

They say you always remember your Printz call. I know my amazing and talented colleagues here—Nina, Jason, Angie and Laini remember theirs. How can you not? You know exactly what you were doing when the phone rang. You were washing the dishes, running or running errands, reading, writing, driving, taking a nap. And you remember what you said and how you felt and...

You remember it all, I know you do. As well you should. It's a glorious phone call. A moment that you will always treasure.

But...I don't remember my *Vincent and Theo* Printz call-- and I never will.

It was Saturday February 10. A cold winter day in New York, I think. I think it was cold. I had just gotten back from a weeklong writing retreat, during which I'd worked really hard. Now I had to unpack and repack to go to ALA mid-winter because *Vincent and Theo* was a finalist for the YALSA nonfiction award and I would be leaving for Denver in the morning.

That afternoon is a haze to me now, a cracked kaleidoscope of fragmented images and scenes, not necessarily in the correct chronological order: getting home, eating--maybe an apple and peanut butter?-- taking a couch nap, going for a walk with my husband, Jonathan. We

did a little food shop. I see myself putting a white Garden of Eden grocery bag on the kitchen floor. And then--I've got nothing.

According to Jon: I was packing for Denver. He was eating pistachios. It was about 6:30. My cell phone rang. Angela Carstensen. Apparently I screamed. A lot. (I do that.) We talked for a bit, Angela and the magnificent Printz committee and I--Thank you so much, all of you!--I hope I was gracious on the call. And then--Angela told me later--I screamed again, as we hung up.

Jon says I was *ecstatic*.

Next (according to Jon) I called Laura Godwin, my brilliant editor, without whom *Vincent and Theo* would not exist. Thank you a million times over, my guide, my partner in creative crime. I have no memory of this call either. I guess we said happy things. Laura probably made me laugh, she always does.

Then I called my agent, Susan Ginsburg, who picked up the phone on a Saturday evening even though she didn't know why I was calling--that says everything you need to know about her. Thank you, Susan, for taking me on, and waiting patiently for five years while I wrote the book.

Jon was monitoring all of this while he ate his pistachios. He was very happy for me, but honestly, nothing

gets in the way of his pistachios and it was pistachio o'clock.

So, imagine—and I personally hate to imagine this—his surprise and subsequent terror, when I walked into the living room and said, “What’s going on, what just happened?”

I don’t remember this, but apparently I was very agitated. I knew something had just occurred, something important, but I didn’t know what.

(I get anxious relating this.)

“What do you mean?” he must have said, something like that, and I asked again, “What’s going on? What just happened?”

He told me Angela had called, and why, and I panicked: I had no memory of the call. Then I noticed my almost-packed suitcase. “What’s that?” I asked him.

“What do you mean? You’re packing for Denver,” he said.

Why would I be going to *Denver*? In February? It didn’t seem logical to me, and although something was going on in my brain, I was still *me*, and therefore logical.

Watching my growing confusion and panic, and panicking himself, Jon called our friend Eva. Let me say before I go on that you should write yourself a note to make sure you

have in your friend circle, if you don't have one in your family, a doctor like Eva. Eva lives in our building, but she was out of town skiing. She picked up the phone immediately.

Eva asked Jon questions. She heard me in the background asking, What's going on? After a few minutes she told him this: I think she's fine. I think she has something called Transient Global Amnesia. Just in case it is a stroke, give her four baby aspirins to chew, but I don't think it is. You have to get her to the ER immediately, but I don't think it's a stroke, Eva repeated. I think, she assured him again (as if this would be reassuring) it's Transient Global Amnesia.

Yes, I got the Printz call and I got amnesia.

I didn't know *Vincent and Theo* had been published already, didn't know anything that had happened with the book. At the ER, when we first arrived, the attending physician asked me what year it was and I had no idea. When he asked me who the President of the United States was—ditto. Oh please don't tell her, Jon thought, don't—

But he did, and apparently I looked at him and Jon with horror and said, WELL HOW DID **THAT** HAPPEN?

Ignorant bliss, being conscious and not knowing who the President was. If only I could have appreciated it.

I don't have time to tell you everything about that night, but I will tell you a few things. Apparently I could retain information for only 90 seconds. This is what happens with TGA. You lose about 18 months of memories, temporarily, transiently, and you are on a minute and a half loop. That meant that every 90 seconds I asked what was going on, and Jon had to tell me all over again.

I was so agitated, they wanted to sedate me. But Jon said, please don't, I still have her, she's still *her*. I don't want to lose *her*.

