

**The San Luis Rey (Chapter One from *The One You Get: Portrait of a Family Organism*)**

**By Jason Tougaw**

“FUCK THE BABY,” I shout, with glee from the toddler seat of the shopping cart my mom pushes. It’s my first sentence, announced with delight at San Diego’s most expensive grocery store, Jonathan’s. Nanny is taking my mom shopping, to celebrate our new life without Charlie, my father, who’s probably in prison by now.

“Fuck the baby,” I shout again. My mom and Nanny are quiet, squelching the laughter rumbling under their ribs. They give in a little and let the laughter splutter. Jonathan’s is huge, a chaos of clean light. The aisles are polished so severely that my sentence bounces off the jars and cans that line the shelves.

“Cathy, shut him up.”

“Me? Why me? Just find the Grey Poupon and let’s get out of here.”

“Because you’re his mother, for godssake.” A pair of women in their sixties, with penciled eyebrows, pearls, and pocketbooks round the corner. “Fuck the baby.” My mom reaches a hand over my mouth. The women have stopped rolling their carts to observe. I yelp a muffled four syllables. If you’ve heard me already, they’re unmistakable.

I don’t remember this, but I knew what I was doing, they’ll tell me later. I was conscious of their embarrassment, egged on by their blushing and laughing.

“Let’s get out of here,” Nanny says to my mom, and the laughter bursts again. The women with pocketbooks push their carts, careful to avert their eyes.

“Okay, we just need bread and a can of salmon,” my mom says, rolling the cart at top speed, hand still over my mouth.

“And a bottle of wine,” Nanny says. “I think he’s finished anyway. He wore himself out. Didn’t you, Unigagin?” she says, pointing a finger at me. (Unigagin is her nickname for everybody.) They collect the salmon, seven-grain, and Chianti, and head for checkout.

“You finished, Boog?” my mom asks.

“Fuck the baby.” All eyes are on us—women shopping, checkout clerks, the pharmacist thirty feet away. Nanny and my mom are beyond controlling themselves. The laughter shoves its way through their lungs and ribs, scratching their throats.

“Sssh. Jason, shush,” my mom says.

“For godssake, Jason.”

My mom’s hand is back on my mouth. Nanny has tightened her face and reached into her purse for her wallet. She presses her lips together as she pays, but the cashier’s stare lets her know her laughter is still visible.

The three of us are collaborators in this scene. We’ll pass the blame around later. *I was just a baby. Who’d I learn the words from, anyway? I’ll say. Certainly not me,* Nanny will say, not even convincing herself. *Yeah right,* my mom will chime in. *Who was the one laughing?* The truth is we all want the blame. We love this idea of ourselves, a trio of rabble-rousers enjoying the clean-lit luxury of Jonathan’s while raising our middle fingers to its propriety. If “fuck the baby” really was my first sentence—as my mom and Nanny will insist it was—it’s almost too good to be true. How could I, at eighteen months, have found a sentence wry enough to bundle the terrifying, liberating,

and hilarious chaos of being raised by Southern California hippies during the 1970s, in a family that had just fallen from wealth and celebrity, trying to figure out how to live as the counterculture revolution evaporated like a dream?

When I moved to New York in 1993, I found myself telling people about my California hippie childhood. Geographical distance seemed to loosen my lips. I talked about the near abortion, living on a converted school bus, my heroin-addict father in prison. About growing up hippie and poor in the shadow of celebrity and wealth. About Ralph, my famous jockey Grandpa who squandered his fortune, about Nanny (or Midge), his wife, whose best friend was Betty Grable. About the drugs my elders swallowed and the addicts they became. I listed diagnoses of mental illness and described our endless moving from house to house, my mom's many abusive boyfriends, her many marriages and divorces. "Why aren't you more fucked up?" people kept asking me.

At first, I'd shrug. My family's lore had done its job. While the sensational details are largely true, they've also been refined, through decades of retelling, to provoke questions like this. Of course, what people really meant was, "How did you survive?" and "Why do you seem so different from the people who raised you?" The first question is the one the lore is designed to elicit. Its answer casts us as unlikely heroes, survivors. The second is less self-serving, a version of an undeniable philosophical question that haunts us all: "How did *I* become *me*?"

