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Thor Reabe Nystrom  
*University of Iowa*

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LOCKED AND LOADED

by

Thor Reabe Nystrom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English (Nonfiction Writing)  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Jeffrey Porter

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Masters thesis of

Thor Reabe Nystrom

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in English (Nonfiction Writing) at the May 2012 graduation.

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To Mom: You were the Miracle

The mind is its own place and in itself can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven.

John Milton  
Paradise Lost

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## PREFACE — AUTHOR’S NOTE

Medical documents, police records, personal diaries, interviews with family members, friends, acquaintances and professionals, and the author’s memories were used to recreate this narrative.

In some instances, names have been changed. Because of space considerations, the author condensed portions of a few official documents. The wording of those documents was not altered in any way.

## 1. HANGOVER

Topeka, KS.

Friday October 10, 2003.

7:00 A.M.

Seven months before the day I should have died, a gentle shake of my shoulder woke me. My face was puffy, right eye nearly swollen shut. An inch behind my left eyebrow, a pulsing throb drove against my skull, as if it wanted to escape. My teeth felt grimy. I imagined them stained brown. My mouth tasted of smoke and blood. I ran a dry tongue over my lower lip—split clean. I peeled gunk from my eyelashes, shielded early-morning sunshine with the other hand. My sweatshirt was crusted black with dried blood and dirt. Strings of saliva settled on the mess.

The police officer had been with me for hours by then, hadn't had the benefit of sleeping. I wanted to apologize, tell him I wish I could take it back. Tell him who I was, humanize myself in some way. I was a small-town Minnesota boy, not a criminal. That's where I would start. I grew up near Canada in a region best known for its comically thick accents. Linda Eder was the only quasi-celebrity our town ever produced. She'd been on Letterman, Regis and Kathie Lee and Rosie O'Donnell's program. My mom had Linda's autographed album above her desk. As soon as I began grade school, Mom wanted to instill in me that I didn't have to settle for working the summer tourism season or become a fishing guide. Hell, she wanted to instill in me that I didn't have to settle for becoming a doctor or a lawyer. *You can be whatever you want, Thor; a painter, a pilot, a teacher, whatever. Linda graduated from Brainerd High School and look at her now.* Mom knew

my finger paintings were terrible, I think, but she tacked them to her office walls anyway. Eder performed on Broadway for a bit. Ran away to the bright lights as soon as she could.

You remember the movie *Fargo*, officer? That is Brainerd's lexicological marker, the way I can guarantee you that I'll always be able to start a conversation with anyone from Mississippi to California. Finishing interactions is a bigger concern of mine, but that's not my point. My point is that the Coen brothers set the film in my hometown, though it wasn't filmed there. Francis McDormand played a seven-month-pregnant Brainerd sheriff. It's funny, officer—my Nana, Lois, hated the way our accents were depicted. Never had the heart to tell Nana that her accent is thicker than the movie's characters.

The officer reached under my armpit as I tentatively put my left foot onto the pavement. I nearly fell twice as we stumbled toward a sprawling complex of low-slung brick buildings connected at right angles. Apologized both times—*Sar-ree sir*. He eventually ducked his head under my arm and clutched my waist.

Brainerd is a vacation town the wealthy flood in the summer, officer, northbound highways congested with SUVs and Hummers toting shiny boats fresh from the dealer. There are almost 500 lakes within 25 miles of my city. You also should know that Baby Face Nelson and his crew held up the First National Bank of Brainerd in 1933. I used to remind myself of those facts in high school when I felt bitter towards my parents for settling there: *Fargo*, lakes, and Baby Face. Guess my uncle from New York planted an insecurity in me when I was eight, explaining that Minnesota was “flyover country” and complaining about the “feed corn” grandma served at dinner.

In the winter, hundreds of million-dollar “cabins” sit vacant on frozen Brainerd lakefront, opulence the wealthy forget when they return to the Cities. The mill workers that live in the northeast part of town don’t care much for that, officer, and it doesn’t do any good when you try to explain that the loaded metro businessmen are paying taxes and utilities year-round and only bother us for three months. Because I’m a teenager, the mill workers figure I don’t know what I’m talking about. A collective camaraderie settles over Brainerd townspeople in January, when they’ve battled the cold for two months and the temperature plunges further below 0-degrees, as if Mother Nature herself is taunting us. Brainerd is always friendlier in January, when people hustle inside gas stations after a fill and lament the weather and another failed Golden Gopher football season so snow will melt off their parkas before they venture into the elements again. I miss all of it, I wanted to say.

The officer dragged me to a chair in the waiting room, lowered me down. The chair’s fabric itched and its legs seemed to teeter. I studied the blurry walls and wobbling bookcase for a second before I dozed off. The officer woke me and leaned down, our cheeks touching as he whispered. I couldn’t understand him.

“You are going to be checked in now,” he said, stepping back. “Feel better.”

He nodded at me. I almost offered him my hand, but that didn’t seem appropriate. Neither did an apology. Before I could convey gratitude, or remorse, he was out the sliding door, back into the sunshine.

A receptionist led me through a labyrinth of hallways, past a nurse pushing a slack-jawed patient in a wheelchair. We reached a set of metal doors. She pulled at a plastic card connected to a coil at her waist, extended it to a rectangular box on the wall.

A red light turned green, a beep sounded, a deadbolt slid. Ten seconds later, the deadbolt realigned and I realized I no longer had permission to leave. I thought about that scene in *The Shawshank Redemption* when the lights are turned off and the veteran prisoners bet on which fish will break down first. I'd seen that movie a handful of times and always thought that part was funny.

My eyes darted from white wall to white wall, calculating the dimensions of the small room. Three couches surrounded a small TV. A spectacularly obese man sat on a couch facing me. He wore a week's worth of facial hair, his massive stomach spilling over his lap and onto the couch. *Your pannus is showing, sir*, I thought, remembering my favorite medical jargon joke. He sat next to a woman with greasy black hair and a creased face that folded into a permanent pucker at the mouth. She slumped back as if shot dead, an effect heightened by her stationary eyes. An older woman nearest the television looked like a heavier, rougher version of the female bartender from *Cheers*. She held herself perfectly still, remote control in her lap. I just need to lie down, I decided, sleep off the dizziness.

A pale, emaciated man waddled slowly by, shoulders hunched near his ears and elbows pointed out as though he expected a rebound to fall from the sky at any moment and he wanted advantageous position on it. The strings behind his blue gown were tied loosely and his pink, dimpled ass sagged out for all to see. Transfixed, I stared at the ass as it went along with its business, dutifully following the waddler, who gave the impression he was trying to conserve heat around his head.

"Follow me, please," the nurse said. "This will be your room. You are fortunate. We aren't full, so we are able to offer you your own room, at least for today."

The nurse handed me a bundle.

“Please put these on,” she said. “I’ll wait outside while you get changed.”

“Why do I have a room?”

“You cannot be discharged until you meet with a psychiatrist,” she said. “Dr. Wilson is off today. Our psychiatrists generally don’t come in on Saturdays. But there will be one in on Sunday. You are scheduled to meet with him then.”

“You must be joking,” I said. “I’m not staying here all weekend.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have a choice,” she said. “Your circumstances require a meeting with a psychiatrist before you can be legally discharged.”

“What circumstances?”

“Please put these on and open the door when you are done,” she said.

“I’ll just wear what I’m wearing,” I said.

“What is your name?” she said.

“My name is Thor.”

“Thor, you are on the suicide-watch unit,” she said. “That means I have to take your clothes.”

“How could I possibly commit suicide with my clothing?”

“Please put these on and open the door when you are done,” she repeated.

An acrid odor, sour and molding, like a sticky barroom floor, filled my nose as I peeled off my sweatshirt. I slipped on a body-length aqua blue scrub, which was more or less a paper-thin Snuggie. I fumbled with the strings, but found that completing a knot backwards was beyond my dexterity level.

It took a second to recognize myself in the mirror on the closet door. Face

discolored and scuffed, right eye blues and greens and purples, greasy tufts of hair reaching in all directions. *Nick Nolte's mugshot has nothing on you.* A dark lump bulged from beneath my right eye. I poked it gently, firm and squishy at the same time, like the inside of an orange. The day after you get beaten is worse than the day of. A body won't disclose the full extent of pain until you're out of danger. It waits until you've intellectualized your mistake before announcing bad news.

I had been in one other fight in my life, on the top deck of a cruise ship during spring break of eighth grade. A small boy challenged me to a one-on-one basketball game for twenty bucks. He was quick and skilled, but I backed him down on the block each possession and lofted identical hook shots over his outstretched hands. After the game he refused to pay and called me a fat fucking faggot. I slapped him. We agreed to meet on the top deck of the ship. By the time of the fight, hours later, a large group of kids lined the synthetic basketball court. The small boy began the fight cleverly, dancing and jabbing me in the face, using his speed advantage. I reconsidered my boxing strategy and charged, tackling him onto the hard rubber surface. I heard the air leave him, a whoosh followed by a gasp. He thrashed as I punched, his mouth opening to red-stained teeth. I pinned his biceps beneath my knees, saw the horror of defenselessness in his eyes. I pulled back my right fist and was tackled from behind. I tried to get to my feet, but there was a mob of boys above me, kicking. My opponent stood and the group parted. He took an exaggerated step and punted his sneaker into my gut. When my breath returned, I took an elevator down to my parent's room. I deserved a tongue-lashing. Mom opened the door. Dad brought washcloths and ice from the mini fridge. When I returned to school, I enjoyed a weeklong popularity spike. It wasn't a great lesson, looking back. I altered

details of the story, said I'd *Beat the SHIT* out of the kid, that I had been jumped and pummeled by his friends. *Lucky they didn't toss me overboard*, I said. *Does it hurt?* Amy Benjamin asked. *Not when it happened. Maybe a little bit, now.* My friends shadow boxed as we passed each other in the hallways of Mississippi Horizons Middle School. Each time, I forced myself not to flinch as their fists neared my chin.

“Thor?” the nurse called from the hallway, knocking.

“Yeah,” I said. “OK. Sorry.”

I fumbled with the door handle.

“How do I look?”

She didn't laugh.

“I will require your expertise with the string in the back,” I said, turning my bare ass to her. She tied it and gathered my discards.

“So what do I do all day?” I said.

“It's the weekend, so it's fairly slow,” she said. “You are required to meet with a staff member twice a day—today and tomorrow, those meetings will be with a nurse. We offer group sharing sessions that you will be encouraged to attend. Breakfast is at 8:00, lunch is at 12:00, and dinner is at 5:00. You saw the TV. That is shared amongst the unit. We have a few magazines at the desk. Maybe a book or two. What else? Ummm... there are also board games that can be checked out at the desk. You can play those at the table in the lounge. I'll leave you alone for now.”

I shut off the lights, remembering that Groucho Marx saying—*A hospital bed is a parked taxi with the meter running*. What would he consider a suicide-unit bed? I fell asleep attempting to come up with a saying just as catchy. *A nuthouse bed is a...*



“Hello, Thor,” a woman said, waking me. “I am Nurse Baker. How are you?”

“Outside of the fact that I’m in a mental institution?”

She didn’t respond.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“I’d like you to read this,” she said.

She passed over a packet, the cover of which had a picture of a man’s face covered by a shadow. He was looking down, lonely. The nurse sat in a chair by my bed as I leafed through.

*COPING WITH DEPRESSION is meant for teens suffering with a depressed mood. Some stuff in this guide will make more sense to younger teens and some stuff will make more sense to older ones. But check it out for yourself. At the time, I appreciated the packet’s manic effort to appear colloquial, from its repetition of the word “stuff” to its weird charts and facts nestled between truncated paragraphs. MYTH: It’s normal for teenagers to be moody: Teens DO NOT suffer from “real” depression. FACT: Depression is about more than moodiness. It affects people of any age, including teenagers. I lingered on a page entitled WHAT CAUSES DEPRESSION, which had five balloons—literally floating balloons, with strings—with arrows drawn between them. The balloons were: SITUATION, THOUGHTS, ACTIONS, EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL STATE. Under ACTIONS, for instance, Withdrawal from others, Reduced activity and Poor self-care were listed. THOUGHTS, EMOTIONS and PHYSICAL STATE were precursors to ACTIONS, according to the packet, illustrated by squiggly arrows from the former to the latter, while SITUATION was affected by ACTION alone. I squeezed my sore jaw shut a few pages later, looking at a picture of a dejected man in front of a computer screen*

which read *Piper: Hi Jack, Let's just be friends, OK?*, to stop a giggle that threatened to leap from my throat and attack the nurse. I pretended to scan the remaining pages thoughtfully, though I did so quickly. I set the pamphlet on my bedside desk, as though I wanted to return to its pages later.

“Do you have any questions?” she said.

“Nope.”

“I would like you to come to a group meeting starting in ten minutes,” she said.

“Would you do that?”

“I'd prefer to sleep.”

“Your cooperation will go a long way toward proving to the doctors that you are invested in your recovery,” she said.

The group meeting was in the common room. The fat man and his two female compadres were sitting in the same spots. Plastic chairs were brought in by the staff and fanned in a semicircle around the couches.

“Come in, come in,” a nurse said. She sat in the circle, taking attendance.

“Welcome. Thank you for coming to the meeting. Today's group session will be very brief. I would like to go around the circle and have everyone say how he or she is feeling. If you would like to suggest a group activity for later—maybe a movie or a board game?—I would love to hear that, too. Let's start with Barb.”

She was looking at the woman on the couch who still had the TV controller glued to her thigh.

“Well,” Barb said, “I'm sick of group sharing. I wouldn't even be sitting here if it weren't for my asshole ex-husband.”

“Barb...” the nurse said.

“And I’m tired because my roommate snores,” Barb said. “I asked the doctor for a room change last week, but he just said to be patient. How can I be patient when I’m in a place I don’t wanna be and I can’t get any sleep?”

“Barb, I...” the nurse said.

“And I can’t even get a cup of coffee, much less a smoke,” Barb said. “You’d think I could get a cup of coffee. Seems harmless enough, don’t you think?”

Seemed reasonable to me.

“Well, we...” the nurse said.

“Wheel of Fortune is going to start soon,” Barb said. “Fifteen, twenty minutes or so. This whole thing better be over by then.”

“Barb,” the nurse said, “could I offer you a P.R.N.?”

P.R.N., I’d learn later, stands for pro re nata, a Latin phrase meaning “for the thing born.” In medical parlance, it translates to “as needed,” a medication administered without prescription, usually an anti-anxiety pill.

“No one wants to hear the truth anymore,” Barb said. She gestured at the nurse with a dismissive wave of her gnarled hand. “You guys don’t want free speech. You want everyone to say they’re OK. Well, I’m not. Sheila’s not, George’s not, Craig’s not. Don’t ask for my opinion if you don’t wanna get it.”

“Thank you for sharing, Barb,” the nurse said, turning her attention to the fat man. I admired the nurse’s ability to simulate a sort of peppy curiosity.

“I’d prefer not to share today,” Jim said. As the nurse moved on, Jim jumped forward with index and middle fingers extended. “I’m sorry, nurse, could I say one more

thing? I'd like to watch *Homeward Bound* later. If that's OK with everyone else."

*Jesus Christ*, I thought, *not the movie with the talking animals*.

When it was my turn to talk, I introduced myself.

"I feel great," I said, plastering a beauty pageant smile to my face. "I need to clear up a misunderstanding about some mistakes I made last night, but it's been really interesting being here. I'm looking forward to getting back to Lawrence, where I'm studying to become a journalist. Thanks."

