doctor with the central-casting trimmed gray beard invited me in. His wood-paneled office was decorated with aviation

memorabilia—model planes, a vintage helmet, flags, pins. (Of all the shrinks' offices in all the towns in all the world.) He was an amateur pilot, it turned out. And, as I could have guessed from the moment I walked in, he was keenly interested in what my sister calls our family's "trail of tragedy." Chiefly my father's death in that plane crash in 1990, the near-loss of my mother to cancer when I was eight, her loss of her first son (my brother) to Down syndrome, but also my own close calls in various conflict zones. We talked for about an hour.

But it wasn't therapy I was after. The trials of juggling a career, a marriage, a growing family, an ailing mother, a financial betrayal by someone close to me, and my constant panic attacks had become more than I could bear. I sought salvation from the one source that had most reliably offered me comfort in the past: pharmacology.

Back in 2003, when I was a twenty-five-year-old print reporter, I had spent nearly six weeks in Iraq in the days after the US invasion. Nothing particularly bad had happened to me there. A colleague and I had done multiple reporting trips to Fallujah, an increasingly

restive town that would soon become a byword for the insurgency, to report on the first attacks on US troops there. In the holy Shiite city of Najaf I had been swept away by a jubilant mob welcoming home an exiled cleric and was pinned against the doors of the mosque there until custodians opened them. Scary, for sure, but not something I considered traumatic at the time. Unlike some colleagues, I hadn't been shot at or detained by thugs (that would happen years later).

In fact, during the orgy of looting in those first few weeks after the US invasion, I witnessed what seemed the opposite of trauma: rapture. On several occasions Shiite men in the slums of Sadr City accosted me in the street only to wrap their arms around me. I stood there in shock as one man brought me in for a bear hug and cried out, "I love you, America! I love you, George Bush." When I asked him why, he spun around, lifted his shirt, and revealed the railroad yard of scars on his back and legs, the result of whippings in the regime's jails. Saddam's torturers favored electrical cables. And now Saddam and his henchmen were gone. Within a couple of months, almost no one was saying, "I love you,

America."

For whatever reason, by the time I got back to my apartment in Tel Aviv, I had fallen into a funk—rarely leaving the apartment and watching *Black Hawk Down* on repeat. I was referred to a kindly Israeli psychiatrist who diagnosed me with mild depression and ADHD. He said my depression could easily be treated with a popular antidepressant called Paxil.

The first couple of days my mood and productivity skyrocketed (perhaps the placebo hit me before the chemicals). I reached a near-manic state, driving my tiny Fiat Punto into the West Bank for all-night reporting stints. Within days the high leveled off. I wound up staying on Paxil, with a few hiatuses, for much of the next eighteen years.

In the meantime, my career was beginning its ascent. Journalists typically want their stories heard or read by the largest, most influential audience possible. My own dream had been to be a swashbuckling Middle East correspondent for *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* like Thomas L. Friedman and Anthony Shadid. I loved my job as a print reporter for *The*

Jerusalem Post, whose editors offered me a long leash to report on almost any topic I wanted. But when I got the opportunity in 2005 to begin working with ABC News Radio, I jumped at it. The gig would be as a Jerusalem-based freelancer. ABC Radio broadcast short, fast-paced bulletins at the top and bottom of every hour. My reports, which I would often deliver live, would typically last anywhere from twenty to thirty-five seconds. Since it was radio, I could read from a script either in the field or from a studio in Jerusalem.

ABC had sent me a CD of sample reports from its correspondents—an elite crew of virtuosos with godlike voices and always-perfect deliveries. As I began my own career in radio, I found myself prone to bouts of “nerves”—echoes of the full-fledged panic I had experienced that first time five years earlier as a Williams undergrad, though I was still so ignorant and ashamed of my panic that I never fully connected the experiences. It was “nerves” that would cause words to magically disappear from the pages I held firmly in my hands. It was “nerves” that caused my voice to crack or croak.

It rattled me: How could something that seemed so easy—just reading a short passage that I’d written myself—cause such sweating, breathless, word-mangling torment? I found I enjoyed the reporting work—gathering information, talking to people, writing up scripts—much more than the performative work.

