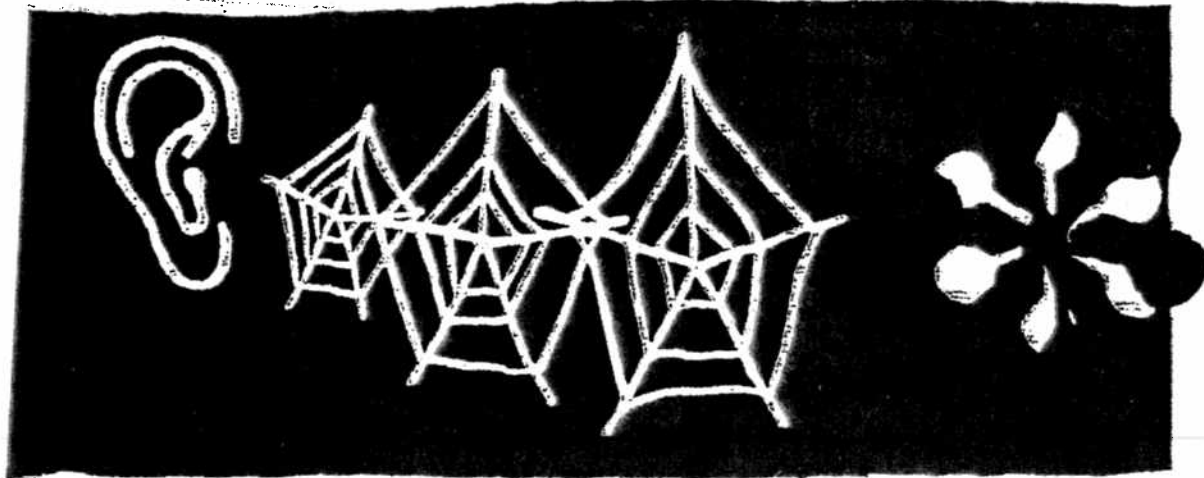


# A PRIMER FOR THE PUNCTUATION OF HEART DISEASE

BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER



□ The “silence mark” signifies an absence of language, and there is at least one on every page of the story of my family life. Most often used in the conversations I have with my grandmother about her life in Europe during the war, and in conversations with my father about our family’s history of heart disease—we have forty-one heart attacks between us, and counting—the silence mark is a staple of familial punctuation. Note the use of silence in the following brief exchange, when my father called me at college, the morning of his most recent angioplasty:

“Listen,” he said, and then surrendered to a long pause, as if the pause were what I was supposed to listen to. “I’m sure everything’s gonna be fine, but I just wanted to let you know—”

“I already know,” I said.

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

□

■ The “willed silence mark” signifies an intentional silence, the conversational equivalent of building a wall over which you can’t climb, through which you can’t see, against which you break the bones of your hands and wrists. I often

inflict willed silences upon my mother when she asks about my relationships with girls. Perhaps this is because I never have *relationships* with girls—only *relations*. It depresses me to think that I’ve never had sex with anyone who really loved me. Sometimes I wonder if having sex with a girl who doesn’t love me is like felling a tree, alone, in a forest: no one hears about it; it didn’t happen.

?? The “insistent question mark” denotes one family member’s refusal to yield to a willed silence, as in this conversation with my mother:

“Are you dating at all?”

□

“But you’re seeing people, I’m sure. Right?”

□

“I don’t get it. Are you ashamed of the girl? Are you ashamed of me?”

■

??

• As it visually suggests, the “unexclamation point” is the opposite of an exclamation point; it indicates a whisper.

The best example of this usage occurred when I was a boy. My grandmother was driving me to a piano lesson, and the Volvo’s wipers only moved the rain around. She turned down the volume of

the second side of the seventh tape of an audio version of “Shoah,” put her hand on my cheek, and said, “I hope that you never love anyone as much as I love you!”

Why was she whispering? We were the only ones who could hear.

•• Theoretically, the “extraunxclamation points” would be used to denote twice an unxclamation point, but in practice any whisper that quiet would not be heard. I take comfort in believing that at least some of the silences in my life were really extraunxclamations.

!! The “extraexclamation points” are simply twice an exclamation point. I’ve never had a heated argument with any member of my family. We’ve never yelled at each other, or disagreed with any passion. In fact, I can’t even remember a difference of opinion. There are those who would say that this is unhealthy. But, since it is the case, there exists only one instance of extraexclamation points in our family history, and they were uttered by a stranger who was vying with my father for a parking space in front of the National Zoo.

“Give it up, fucker!!” he hollered at my father, in front of my mother, my brothers, and me.

FLIP PAGOWSKI

© 2002 (5)

"Well, I'm sorry," my father said, pushing the bridge of his glasses up his nose, "but I think it's rather obvious that we arrived at this space first. You see, we were approaching from—"

"Give . . . it . . . up . . . fucker!!"

"Well, it's just that I think I'm in the right on this particu—"

"GIVE IT UP, FUCKER!!"

"Give it up, Dadi" I said, suffering a minor coronary event as my fingers clenched his seat's headrest.