Perhaps it was just my perception at that specific moment, but the enthusiastic group leader seemed to lose some of her rah-rah zest as she wrote in her chart when I finished talking. I told myself I was being paranoid. But I had to reprimand myself from butting into the silence to speak more, as I had undoubtedly said the wrong thing. What was in that chart, exactly? Maybe the gung-ho leader wanted me to show vulnerability by initiating a discussion about the previous night. But that didn't seem right, either. There was no way I could tell that story without sounding bitter. I was rested, sober, and the night was coming back in splinters of memory. I remembered Last Call. I remembered a slippery dance floor with strobe lights. I remembered whiskey shots and white plastic Bud Lite pitchers and the senior I hired to buy them for our table. I remembered what it cost—a dollar extra per item. I remembered him thanking me when we left, telling our group we had gotten him drunk for free. I remembered the proprietor beside the door in a tacky suit, transposed from a mafia spoof, dyed black hair slicked back over a balding scalp, hands over his crotch, unlocked only to shake with regulars. I tucked a \$1 bill into his breast pocket as we stumbled out, thanking him for the hospitality and telling him in my best Billy Bats voice to go home and get his shine box. I remembered him yelling

after me in his Vito Corleone accent, *Little fucking shit*. I remembered my friend Andy making a crack about cab fare when we got back to the dorm. I could remember what pulled me across the spotted concrete, away from my friends—the curses piercing through the cold bone of night—but not why it had made me so upset. I had staggered to the outer perimeter of the parking lot, toward the shouting, looking for a confrontation.

As I pieced it together, the group leader finished the meeting and thanked us for coming. Most patients stood. Some stretched and yawned. Barb flipped on the TV. I returned to my room, pressing my memory to fill in the gaps. I remembered that I thought the guys in the parking lot had been swearing at my friends. I visualized the parking lot—there was no way those guys could have seen us. I remembered that there were six of them, most wearing backwards hats. I remembered screaming at them to *Shut the fuck up*. I remembered the acid chewing at my chest as I stood before them in the cool Kansas air, gastric reflux, diagnosed in middle school, treated after symptoms occur, Tums and Pepto. Bottles were next to my laptop in Room 213. Had a weak stomach, like my father. Didn't know when to shut up, like my mother. Couldn't walk away from a fight, like my grandfather. I remembered thick cigarette smoke forming a curtain between the group and me. Made them appear like ghosts. I remembered the tallest one floating towards me. Fell asleep remembering how I'd tried to act tough in front of that group, using clichéd cinematic tough-guy dialogue. I haven't met many people who are actually *tough*, the quiet type who keeps to himself but will knock you out if you make a lewd comment to a woman. Most of us do our best to fake it, and in so doing prove how weak we are.

I dozed off. Dreamt about one specific moment from the previous night—when I charged the tall guy, swung and missed, landed on my knees. All I heard was laughter. A

different nurse woke me a few hours later.

“You have visitors,” she said.

She led me down a hallway, through the common room, past the desk, through the doors that needed security clearance, down another hallway, and through a door beneath a plastic sign that read GUESTS.

Mom and Dad were sitting behind a round table, holding hands. When I saw them, I forgot to exhale. Mom rushed to me, throwing her arms around my neck. I stood paralyzed, smothered, wanting to run back to the safety of my room. My blue scrubs suddenly mortified me. I couldn't explain why, but I was angry with my parents for coming. Mom studied my face. As much as I wanted to blame the hospital's staff, or the officer, or the guys in the parking lot, I'd been the instigator of every step that culminated in this room. I knew where my anger belonged. I studied the floor tiles as Mom brought her hand to my face. She ran her fingers down the scratches on my cheek. I tried to act strong, lock my jaw to neutralize a quivering lip, squint my eyes and flare my nostrils to prevent tears. That expression must have come across as defiant, at worst, or a demonstration of somebody desperately trying not to break, at best. I never could control emotions. *Is the back of my gown tied tightly—why the fuck didn't I double-check that before I left my room?* I thought.

Dad gave me a hug, squeezed too hard. I meekly put a hand on his back. When he let go, the three of us just stood there. I looked at their shoulders. If I didn't make eye contact, none of this seemed quite as real. But, even standing there, I couldn't deny that our tranquil relationship had been irreparably damaged.

“I'll be outside,” the nurse said. “You have 30 minutes.”

Mom reached her hand across the table. I put my hand in it. She squeezed.

“Are you OK?” she said. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“Is there anything we can do?” Dad said.

“Yes,” I said. “Get me out of here.”

“I don’t think we can do that, Thor.”

“Sure you can. Tell them you are taking me. Tell them you are my parents and you are taking me home. Tell them I have school on Monday and homework to do.”

“You’re nineteen-years old. It doesn’t work that way. You’re an adult now.”

I stared at my father with misplaced hatred. By explaining the system he became part of it. I imagined the way my parents must have viewed me—a foolish, petulant child. Someone they thought they knew left home and turned out to be someone else entirely, a criminal, an out-of-control drinker locked in a mental institution with schizophrenics and OCD tweakers. A parent’s first job—maybe their only real job—was to teach the difference between right and wrong. They had the look of people who didn’t know whether or not they were guilty of a crime, fidgeting in their chairs, Dad nervously rotating his wedding ring. Their son was unhappy, ungrateful, unworthy—un, un, un. I studied a crack in the table.

“How did you find out about me in here?” I said. We were an 11-hour drive from Brainerd. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“We woke up this morning at 5:00 AM and the doorbell was ringing,” Dad said.

“My heart dropped,” Mom said. “We heard this rapping. Rap rap rap. Rap rap rap.”

“I open the door and it was a policewoman,” Dad said. “She was knocking with a

nightstick. She told us that they had called and no one picked up.”

“My heart dropped,” Mom said again.

Mom and Dad’s neurotic sleep tendencies had been passed down to my siblings and me—they wore earplugs and sleep masks, cranked a white noise machine and lowered the house’s temperature. It’s a wonder they woke at all.

“She said that you had been arrested,” Dad said, “and that you had been brought to a psychiatric facility in Topeka because you said you... Because you said you wanted to harm yourself.”

“Thanks for coming,” I said. I meant it.

“Will you call me?” Mom said. “If things ever get like this again? At any time of the day. Please.”

I didn’t respond.

“Thor? Will you?” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

She looked unconvinced but reached across the table again and squeezed my hand.

“How have you been holding up in here?” she said, sensing an opportunity to change the subject.

“I’ve mostly just slept so far.”

“That’s good after the night you had,” she said.

My face flushed and I looked away. Not intending to embarrass me, she talked quickly to undo the awkwardness.

“And the people here?” she said. “Have you talked to anyone? Have the nurses



treated you well? Is the food edible? I once went inside a prison for a radio story I was doing and the food was like what you'd see in a movie; a big gob of slop that looked like reddish mashed potatoes. The administration said it had all the necessary nutrients to sustain a healthy prisoner. I don't think I could have eaten it."

"I actually haven't eaten yet," I said.

"You haven't eaten yet?" Mom said, indignant. She used to make my sister Quinn and I apple slices with peanut butter when we got off the bus, asking us what we had done in school that day. "Should I talk to someone about that? Maybe they'll let us bring you back some McDonalds or something."

"It's just that I slept through breakfast and lunch," I said. "It isn't a big deal. I would love a burger."

"We'll ask if that's allowed," she said. "Now, we better make way for your next guest."

"What?"

"Shane was in the waiting room when we got here," she said. "What a guy."

"Shane? Really?"

"He wants to talk to you," she said.

"That's great. Bring him in."

"Can I get you anything?" Dad said.

"A magazine. And a book."

Mom and Dad hugged me.

"We will be back tomorrow," Dad said. "Hang in there."

"OK, I said. "Oh, and Dad? Could you maybe try to get a little radio? The

Jayhawks play Colorado tomorrow.”

A few minutes later, Shane sauntered in. His hair was matted to his skull. It appeared as though he hadn't slept. Shane was the guy at Brainerd High School who could get you anything—beer, liquor, weed or Adderall—within an hour. We enrolled at Kansas together, though he lived in dingy McCollum while my parents had paid extra for me to live in the Holiday Inn-run Naismith Hall. I wondered if he resented me for that. We hadn't spent much time together the past few months. Shane's mom was in prison for dealing drugs. His infant sister was taken away when the police charged in and his mom was smoking meth at the kitchen table as the baby chewed mashed carrots in a highchair. His mom married the wrong man, got beat up, re-married and underwent a boob job to please her new husband. We didn't talk about her.

“Thorman,” he said.

“Peel,” I said, calling him by his high school nickname. No one could pinpoint the moniker's origin, but Peel specifically asked me to call him “Shane” when we moved to Lawrence. My promise lasted all of one night. He wasn't Shane to me.

We made that exaggerated college-dude step you take when you don't know whether to hug or not. I sheepishly grinned, unsure whether I should diffuse the awkwardness with jokes or be serious.

“How did you find me here?” I settled on.

Without a word, he pulled a crumpled yellow sheet of legal paper from his pocket. It was filled with Peel's sloppy handwriting, scratched out names of hospitals, cities, and phone numbers. There were more than 20 hospitals on the sheet, every institution and jail within 150 miles of Lawrence.

Peel persuaded the staff to allow him to visit. It was against the rules, he wasn't family. They patted him down and made him leave his backpack at the front desk. He didn't like that. There was a long silence and I could tell Peel wanted to say something. He tugged on the dangling strings of his sweatshirt. With Peel you had to weather the silences while he belabored over how to articulate what he'd prefer not talk about.

"I didn't know you were unhappy," he said finally. "I wish I would have known."

I shrugged, considering a response. There was a knock at the door and the nurse strode in carrying a clipboard.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but visitation time is over."

Peel nodded at her. I seethed. This time, I gave him a hug, letting my emotions get the best of me. He wiggled uncomfortably. Peel said he would see me soon. The nurse closed the door after him.

"I have a handout for you to read, about alcohol abuse," she said. "I thought you could read it and then we could talk about it—and anything else that happens to be on your mind."

"I'm going to decline," I said.

"I always advise patients to embrace the help we are trying to give," she said.

"Be that as it may, you just interrupted a personal conversation I was having with a friend," I said. "And for what? So that you could give me another packet that I pretend to read and pretend to think is interesting. I can see why you'd think that is more beneficial to my mental health than speaking to a friend who spent the last 10 hours trying to locate me, but you've lost my goodwill for tonight. I'd like to go back to my room."

Her lips pursed smugly, I thought, almost into a grin, as though she lived for moments of patient insurrection. The week before in psych class, our professor lectured about an autistic woman who said her life's greatest frustration was knowing what she wanted to say but not being able to talk. I couldn't empathize until now. I was trapped in a building where my words were useless. I'd be better off, in fact, not using them at all. This nurse didn't know me from any of the other cutters or pickers or screamers. My first inclination was to explain that I was a normal guy who had lost his mind for one night. Locking me up had worked—I was scared straight. I would do anything to walk through campus, eat a slice of meat-lovers pizza from Papa Keno's, and catch a movie.

I remember her look of indifference, as if she knew she were in a position to break my spirit and was giddy to do so. She regarded me as a momentary nuisance. When I fell in line with the others, I'd be treated with respect. Realizing this and obeying, however, were two different things entirely. This woman had wronged me and I'd be damned if I was going to do her a favor that made her menial job easier. It was this obstinate attitude that instigated my two-year descent into perdition: Diagnoses, pills and mania. As much as I want to save that kid sitting at the table—I still see him, looking down the tip of his nose at the nurse, believing he's done nothing wrong, believing her inept and himself misunderstood—all I can do is study him. Absolute terror over what he is about to experience will never subside. It wakes me at night, thrashing. My girlfriend says I talk in my sleep. She says I'm angry, but she can't decipher whom I'm yelling at. The conversation never goes further than that. I still have violent, sob-inducing flashbacks. But I can't alter that kid's self-destructive nature, no matter how often I think about him. Can't adjust his future.

“Would you like a P.R.N. for anxiety, Mr. Nystrom?” the nurse said.

“I’m happy you asked,” I said. I badly needed a stiff cocktail, but I’d settle for whatever I could get. “I would love a P.R.N.”

She left the room and returned with Seroquel and water.

“I have a treatment questionnaire I was hoping you’d fill out,” she said.

I gave her an exaggerated *Seriously?* look and we sat in silence.

“OK, another refusal,” she said. “Your agitation is misplaced, Mr. Nystrom.”

“If I have to stay here, I’d like to be removed from the suicide-watch unit,” I said.

“And I want my shirt and pants back.”

“Suicidal patients must be on the suicide-watch unit.”

“Understood,” I said. “But I’m not suicidal.”

“Your recent behavior suggests otherwise.”

“Hoping that someone kills you is not suicidal,” I said.

She jotted again, refusing to argue semantics or point out my rather obvious flaws in logic, which, though it pained me at the time, earned her a sliver of respect. Aversion to authority and glee in instigating juvenile arguments were two of my biggest problems as a child. In a mental institution, you either cure yourself of both or your dosages will increase until you’re cleansed.

“I only agreed to come here,” I said, “to keep from going to jail. You get that, right?”

She jotted more notes.

“OK, whatever. Should I go back to my room or is it dinner time?” I said.

“Dinner is soon,” she said. “Before you go, I’d like to talk about the incident that

brought you here.”

“I got into a fight,” I said. “I was drunk. That’s what college freshman do when they are drunk.”

“I see here that you challenged a group of boys in a parking lot,” she said. “Why did you do that? What were you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Later, you asked a policeman to kill you,” she said. “Do you remember that?”

“Faintly.”

“Do you have frequent suicidal ideations?”

“No.”

“How often do you think about harming yourself?” she said.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “Listen, I want to leave. My parents are in town and can bring me back to Lawrence. I have classes on Monday. I voluntarily admitted myself. I do remember that distinctly. I would now like to leave.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Mr. Nystrom.”

“How does it work?”

“You can request a discharge. There is a three-day wait for that process, once the request has been made.”

“Dear God. What good is that going to do?”

“Please watch your language,” she said.

“OK, I want to make the request.”

“Noted.”

“I want to make it in writing,” I said.

“OK, then,” she said, passing a white sheet of printing paper and a black pen across the table. Years later, when I examined documents from that time, I happened across a photocopy of the request. My handwriting is legible, but the words seem to shiver. I remember gripping the pen tight, trying to squeeze the palpitations of anger out of my wrist. I wrote:

*I am requesting an immediate discharge. Evidently voluntary includes no rights.*

*Thor Nystrom. 10-10-03.*

I slid the sheet back to the nurse and said: “Can I go to dinner, now?”

The cafeteria was elementary school small. I was served thin slices of turkey drowned in gravy the consistency of broth and the color of Pepsi. I spotted a girl who must have been about my age. Her head was slumped as she shoveled in food. She was pretty enough, with smooth, pale skin and thin brown hair framing a delicate face. I took a gulp from the same pink skim milk carton that I used to drink from at Baxter Elementary School snack break. I exhaled loudly when I was finished, hoping she would look up. She didn’t, so I considered potential conversation starters. I settled on asking her if she went to school around Topeka. I began the process of converting thoughts to words, but my eyes stopped abruptly at her arms, which were palms up on the table like she was accepting communion.

Each arm had several large staples from the wrist to the inner-elbow that held together long flaps of skin. In between each suture I saw the red meat inside her. I could have stuck a finger inside her arm. This could not have been done with a razor. She must have sharpened a butcher knife or purchased a hunting blade at an outfitter. The most

shocking thing to me was that both arms were evenly—and cleanly—carved. I imagined her locking her jaw, slicing open her left arm, screaming at the horrific pain, watching the blood squirt from the wound, grabbing a pre-placed towel to mop up the blood, transferring the knife to the other hand—attached to a wounded arm—blinking away tears, and plunging that knife right back down. She must have passed out from the pain and blood loss, her contorted face on a tiled bathroom floor in a pool of thick red blood, life seeping from her while she slept. And who found her? A boyfriend, a neighbor, a family member? Or was she at college in a communal bathroom and her screaming summoned help? Maybe girls ran into the bathroom and saw blood spreading across the floor. One brave girl would have dove beneath the stall, got the sick girl's head onto her lap and shrieked for help. She would have stroked her hair and whispered, praying to God to let the dark-haired girl live.

She *was* alive, but I saw someone who had succeeded in killing off something, a piece of her soul. She looked strangely fractional to me, half-alive, a zombie. Take life for granted too long and you'll lose the innocence needed to endure it. She was the type of pity case that you felt bad turning away from, but what did her mother feel when she clutched her daughter? Maybe that was the problem, I decided, maybe her mother never did.