However you phrase it, the question is hard to answer. You might say it started with a fetus not flushed down a Tijuana river that's really an estuary in North County.

You might say you have to understand California in the seventies, or the tenderness of both my mom and Nanny, or genetics and human physiology. You might have subject me to a battery of brain scans at various stages of childhood to chart the series of adaptations I made to my surroundings: shoot x-ray beams through my head and develop cross-sectional photos of the meat inside; slide me into a noisy fMRI and measure the oxygenation of cerebral blood flow; tape electrodes to my skull to see how it conducts electricity; saw through my skull and insert tiny electrodes that measure localized energy exchanges among particular neurons; inject me with radioactive materials so the PET can measure their emissions as they decay; and poise a halo of helium-soaked coils over my head to measure the faint magnetism of the electricity buzzing around in there. Even if this were possible, the yield of information would likely be modest. You might learn some things, and some of them might be telling. But despite what some of the neuroscientists think, neural networks and selfhood are not the same thing. They are fundamentally related, and their relationship is fascinating. But neurons alone do not explain self, and even if they might, we are not even close to knowing how.

In the meantime, here's my plan. I can tell the story, with the benefit of my unforgiving memory and the brain science that's beginning to offer new ways of understanding the development and experience of self. It begins with the fetus.

The story is family lore.

It's 77 degrees at 4 am in Del Mar in November, even right on the beach. Doug closes and locks the door gently behind them. The air is visible with ocean fog. Cathy focuses for a second on the foam splattering in the darkness as it bounces off the shore,

like staring at it might dissolve the moment. All three shuffle across the sandy driveway to Doug's Chevy station wagon, surfboard still strapped to the roof rack. Cathy protests, but Doug and Midge hold her snug and squeeze her into the back seat. Doug starts the car, turns on the wipers to slice a sheet of dew off the front windows.

Doug manages to make even the engine seem quiet and calm. As they turn out of the driveway, to begin the forty-minute drive to the border, Cathy feels the nauseating pull of morning sickness. It's 1968, and abortions are legal in Mexico.

It's been less than fifteen minutes since Doug nudged her awake. His hands are gentle and solid—as opposed to the tiny manic hands of her father—and so at first they just made sleep more comfortable. “Cathy,” he whispered, pulling strands of iron-straightened Portuguese hair from her face. “Cathy, wake up, honey. Wake up. Get some clothes on. Your mother's waiting.”

He was insistent enough to persuade her, so she threw on a filmy white embroidered blouse and some jeans, size one. Doug led her down two stories of steep and winding stairs. Midge was sitting in a chair in the cavernous terra-cotta tiled, tall-ceilinged foyer at the bottom, clenched from head to toe. Mother and daughter exchanged a glance, and daughter knew. She turned back toward the stairs, but Doug was there, like a gentle roadblock. “Come on, Cathy.”

“No. Let me go.”

“For Godssake, Cathy.” Midge couldn't find much to say.

“Let me go.”

“Just come along, Cathy. I'll explain in the car.” He was firm.

“You don't need to explain,” she said, to show him she knew what was going on.

Doug knows how to get things done. He's a blonde, surfing, Qiana-clad car salesman, 29 to Midge's 46. He calls her "my silver fox." It was Cathy who discovered their affair, when she came home one night and caught them making out in the driveway before the divorce from Ralph, her dad, was even final.

Doug calms Cathy as he drives. Renowned for her histrionics, her nickname has been "Sarah Bernhardt" since childhood. One famous story has her ranting to newscasters about how neighbor Desi Arnaz tried to shoot her with his rifle. This time she has a reason for hysterics.

"Just think about it. Just come to the clinic," Doug repeats, mantra-like. "If you still don't want to do it, we'll turn around and drive home." She can trust him. Midge is another story. Her silence is a sign of duplicity.