A couple of years later I accepted a promotion as the Miami correspondent for ABC Radio. My wife, our two-month-old, Libby, and I packed up for South Florida. The staff gig came with a better salary, more responsibility, and something intensely coveted in the freelance world: a proper @abc.com email. I was now an official member of an elite tribe whose lineage of chiefs includes David Brinkley, Barbara Walters, and Peter Jennings. But that first year in Miami, whenever a big news story would break, my boss would burst into my radio booth vibrating with enthusiasm. He would ask, almost rhetorically: “You psyched about getting on air?!” It’s been said that TV and radio reporters “live for airtime.” So he was likely confused by my standard reply, a halfhearted, hesitant “*Yeah...*”

In April 2010, ABC Radio dispatched me to cover the BP oil spill befouling the Gulf of Mexico. All but moving into Louisiana's marshlands, I made friends with shrimpers, coast guard officials, and sources at BP, resulting in reporting and insight that gained notice. On a swampy Tuesday afternoon, in a moment that seemed pulled from a cheesy Hallmark movie about an aspiring TV journalist, I got "the call." It was the TV news desk—not the radio desk—asking if I would be willing to file a report on Diane Sawyer's *World News Tonight*.

"Um..."—deep breath—"yes."

Sawyer had apparently watched me on a weekend news show—I'd begun filing TV stories from the Gulf on the weekends with David Muir—and she liked my work enough that, two days later, she asked for me not just to appear on but to lead off her show. I had about two hours to write a script (which for a radio reporter was actually tons of time) before presenting the piece live.

In the space of less than a week, my career metamorphosed from that of a radio journalist in a satellite bureau to a mainstay of ABC's flagship newscast. I was now, in the words of *The Daily Beast*, one

of Sawyer's "hunks," "the brow-furrowing newcomer who came up through ABC Radio but has a torso for TV." The sudden attention from the press, talent agents, and strangers on Facebook spawned ribbing from my colleagues and camera crews, who coined the nickname "the gunk hunk."

The live portions of my TV reports were actually shorter than my radio hits. But now I would be presenting not in some undisclosed radio booth but before a high-definition camera, consumed by an audience that had instantly grown by an order of magnitude. TV meant broader influence and a bigger salary. My "nerves" grew alongside them.

It was exactly what I had wanted, and precisely what I had feared.

The most obvious remedy to my "nerves," albeit a temporary one, was a flawless performance. Those came from time to time, wrapped in delicious dopamine that left me craving more. I found I was at my best when a shot involved a measure of choreography between camera, reporter, and control room—when it required a prop, or walking viewers through a tableau

of destruction, or wading through oily water. That choreography helped take my mind off the precision of phrasing that I demanded of myself—and doing anything incorporating physical movement also seemed more authentically *me*.

During those first few months, when every live shot seemed like it could make or break a fledgling career, going on air felt like climbing into a boxing ring with the knowledge that a physical battering lay ahead. I would sometimes—fully aware of the cheesiness—psych myself up by humming the chorus to Eminem’s “Lose Yourself”: “You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow / This opportunity comes once in a lifetime.”^[*1]

Perversely, the hair-on-fire nerves made my live performances appear more kinetic, earning me the reputation of someone who *thrived* on live TV. My efforts to ward off panic were interpreted by a *Good Morning America* executive producer as “energy” that “really punched through” to the audience. That got into my head, only ratcheting up the pressure.

Over the next few years, I almost never turned

down an assignment, and my managers rewarded me by sending me everywhere—which of course meant more live reports. I most dreaded what should have been the “easy” live shots—just standing in front of a camera and offering a single thought in a couple of sentences. Their brevity came with an expectation of flawlessness, which meant that “ums,” “uhs,” repeated words, or brain farts were to be avoided. And anyway, how can anyone screw up fifteen seconds of talking? In those situations, I would have to physically hold myself together so tightly, spine so erect, that I’d walk away from the camera with Frankenstein stiffness, my lower back aching and my waistband dampened by the sweat coursing down my spine. It seemed to me that success in this industry depended on conjuring up a daily mirage and sustaining it for years. And I was certain that the next live shot would be the one in which my act was revealed to be an illusion—*I am not the person you see on your screen*.

You might now be thinking: If this job makes him so miserable, why the hell does he do it? It’s a valid question. Like most jobs, mine can often be mundane. But sometimes we are witnesses to history. And, at

its best, TV journalism reaches through the TV and grabs viewers by the lapels. In late February 2022, my producer Robert Zepeda and I crossed into Ukraine the day after Russia's invasion. We were among the first to report from the Krakovets crossing between Poland and Ukraine, where tens of thousands of refugees on the Ukrainian side were pressed up against the border gate, begging to be let through. Behind them was a twenty-mile-long traffic jam snaking back from the border. Many had run out of gas, abandoning their cars and lugging bags and children over gravel and slush to the border. These people would become the spearhead of the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.