I lost my appetite. Kept my head down, rearranging my food. I fixed my Teddy Graham dessert to my hip as I passed the orderly on the way out. That night dragged. Barb had control of the TV and watched re-runs of old game shows. I went to the front desk and requested a book. They didn't have any.



## 2. DIAGNOSIS

Topeka, KS.

Saturday October 11, 2003.

8:00 A.M.

At breakfast, I sat at an empty table. I slid my tray of clumpy scrambled eggs, cold bacon, a bruised banana and a carton of milk across the table. I wasn't known to pass on a meal, free or otherwise, but in the institution I found an indifference to food, time and hygiene. The only thing that mattered was what I would say to the psychiatrist Sunday. I ran my fingers through hair that felt like it had been marinated in butter. I touched the split in my lip. My tongue massaged away the sting. A man sat across the table, perhaps thinking he could eat my food. Reflexively, I yanked back my tray. If anyone was going to eat this shitty food, it was going to be me.

I had never eaten in a room full of people who didn't talk. You become hyper-aware of any noise you make. The man across the table belched loudly, a gunshot in a library. His green eyes rolled around in their sockets, darting this way and that, like strobe lights, never stopping. His long, stringy white hair had obviously not been washed in some time, making him look like Sean Connery in *The Rock* before they gave him a haircut and he escaped from Nicholas Cage and his government friends.

What did he do to get here? Did he like living here? Maybe he just wasn't built for the real world. He scratched his neck beard with a spork, leaving behind bits of egg. He scooped up another sporkful of egg and chewed quickly, eyes bouncing left to right

and back again. I sat two feet from him and stared deep into his eyes, but he couldn't see me. If the old man were given his freedom, would he use it to hurt others? Was possession of a sick mind crime enough to justify imprisonment? More to the point, would I be him in 40 years? Was this my future? It was a thought I couldn't escape lying in bed after breakfast—he, too, was once 19-years-old. Probably thought he would be famous, thought those personality quirks that amused his friends would have commercial use. Maybe he'd been a painter or a writer. Maybe he liked the idea that he was different and accelerated his personality quirks, stretching them to their outer limits, his tangential rants during political discourse previously entertaining to dinner guests becoming bitter anti-establishment rants on the open mic at his local school board meeting. Dance for the crowd long enough and you forget what you look like without makeup.

When I woke up from a nap, I had an hour to kill before lunch. I read a pair of articles in *Home and Garden*; one involved lawn care tips for the fall, another offered readers the opportunity to ask experts questions about home improvement. I threw the magazine across the room. A few pages dislodged and floated in the air as the magazine hit the wall. The sound echoed for a second and then I was alone.

When I was a kid, my dad refused to ride roller coasters. He brought me to amusement parks, but he'd never join me on Space Mountain. I'd beg, but he politely refused. *I'll be watching you from the bench. Extreme claustrophobia*, he said, *I had a panic attack on one of those last year at Worlds of Fun*. At the time, I thought he was lying. *You were fine, Dad! I was with you!* Sitting on that bed, staring at the ceiling, I understood. The room didn't even have a window. It was a spotless white box. Someone made the bed every day and checked to make sure I hadn't smuggled in a knife. The box

started to contract. I wanted to pound the walls until my fists cracked. I wanted to punch that puffy face in the mirror. Wanted to walk into the common room and address the nurses behind the desk: *Goddamnit let me out of here or you'll be sorry*. I convulsed, ripping at the covers. I couldn't yell, or a nurse would write a report, and then I'd be locked in there longer. I bit my lower lip so I wouldn't yell. Scabs broke along the split. I tasted blood, but I didn't stop.

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My parents came for a second visit later that afternoon. Dad handed me copies of *Sports Illustrated*, *Sporting News*, and *ESPN the Magazine*. He forgot the radio.

“Maybe Walgreens will have one,” he said to my mom.

She looked back at him, dazed, non-responsive.

I had Mom's sky blue eyes. I had her skin. As a kid, I went to her office and watched her listen to interviews, cut film, splice together packages using tape. I wanted to be a reporter after that. Mom got arrested as a young journalist because she refused to give up her tape recorder after she interviewed survivors of a small plane crash at the local airport. That was my favorite story—she had principle and never backed down. Sitting in that room across from me, Mom was inside a nightmare, perhaps more so than me. I saw the quiet panic in her eyes, like the time my brother was hospitalized for three days as a five-year-old, diagnosed as a diabetic. She tried to correct her defeated, slumped shoulders, push them back for me.

“I hate this place so much,” I said to her.

“The doctor will be here tomorrow,” Mom said. “Hold on until then.”

We talked for 15 minutes and then a nurse said visiting time was over.

“We will be back tomorrow,” Dad said.

Forty minutes later there was a knock at my door, a nurse holding a small grey portable radio. I found the football game on the tuner. The scratchy signal came and went. The Jayhawks led at halftime, but allowed a game-tying field goal with 14 seconds left. Colorado won in overtime with a touchdown run.

“Motherfucker,” I screamed, head buried in the pillow to muffle the sound. I clicked off the radio and pushed it off the bed, relieved—happy, almost—to be angry about a triviality again.

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A nurse knocked on the door, said it was time for arts and crafts.

“Thanks. But, decline,” I said.

“Group sharing, later?”

“No thanks.”

“Group exercise outside?” she said.

“I prefer to be alone, for now,” I said. “My head really hurts.”

“I’ll get you some Tylenol.”

I spent Saturday night in darkness, lying in bed. Sunday was a big day.

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I paced around my room after breakfast, white wall to white wall. My strategy with the shrink wasn’t unlike a first date: I’d stay on neutral subjects (college acclimation, perhaps), not offer incriminating evidence (wrist cutting), concede to my human condition in order to appear honest, vulnerable and nuanced (I am depressed), remain amiable and good-humored and otherwise paint myself in the best possible light.

A nurse knocked and I followed her to the med counter. She handed me a cup of pills. She led me down several long hallways, stopping in front of a door labeled 024-B. A young psychiatrist leafed through my file as I walked in. His congenial expression was not happy or sad. Psychiatrists always greet you like this. Showing happiness would be boastful. I wasn't grinning. But I wasn't frowning either. No, I didn't want him to think I was sad. But I also didn't want him to think I was feigning happiness to fool him. So we basically wore the same idiotic neutral facial expressions as we shook hands.

The room was bright white. White light reflected off the white tiled floor and white painted walls and bounced back off the paneled white ceiling and white florescent panels. The table was white. White file cabinets lined the far wall. The doctor's smock was white, as were his straight ivory teeth. Beneath the smock was a buttoned-down denim shirt. He probably came from church. His gold wedding ring twinkled when he turned his wrist.

"You've been seeing a Dr. DeSalvo at KU?" he said.

"Well, I've seen him a few times, yes."

"You're currently on Paxil for depression and anxiety," he said. "Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"And you take Adderall for ADHD? Trazodone for sleep?" he said.

"Yeah."

"How do you feel they are working for you?" he said.

"I think I'll answer your question by talking about something else and coming back," I said. "I have a wonderful life on paper, I really do, and I feel ungrateful and unworthy of it sometimes. Have you ever been given a Christmas present, say from your

parents, and it's a fine and generous gift which you asked for, let's say concert tickets, but a minute after you thank them you study the tickets and notice they are in the upper deck and you figure your mom got them bargain-basement on eBay from an overstock outlet? You start thinking about how last year they gave you a Westinghouse television instead of the Panasonic you'd hoped for, and all of a sudden this gift, which you should be grateful for, which you didn't even own five minutes ago, is the newest example of their cheapness and an indictment of their corner-cutting ways in general, which maybe caused you not to ask to apply to eight colleges as opposed to three, for fear you'd be rebuffed, which might have been the difference between you going to a dream school as opposed to the gigantic state university you attend instead. And although you do realize that this is flawed and unfair logic, you are resentful toward them for taking you down that path because they wanted to save a hundred bucks. Once you calm yourself, you fall down the mineshaft of realizing what an ungrateful zero you've always been. In a nutshell, that's how I view my life. It's confusing and I'm still sorting out in my head how the medications are helping with my moods."

The doctor calmly studied my face as I talked. I was embarrassed for having launched into such a long—and stupid—diatribe and I attempted to display my social adjustment by undercutting myself with a self-deprecating joke.

"So, are the pills helping?" I said. "I don't know. I'm in an institution right now talking to you. Fine gift I've given my parents."

He maintained eye contact for a moment as he removed a pen from his breast pocket, clicked it, and scribbled in my file. After a beat of silence, I laughed quietly, almost under my breath—I didn't want him to think I was being rude—to cue him to the

fact that I was joking. A muffled noise clanged around his mouth, which sounded more like throat clearing than a chuckle. You never want to be out of conversational synch with a psychiatrist. I'd only seen a few, but even I knew that. There was always a muted intensity when you talked to them, even when you were a 14-year-old picking up your Adderall 'script. Something felt off. The intensity wasn't muted in that room. It was deafening, a barrage of steel drums. A tone you don't perceive as much as you feel—my heart refused to calm itself. My armpits were moist, excreting a toxic waste dump sweat of Jack & Coke and cigarette butts. I hadn't showered in days. I had already made two easily identifiable mistakes, both of which violated my initial strategy: Rambling without prompt and leading off with a joke. Stupid. Forcing intimacy wasn't going to get him on my side, nor was faking Type-B easygoingness. *Stick to finite particulars. Use short, punchy sentences. Let him dictate the conversation. That was the plan. Get back to that.*

“How would you characterize your depression at the time you began taking Paxil?” he asked.

“Mild, I guess,” I said. “I broke up with my girlfriend and then I sort of started freaking out about leaving for college. It was a rough couple months, for sure. And then you come to a new place and you want to fit in, so maybe you fake it for a while and everything's a whirlwind and you don't realize that you are just being a grating asshole to everyone around you. I think maybe it was good that I had a little two-day vacation here so I could reset, start over in a sense, think some things through. As far as that goes, Paxil isn't really doing anything for me. I definitely feel angrier and more depressed than before. I'd prefer to be switched to something else.”

“Thank you for being honest,” he said. “Thor, do you know why you are here?”

“Yes.”

“Could you tell me why?”

“Yes,” I said. “Well, I got drunk on Thursday and then I got into a fight. And then I asked a police officer to shoot me.”

I didn't say that my biggest fear that night was going to jail, that I would have said anything to avoid it. In hindsight, this was a major mistake, perhaps one of the biggest of my life. I have a tendency to overanalyze, to be too clever for my own good. In the white room, sitting across from the fledgling psychiatrist, my only goal was to acquire my discharge papers. To do so, kernels of fact were mixed with vague psychobabble to appeal to the doctor's goodwill. He, and he alone, had the authority to release me. In my mind, confessing to asking a police officer to shoot you because you didn't want your parents to hear you had been arrested was the thought process of a madman, grounds for an institutionalization hearing. Absolute honesty was never considered.

“Why did you ask the police officer to kill you?” he said.

“My mind was kind of racing,” I said. “I was really drunk. I guess it was just what I felt at the time. It was like a voice inside my head was telling me to say that. Telling me I should die; that I deserved to die; that I should hurt myself.”

In hindsight, it's difficult to reproach myself for those last two sentences, though they set in motion everything that was to come—dropping out of college, a handful of separate diagnoses, a 140-pound weight gain, the ever-changing colors and shapes of pills I took each morning, the suicide attempt, involuntary commitment, and everything that happened afterward. It's a moment you want to edit out of your past, two clicks of the mouse on each side of that clip and a swift punch of the delete button. Unfortunately, life



isn't iMovie.

What I should have said: *I've been struggling, to be honest. Normal teenage problems. I haven't been dealing with them effectively. I understand that now, and I will change, immediately, you have my word. Last night, like most others, I ignored that red sticker on my orange bottle of Paxil that said I couldn't drink on it. It was stupid. I drank way too much. I started a fight. A tall guy socked me in the eye. I deserved it. I dropped. Instead of staying down, I got back up. I wanted to feel pain. I can't explain to you why. I yelled at those guys to hit me, locked my hands behind my back so they knew I wasn't going to fight back. A beefy guy with a backward hat landed a hook into my eye socket and everything went white. They kicked me. I don't know how long it went on. One kick landed in my diaphragm and I couldn't breath, an asthmatics' greatest fear. They kicked me in the head, the groin, the ass, the stomach, everywhere. My forehead scratched the concrete as I covered up. The kicking stopped, suddenly, and I heard shouting. My ears rang, like I'd just fired a shotgun. I saw those guys run. I drooled blood. The parking lot filled, friends and acquaintances pointing and laughing. An RA crouched beside me, told me to stay put. Then the cops came, handcuffed me. All I can remember thinking about as the squad car pulled away was how I was going to explain this to my parents. That and swallowing every few seconds to keep from puking on the plastic divider. In that car, all the lights blurring out the window, I was in this free-falling vertigo, bound with miles of rope, mummified, dropped from a helicopter. I remember the Emergency Room, the woman behind the check-in counter. She wrote in a clipboard: Another worthless, violent teen, dime-a-dozen fuckup, I remember thinking. The cop was not much older than me. I was ashamed, as drunk as I've ever been, and I saw his gun. I knew they were going to*

*call to my parents, tell my father, the school board chairman, and my mother, a county commissioner, both church leaders, that I was in jail. I don't remember my thought process as I stared at his gun—I don't think there was one. I just asked him to shoot me. I remember doing it, I won't deny that. But everything from that night is still foggy. I can't tell you why I did what I did. That isn't me. A nurse told me later I picked this institution over going to jail, or detox. I'm not denying I need help. But I'm stable, I promise you that. I will never drink that much again in my life. You have my word.*

But I didn't say that. I told the young psychiatrist I heard a voice. It was an innocent enough mistake. But you don't have room for mistakes, especially open-ended allusions to psychotic symptoms, when the psychiatrist has this police report in his file:

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### **Law Enforcement Investigative Report**

Case#: 0203-09463

Victim: State of

Kansas

Offense: Protective custody

Suspect: Thor

Nystrom

Date/Time: 10-10-03 0230

Officer: Ryan

Sayler

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...

*R/O placed Nystrom in R/O's patrol unit and began transporting him to MLH. During the trip he stated that he wanted R/O to get into a wreck so that he would go through the windshield. He also stated, "don't make me make you hurt me." R/O asked Nystrom why he wanted R/O to hurt him. He stated that if an officer would shoot him, he would be grateful.*

...

*The LMH screener evaluated Nystrom. Mr. Nystrom agreed to sign himself into treatment with Stormont Veil in Topeka KS. R/O transported Mr.*

*Nystrom to Stormont Veil. R/O released Nystrom to staff at Stormont Veil.*

*Nothing further at this time.*

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“Did you want to die?” the young psychiatrist asked me. He rubbed his chin with his pen.

“At that moment, in the hospital, yes,” I said without thinking. I felt like a pitcher who had just hung a curveball to Barry Bonds. I wanted the pitch back as it was halfway to home plate. For some reason, I thought of Mike Tyson—*Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.*

“What about right now?”

“No,” I said, perhaps a bit too firmly.

“Are you having thoughts of harming yourself or anyone else?” he said.

“No.”

“Do you think you would be safe outside the hospital?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to give the word no affect.

“You mentioned voices,” he said. “Do you often hear voices in your head telling you to do stuff?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I said. “I feel like I have two tracks of thought. Like, you know how you see people with an angel and a devil on their shoulder in movies?”

“So one of the voices sounds like the devil?” he said.

“I guess in a matter of speaking, yes.”

The young doctor’s brow furrowed. He scribbled furiously. I wasn’t sure what I’d said to trigger such intensity. I fidgeted in my chair and took in all the white around me.

“I notice you have cuts on your wrist,” he said. “Why do you cut yourself?”

“To stop my thoughts,” I said.

“How long have you been doing that?” he said.

“I used to really, really love baseball,” I said. “I practiced and practiced and practiced when I was a little kid, thought I could play in the Major Leagues someday. I went to all the pitching camps in town but I could never locate the ball accurately or put any spin on it. So I decided I’d make it as a first baseman. I was big and could hit the ball a long way.”