"Je-sus!" the man yelled, pounding his fist against the outside of his car door. "Giveitupfucker!!"

Ultimately, my father gave it up, and we found a spot several blocks away. Before we got out, he pushed in the cigarette lighter, and we waited, in silence, as it got hot. When it popped out, he pushed it back in. "It's never, ever worth it," he said, turning back to us, his hand against his heart.

~ Placed at the end of a sentence, the "pedal point" signifies a thought that dissolves into a suggestive silence. The pedal point is distinguished from the ellipsis and the dash in that the thought it follows is neither incomplete nor interrupted but an outstretched hand. My younger brother uses these a lot with me, probably because he, of all the members of my family, is the one most capable of telling me what he needs to tell me without having to say it. Or, rather, he's the one whose words I'm most convinced I don't need to hear. Very often he will say, "Jonathan~" and I will say, "I know."

A few weeks ago, he was having problems with his heart. A visit to his university's health center to check out some chest pains became a trip to the emergency room became a week in the intensive-care unit. As it turns out, he's been having one long heart attack for the last six years. "It's nowhere near as bad as it sounds," the doctor told my parents, "but it's definitely something we want to take care of."

I called my brother that night and told him that he shouldn't worry. He said, "I know. But that doesn't mean there's nothing to worry about~"

"I know~" I said.

"I know~" he said.

"I~"

"I~"

"□"

Does my little brother have relationships with girls? I don't know.

↓ Another commonly employed familial punctuation mark, the "low point," is used either in place—or for accentuation at the end—of such phrases as "This is terrible," "This is irremediable," "It couldn't possibly be worse."

"It's good to have somebody, Jonathan. It's necessary."

"□"  
"It pains me to think of you alone."

"■↓"  
"??↓"

Interestingly, low points always come in pairs in my family. That is, the acknowledgment of whatever is terrible and irremediable becomes itself something terrible and irremediable—and often worse than the original referent. For example, my sadness makes my mother sadder than the cause of my sadness does. Of course, her sadness then makes me sad. Thus is created a "low-point chain": ↓↓↓↓ . . . ∞.

❄ The "snowflake" is used at the end of a unique familial phrase—that is, any sequence of words that has never, in the history of our family life, been assembled as such. For example, "I didn't die in the Holocaust, but all of my siblings did, so where does that leave me?\*" Or, "My heart is no good, and I'm afraid of dying, and I'm also afraid of saying I love you.\*"

☺ The "corroboration mark" is more or less what it looks like. But it would be a mistake to think that it simply stands in place of "I agree," or even "Yes." Witness the subtle usage in this dialogue between my mother and my father:

"Could you add orange juice to the grocery list, but remember to get the kind with reduced acid. Also some cottage cheese. And that bacon-substitute stuff. And a few Yahrzeit candles."

"☺"  
"The car needs gas. I need tampons."

"☺"  
"Is Jonathan dating anyone? I'm not prying, but I'm very interested."

"☺"

My father has suffered twenty-two heart attacks—more than the rest of us combined. Once, in a moment of frank-

ness after his nineteenth, he told me that his marriage to my mother had been successful because he had become a yes-man early on.

"We've only had one fight," he said. "It was in our first week of marriage. I realized that it's never, ever worth it."

My father and I were pulling weeds one afternoon a few weeks ago. He was disobeying his cardiologist's order not to pull weeds. The problem, the doctor says, is not the physical exertion but the emotional stress that weeding inflicts on my father. He has dreams of weeds sprouting from his body, of having to pull them, at the roots, from his chest. He has also been told not to watch Orioles games and not to think about the current Administration.

As we weeded, my father made a joke about how my older brother, who, barring a fatal heart attack, was to get married in a few weeks, had already become a yes-man. Hearing this felt like having an elephant sit on my chest—my brother, whom I loved more than I loved myself, was surrendering.

"Your grandfather was a yes-man," my father added, on his knees, his fingers pushing into the earth, "and your children will be yes-men."

I've been thinking about that conversation ever since, and I've come to understand—with a straining heart—that I, too, am becoming a yes-man, and that, like my father's and my brother's, my surrender has little to do with the people I say yes to, or with the existence of questions at all. It has to do with a fear of dying, with rehearsal and preparation.

✂ The "severed web" is a Barely Tolerable Substitute, whose meaning approximates "I love you," and which can be used in place of "I love you." Other Barely Tolerable Substitutes include, but are not limited to:

- |←, which approximates "I love you."
- ☐, which approximates "I love you."
- , which approximates "I love you."
- ✕, which approximates "I love you."

I don't know how many Barely Tolerable Substitutes there are, but often it feels as if they were everywhere, as if everything that is spoken and done—every

Handwritten scribble and circled number 6.

FLIP PACOWSKI

Rediscover...



the child within

THE PERFECT GIFT  
for anyone who was  
ever a child—  
or a parent

With a special illustrated  
introduction by Roz Chast

AVAILABLE WHERE  
BOOKS ARE SOLD

Blooming Press

©2001 Blooming L.P. All rights reserved. BLOOMING and BLOOMING PRESS are trademarks and service marks of Blooming L.P.