"This is the only thing you can do, Cathy. You're not ready to be a mother," Midge finally blurts. Cathy is pissed, but Doug keeps driving. Her brothers were grown before the divorce. They got everything they needed: cars, college tuition they traded for drugs, their father's door-opening notoriety. She got a single parent panicking as her fortune dwindled, and now an abortion. Her body carries a fetus too tiny to show but real enough to retool her physiology and alter her already volatile moods.

The sun has not even begun to rise, but there is a small line of cars at the border. Somebody must be getting searched. "Cathy, don't worry," Midge tries to find something to say.

"Shut up, Mom. Don't worry?"

"Goddamn you listen to me Cathy. You—"

“Sssh. Midge, calm down, Hon. We’re almost there.” He wants to say, *Does the world really need another Neves? One more baby with the blood of the Portuguese Pepper Pot sloshing around in its veins? With a teenage junkie for a father?*

Doug pulls the car up to the booth, quietly and confidently. The border guard, who looks like a San Diegan with his feathered hair and mustache, bends to peer into the car. He looks Cathy up and down with Tijuana suspicion. “What’s the purpose of your visit?” he asks in perfect southern California English.

“Shopping,” Midge says.

“So early?”

“And surfing,” Doug intervenes. “You ever ride a few while the sun rises?” he asks, glancing toward the roof, where his board is strapped.

“Can’t blame you,” he says, nodding. “We got better waves in Mexico. Enjoy.”

They drive another thirty minutes of empty highway, parallel to the shore, before they reach the clinic. Doug and Midge stand on either side of Cathy. The sun, just beginning to rise out of the east, casts a butterscotch glow on the clinic’s entrance, streaming in with them as they enter and disappearing when they click the door closed.

Five-feet tall, ninety pounds, pretty in a dark, Liz Taylor way, Cathy looks much younger than her eighteen years.

A nurse comes at her speaking gentle Spanish, nudges her sympathetically into a room. “Como está?” she asks, handing her a gown. “Que linda,” she says. Cathy could almost be Mexican, with her straightened hair and tan skin. They could pass for mother and daughter

Cathy shakes as the nurse guides her onto an examination table. Her feet are hopping in the restraints, “like Mexican jumping beans,” she’ll recall later. “Cálmate, niña,” the nurse says. “Cálmate.” She must think Cathy is twelve or thirteen. “Cálmate.”

For just a second, the nurse’s brown eyes sink into Cathy’s and swim there. It’s all the encouragement she needs. Cathy rises from the chair. She storms back through the waiting room, collects Doug and Midge with a nod, and pushes her way into the blazing Mexican dawn. “I guess you’re gettin’ another grandchild,” Doug says to Midge. The trio drive back to Del Mar in silence.

“It’s my fault,” my cousin Bryan says. He’s schizophrenic, so nobody pays him much attention, but he keeps saying it. “It’s my fault Jason is the way he is.” I can’t be sure which *way I am* he means, but he’s making me self-conscious about my black cherry hair and matching lipstick. He might mean the way I’m in my own world, or contemptuous of my surroundings, or the way I’ve become a Newro (short for New Romantic, the most fey of new wave styles), but I’m pretty sure he means the way I’m gay.

It’s 1985, my sixteenth birthday party, and for some reason I’m letting it happen at Ralph’s mobile home. *It’s not a trailer*, I think to myself, *or I wouldn’t be in it*. Ralph, divorced from Nanny almost twenty years, during which we hardly heard from him, returned a couple of months ago. This is a story about comings and goings.

“Shut up, Bryan,” my cousin Nichole tries to make a joke out of it. She’s my closest family ally. She’s seven months younger than me, and her style is the lighter side of new wave: hair dyed auburn, bangs teased just a little, rhinestone brooch cinching her



collar. I can tell that she and I are both wondering if Bryan's talking about the time he taught us to play "naked in the bag" when we were kids. But we also both know that his delusions don't require a source that's part of any shared reality.