The doctor looked impatient, but I wasn’t done with the story so I started talking quickly so he wouldn’t cut me off before I made my point.

“Anyway,” I said, “when I got to ninth grade, I started to get really afraid of the ball. A pitch hit me when I was younger, sixth grade I think. When everyone could throw harder I always had the same vision in my mind as the pitcher went into his windup—he was going to throw 90 miles an hour and to hit me in the temple. I was going to die. Same thought every pitch. So you can imagine—I always stepped toward the third base dugout when I swung. I struck out all the time. I just resolved to work harder and harder, even as I kept failing. I thought if I became the best fielding first baseman in the school, I could eventually start for varsity. So I took all this pride in fielding and had my dad throw hard grounders to me in the front yard. I got pretty good at it. During one of our last games my freshman year, we were in the playoffs and we played on this big, manicured college field. The lines were crisp and the grass had just been cut. Felt like the big leagues, in a way. The bases were professional grade, all that stuff. I made an error that game in the bottom half of the last inning that cost us the game. A grounder bounced off my glove and the runner on third ran home by the time I got to the ball. I was devastated. The other

team celebrated and I ran to my mom's car without talking to anyone. I went down to my bedroom and sobbed. I saw a tape dispenser on the desk and I cut my left hand with it over and over again until the pain took over and I wasn't crying anymore. I don't know why I did that. Maybe I wanted to punish the offender, alleviate the disgrace I felt. I always felt like I could help people most on the sports field. But, you know baseball—individual sport, nowhere to hide. I was no good at it. I didn't reconcile with that idea until the error. I felt a little better after I got done cutting. To answer your question, I've done it sporadically since then when something awful happens. When I got to Kansas, I was in a bad funk. I'm a long way from home. I wanted to get back together with my girlfriend and she found someone else. So I cut myself a few times. I'm guessing those specifics are in your notes."

They were documented, I assumed, because he'd mentioned Dr. DeSalvo, a psychologist I'd seen in Lawrence a month before. I'd called my ex and cried, begging for a second chance. She said it was too late. I hung up and sobbed and cut at my wrist with a Gillette razor. The next day, embarrassed and scared by the habit, I visited the school clinic. I asked the receptionist in the psychiatry wing if I could see a doctor. She looked at her calendar and said the first available appointment was in two weeks. I pulled up my sleeve and showed her my wrist.

"Please fill this out," she said. "I'll get you in right away."

"You said sporadically—how would you define that?" the young psychiatrist said, itching his cheek with his pen. "Could you give me a specific number, or?"

"Monthly?" I said. "Bi-monthly? I don't know."

"I see here that you told a nurse that your mind is always racing," he said. "It

gives you headaches.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve been feeling pretty sad at school, I guess. Don’t get me wrong, I like it. I usually love it, actually. But it gets to me, sometimes. Like when I’m alone. It’s tough, you know? Leaving, breakups, those kinds of things. My thought process speeds up, goes haywire or something. And, it’s weird, cutting stops that. But I should say that they were surface scratches. With a razor. Gillette, you know? For your face? It has the safety guards so you can’t nick yourself too bad.”

I paused for a moment, thinking.

“And I understood that, consciously,” I said. “That I couldn’t hurt myself with it. I mean, I could have a box cutter, or whatever, but I think that probably I just knew that a little pain would stop my thought process momentarily.”

He asked me about my alcohol usage. I was honest with him. I drank to get drunk, four or five nights a week.

“Drinking makes me feel more like I think I should feel,” I said. “The pettiness I talked about before goes away, I feel happier.”

The doctor gave me a hazy look of deep concentration, like he was somewhat puzzled, but I got the sense he feigned that expression so his patients perceived him to be thinking really hard.

“Do your thoughts often manifest as hateful?” he said.

“That’s kind of broad,” I said. “I’d say no. But, like I said, there is good and bad. There are sunny thoughts, there are hateful thoughts. Sometimes I will be having a good day and then the bad thoughts come in. Like rapid fire. A mean voice, it sounds like, a running commentary. And its been happening more frequently here at school. A lot more

frequently recently, in the last month or so. Sometimes I just want to shut my brain off. I want silence. I want my thoughts to stop. I want peace and quiet, you know? It causes a lot of anxiety and stuff.”

“Thor, how long have you thought this way?”

“Wow, I don’t know. I can’t remember ever thinking a different way, I guess. It’s just that I’ve been sadder recently. More anxious. Stuff like that. If you’re asking specifically about stress or anxiety, maybe I started to perceive them a few years ago.”

“So, again, you would say you are able to differentiate between your thoughts?” he said. “The voices?”

*Can’t everybody?* I thought.

“Yes,” I said.

He wrote in his notes: *PT finished Relapse Prevention Plan, ready to go home, 0 suicidal. However, CT happened to bring up the fact he hears “a voice” - very classic for password type Schizophrenia—a “running commentary” which is mostly derogatory in nature.*

He closed the file and crossed his legs, resting his hands on his lap. He looked thoughtfully at me.

“What you are describing sounds to me like schizophrenia. Have you heard of it?”

I nodded.

“The auditory hallucinations you have been experiencing are symptoms of schizophrenia,” he said. “This may have changed your sense of reality, and it explains the

delusions and suspiciousness. You have a chemical imbalance in your brain, and I can prescribe you medication that will make you better.”

I almost smiled. I remember distinctively trying to stop myself from doing so. It’s a second in time I’ve replayed in my mind thousands of times. One of those moments you would cut off a finger to have back. Years later you tell yourself that things turned out for the best, even if you don’t believe that lie for one second. I remember the small mole on the doctor’s neck that I studied to help my face stay expressionless, even as my brain tingled. I remember picturing Russell Crowe’s face, as John Nash, in my mind’s eye.

Schizophrenia? Schizo-fucking-phrenia? I didn’t know much about it, but I knew of tortured savants who had it, I knew of movie characters who saw people who weren’t there, who talked to whispers no one else heard. John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* was brilliant and brash. The games inside his head—the delusions of CIA operatives—were fascinating. And he fucked Jennifer Connelly.

I also experienced a great sense of relief, like the vet that discovered why our dog Ruby was coughing up blood after months of examinations. Something had changed the last few months in the way I reacted to things, always one slight away from lashing out. Thursday night had been the most egregious example, but certainly I had been an irritating shit outside of that—savagely gossiping, snapping when interrupted, and feigning frat-tastic confidence that came off as a bad Paul Walker imitation. Really, nothing had gone right since the summer, when, hoping to escape the funk I was in, I procured a Paxil prescription after a brief meeting with my shrink. It reminded me of when my parents had me go to the psychiatrist in tenth grade—I always got B’s while my Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores insisted I should be getting A’s. This produced in me an



irreverent hatred of standardized exams, believing them to blow the whistle on school-haters. Every year I considered tanking the test, filling in all C bubbles on the Scantron, or drawing a Rorschach-like interpretable blot. Fear of punishment squashed that fantasy. Mom always talked about my “potential” and told me I needed to “work harder.” Sick of it one day, I angrily suggested that maybe my inadequacies as a student stemmed from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This ended the argument, and my subsequent diagnosis and Adderall prescription gave me the double pleasure of silencing them and possessing a ready-made excuse for future scholastic shortcomings.

The young doctor rose, extended his hand. I had been in the room less than 10 minutes. There wasn't time to discuss the diagnosis. He had other patients to see.

“Good luck, Thor,” he said.

“Does this mean I am being discharged?”

“Yes,” he said, “it does.”

I beamed. I didn't have to act anymore. It was official. I'd given him the right answers to regain freedom.

The doctor had a three-minute meeting to discuss schizophrenia treatment with my parents. Mom and Dad wobbled from the room, as if leaving a funeral. Dad's arm was around Mom's shoulder. The doctor gave them a website to learn more about the illness. As they left the room, he wrote in his personal notes: *Spent much time educating about Schizophrenia & its fx. Will d/c Paxil & Concerta. Will send PT home w/ RX for Effexor & Geodon. PT has “heard voices” for ~ 2 years.*

I signed papers at the front desk and walked out the hospital with my parents a

free man. On the ride back to Lawrence, under her breath, Mom kept reading the same sentences over and over again from her schizophrenia printout, like there was a scratch on this logic and her Discman brain kept skipping over it.

*Schizophrenia is a serious mental disorder. It is an ailment that makes it difficult to tell the difference between real and unreal experiences, to make sense of reality, to think logically, to have normal and healthy emotional responses, and to behave acceptably in social situations.*

She didn't look back at me. Her hands trembled. She cleared her throat.

"Thor, your father and I think that it would be best for you to drop out of school and come back to Minnesota with us tomorrow."

"Absolutely not," I said.

"We should talk about this."

"Absolutely not," I repeated. "We can talk about plans over winter break, but I'm not dropping everything to come back on short notice. I need to finish my classes."

She didn't respond.

"I'll take the pills and go to a psychiatrist," I said. "I promise this won't happen again."

"They also want you to go to group therapy," she said.

"Yeah. Okay. Whatever. Fine. I'll do that, too."

At some point during our ride, on a sunny afternoon in Kansas, the young doctor with the shiny wedding ring returned to his office. He opened a word document and typed:

*A 19-year-old single Caucasian male admitted 10/10/03 with increased*

*depression and suicidal ideation. The patient also reported cutting self approximately 1 time per month for the past 4 years, more frequent recently ... On 10/12/03 the patient reported a history of auditory hallucinations, derogatory in nature. The patient's Paxil and Concerta were discontinued. The patient was continued on Effexor for depression and was started on Geodon for psychosis. He was discharged with follow-up treatment. The patient's suicide watch was discontinued as he denied any thoughts of harming self or others and stated he would be safe outside the hospital.*

***Principal Diagnosis:*** PARANOID TYPE SCHIZOPHRENIA

***Secondary Diagnoses:*** ALCOHOL ABUSE

### 3. APPEARANCES

Lawrence, KS.

Sunday October 12, 2003.

5:35 P.M.

It was sunny outside my eighth floor dorm window. Pleasant, in fact, as it always was. Postcard weather. *Greetings from the prairie*, it would proclaim between a cordial sun and crunchy brown grass. *Fucking Kansas*, I thought. T-shirt and gym short weather 300 days a year. Nuance is more important in land than people, I believed. Choose to live on land with personality, I thought, land that changes and evolves and interacts with you. I leaned on the cool metal sill and gazed down at the lazy oak in front of my dorm. Its branches formed a broken umbrella over the co-ed reading a textbook beneath it. I was used to four distinct seasons, lakes in all directions, and giddy anticipation for spring thaw. I was used to deference when I told people I was from Minnesota, as though that fact made me 1-percent more interesting. By contrast, Kansas was utterly dull. Between the consistent weather, the perfect rectangular geographical shape, the position at the center of the United States, the paper-flat topography and lack of reservoirs, I viewed it at the time as a friend of convenience. Yes, Kansas, I enjoy that you're located far from home and allow me to read novels on the grass most of the year. It's just that you aren't that interesting—we don't have a lot in common. That day, I eyed a typical cloudless blue sky, thankful for privacy.

She was mousy and sinister, the pointy-nosed shrew on the third floor distracting

my new roommate, a better-looking Evil Queen from Snow White. But she enticed Adam with hand jobs, not apples, and forced him to watch Mandy Moore movies instead of magic mirrors. When I started scraping at my wrists and required seclusion, I altered my strategy when Adam asked for advice. Instead of telling him he could do better, I made a thinking face and said things like, “College is about getting consistent pussy,” and, “She’s an 11.”

“An 11?” Adam asked.

“Blackjack,” I said impatiently. “You hit 11 every time.”

He was confused and I had no time for confusion, so I turned my head back to an online article about the Minnesota Vikings. It’s fortuitous that I only had one roommate in college. Adam was a salt-of-the-earth good man, but I couldn’t fucking stand that he didn’t quickly understand word play, double entendres or metaphors. It took me years to sand down that brand of pettiness. Adam never forgave me for it. He impregnated a woman on a one-night stand a few years later. I saw pictures of his baby on Facebook. In college, Adam quantified his parent’s conservative values vaguely. He said things like, “They are the only republicans in Austin,” or “Look—I’m a republican. But I’m not the type of republican that my parents raised me to be.” I sent Adam a few Facebook messages, but he never wrote back. I wanted to be there for him like he’d been there for me. The problem with accepting solace over and over again without expressing gratitude is that the other party will never trust your ability to be magnanimous again. If I were Adam, I would have cut me out of his life far sooner.

Standing in front of the mirror with a bottle of concealer Mom gave me in high school, Adam was gone, and for that I was grateful. I tipped a dab of cream that smelled

like concentrated gunpowder on my finger. I didn't spend much time in front of the mirror at the psych ward, preferring to preserve a mental image of myself as a falsely imprisoned civilian, rather than a beat-up loony in scrubs. A vein had burst in my sclera and the iris of my left eye looked frightened, a powder blue marble floating in a glass of Cabernet. My left eyebrow drooped like an awning. The bone above my cheek had taken the biggest punch—or had it been a kick? I ran my finger across the squishy ball. *Nasty contusion you got there*, a friendly orderly said in Topeka. I thought about replying, *You should have seen the other guy*, but instead looked at him coolly until his smile faded.

I rubbed in peach cream, making sure, as Mom taught me, to apply an even amount to each area. My skin turned from the color of a ripe Concord grape to the tinge of a fingernail. The growth had the give of a stress ball. Blood and cartilage moved around as I smeared, making it impossible to get consistent strokes on it. I quickly gave up, frustrated, and side-armed the container across the room. It bounced off the carpet and slammed against my desk. I splashed water on my face, washed it clean.

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Two months earlier, my parents drove me to Lawrence, lugging up bedding and Minnesota Twins pennants. My new roommate wasn't there, but he had already unpacked, claiming the bed closest to the window. His bedspread was black with yellow stars and he'd hung a black curtain over the window. A string of purple lights snaked across the wall over his desk. I gave my mom a *What the Fuck?* face and she responded with a resolute *Be understanding, Thor, you're an adult now*, face. Mom and Dad checked into a hotel and I met my roommate Mitchell Papich. Still remember getting the card in the mail with that name. My baby brother, Will, told me that Mitchell would

either be my best friend or a serial killer who rigged hidden cameras around the room. Mitchell's teeth were as yellow as the stars and his curly black hair reached his shoulders. He told me he was a magician and asked if I wanted to see some new tricks he was working on. He produced a deck and made a card disappear by slipping it into his long sleeve. He looked intently at me.

“Can you figure it out?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said. I changed the subject, asked him if he wanted a beer. I'd smuggled eight cans south in my suitcase. He said he didn't drink.

Still a month away from switching roommate assignments, I sprawled on my bed, remembering what I thought my first night of college would be like—parties, girls, a roommate with a big-screen TV and a bottle of Grey Goose. My parents were in a hotel a mile away, but I couldn't call them. Nobody wanted to hear about my depression or the petty shit that needled it.

Las Vegas, I thought as I laid in bed—that's where all of this started. My friend the quarterback and I had made one of those pacts that high school seniors make before spring break: *We both need to be single for Vegas. Vegas, baby. Vegas.* And so we were. It felt honorable to break up with Krista before college. I didn't want to be one those guys that drove home every few weeks to see his high school girlfriend. In my mind, four months was an adequate amount of time to get over a 16-month relationship. Someone told me that: *You need to mourn one day for every four you were together.* When summer came, loneliness came with it. Krista was dating a 21-year-old. I pled with her to take me back, apologizing for my callousness. For the first time, my pain had an all-consuming focus. I didn't care about the way I acted, didn't care about what I said to other people. I

didn't care that I drank in a field at a party until I puked out of my nose near a bonfire.

After two weeks of agony—embarrassingly, I actually referred to it as such—convinced I was depressed, I decided to take a shortcut to recovery. There are no shortcuts to moving on, of course, an idea that eventually made *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* one of my favorite movies. Memories, like people, can't be erased, but emotions, instinctive states of mind and the chemicals that cause them, can be dulled. I'd found solace in psychiatry once before. I would do so again.

