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What interested you about the prospect of somebody with the perfect life committing suicide? Was it just the irony of it?

G.K. Chesterton said -- I came across this after the book was published, and I thought, hmm, that is very close to what I was trying to do -- the quote is something like, "Suicide is a much greater crime than murder." Murder kills only one or two or a handful of people, but the suicide kills everyone on the planet. The suicide rejects the planet. Usually you look into a suicide and you think, well, his marriage wasn't ... there was this, there was that. But what if it really was a rejection of the planet? That's what I was interested in, as a judgment on the planet.

Jennifer's profession encourages a cosmic perspective.

Making her an astrophysicist gives the suggestion -- which Mike Hoolihan downplays or even rejects -- that if you spend a lot of your time thinking about other worlds, or even other universes, then you are going to look at this world with a more critical eye. There is nothing inevitable about this landscape. There is nothing inevitable about the fact that we spend all our time grubbing along in our little rat races, that we spend so little time thinking about ourselves in a grander context. As good as it gets down here, it may look not very good to some people.

Do you identify with Jennifer's perspective at times?

I think all artists look at the world with that kind of critical notion, that it didn't have to be like this: Why all these cars, why cities? Why, why? They're always questioning. As far as rejection of the planet in a cosmic sense, I feel the other way. I feel that the discoveries of this century about our place in the universe are beginning to sink in. Even Einstein, in 1920, thought that the Milky Way was the extent of the

ARCHIVE

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By Anna Quindlen

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universe, that that was it. We didn't know that the universe was expanding in 1920. We now know that it is, that it is unimaginably vast, and that we are just a tiny speck in a rather unfashionable part of the Milky Way. It is becoming clearer that there is an infinity of parallel universes, too.

I think it's a very inspiring notion that we are so tiny and fragile and isolated. It does scare me a little bit, but it excites me to know the truth. But there will be people who will find it terrifying. There will be casualties. I also think that there will be gratuitous suicides simply because everything that can happen will happen. I think there are impulse suicides. People just do it out of the blue. Suicide is a very weird subject.

You've known suicides?

I have known three or four. And one in particular has been in the back of my mind. The mother of my grown-up daughter, who I have only gotten to know in the last two or three years, killed herself. I think that has been kicking around in my unconscious for a long time. But once you look into it, you see that it is the strangest subject. Something unholy about it --

It's a big override of the way living beings are set up, which is to survive. It's the ultimate perversion.

It is, it is. Of course, nowadays, I don't think any of us would judge a suicide. As Mike mentions in the book, you used to be punished by the state, your family would be punished financially, you might be buried on unsanctified ground or even under a pile of stones, with a stake through your heart. As Joyce says in "Ulysses," "As if their hearts aren't broken enough, already." His is the modern view of suicide: Oh, you poor thing, how horrible.

You would assume a suicide was in extreme pain.

Absolutely. Self-lacerating pain. You could even say that in some cases, it is involuntary, suicide, just a very, very powerful impulse, like when you're on a cliff and there is that 1 percent of you that wants to jump. It's not that you aren't happy, but there's this icky thing that you can do.

It's like the Freudian idea of Thanatos, the death wish. You can feel it sometimes when you're driving and thinking, if I just veered off --

-- Into this truck. It's a disgusting thought. It makes you feel --

But exciting.

Exciting and nauseating.

You talked a lot, when your last book came out, about your midlife crisis. Is there a connection between that and being interested in suicide?

The midlife crisis, as I defined it, was the sudden accession to death, where you suddenly think, "Jesus, it wasn't just a rumor. This is really going to happen. I am not the exception I thought I was." Both are very death-centered themes. When you're 16, it's your answer to anything -- well, I'll just commit suicide. No trouble at all. I remember Kurt Vonnegut saying, hauntingly, that if you are a child of a suicide, then it becomes your first recourse when anything goes wrong. Roof is leaking, I'll kill myself. The pump doesn't work, I'll blow my brains out. We all do that when we're young.

Then I remember having a talk about it with someone who was very depressed, and I said, "Do you ever think about suicide?" And she very seriously said, "I have but I know that I haven't got the courage to do it." And I suddenly thought, yes, it would take a lot of courage. Not just to have the 1 percent, the 2 percent, but to have the 100 percent to go over the cliff, or to steer the car into that wall. Courage or extreme desperation. But still courage to do yourself that harm, to do your body that harm. It is out of the question for me.

Did you decide from the beginning to make your investigator a middle-aged woman?

It wasn't always going to be a woman. The original conception had a domestic setting, and it was going to be a man. But then, as soon as the victim was established in my mind, I thought, no, no, you'd have to have a woman because the man wouldn't see certain things.

What seem like big decisions are taken instinctively and instantaneously by the writer. Lucky, you don't know where these things come from. The unconscious decides a lot of this stuff. You never write something because you are interested in the subject. You write something because it is given to you to write. You

think, this is something I can write. That is all it comes down to in the end. It is not an attraction to the subject, it is just, here is something for you to write.

And the memoir, is that something you've been thinking about for a while?

For quite a while. I started it, and I find it's not anything like as exciting as writing a novel. You are limited.

Do you find, as you're writing, that you feel differently about certain events? Do you surprise yourself?

Yeah, you don't quite know how you feel about anything until you start writing about it. Even writing an essay or a book review. How do I know what I'm going to say until I see what I write? When you're reading a book and making notes to review it, you're on a kind of conversational level. But once you start to write about it, you move up a hair. Then you do find out what you deeply think about it, rather than what your random thoughts are. I write about these things, and I think, Where did that come from? Or, I didn't know I felt that way about it. You're going deeper, it is another level.

Is there anything in particular that surprised you?

I haven't really written about me much yet. I've written some about my father, and mostly what I have written is about my cousin. This is the other great theme: My cousin disappeared in 1973. She was 21. We didn't know what had happened to her. Then in 1995, 22 years later, she was dug up in a garden of the mass murderer Fred West.

He was described in Andrew Hagan's very good book from last year, "The Missing," right? One of his victims was your cousin?

My mother's sister's child. I realized that that had been knocking around in my unconscious, and so I was writing about her and Fred West. I also found that I was writing about three occasions in my life where I was molested as a child by strangers. Once by a couple. There was a party going on at the house. I was 9 years old in my bedroom. He said he was a doctor. She just stood at the door. That sort of thing gets you going off into strange areas.

Did all of these events happen in your own home?

No, the other two, one on the street, one on the beach.

That is terrible.

Yeah. Well, you feel so trusting.

After being molested in your own bedroom, where would be safe?

Yeah. [Long pause] So I don't know what it's going to be like writing about myself. That might feel more like writing fiction than writing about historical persons, like my cousin, my father. Writing a novel is close to God-like power because you control everything, and you're completely out there on your own. With a memoir, or a piece of journalism, there are constraints and there are other people, other people's feelings, and the narrative of what actually happened. You are constrained by the goddamn truth. So, it is less heady, but I can write 1,200 words in a couple of hours. I couldn't write fiction at that rate. It does feel like a chore, although once you get going, you find doing the chore is great, and you get the satisfaction of a chore well done. But not nearly as exciting.

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