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Ralph asks. He's 4'11," with tiny feet, a huge ego, and a filthy mouth. He's the living legend responsible for the destruction of the family—Ralph Neves, the reckless and famous jockey who returned from the dead three times, who raised his kids among Hollywood royalty, who finally grew bored and left right around the time Bryan, his first grandchild, was born. The press called him the Portuguese Pepper Pot. Now he and his hair plugs live in a double-wide. He has returned—and this is the all-important detail—without his fortune. There was a time, I've heard all my life, when he and Nanny could have bought nearly all the beachfront property in Del Mar. Nanny pleaded with Ralph, but he said money was for spending. Hence the mobile home. Despite the glorious style of his past, Ralph's current interior is at odds with my personal aesthetic. The decor clashes with my hair, shaved up the back with long bangs I tease.

"Bryan," Nanny says. "Can we just enjoy the party?"

"It's my fault," Bryan repeats.

"What is he talking about, Jason?" my mom asks, sipping red wine, a terrifying bloodshot gleam in her eyes.

"What?" I say. The reply makes no sense, but it's all I can muster.

"Cathy, let's just enjoy the party?" Nanny says. That's enough to set my mom off. Nanny and I are in cahoots. I idolize her and resent my mom. She's sick of it.

"Why don't you tell him?" she asks, one brow raised a little higher than the other.

“Can we just have a nice party, Cathy? For once?” Most of our family parties involve a scene.

“Your Nanny wanted to flush you down the San Luis Rey.” She’s chosen my sixteenth birthday to tell me the story for the first time.

“Bullshit, Cathy,” Nanny replies. But my mom tells the story of the clinic by the river anyway. “Bullshit,” Nanny keeps repeating.

The rest of the evening is a blank. By this time, I’ve developed my technique for dealing with these situations. I become all brain, retreating to the land of mind, where the rest of my body, which has to live in the world and deal with its challenges, seems like an unpleasant prosthesis. The next day, and for the rest of our lives, Nichole and I will talk about what a bizarre and fucked up night this was. We’ll laugh about it. We’ll wonder how Bryan could remain such an effective instigator even though he lives in his own psychotic world. But for the moment, all we do is exchange glances to let each other know we’ll debrief later. In the meantime, I focus on imagining what it would feel like to whirl down the San Luis Rey, tiny and translucent, bobbing with the current, banged up and bleeding from the rocks. I can see all my tiny organs, including the blobs of cells accumulating to form my brain and spinal cord. I wouldn’t have felt anything. I’d have been recycled into universal matter and redistributed.

The San Luis Rey will become family lore—like Ralph’s near-death encounters, Nanny’s endless stream of pink T-Birds (a new one every year) in the fifties and early sixties, or the converted school bus we lived on when my mom was married to Stanley. After this night, the story will be refined and expanded at virtually all our gatherings. It will spawn bloodshot arguments.

At the time, I drew the wishful and melodramatic conclusion that I was born at the wrong place and time, to the wrong family. *My mom had no business giving birth*, I decided there in Ralph's trailer, *and I had no business being born*. In fact, my birth was really no more or less an accident than anybody else's. In fact, the story turns an accident into a choice—my mom's choice. But it took me a long time to figure that out.

I do wonder whether those cells would have had the capacity in their lingering moments of life to send out a panic signal, like the ones I have spent years trying to understand, control, and dampen. Since childhood, an excruciatingly slow terror has been a trademark experience for me—measured in recurring nightmares, in the countless hours I spent as a kid examining my skin for signs of leprosy or in my twenties envisioning my blood, which I was sure was full of HIV. I try to trace the panic back to my fetus, when my cells might have mustered a last-minute attempt to communicate with a self that had not yet developed.

But if brain science has taught me anything, it's that no experience or personality trait can be traced to a single point of origin. Becoming somebody is a tangled process whose strands are well beyond the comprehension of a human mind. There's no end point, no finished self either. Even death is a moment in this process. But I imagine the waste of my underdeveloped brain matter anyway. I picture it disintegrating from exposure or devoured by river snakes, a lifetime of thoughts and feelings gobbled up and digested before they have a chance to torment or delight. I look for meaning in the fantasy. Looking without comprehending seems to be what we humans are built to do. That's why life can be so scary.