One night early that summer, I called my dad downstairs with one goal in mind: Get on an anti-depressant. I had never before felt that stabbing sensation in my chest unique to rejection. I wanted it gone. Dad and I sat on the crisp red comforter covering my bed. We never had serious conversations. I saved those for Mom. She and I understood each other. Dad and I, however, had difficulty relating to each other on an emotional level. We related to each other in a different way. He and I often discussed potential Twins' offseason strategies and debated about whether *Red Sonja*—his choice—or *Terminator*—mine—was Arnold Schwarzenegger's best movie. My dad is sincere to a comedic length. My brother asks him questions like “If Texas invaded New England, which side would win?” and giggles while Dad calculates the population and gross revenue of each side. Dad was an easy mark.

“Dad, I'm not doing well,” I said. “You've probably noticed. This is embarrassing, but I wanted to talk to you. I feel... I feel like shit. My thoughts are really negative.”

Dad was a pharmacist. His medicine drawer teemed with bottles treating depression, anxiety, acid reflux, IBS and stress-related insomnia. And that was just what I



knew of. Dad nodded, urging me to continue.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said, “but I think it might be depression. Maybe what I’m feeling is just a temporary thing, but that’s what I’ve been thinking for the last few months. I just keep feeling awful.”

The skin of Dad’s face seemed to drip downward, the realization that he’d passed mental illness to his first-born. A kind person would have stopped. A kind person would have consoled him. I’ll never forgive myself for using Dad’s expression to go in for the kill.

“I thought maybe you could make an appointment for me with Dr. Delesante,” I said. “Maybe you could tell her receptionist it’s about these feelings I’ve been having.”

Four times a year I met Dr. Delesante to get my Ritalin refilled. She was an easier mark than Dad, doling out prescriptions as if on commission.

Dad put his hand on my knee and squeezed. I flinched—Dad and I didn’t touch except for high fives after Torii Hunter home runs or Randy Moss touchdowns.

“Hang in there,” he said. “We’ll get you all the help you need.”

Dad’s father worked at a lumberyard in Crosby, Minnesota, in the 60’s. Papa came home after 10-hour days looking for a warm dinner and silence. When my dad had a son, he promised his wife things would be different in his family.

There’s no blueprint for being a father, no perfect way to foster the idea of manhood in your son. Dad resented the stoicism of his father. Papa grew up in Crosby. To me, my grandfather embodied my home state. Every since I’d known him, he refused to speak at dinner unless we spoke of The War, which had given him memories, a bullet wound in the foot and a medal. Emotional withdrawal, a psychiatrist might call it, but I

romanticized his rough exterior. It brought to mind our Midwesterners abandonment issues. We lived in the tundra because no one else would. Minnesota was the state of Scandinavian conformity and vicious weather. Papa seemed to understand this when he loaded up his plate with sauerkraut at The Sawmill Inn and scooped it into his mouth silently during lunch. Papa's demeanor reminded me of the nostalgic bent to Minnesota's F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote: "The sentimental person thinks things will last — the romantic person has a desperate confidence that they won't." Papa would have loved Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*, recorded in a Minneapolis studio by a boy who grew up on the Iron Range, if he had ever listened to music. Papa would have respected Dylan's moxie, laying himself bare in the greatest breakup album of all-time after Dylan's marriage fell apart. Papa didn't talk about emotions. He left those back in Germany, watching his friends die. Next time I see him, I'm going to buy Papa a CD player and Dylan's *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, which has several songs about Minnesota and the Iron Range drying up. To Papa, the world is comprised of Minnesota and War. He doesn't leave the state.

Conversely, I often took for granted the easy-going benevolence of my father. Perhaps I did so because Dad's nature allowed him to be manipulated by his children, or maybe I resented it because I perceived it to be a convenient way to pass the responsibility of rearing us to my mother. If Mom denied us kids the permission to go to a concert in the Cities, we sought out Dad, argued our case, and split the parental vote. That wasn't fair to their marriage, I understand now, though their union survived our petty machinations. Dad's business persona was incompatible with the perception I had of my father at home. He fired employees, maniacally double and triple checked

inventory and created innovative systems to undercut his competition, such as manufacturing generic versions of popular drugs. I didn't see most of this. That was his other life. What I saw instead was Mom's imposition of mandatory one-hour study sessions every school night, her ban of television during the week, and the myriad of contracts she made us sign, such as the Car Agreement, which called for the surrendering of keys if we got a speeding ticket. Years later, after Dad retired, he started attending three Alcoholics Anonymous meetings per week. I never saw him drink until after I went to college. I've never asked if the trauma I was about to put him through accelerated his anxiety to the point that his glove compartment became filled with mini bottles of vodka and the boxes on his workbench became stuffed with cognac. He would spare my feelings either way; would probably say work-related stress pushed him to drink. I don't think I would believe him.

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Sunday night was *Sundae Night* at the Naismith Hall cafeteria. I gave myself a final once-over in the mirror. *Don't worry. Everyone's gonna think it's badass. Two cop cars, remember? You have a Hannibal Lector thing going now.* My reflection wasn't as confident.

I filled my tray and lingered over the ice cream station. Two girls huddled as I passed, one shielding her mouth. The stoners I fought with Thursday were nowhere to be seen. My friends sat at the last table on the right, facing the flat screen on the wall. Every week we came to Sundae Night at 6:30 on the dot, just after the second set of NFL games ended and the highlight shows began. They exchanged looks as I approached.

I set down my tray. They were quiet. They were never quiet. I tried to think of a

joke and started to panic. I'd spent 30 minutes unsuccessfully applying makeup to hide a black eye from a roomful of people who'd seen me get my ass kicked, but I hadn't given a second's thought to preparing for this interaction. Adam gave me a resigned nod, the kind you get at funerals. I didn't know how to interpret that. I wondered if he'd been defending me while I was gone. Maybe he'd talked shit.

"Boys, I hope you survived the weekend without me," I said.

They nodded, waiting for me to talk. I didn't know where to start, so I asked about the Jayhawks' football game. Dane said that our fat coach should be fired. Donnie said a heart attack would get him first. Justin said football only mattered in the south. It bought five minutes.

*You should tell them. But it's not their business. It is. They are your friends. I don't owe them shit, we barely know each other. Friendship is based on trust. Now you're just stating a fact. These are your schizo voices arguing. We are schizo voices.*

I almost laughed, realizing it for the first time, a eureka moment. Doc was right: I was a real-life crazy person.

*It's going to be this giant unstated thing between all of you until you say something. It's as awkward for them as it is you. So they know you got your ass kicked and hauled off in handcuffs. So what? They probably think you were in the Johnson County Jail.*

"I have schizophrenia," I blurted.

Adam's fork hovered, Dane stopped chewing. I blasted words at the silence.

"That's what they said after I got taken away. A doctor said that, I mean. They brought me—the police brought me—to a hospital after the fight. Probably for detox, or

something. I'm not sure. I guess I was still pretty riled up so they brought me to another hospital in Topeka. It was like jail. They had a TV but they didn't let me watch football. They made me stay there until I saw a shrink. On Friday I ate dinner with a girl who sliced open her arms. Looked like your type, Donnie. I finally saw a doctor this morning. He said I have schizophrenia. Pretty random, right?"

Adam rearranged his food and Donnie pretended to watch highlights. Dane finally spoke.

"Schizophrenia? Isn't that where you see people who aren't there?"

"Not for me, no."

"What is it then?"

"An illness of genius," I said. "Think Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*, minus Jennifer Connelly and the creepy rooms full of random newspaper articles and shit. But seriously, how cool is the black eye? Pretty fucking badass, right?"

Laughter melted my anxiety. I wondered why I had worried in the first place. This was my freshman year—of course I thought we were best friends and would be forever.

"Dude, we came down when people started running outside and saw the end of it," Justin said. "You looked like the kid in Jerry Maguire taking on a group of Mike Tyson's."

"I got in a few shots!" I protested.

"Shots?" Dane said. "You missed your target more than Stevie Wonder at a shooting range."

"Good to see nothing has changed," I said. "Your pop culture references are still stuck in the same time period as when you slid out of mommy's womb."

“And you took more shots,” he said, “than the last girl Donnie successfully date raped.”

Justin gripped imaginary drumsticks and flicked his wrists through the air, *Ba-Ba-Choo!* Everything was normal again.

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My parents hugged me goodbye in the parking lot, first child off to college. I went upstairs to work on my beer stash before a mandatory floor meeting. Two hours later, I marched into the common room wanting everyone to know I was the life of the party. I bounced around introducing myself, leaning in an extra few inches so they could smell Coors Light on my breath. There was an open spot on a couch next to the magician and he looked at me expectantly. He wore a long, baggy black sweatshirt that looked like a cloak and prescription glasses that darkened when he went outside. Already embarrassed to be his roommate, I didn't want to be associated with him socially in this pivotal first-impression moment. Instead I sat across the room next to a guy from New Orleans. Dane spoke with a drawl and had a southern haircut called “Bama Bangs,” which was basically a bull cut.

“I hear Lawrence has quality hairdressers that can help with your problem,” I said.

“Dude, you're from fucking Canada,” Dane said. “It must be different seeing people without Mounthy hats on. In America, this is how people look.”

“I've seen vaginas with better haircuts than that,” I said.

“I'll make sure to send an electric shaver up north with you over Christmas break so your mom can get that fixed,” he said.

After that, I spent most of my free time in the suite he shared with Justin and Arturo, high school friends from The Big Easy. I exclusively referred to New Orleans as The Big Easy because they said that nickname was lame and I liked getting under their skin. Dane roomed with Justin, Arturo roomed with Donnie. Donnie's real name was Nick. He was from Mankato, Kansas, population 400-something. His dad was rich and had KU basketball season tickets. Donnie was the kind of guy that tried hard and said the wrong things, so we nicknamed him after Steve Buscemi's character in *The Big Lebowski*. He drove a shiny new Dodge truck and had a nice liquor selection in the mini fridge.

Dane drew detailed pencil sketches of giant dicks rammed into our assholes and taped them to the bathroom walls. Justin retaliated with his own drawings of Dane sucking off our RA, taking it in the ass from James Carville, and wiping a smiling Bill Clinton's cum off his mouth.

One Saturday Dane's LSU Tigers lost a big football game and I ran around the floor yelling in an obnoxious Cajun accent "Laissez les bons temps rouler!", French for "Let the good times roll!" By way of revenge, he composed his masterpiece. Dane bought poster board and Crayola markers. He drew me with giant veiny dicks coming out of my mouth, ass, belly button, ears, and nostrils. I held giant pointy dick swords and wore dick glasses. *Thor: God of Cumder* he called it, signing his name at the bottom. Dane walked in on Justin and I admiring his work, beer in hand.

"Well played," I said.

"Eat a dick, Canada," he said.

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After we finished our sundaes and dumped our trays, Dane returned to his room and researched schizophrenia on the Internet. He knocked on my door Monday afternoon. He wasn't smiling when I opened the door.

"It's not a big deal, man," I said. "I just have to take a couple pills a day and see a psychiatrist and go to a group meeting at the hospital once a week."

"But you hear voices?"

"It's just the way I think my thoughts. I guess they don't think it's normal. But really it isn't that interesting."

"I didn't... I never would have... I mean, you know what I mean," he said. "I didn't know..."

"I'm OK," I said. "Seriously."

"You ever want to talk about it, you'll let me know, yeah?"

"Thanks," I said.

"If you ever need to stay in, or anything like that, like not go to a party or whatever—know that I would totally hang out with you back here," he said.

"I appreciate that, thanks man," I said. "Let's play PlayStation."

I was embarrassed by his sincerity. He was a better friend than I ever would be in return. I think we both realized that.

"Sure," he said.

I've lived a lesser life for brushing him aside that day. Dane could be an asshole, but you might meet 25 people in your entire life that give a shit. Your job is to identify them and not let them go. I haven't talked to Dane in years.

That night I typed "PYSCHOPHRENIA" into Google. It corrected my spelling.



*The symptoms of a schizophrenic may not be initially noticeable. For example, the patient may feel tense, have trouble sleeping, or have difficulty sustaining concentration. He/She may become isolated and withdrawn and have trouble sustaining interpersonal relationships. Those afflicted with the disorder often are social outcasts and suffer in maintaining friendships or romantic relationships.*

*That's not you at all, I thought as I ran my hand through my hair. Well, I suppose you have problems concentrating. You do have ADHD. To be fair, you can also be a dick.*

*Symptoms of a paranoid schizophrenic include anger, anxiety, argumentativeness, delusions of grandeur, delusions of persecution, an extreme propensity towards physical violence and self-injurious behavior.*

I studied my scabbed wrists. The only criterion I didn't meet was delusions of grandeur. I felt worthless.

*Schizophrenia is a complex illness. Experts in the field of mental health, in fact, are not sure what causes it. Some believe that the brain may not be able to process information correctly. Most agree that genetic factors play a role. Those who have family members with schizophrenia are more likely to become afflicted with the disease themselves.*

*Perhaps you're the start of a genealogical phenomenon, I thought.*

*Some psychiatrists believe that events in a person's life may trigger schizophrenia. Doctors are in agreement that psychological and social factors also affect schizophrenia's development. The level of social and family support appears to affect the course of illness and may protect against the condition returning.*

In high school, I had a girlfriend, played football and worked for the local newspaper. But as I thought about it more—*Where are your friends now? Where is your girlfriend? You don't play football anymore, you don't write. You are 600 miles from home, lonely. You're an outcast. Maybe the cozy house you grew up in led you to believe differently, but you're not normal.*

*Schizophrenia usually begins earlier in life, often in a person's late-teens or early-20s.*

Check.

*Schizophrenia is believed to affect about 1% of people worldwide.*

The word that popped into my head at that moment was: *Badass*. I wouldn't think so for much longer.

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I shook pills from orange bottles each morning. I didn't then know what they did, but I do now. Geodon is an antipsychotic agent that treats schizophrenia, Effexor is an antidepressant, Concerta is for ADHD and Trazodone is part sedative, part antidepressant. I swallowed them with orange juice at breakfast. Walking to class, I felt them enter my blood stream, minnow-sized piranhas. Molecules reached my brain, the inverse of a junkies fix. My eyelids sagged. Muscles quivered. I slouched. People moved slowly and words didn't make sense. Nausea pains in morning classes caused sweat to pour down my cheeks. I would leave the room and puke in a restroom stall or gulp water until it passed. Seemed like a necessary tradeoff to cure psychosis. Even if I wanted to stop taking the pills, I had become subservient to the psychiatrists. I wasn't used to respecting authority, but I figured that ideology had led to 19 years of suffering from

undiscovered schizophrenia. Dad sent me bottles of high strength antacids to counteract the side effects. Tropical flavored Tums, nighttime Tylenol, Advil, GoodSense Acid Reducers and tins of Altoids filled my backpack. I sounded like a coin machine as I walked around campus.

Dr. Delesante, acting remotely from Minnesota as my home psychiatrist, changed my anti-psychotic medication from Geodon to Risperdal in October even though we hadn't spoken since I moved. Medical documents were faxed from Kansas and she didn't like Geodon. I received packages from Nystrom Thrifty White Drug, Dad's store. There was no difference between Risperdal and Geodon that I could tell.

I forgot my brother's twelfth birthday. Mom called the next day and I lied, said I'd sent a card. I was going to buy a gift, but I started surfing the Internet and couldn't remember why I was on eBay. I never had enough space. Everyone was always so close. I sat in aisle seats on the campus bus and stood if it filled. I wanted to be in a position to bolt from the bus if too many people got on, not forced to brush shoulders with a passenger who rubbed snot from a red nostril as if nobody could notice. For the first time in my life, I watched Vikings games and couldn't remember who wore number 86 or who started at left guard. In high school, I dazzled friends by correctly answering most questions on ESPN trivia shows. A year later, I could barely consider a response before the host revealed the answer. My skin was oily to the touch. Pimples grew on my knees and crotch and back. I forgot what television show I was watching when it went to commercial. I gained 15 pounds in two weeks. My sentences trailed off. At some point, time lost importance and autumn ceased to exist. Interchangeable: Tuesday, Friday, Sunday. Same, the sleeping and the waking.