Thank you, Jonathan, for loving me as I am, always, even when I am on a 90-second loop, or, stressing over a book for five years. Vincent had Theo--and--gosh, honey, I hope I'm not as high maintenance as Vincent was.

[Pregnant pause.]

Our kids got on the subway from Brooklyn as soon as they heard, our two sons and our daughter-in-law, and they were attentive and amazing that night; they are a joy and support to me every day. Thank you, Aaron, Benjamin and Sarah. For everything.

At one point early that night--maybe around 9:30, Jon called my dear friend Rebecca. She was at a museum opening, but answered the phone when she saw it was him. For some reason I do seem to remember bits of that conversation. I

told her I loved her, and she told me she loved me. I probably told her more things—I think I said I was worried about not going to Denver—and can I just say now, I'm sorry and thank you to the wonderful school library people at Macmillan!--Lucy and Katie and Melissa, all of you, for being so understanding and devoted, always.

What I remember most about the call with Rebecca was a strong feeling of gratitude. I am so grateful for you, Rebecca, and for Judy, Barb, Laurie, Nancy, Natalie, Daphne, friends who read my drafts and who hold my hand, who keep me sane and grounded, which, as you can probably see, can be a monumental task.

So my family knew I was getting better, at about three or four in the morning in the ER, when instead of just asking, "What's going on?" I would preface it with, "I'm sorry, I know I've asked you this before, don't kill me, but what's going on?"

And I "came to" gradually, so that I wasn't surprised that I was in a hospital, with my family there. This is what I remember clearly: I had just carefully formulated a joke in my mind, and told it. But nobody laughed. "Why didn't you laugh," I asked, "that was funny!"

"It was funny the first time you told it, Mom," my sweet older son Aaron said, "but the 400th...? Not really."

As you might guess, I've thought about WHAT ALL THIS MEANS over and over again since it happened. I've wondered if I caused it by caring so much about my book and what other people thought of it. I blamed myself. When Jon read up on what causes TGA (because I was scared to), one of the first things he learned was that it can be caused by strong emotion. I was *ecstatic* when the call came, they say, and I guess that's what got me.

You might not want to hear this, but Transient Global Amnesia can also be caused by very hot water, very cold water, overwork—YES!--and—I'm very sorry to tell you this—orgasms.

So.

When the final test came back, and there was no sign of anything bad, that meant that it really was just TGA, not a stroke, nothing terrible. It was unlikely to happen ever again, but I would never get back the memory of the Printz call, or the hours before and after it. Still shaken, and not truly reassured, I asked the neurologist, what should I *do*? He told me to rest more, take more down time. Don't work so hard. Ha ha. But his biggest piece of advice was: "Try not to get too excited."

Yeah, well, I am who I am, amnesia or not, and I'm going to work hard, not rest enough, and yes, get excited.

(Fortunately Laura has told me she will never submit any of my books for prizes ever again, so we're good.)

When I think about Vincent van Gogh himself and how hard he worked, not knowing if he would ever be any good at his art, or if anyone would ever appreciate it, I am in awe of him all over again. How does one do that? Create art, put your whole heart, soul, mind, energy into it and do it just for the art's sake and not for any recognition? Not hope for any recognition? Is it possible? Vincent wanted Theo to appreciate his art. He worked for Theo's approval. And then, later, much later, once he had hit his stride, he wanted others to appreciate it, too. How could he not?

I've also been thinking about the brain—the healthy brain, the hard-working brain, and the vulnerable brain. A common misconception about Vincent van Gogh is that he was a great painter because he was crazy. In fact, Vincent was a great artist in spite of his mental illness. He knew his brain wasn't always healthy, or predictable, and so he worked in a frenzy when he could because he knew he had a limited amount of time. And he very much wanted to leave the world, as he said, a souvenir.

We all do. We create our books so people will read them. We work as hard as we can and we write the books first for ourselves and then we release them—and hope they

will, in some way, make an impact. Make someone--with any luck, many someones--wake up to the world just a little bit.

And when more than that happens, when a book gets this kind of wonderful recognition, well, maybe it is OK to be ecstatic.

I didn't go to Denver, obviously, and so I would like to publicly thank the YALSA nonfiction committee for that beautiful award, too. Thank you.

And I would like to tell you one more story.

That Monday morning, the day of the award announcements, I was back home in my own bed. My son Benjamin came over and watched with me. When the broadcast ended, I--totally sleep-deprived, exhausted, stunned, and frankly, terrified,--turned to him and said, quietly, "Well, we got two."

And Benjamin, without missing a beat, said: "We got two, and we kept our wits about us."

Thank you!