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I was never sure if the San Luis Rey was real, so I did a little research. The only body of water I could find with that name was in North County, San Diego, and was an estuary used for drainage. The drainage part sounded right, but how did The San Luis Rey migrate in my family’s imagination from North County to Tijuana?

The question is hard to answer, as hard as *Who am I? Who are these people who raised me? Why am I so unlike them? Why am I so like them?*

I spent a lot of my childhood asking myself these questions, and I spend a lot of my adulthood trying to read and write, think, and talk my way to some answers. I became fascinated with the fact of consciousness early on. It’s simple enough. We’re aware of our own existence and at least a good chunk of our experience and our personal history. But where does this awareness come from? How does it work? I’m fascinated enough

with these questions to have sought a way to earn my living from them. I write about them. I teach college courses about them, leading students through fourteen weeks of literary, philosophical, and scientific attempts to find answers. None of the attempts settle the matter.

I love this effort to look for certainties that doesn't exist, and I think this must be related to the tall tales I was raised on. When I was younger, I thought science was the enemy. As a kid, I'd have told you I'd become a writer, a pop star, or a music journalist, which seemed like an acceptable compromise between the first two. You couldn't have convinced me I'd be a writer who thinks about science. I had little interest. I didn't like my science teachers, with their formaldehyde frogs and multiple choice exams. I was a child of psychedelic fog, not scientific facts.

But I was a kid who got fixated on things, and I always wanted to know how we come to be who we are, enough to try to understand something about neuroscience and physiology, because right now they seem to be getting us closest to some answers. Still, the questions remain murky, the answers hard to come by, and I'm at least as fascinated with what the neuroscientists don't know as what they've learned. The murk seems fitting, given the family lore, and so I'm enlisting the help of the neuroscientists to tell this story.

I've learned from these neuroscientists that a fetus starts building its brain by the fourteenth day after egg and sperm commingle to make zygote. Fetal cells number in the mere hundreds, but a clique of them has already formed an embryonic nervous system, folding in upon itself and excluding cells concerned with vulgarities like fingernails or

intestinal lining. The ball stretches until it becomes a tube, eventually developing into a spinal cord and brain.

The cells in the clique had to differentiate so my brain could develop. Which would have made for a lot of strife—cells abandoning cells and signing treaties with others who would in turn do their share of abandoning and signing. Neurons are social creatures, according to the neuroscientists. Those who didn't form networks withered and died. Otherwise their extraneous presence would have cluttered my brain's delicate architecture, like empty boxes piled up in hallways.

The neuroscientists used to think that cells in the fetal brain were coded for the roles they would play after birth. Now they believe the process is altogether bloodier. The function of a cell is determined by a game of musical chairs in which the losers are slaughtered. If a cell lands itself in a spot where it's needed, to help the organism hear or taste or feel pain, for example, then it assumes that role. If it migrates to a spot where other cells ignore it because they're busy doing their jobs, it is sacrificed. It ends up in the body's San Luis Rey.

There's a good reason for this. Too many cells, making too many connections, create brain chaos. Imagine yourself as an infant encountering the flood of information you face as you emerge from the womb, fight your way down the birth canal, and tear open your mother's vagina to greet the light of day. But you don't know the light of day from the cold harsh fluorescence of an operating room. You don't know a nipple from a scalpel. Your brain contains too many cells making too many synapses, and it is only upon the elimination of nonfunctional synapses that the world comes into focus. *Massive*

*cell death* is a prerequisite for development. The surviving networks shape the contours of a self.

Sometimes, when she was mad, my mom used to tell me she didn't have to keep me. She could have let me get flushed down the San Luis Rey. Was there a reason for me to survive, I wondered. Now I wonder if there's analogy between my non-flushed fetus and the non-flushed cells. A cell survives because it's in the right place at the right time. If it hadn't survived, the difference would be far too slight for anybody to notice. But that wouldn't matter, because the cell that did survive is the one molding the reality of the brain in question.