The psychiatrist in Topeka had referred me to a weekly day treatment facility in Lawrence. I met other schizophrenics, as well as sufferers of obsessive-compulsive disorder, bulimia, bipolar disorder, and postpartum depression. I was assigned a Lawrence psychiatrist out of central casting. He was bald and bearded and wore fuzzy wool cardigans.

“Your brain is adapting,” he said when I asked about the vomiting, the memory loss. “We preach patience. Developing brains need at least four-to-six weeks of acclimation before a determination can be made on a medication’s efficacy.”

“Fair,” I said and slid down the leather chair.

“All chemical imbalances are different,” he explained, adjusting his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “This is an art, not a science. The medication just needs time.”

I trusted his vague shrink-speak—*your brain is adapting*—but didn’t understand his clinical jargon.

“But how do you know I’m on the best medication for this?” I asked. “Is it just wait and see? Or?”

“Schizophrenia is a complex illness,” he said. “Maybe you’ve heard of the dopamine hypothesis? Perhaps your doctor in Topeka spoke to you about it? Comprehension of the theory is more complicated, perhaps, than understanding the illness itself, which sometimes is par for the course with these things.”

He chuckled. I didn’t realize he’d told a joke but I politely laughed like I understood anyway.

“In a lot of ways, your brain is special, Thor, and I want you to remember that” he said. “You have hyperactivity in dopaminergic transmissions ... D2 receptors in need of

... projection to the limbic system ... neurotransmitters such as glutamate and serotonin ... hereditary issues at play, of course, which we've covered, though don't seem to be ... not meaning to be esoteric and I don't intend to bore ... Does all that make even a little bit of sense? I'm sorry for rambling."

"Yeah," I said, glancing at my watch, thankful my time was up. "Totally."

I was the son of a pharmacist and Dad was the most honorable man I knew. His job was to make people better. When I was a kid, his job seemed mystical. After school, I'd sit behind the counter in his store eating a candy bar as an old man asked Dad about wheezing coughs that were keeping him up at night. Dad would ask a series of questions and then gently grasp the elderly man's shoulder and lead him down an aisle to the box that would fix his problem. Drugs paid for me to go to college. I didn't think about it like that at the time—perhaps I began repressing this brand of cause-and-effect after I was released from the hospital in Topeka—but that was the truth. At its best, pharmacology's job is to erase our pain, make us forget. Writing forces the author to remember pain, purge it. Suffer into truth. This is the truth: My family's name—Nystrom—represented the facilitation of medication in Brainerd. Nystrom Drug, Dad's store, was the most successful pharmacy within a 30-mile radius of town. Nystrom and Associates, my uncle Brian's private practice, was one of the largest psychiatric businesses in the state.

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I brought a water bottle filled with vodka to a Wednesday night science lab. I sat at a table with three girls and sipped on it during the 30-minute lecture by a dorky T.A. The girls smacked gum and checked cell phones under the table.

"And so, you see, hydrogen peroxide foams when it interacts with certain

materials,” the T.A. said. “Our little experiment today will be to test just why we think oxygen bubbles form organic matter.”

“Chlorophyll?” I said, using my best *Billy Madison* voice. “More like bore-o-fill.”

He was confused but I got laughs so I didn’t care. He continued.

“Catalase is an enzyme found in most living things. What we will do next is drop hydrogen peroxide on the outsides and insides of tomatoes and potatoes. If you do well with that, we’ll try a piece of liver. Your group should record everything that you observe.”

“Should that include documentation of Lucy here welching off our group work?”

I said. “This is bullshit. We want to trade her. We’ll accept rental of any group’s Bunsen Burner in exchange.”

The class laughed. The T.A. wanted to fit in, so he nervously laughed, too. He passed out beakers and potatoes and tomatoes from a crate. I took charge and dumped all our chemicals on the potato. The girls tired of me. I said I’d work ahead on the tomato but I dropped a beaker and it shattered. I picked up glass shards and cut my hand. The T.A. asked me to speak with him in the hallway.

“What’s in your water bottle?” he said.

“Water,” I slurred.

“Water, huh?”

“Sometimes I get thirsty in class,” I said. “Can I go back and continue experimenting? My group depends on me.”

He smiled at me like he was in on some inside joke and waved me back in. A week later he asked me if anyone was going out after class.

I can convincingly argue, even to myself, that the parking lot fight began the odyssey to suicide. But it's a lie. I know that. I want to blame the pills, or the alcohol, or the police officer, or the initial diagnosis, or the scores of diagnoses to come, or the swarm of psychiatrists. That's a healthy mindset, at first. It allows you to believe there's nothing ugly inside you, convinces you there's no chance you'll be locked in an institution again. You were the victim of a series of mistakes by professionals, a shitty mathematical anomaly. But that condemnation begins to eat at you, as months go by, because you know it's ascribing false guilt to preserve your fragile mindset. My understanding of those years has become more lucid with time. If you're willing to assassinate your personality to satiate a lust for popularity or power, you shouldn't be surprised when the secondary entity you've worked so hard to cultivate takes over. Terminating that monster requires far more time than creating it.

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Dane gossiped and news spread quickly through Naismith Hall. I never blamed him. Schizophrenia. Something about that word. When asked about my illness I would play the self-deprecating clown for a stanza and change the subject.

“So,” a sorority girl said after she downed too many shots from a handle of Raspberry Smirnoff, “I heard something about you.”

“It's true,” I said. “I have the biggest Richard Pryor on campus.”

We sat on a Navajo patterned rug in a strange dorm room. Her friends in tank tops giggled. The guys cradled red plastic cups of whiskey and ice cubes. I didn't mind the subject if I was drunk and the interested party was a girl.

“We heard you hear voices,” another girl said.

A guy in plaid spit tobacco into a pop can.

I subscribed to a quote-of-the-day email service that just so happened to send out a Jim Morrison quotation the week before: “Some people hear their own inner voices with great clearness. And they live by what they hear. Such people become crazy... or they become legend.” More and more I romanticized the notion that I was a tortured genius.

“That’s true,” I said.

“What do they sound like,” a shy girl said.

“Abbott and Costello,” I said. “Mickie and Minnie. Yoko and John. Rocky and Bullwinkle. Tom and Jerry...”

Everyone but the shy girl laughed.

“...Beavis and Butthead. Brooks and Dunn. Donnie and Marie...”

The shy girl was embarrassed but I was drunk and mentally ill—I didn’t care. The next morning, when I woke, sober, a part of me wanted to seek her out to apologize. I convinced myself that contrition, consistent stabs of conscience, was weakness. I’d been fascinated by the idea of weakness since Jesse Ventura, my Minnesota governor, visited Mississippi Horizons when I was in seventh grade. His best quote was repeated in the weight room as the high school football team did squats—*Pain is weakness leaving the body*. At least I *thought* it was Ventura’s best quote. Apparently he ripped it off from the Marines Corps, which dispenses grey T-shirts with that saying to potential recruits and uses it in advertisements. Either way, I replayed that quote in my head as I did pull-ups until my biceps quit and I slipped off the bars. I began identifying the best traits my father had passed on to me—compassion, selflessness, attentiveness, and altruism—as frailty,



weaknesses to be eliminated.

“...Starsky and Hutch. Laurel and Hardy. Olive Oil and Popeye. Chip and Dale.”

“You *are* crazy,” the guy in plaid said.

“Fuckin’ A’,” I said.

Reconciling that the diagnosis became who I was—unraveling whatever self-identity I retained after going to college—allows me to forgive that 19-year-old kid for nearly ending my life. His defects are still alive in me. I search for those flaws, excavate them, quantify them. That cutthroat frailty grasps my chest every day.

*You’re wearing a tie, in grad school at the University of Iowa, at a party on Brown Street hosted by a poet in the Writer’s Workshop. Everyone sips from wine glasses. Most wear thick, dark-rimmed glasses. You’re in a small apartment with almost no furniture, but you understand that you’re supposed to consider this aesthetic “minimalist,” chic, even, though you’re annoyed because your knees are aching and you just want to sit down. Your classmates—colleagues, you’ve been told to call them—circle the room bragging about their most recent publication. You congratulate them, clink your tumbler against their wine glasses. All you want to do is go home, pour a finger of scotch and watch the Twins. But you can’t. You’re at Iowa now, your ex-girlfriend once told you. These parties aren’t mandatory, but attendance is expected. So instead, as you stand dumbly in the center of the room, you entertain the next best idea: Retrieve your bottle of Beam, carry it around the room, make a show of taking pulls, show these stodgy pricks that their reality is a sham. Get blasted and rip off this stupid fucking tie. Light a cigarette inside and tell them you’d never heard of Montaigne until you got to Iowa City. Nobody else has either. Tell that guy in the Harry Potter glasses and Mr. Belding outfit*

*that no one outside the room we're standing in knows of the literary magazine that's printing his lyric meditation on cicadas. You're agitated, on the road to another panic attack, so you excuse yourself politely and find a bathroom. You drink from a rusted faucet, put your cheeks under the stream. You look at the blue eyes staring back at you from a spotted mirror and tell them this is who you are now. This is your life. You better walk the fuck back out there and be yourself. You aren't in the institution anymore. You belong here, at this party, in this program. Your gaze wavers as you say it, so you force your eyes back to the mirror and whisper it until you believe it—You belong, you belong. You belong here, Thor, you belong. You don't want to tell The Writers that your favorite authors are Bill Simmons and Chuck Klosterman. You don't want to tell them that blasting Lil' Wayne, Eminem and T.I. helps you concentrate while you write. It's none of their business. But you are going to force yourself to do so, because you know exactly where your contrived personas got you—they got you into drunken brawls, they got you a cabinet full of pills, they got you into group therapy with people you barely recognized as people, they got you bloated, they got you in a garage for the night with the engine running. If The Writers insult you later on, that's outside your control. When you're told about the insult by a third party—"Chelsea said she doesn't even know why you're here; she thinks you're a wannabe jock and said some mean things about your work that you don't need to hear... Crazy right?"—your face better project that seizing inside your chest, because you do feel a stabbing sensation in your chest cavity every time it's repeated to you that you aren't respected. If you were them, you wouldn't respect you either. They're right. You're a sportswriter. You only have one year left here, you tell those blue eyes. You control no narrative, my friend. Your autonomy is standing right in*

*front of you.*

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“Frost,” my English professor said in slow motion. His mouth moved but his words were mashed potatoes, mush. “New England... a biblical... tonally... little nuggets... investigates... use of...”

Suddenly Professor Burton stopped talking and turned to me. I had been staring at him like his face was playing *Eraserhead*. I wanted to explain to everybody that I tried really hard to pay attention. This wasn't my fault. Just been a rough couple weeks. My stomach is being eaten away at. Look here, that *Space Balls* alien is going to rip through my shirt and dance on the desk. I couldn't make it through the reading. I stared at the words in my dorm room, but they didn't make complete sentences. Show me your books and let me see the sentences you got.

“Um, sorry?” I said and prepared to concentrate harder than I ever had.

“I said in what sense do you think the farm was home for Silas?” Professor Burton said.

Who the fuck was Silas?

“This is a poem about relationships... you know?” I said. “And Frost is trying to impress upon, upon the reader... that... Silas has a void that is, um, I guess filled symbolically by the farm.”

“OK,” he said. “What section of the text can you point to that led you to this reading?”

“Just a sec,” I said.

I leafed through the book. I wiped a sleeve across my forehead. I sat in a puddle.

Inkblots smeared every page. Professor Burton lost patience as I flipped furiously.

“It’s... um... I’m just having a little problem finding...”

“Let me make it easier,” he said. “How would you define ‘home’ in this poem?”

“It’s the place where the characters feel at peace,” I said.

“Who can help your classmate?” Professor Burton said, elongating *Who*.

Right then I wanted to charge through the row of desks and stab that motherfucker with my sharpened pencil. Years later, I began teaching classes of my own. One semester, a troubled student, years older than the other sophomores in the introductory writing course, insisted on wearing sunglasses in class. I made the mistake of asking him if he wouldn’t mind taking them off during discussions. The man threatened me and sent a series of email rants before he was removed from the class. He terrified me, even though I knew he was harmless. His “threat” consisted of menacing gestures as he cursed me out and his e-rants were more unintentionally funny than menacing. But that didn’t stop me from having a panic attack on the day he was finally expelled from the class. I excused myself and stood in a bathroom stall until I stopped shaking. I knew my fear was a projection. I realized the man probably hated me as deeply as I had once hated my professor. I figured he was on recreational drugs. What I really feared was that he was also on pharmaceutical drugs.

Professor Burton returned our Frost essays a few weeks later. He gave me a 74 and wrote: “Thor- This was a borderline “A”-quality paper, but you omitted your thesis statement, and, worse, you just left that sentence as a fragment without punctuation. Like we talked about before, you just can’t turn in papers with those types of mistakes in college.” It wasn’t as though I wanted to turn in a paper without a thesis. I’d read over the

paper slowly several times before I turned it in. Maybe I soured on my original thesis and forgot to fill in the space. Maybe I inadvertently hit the delete button as I clicked print. Maybe I hallucinated a thesis statement. I thought about telling Professor Burton I was a schizophrenic after class, but I had been humiliated enough.

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“I’ve told you to stop calling me,” Krista said.

“But I need to tell you something important,” I said. I could smell her breath over the line, peppermint toothpaste and strawberry Chapstick.

“So I’m special *now*, Thor? I never felt that way when we were together. You need to understand something. I’m with someone else. I don’t like you anymore.”

“Do you fuck him?”

“Yes.”

“Is he good?”

“He’s really good. Most times he doesn’t even take off my bra.”

“Do you let him come inside you?”

“Well, yeah. I’m on the pill now.”

“Just listen to me, for one minute,” I said. “I will change. I promise.”

“I heard you were in a psych ward down there.”

“Who told you that? What does that have to do with anything?”

“You need to get help,” she said. “But I can’t talk now. Nate is going to be here soon and I have to get ready.”

“Come visit. I’ve changed. You’ll see.”

“I’m sorry, OK?” she said. “I have to go.”

I wanted her to go comatose over what she'd done, wanted to hurt her like the time her dad walked out. Show me that face again like that night we were in the basement and we heard your mom stumble in drunk with a man from the bar—they made it to the couch and I watched you listen to them clumsily go at it. Together we watched your mom drunkenly fuck her way through the divorce.

I lay in bed, face quivering inches from the wall. I don't like to remember the person who imagined tying Krista and her boyfriend up in his apartment, lighting them on fire, watching skin melt like grease dripping from a burger. But that's what I did as I had the first panic attack I can remember.

Warm oatmeal erupted from my throat. I choked and spit to clear my mouth. I freed myself from the covers. The wall dripped diarrhea; beef stew from lunch. Carrot chunks and peas dotted the sheets. Now I had to do laundry. Everything was fucked and I couldn't do shit to unfuck it. I cried against the wall until Adam walked in.

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Over fall break Dane, Justin and Arturo flew back to New Orleans and Donnie drove home. It was a Friday night and Adam and I sat on his black futon watching *Blow* and drinking whiskey. Adam had asked me to switch roommate assignments even after the parking lot fight. I moved my stuff out of the magician's room the next day. Adam got up, changed into a suit, and left to go to a frat party.

I slipped a flask into my pocket and took my mug out the door. I started knocking on doors, looking for something to do. The ninth floor was deserted but I walked downstairs and my friend Melissa answered in sweats and glasses.

“Need a study partner?” I asked.

“Doesn’t look like you’ve been hitting the *books* tonight,” she said.

“Lucky guess.”

She waved me towards her roommate Tracy’s bed. Tracy and I didn’t get along, stemming from the time she drunkenly called me an asshole and I drunkenly called her a cow. I believed burning bridges with people I didn’t like was a worthwhile transaction, so I refused to apologize.

I lay on my back staring at the ceiling and giggling at an old prom story of Melissa’s. I heard a key in the lock and the door swung open.

“Why the fuck is he on my bed?” Tracy said.

I started whistling, hands behind my head.

