



blame: a novel

Tony Holtzman

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A bright young star on the medical school faculty, Jason Pearce worries that he'll lose NIH funding as his basic research falters. He signs a contract with a venture capital company that enables him to embark on a study of mice whose memory fails as they age. He discovers that their forgetfulness is due to a defective memory gene; that injecting young mice with the normal memory gene can prevent the loss; and that the same type of gene defect increases the risk of Alzheimer's Disease in humans. With approval of his medical school's ethics review board, he launches a randomized clinical trial to see if injection of a normal human memory gene can prevent Alzheimer's Disease. One of the subjects in the trial, Betsy Matthews, a middle-aged African-American, develops leukemia triggered by the injected memory gene. Her minister confronts Jason's university with its failure to recruit a fair number of African-American medical students and faculty. A young investigative reporter asks a question that others had failed to ask. The answer shatters Jason and his family, his university, and the venture capital company. Failing to accept that he has done anything wrong, Jason flees to his partially built country house, constructed with money and loans from the venture capital company, leaving his wife—an attorney in the medical school—and his two young children. Drinking heavily, he decays morally over the Thanksgiving holiday in 2004. Without telling anyone he leaves the incomplete house and starts on an odyssey that takes him halfway across America. Only after he gets into a fight with a racist in a Kansas bus terminal does he confront the reality that his error had killed Betsy Matthews.

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