Why pay full price for a hotel room?

Save up to 70% on the places you want to stay!

New York from <b>\$59.95</b>	Orlando from <b>\$39.95</b>	San Francisco from <b>\$49.95</b>	Las Vegas from <b>\$29.95</b>
------------------------------------	-----------------------------------	---	-------------------------------------

**hotels.com**

THE BEST PRICES AT THE BEST PLACES. GUARANTEED.

Save on thousands of hotels  
in hundreds of cities worldwide.

**800-360-7024**

hotels.com lowest price guarantee does not apply to all dates  
or properties. See www.hotels.com for further details.

SMALL SPACE = BIG BUSINESS

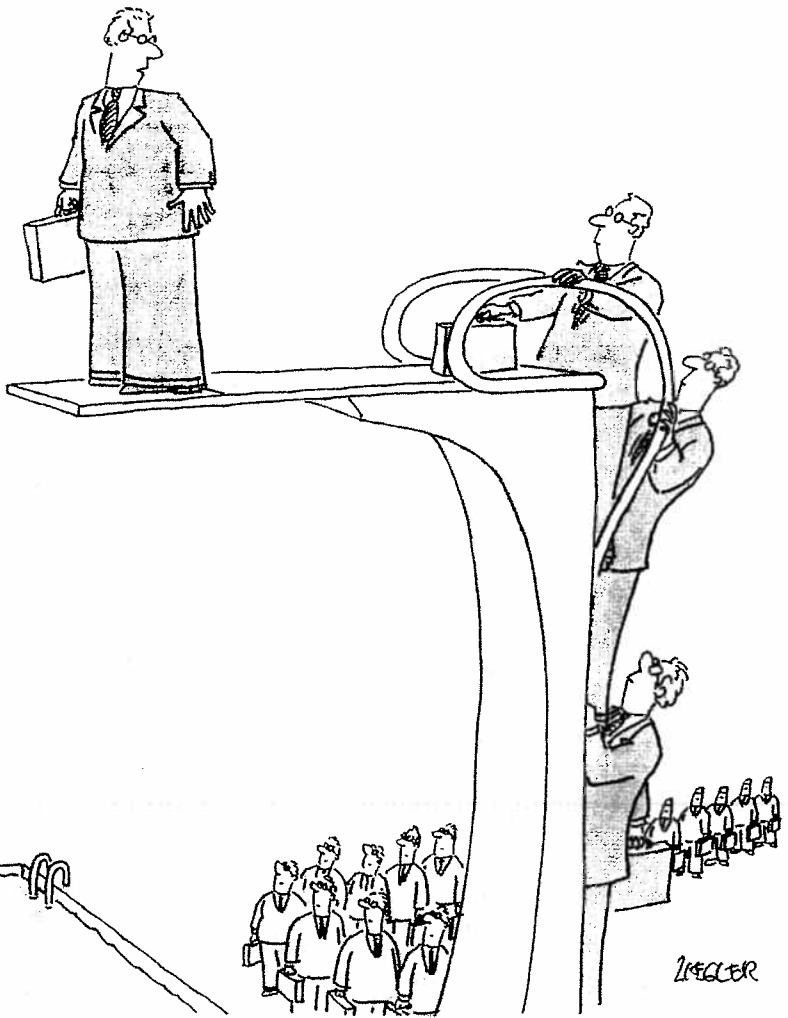
Write your own success story by advertising in  
THE NEW YORKER.

For more information on SMALL SPACE ADS,  
please call toll-free 877.843.6967.

**(877.THE.NYORKER)**

**PRESENTATIONS**  
USING NEW YORKER  
CARTOONS

**cartoonbank.com**  
OR CALL 1800-897-100N



*"The bottom line here, gentlemen, is that, no matter  
what we do, we're going to end up getting wet."*

"Yup," "O.K.," and "I already know,"  
every weed pulled from the lawn, every  
sexual act—were just Barely Tolerable.

- Unlike the colon, which is used to mark a major division in a sentence, and to indicate that what follows is an elaboration, summation, implication, etc., of what precedes, the "reversible colon" is used when what appears on either side elaborates, summates, implicates, etc., what's on the other side. In other words, the two halves of the sentence explain each other, as in the cases of "Mother::Me," and "Father::Death." Here are some examples of reversible sentences:

My eyes water when I speak about my family::I don't like to speak about my family.  
I've never felt loved by anyone outside

of my family::my persistent depression.  
1938 to 1945::□.

Sex::yes.

My grandmother's sadness::my mother's  
sadness::my sadness::the sadness that will  
come after me.

To be Jewish::to be Jewish.

Heart disease::yes.

← Familial communication always has to do with failures to communicate. It is common that in the course of a conversation one of the participants will not hear something that the other has said. It is also quite common that one of the participants will not understand what the other has said. Somewhat less common is one participant's saying something whose words the other understands completely but whose meaning is not understood at all. This can happen