“We were just talking,” Melissa said. “I’m sorry.”

“Get the fuck off my bed,” Tracy said.

“Moooo,” I said.

She opened the closet, pulled out a metal hanger. I reflexively turned onto my stomach as she brought it down, lashing my back. A welt developed, but it didn’t hurt in the moment. I laughed as she whipped me.

“Are you done?” I asked.

“Not until you leave,” she said.

“Then we’re at a standstill,” I said, rolling back onto my back.

“I’ll call the front desk,” she said.

I feigned a yawn and Tracy pulled out her phone. A few minutes later, the night manager—a senior named Steve—was in the room.

“Get off her bed, Thor,” Steve said.

I didn't respond.

"There isn't much else to say here," he said. "Get off her bed or I'm going to remove you from the bed and then I'm going to call the police."

"You're going to remove me?" I said, laughed a drunk's laugh. "You Steve? Dude you're 160 pounds. C'mon."

"I'm going to ask you once more," he said.

"Fuck you Steve."

He yanked my left ankle. I slid a few inches. Once I recovered, I grabbed the covers for leverage and kicked at his wrists. He heaved again. My back hit the floor and my vision went blurry when my head snapped back and bounced off the carpet.

"You're a strong little fucker," I said as he pushed me out the door.

He filled out forms at the front desk.

"Stop writing and I won't call my dad and have charges pressed against you," I slurred. He didn't look up.

"You're a tough guy, eh?" I said. "Big tough guy fighting drunks and writing reports. Big tough guy working on a Friday night. Bet all your friends around campus are devastated by your absence."

"The big, bad freshman that wouldn't leave a girl's room is lecturing me on being tough?" he said as he continued to work through the form.

"I was a guest," I corrected.

"Sign this sheet," he said. "Bottom box."

*Thor Nystrom refused to vacate Room 714 (occupants Tracy Goldstein and Melissa Wentworth) upon request of Ms. Goldstein. RA was notified. Mr. Nystrom, who*



*was drunk, became demonstrative and wouldn't respond to RA's request to vacate.*

I ripped the sheet in half and then ripped the halves in half.

“You got more big words lined up for the next draft?” I said.

“I'm very close to calling the police,” he said. “You are out of warnings.”

“Call them.”

“I'm not joking, Thor,” he said.

“I'm not either,” I said. “In fact, let me do it for you. I'm sick of your empty threats.”

I pulled out my phone.

“911, what's your emergency?” a female voice said.

“Yeah. I'm at Naismith Hall. My name is Thor. Evidently I've caused a disturbance. An RA here keeps threatening to call you and I thought I'd save him the trouble. Here he is.”

I passed the phone across the desk. When Steve heard a voice on the other end, he gave me an *Are you fucking kidding me?* expression. Twenty minutes later, two uniformed officers, one male and one female, knocked on my door.

“Could we speak to you in the common room?” the male officer said.

“Yes sir,” I said.

“The dispatcher said you were the one who called,” the female officer said.

“Officer Brooks and I were talking on the way over. This is a first for us. Why would you do that?”

“I don't know,” I said. “Nobody was treating me with respect. I was on this girl's bed talking to her roommate and the girl just started yelling. And then the RA was

threatening me. I just wanted them to ask nicely. Everything got out of control and I pushed the situation to the worst possible conclusion because I was flustered.”

“That’s honest, at least,” the male officer said. “Have you been drinking tonight?” He asked as officers do, knowing the answer and hoping instead to analyze the method of response.

“Yes sir.”

“Can you estimate how many drinks you’ve had tonight?”

“I’m drunk, sir,” I said.

The officers leaned toward each other and whispered. The female officer told me to go back to my room and go to sleep.

“It won’t be pleasant for you if we’re called again,” she said. “Lock your door and don’t come out again tonight.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

I staggered up and shook hands. Then I was breathing heavily in my room, sitting with my back against a locked door, wondering what the woman would have done had I grabbed her partner’s gun from the holster while we shook. I’m playing with the gun in my mind, transferring it from hand to hand while she shouts, weapon pointed. I could have sped up the natural process, lived a lifetime in those few seconds, seen the intensity in her eyes and the stillness of the barrel. My gun rising and her partner’s hands waving *No* while she’s screaming, but everything is calm and clear. I see dust particles floating in the air and smell the worn fabric of the couch. The barrel is at my temple and I have the blank expression of a pilot blurring down tarmac.

## 4. BLUFFING

Lawrence, KS.

Thursday October 23, 2003.

8:45 P.M.

Yeah, I could have been out at the bars. I could have been at Last Call with Dane, Justin, Arturo, and the rest of the freshmen, spiking my hair, squeezing through crowds, spilling beer, trying to get my dick wet. I *could* have been out, thumping my chest at the exhilaration of youth.

Instead, I sat in a circle next to Donnie in an off-campus house on shag carpet around a towering purple bong. Donnie befriended an upperclassman in ceramics class who invited him over for biweekly pot smoking sessions. After the parking lot fight, Mom made me promise not to go back to Last Call. I wasn't averse to breaking coerced promises, but her points seemed valid. Scanning the dimly lit room, a smoke cloud suspended over the circle, it became clear to me that she was right, even if she didn't understand why. My mind had ripped free of its chains, situating me in a reality without judgment, teachers or doctors, group sessions or pills. I held court in that room as if back in the Brainerd High cafeteria.

"Do you think I watched *Felicity* in high school because it engaged me intellectually?" I said. "Fuck no. I watched it because the girl I liked in Home Ec was doing the same. I watched it because I needed to know that Felicity was our societal archetype of *The Good Girl* and I needed to know that Felicity was sexually active,

because that established a paradigm. That knowledge was worth an hour of my time. People don't consume pop culture to be entertained. It's like with almost anything, I guess—the need to understand lexicon is more important than certain degrees of personal autonomy. No one would agree that they think that way, but it's true, I think.”

I had no idea why I was talking about *Felicity*, but I knew everyone in the room was listening. A girl across the room riffed off my point and by God it appeared as though I'd instigated a real conversation.

*This* was precisely the brand of social acceptance I'd squandered at the dorm. I had reasoned that being interesting meant you had to do or say things that a normal person wouldn't. When I drank, there was an expectation that I would do something outlandish. I challenged strangers to fights and lit cigars in dorm hallways. Once I impressed three girls on the seventh floor who didn't like Adam's girlfriend by smearing a tampon in ketchup and heaving it through her open doorway, onto her bed. That's who I was, mistakenly believing I was accumulating social wealth with each bold display of bravado. What I didn't understand was that creating a persona renders you inherently derivative and boring. I walked the Naismith Hall corridors not as another faceless freshman, not as Thor, but as *The Schizophrenic who'd been arrested twice*. The first time I heard that—that I'd been arrested twice—I corrected the mistake. I had only sort of been arrested once. Soon, I was embellishing details of both incidents. I wanted creative control of that narrative. I always tapered off at the end of a story so the listener's imagination could fill in the gaps. If college life had a director, I wanted him to cast me as a compelling, nuanced vigilante, misunderstood, a good man the audience recognized as a willing rogue.

Marijuana cleared the billowing haze in my mind, I thought at the time. I was surprised, years later, to find that the medical community, or a sect of it, confirmed benefits of pot to those taking anti-psychosis medication. Antipsychotic meds block a specific subtype of the dopamine receptor, D2, but they can also block D2 receptors in areas outside of the mesolimbic pathway, which can worsen symptoms of the specific illness. Blocking these receptors in a teenager who isn't schizophrenic is dangerous, yes, but at the time all I thought was: *My brain won't work*. "The power of cannabis to fight depression is perhaps its most important property," Tod Mikuriya wrote in the *Marijuana Medical Handbook*. I doubt that to be true, but I also can't argue. I haven't found a better use for pot, outside of being able to eat a Dominos pizza in one sitting or perceiving Richard Linklater movies as two-percent more interesting.

While smoking, I re-acquired whatever wit I used to have and used it deliriously. I laughed because I was happy, not because I was pissing on a towel dispenser to drunken cheers. Marijuana didn't poke that knot of anger in my gut antagonized by booze. In the last month, that rage smashed a lamp at a frat party and punched my right fist through a hallway wall.

I sat cross legged, staring at the upperclassman's giant Bob Marley flag, making a mental checklist: Cut down drinking, stop being such a stooge, and smoke more pot. Those were my thoughts when I met Sarah, our knees touching in the circle.

"I would never date anyone younger than me," Sarah said, emerald eyes squinted as she exhaled a gust of smoke. "I only date men over 25. What can a younger guy teach me? Seriously. That's what I don't..."

"You will," I interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“If you’re lucky I will come around on you,” I said. Negging—the act of wrapping a light insult in the package of a compliment—was a new fad in something called the “seduction community.” I had taken to reading online message boards in my free time; the short, simple sentence structures users wrote in were easy for me to understand. My favorite non-sport board dispensed advice about how to attract women. Using disqualification as a conversation starter struck me as counterintuitive and I didn’t understand how a girl wouldn’t see through such an overtly transparent gimmick. Failure is a powerful motivator—I hadn’t been laid in months—so I decided to give it a shot.

“I’m going to need to see more tolerance, though,” I continued. “It’s unbecoming of someone so obviously cultured.”

“I would never, ever date you,” she said.

“Right now everything is great with us,” I said. “It’s all fresh and new and you still like my jokes and we’re in love and everything is wonderful. But you should know that sooner or later we’ll be screaming at each other and then we’ll be in a law firm divvying up kids and assets.”

Baked off my ass, I butchered the *When Harry Met Sally* quote. She giggled anyway. Cat-string theory, another seduction community strategy I’d learned, advised to terminate attention and hope she chased.

“But enough about Sarah,” I said to the group. “What’s going on later tonight?”

An hour later, I had her phone number. One week later, in the same bedroom with Bob Marley’s flag, I sat against the wall with Sarah’s head resting on my chest. I smelled the shampoo in her hair and concentrated as hard as I could, trying to save the memory.

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Seduction forums appealed to me for reasons beyond syntactical simplicity, of course. Instead of studying my course packets, I read about Ross Jeffries, neuro-linguistic programming and speed seduction. I read David D'Angelo and tried to integrate his dating advice—Stop giving approval, Focus on your inner game, Build self image, Become selfish to become generous, Become an expert on self deception, Don't be boring or predictable, Become the most interesting person.

That last idea—*Become the most interesting person*—seemed like a manageable goal. I didn't believe I would date or make high-status friends without forging the most intriguing singularity in every room I entered. That guy, that college freshman, the person I was, wasn't a person at all; he had more in common with the papier mâché pig he made his mother in kindergarten than whoever he was supposed to be. He collected strips of memory and acquired knowledge—movie characters, popular kids in high school, renegades from his favorite books and TV shows, advice from web dating forums—and pasted them onto a mold of his personality. In retrospect I'm humiliated that I actively thought about my persona's creation, thinking myself more clever than my roommate and friends, conceiving of identity with such simplicity, believing individuality and uniqueness to be a creative endeavor, a craft to be worked on.

When my brother Will enrolled at Baylor University, years later, my only advice was *Be yourself, brother*. I repeated it so often—*Be yourself, Willis, promise me that*—that I hoped it would transcend its platitudinous roots. I teach writing, nowadays. I repeat that old writing cliché to my students: Show, don't tell. Show the reader your pain, make them feel it, don't describe it in stock phrases, you'll lose them. You won't forge a

connection because they won't feel that tingle of common experience in their skin. But how do you show, not tell, your baby brother that your worst fear is getting *the* phone call that has me barreling down Highway-35, 85 miles per hour, to visit him in an institution? It's not a realistic fear. Will isn't me. To obsess about him getting committed the entire summer before he left for Texas wasn't rational. Will isn't easily irritated. He doesn't have an anxiety disorder. He has natural charisma; he doesn't need to act out to get attention. He isn't violent. He doesn't require shock value to make you laugh. After a rough day, he doesn't tell his girlfriend that he can't talk until he's had a drink and watched that day's episode of *Pardon the Interruption*. That's me, not him. But it doesn't stop me from calling, checking up, asking how he's doing on the girl front, how classes are going, or if the Heisman Trophy winner, Robert Griffin III, has stopped by his apartment again. Maybe he knows the real reason I'm calling, maybe he doesn't. I just hope that if he ever decides to say *Fuck it* that I'll be his first call.

Deep down I know he's well adjusted. In those moments when I'm alone, late at night, remembering what I did in Lawrence as a 19-year-old when I felt like an outcast, hoping Will isn't suffering the same in Waco, I re-read David Foster Wallace's *This is Water*. Next to my desk, those words—THIS IS WATER—are inscribed in red marker on white paper over blue squiggles, the surf, a picture of three-year-old me at Mill Park in Brainerd taped to it, wearing a blue THOR wool cap with a fuzzy ball on top. Helps me keep perspective without tattooing the words—*This is Water*—on my chest like Guy Pierce in *Memento*. Specifically, when I can't shake the image of Will in handcuffs, I read a paragraph I've probably memorized, though I look it up every time so as not to concede to the OCD diagnosis I was once given: "This is not a matter of virtue," Wallace



says. “It's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self. People who can adjust their natural default setting this way are often described as being "well-adjusted", which I suggest to you is not an accidental term.”

Back in 2003, during the first semester of my freshman year, I *wanted* to be the craziest person in Naismith Hall. I *wanted* to be the lunatic who terrified Lawrence police. That was the throbbing truth. As I frenetically remade the precocious offspring of well-respected parents from a small town in Minnesota into Steve Stifler from *American Pie*—and, yes, I wince at the admission that I patterned my persona on a character Roger Ebert described as: “Proud possessor of a gigantic ego, able to conceive and stage-manage appalling scenarios, incapable of understanding why he is not universally loved, Stifler is, we all secretly know, the character in this movie we like the best. He is so incurably optimistic in the face of the crushing handicap of being himself.”—I was intercepted by an agency that branded me with me a label that shattered whatever coming-of-age singularity I was crafting. Instead of being honest at any point—with my parents, friends, or psychiatrists—I stubbornly charged ahead, an amnesiac who wakes from a coma convinced he is the hospital’s director.

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As a conservative Jew from Texas, Adam didn’t condone marijuana use. By way of compromise, I never smoked in our room. I placed a towel under the bathroom door and ran scalding water until steam blurred the mirror. Adam thought the RA would call the cops as I smoked and they’d break down the door with snarling drug canines, guns

drawn. He gave me a toilet paper roll stuffed with fabric softener and asked me to use it. I made a show of bringing it with me but never did.

I came out of the bathroom, clouds of steam in my wake, grinning like an idiot as Adam studied at his desk. I turned on the television and flipped to *Monday Night Football*, lying on the futon with my legs draped over the frame. Adam left, slamming the door. I stared at the ceiling and thought of nothing at all. I woke in darkness hours later to a blank television.

Pot helped me control my drinking, but Adam's scolding dampered my enjoyment and soon I only smoked at parties. I swapped drinking for smoking, then smoking for poker. Seems to be our pattern: We jump from one diversion masquerading as a cure to the next, unable to juggle.

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I sat on a red plastic chair in front of an old wooden table, a beady set of brown eyes studying mine. I tilted my head so the brim of my cap hid my face. My hands shook slightly, but that information wouldn't help my opponent. The anti-depressants made my biceps twitch, which sent mini tremors up my arm.

Most of my chips were in the pot. Across the table, Tony shouldered the burden of resolution. He had dominated the game for two hours, but now his face was contorted, folding into itself, like the skin of a spoiled orange. Two hands ago, a bad beat cost him a portion of his stack and now I was gambling that his brazen action was a desperate attempt to recoup losses.

Peel had befriended a group of degenerates from all over the country: Chicago, St. Louis, Denver, Kansas City, New York, Los Angeles, Wichita and Minneapolis. As if by

fate, they found each other on the third floor of McCollum Hall. As far as I could tell, they played poker all night, every night. Mike, the biggest reprobate of them all, took over the common room at 9:00 PM, dropping a metal case on the table, flicking latches and revealing rows of multi-colored chips and crisp decks. Soon, Mike was advertising the game on internet chat rooms and strangers showed up with stuffed wallets. Mike was a business major with a gambling problem who saw an opportunity to ratchet up the stakes. He raised the minimum buy-in to one hundred bucks.

I thought of my chips as troops. Texas Hold 'Em simplified the world to terms I understood. I was dealt two cards. If I liked them, I put troops at risk. If I didn't, I surrendered. Simple. I became serious about poker in a way I wasn't with school. Poker winnings stacked up in front of you, a tangible sense of accomplishment. Science classes couldn't offer the same satisfaction. I usually returned home after 2:30 AM, creeping through the darkness as Adam slept.

Forty seconds passed and Tony still hadn't made a decision. I leaned forward and peaked at my hole cards. I had nothing, a busted straight draw. The pot held more than \$400, roughly equivalent to each paycheck I made over the summer working at a lake resort. At the poker table, you can't think about money. I had just made a \$125 bluff without compunction. Two video games and a night out, but I didn't think in those terms until I cashed out. Tony could study my face all night; it wasn't going to help him. My face was always slack, a droopy veneer. With \$400 in the pot and *Johnny Bravo* playing quietly on the television, you feel tension. But I no longer felt pressure. Pressure is a tariff for those without real problems.

I was sober. I didn't smoke or drink when I played. Poker was a sport and I

wanted to be the best. For me, it was like football. As a ninth grader, I used to plaster diminutive defensive lineman in blocking drills on the practice field. I wasn't trying to humiliate them. They were my friends. I wasn't trying to impress my coaches either. I figured they already knew who the best players were. If you lined up someone across from me—even if we'd been friends since we were little boys—I had to knock him on his ass. If he beat me, I was in for a night of inner torment—*Why in the fuck did you allow him to get that angle on you? Stop dicking around.*

Tony exhaled and stood. He removed his Chicago Bears cap and wiped it across his brow. He leaned over the back of his plastic chair and said *Fuck*. Tony slapped the table, grabbed his cards and tossed them face-up onto the scattered pile of chips. He had folded pocket kings, an over-pair to the board. It was the biggest pot of my life and I didn't even have to show my cards to win it. Tony revealed his in a failed attempt to get me to do the same. He didn't understand that withholding information is sometimes the greatest power we have.

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Things were going well with Sarah. We'd been on two official dates and she'd come over to watch *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Boondock Saints*. A KU transfer from the University of Maryland, she was two years older than me. She wanted you to know that she liked books like *Catch-22* and her favorite activity was verbal joust. She liked to be teased and was intrigued by seemingly-definitive statements such as, "I'm not saying your reading Nietzsche is a waste of time. I'm saying he's constitutionally invalid and I wish the best to your clichéd grad school dissertation." I don't know why, but I was able to talk like that again around her. It was the damndest thing.

Sarah knocked on my door Halloween night dressed as a slutty cop. Adam had flown back to Texas for the weekend and I had the room to myself. Sarah curled onto the futon and started talking about Dostoevsky, but I couldn't concentrate with her breasts pushing out of the uniform. When she touched my cheek, I lunged at her with an open mouth and pulled her hips to mine. Her black cop hat hit my forehead and fell to the floor. Her baton poked my waist. I unbuttoned her uniform. She shook her head.

“Not tonight,” she said.

I was disappointed but not upset. In truth, I was flaccid and nervous about my ability to perform. I hadn't been masturbating much and needed utmost concentration to come when I did. When I tried, my penis usually chafed and bled, leaving scabs. As Sarah and I made out, I decided to tell her, if she noticed, that I caught my dick in the zipper. It wasn't an alibi she would question. I had never had a problem with my penis before, but I was fairly certain I knew why I was then. A printout I was given at the hospital warned: “In clinical studies, the most common side effects with Effexor (reported in at least 10% of patients and at least twice as often as with placebo) were constipation, nausea, nervousness, sexual side effects...” Years later, I learned that anti-depressants like Effexor produce high rates of sexual dysfunction. At the time, all I knew was that I wasn't getting boners like I used to. I still had an urgency to fuck Sarah, it just didn't manifest itself as the physical craving I was used to. I was desperate to claim her as my own. At the same time, I had already slept with two girls since the semester started, bring *my number* to three. I was embarrassed by that. I obviously never told my friends this, but the most women I wanted to have slept with before I met my wife was four. I didn't want to need two hands to count my partners. I wanted to remember each of their

names. I wanted each one to represent an aspect of my life. I wanted to learn something from each one of them.

Sarah and I formed an unspoken agreement about sex that, because of my newfound shyness, I accepted. She said things like, “I want to take things slow,” and “I make guys work hard for that.” I was given credit I didn’t deserve when I nodded agreement. We were that annoying high school couple, making out in hallways and at parties, but never escalating beyond that privately. I enjoyed the cachet our public dalliances gave me with friends.

Sarah told me that what really made her wet was making men squirm, that she’d tied up her ex-boyfriend for three hours one day and rubbed her tits all over his dick until he begged. She said he started yelling after 15 minutes as his wrists scraped against the ropes. She watched TV in the next room until he calmed down. Then she did it again.

It was a cruel game she couldn’t play with me. Sarah never saw me physically yearn for her. During a make out session, she would whisper seductively, “Imagine what it will feel like when you’re inside me,” and I got the impression she wanted me to pin her to the bed and ravage her. But I remained limp and scabbed and content postponing the inevitable until I knew I could perform.

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John Mayer’s voice blasted through the dorm bathroom vent at a volume usually reserved for rap music. It was 9:12 A.M. Adam was at his morning seminar and I was alone. I pounded on the wall and yelled: “Turn off your shitty music.” Our neighbors played music 20 hours a day—we fell asleep to it, we woke to it. I walked across the bathroom and knocked on the connecting door.

“Turn it down, goddamnit,” I said. “I’m trying to sleep.”

*They don’t respect you enough to tell you to fuck off.*

I clenched my muscles, tried to suffocate the wrath brewing in my stomach, neutralize it before it took over. Listen to the psychiatrist, take deep breaths. Think logically. This isn’t logical. The psychiatrist knew I liked to read. During a session about anger, he read me Twain: *Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.* But it was too late, already, my pectorals and biceps taut. I watched my hands curl into fists and punch the door. My vision distorted as I heard my voice screaming *You fucking motherfuckers* over a crescendo of clangs—the metal towel hanger bouncing against the door. I felt a prick on my right hand and noticed thin streaks of red across the white doorframe. My hand had grazed the hanger. I tried the handle, but it was locked.

“I just want to have a little talk,” a voice whispered from my mouth. It didn’t sound like my voice. “Come out of there.”

*One mile to every inch,* John Mayer sang, *of your skin like porcelain.*

No response. I slammed my door. I wanted to dismantle the room, to pull down the bunk bed, to punch through the window, to throw my laptop against the TV. I wanted to break something. I wanted to break someone.

I crouched, hands ripping at my hair, rage electrocuting my intestines. I crawled across the carpet and pulled out a bottle of Jack from the mini fridge. Liquid gushed out faster than I could swallow. I spat a mouthful of brown mist into the air.

A new song reverberated through the vent, John Mayer crooning about how he tried to forget me, tried to stay away. John Mayer would never experience the amount of

pain I was in, I thought. Shoulders resting against the mini fridge, liter of whiskey lying on my paunch, I decided I wanted him to. A new type of artistic scholarship, like the Fulbright, should be given to celebrities: Lock them in a closet for a month and feed them anti-psychosis pills, see if their art improves. This idea pleased me. It would eliminate clichés from John’s schmaltzy anthems, infuse hate, confusion. Your banal lyrics, John, perpetuate the myth that mystical relationships are a given for everyone, 40 acres and a mule for my generation. Fucking asshole, I thought, as I took another pull. Your fake love songs will lead to more divorces than you can imagine.

It was 9:28 AM and I was lying drunk on dirty carpet a thousand miles from home. I looked up through the window at a sun that had risen for millions of years. *Nobody knows you exist, Thor. Your void on this planet is being filled this very second, two people on welfare going at it in a trailer park, bellies full of food purchased by stamps. He blows his load and this planet regresses again, bringing us back to when we were apes. Maybe it’s for the best. What advantages do we have over primates? We’ve got telephones and cancer. We’ve got cars and air pollution. We’ve got porn and AIDS. We’ve got Medicare and grenade launchers. These things come in pairs. In the end, we punt every cognitive advantage we’re given. That’s human nature. Look at you—money and mental illness. Family and famine. Everything in pairs.*

The bathroom door opened from the other side. Sounded like a prop. Then I heard urine hitting the water, but that too seemed fake, a sound effect. As I wondered if I was imagining things, I heard a voice clearly through the door: “Fuck you, psychopath.” Then another slam of the door and the music turned louder.

I opened the top drawer of my desk, taking out scissors with black plastic handles.



I gripped one of the blades like a pencil. I brought it to my left wrist and slowly traced the green vein running diagonally downwards. The metal was cool. My arm tingled. I gritted my teeth and brought the blade sharply down the green line. Reality is fake, pain is real. I didn't think that, exactly, but it more or less summed up my mindset. The scratch was what psychiatrists call a "surface abrasion," but cutting isn't about physical punishment or creating scars for attention. Tears ran down my face, but I couldn't tell if they were from the pain or the anger or the realization that wrist cutting provides, at its core, fleeting seconds of peculiar clarity.

Droplets of blood poked up through the cuts. I called Sarah. When we first met, I tried to keep my self-destruction from her. When I realized it was the reason she was attracted to me, I mythologized it. She picked up on the second ring.

"Mind coming up?" I said.

"This early?" she said.

We sat on the futon and I rolled up my sleeve. She looked at the cuts and her eyes welled. She pulled me toward her. I curled up like a little boy in her lap. She wore corduroy pants that smelled of river water, the sort of expensive laundry detergent Mom used. I ran my index finger along the fabric lines of her pants as she brushed fingers through my hair. She kept whispering, "It'll be okay, it'll be okay."

Every so often, I have an urge to search for Sarah on Google or Facebook and find her phone number. I want to apologize to her for that day. I don't regret much from that relationship—even at the time I understood that in some ways she reveled in being a faux-martyr and she must have understood that, for me, her company was key to my social aspirations—but what I did that day surpassed cruelty. Getting her into that room,

showing her my bloody wrist, not hiding the bottle of whiskey—was it a calculated ruse to amplify her attraction to me? I want to think that, in the moment, I needed her company, needed her nails messaging my scalp, needed someone to tell me everything would be OK. But there was also a remorseless, diabolical thought that probably danced through my head before I called her: You can turn this shitty day around by offering fragility to her for the promise of her own vulnerability in the future. Can I confirm that I thought about a pain-for-sex transaction before I called? No. Frankly, I can't remember what I was thinking after I dropped the scissors. But I can't deny that I may have thought it. After all, I could just as easily have called my mom, or my shrink, or a high school friend, or walked to Dane's room. That egomaniacal aspect of my personality, that disturbing moral corruptness, can't be blamed on altered chemistry in a developing brain. The reason I still think about the morning John Mayer woke me up, the reason I'm excavating the 19-year-old version of myself who died several months later in the backseat of his mom's SUV, is to shine light on the darkness that led me into that garage with an armful of rags and tape. I'm getting older now. It's time to think about a wife and kids and a house. Never wanted to be anything but a good dad. Can't bring a son into this world when I can't guarantee his safety. No one needs to tell me I'm lucky to have a second chance. Doesn't stop them from doing it.

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Sarah often asked me how my mind worked, what schizophrenia felt like.

"It feels weird," I said truthfully, but I was talking more about being branded with the diagnosis than anything else.

"But, I mean, what does it feel like when you start to hear voices?" she said. "Do

you know that it's not real?"

"It feels real," I said.

I could tell she didn't get it so I changed the subject. It was hard to blame her line of questioning for a variety of reasons, primarily because she wouldn't have been interested in me if she didn't perceive me as different. Once, I tried to have a genuine conversation with her.

"I'm scared of the word," I said. "Schizophrenia. Say it. Schizophrenia."

She studied my face like a shrink. I suppose I should have felt lucky that a girl of her intelligence was interested in this erratic, moody, fat avatar. It was quite the opposite. She made our relationship into a transaction, bastardizing my self-perception. She wasn't interested in Sane Thor. She was interested in adding to her portfolio of life experiences: *Dated a schizophrenic*. I believed there was integrity in realizing that she saw me as an eccentric prize. Although I genuinely admired her, I didn't respect her freak show attraction. You pay to watch the bearded lady on stage, I thought, you don't fuck her.

The situation wasn't untenable or uncomfortable. It was a marriage of convenience and marriages of convenience are marked by dates of expiration. Sarah accepted me as a schizophrenic at a time when most did not. A part of me wanted to embarrass her by saying I knew she was fulfilling some nurse impulse by trying to rescue me. But even the part of me that wanted to say it needed her acceptance. Sarah made me believe that maybe there was a future in which I could function with this disease. That concept was worth more than I was paying for it.

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Over Thanksgiving, Sarah drove me to the Kansas City Airport. Jerry Seinfeld

said real friends helped you move and drove you to the airport. I was thinking that as I looked out the window.

“Say hi to Minnesota for me,” she said.

I took her face into my hands and kissed her on the mouth. I hated movie scenes where characters turned around as they walked away, so I reminded myself not to.

The small plane bounced violently through a snowstorm. I gripped the armrest and closed my eyes. The cabin was frigid—I felt the oppressive cold through the aircraft’s thin shell. Per instructions, I finished my whiskey and returned my seat to the upright position. Suddenly, I wondered why I was flying home at all. How would I explain the past four months, which had passed by almost like a dream? Nobody wanted to hear about my dreams. There were events, but I wouldn’t talk about them. I had lied in bed, dragging myself to the campus hospital and the psychiatrist and back again. Each night when Adam went to sleep, I waited until his breathing changed, then began my nightly vigil: Drinking whiskey and chewing on beef jerky while enduring the excruciating boredom of being alive.

The plane skidded to a stop on an icy tarmac in Brainerd, its propellers pureeing the bitter air. Snow gusts swirled outside my window in banded curves. When Mom picked me up at the airport, she leaned in to kiss me and I turned my head away. She knew better than to ask if anything was wrong.

I caught her staring at me during Thanksgiving dinner. It made me uncomfortable, so I looked down at my plate of turkey and Nana’s Snicker salad. I ate and ate, never full. Relatives were up from Kansas City and I tried to be polite, but I caught myself giving grunted, monosyllabic responses. After dinner, I could go to the basement and watch

football alone.

Over pumpkin pie, Mom told me that I was twitching, arms and legs and head.

“Are you OK?” she asked. “Your face is trembling.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like something is moving under your skin,” she said.

“I’m fine,” I said.

She pressed her finger to the quivering skin. I jerked away from her.

“I’m going to go to bed,” I said.

“Bed?” she said. “It’s 7:30.”

I was more or less used to these tics, but being home made them feel alien, like they’d manifested when I stepped onto Minnesotan soil. I hadn’t been forced to confront my transformation in Kansas, where one bizarre situation spiraled into another and I didn’t have the inclination to take stock of the changes: the quivering muscles, the memory loss, the nausea, the stuttering, the sluggishness, the extra folds of skin, the fat multiplying like a virus on my torso. Sitting alone in my bedroom, I realized I could never go back to being the old Thor. He was gone. I’d left for Kansas and transformed. I’d imagined a monster and now it was wearing my bloated, twitching body as a costume. It was all wrong—the clothes, the skin, the face, the hair, the voice.

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The last time I met with Dr. Delesante, I was feeling anxiety about going to college and had been given an anti-depressant prescription. The time before that I joked my way through the obligatory 15-minute session necessary to refill my Adderall prescription.

I trudged into her office the Friday after Thanksgiving. I was 25 pounds heavier than the last time she'd seen me. As I sat down, I studied her face to gauge surprise at the revelation of my new diagnosis. Her mouth was pursed in its habitual state of agreement.

“Should we get started?” she said.

I couldn't speak, just stared dumbly at her. Maybe I thought she would console me, or refute the diagnosis outright. Instead, she smiled. If she had always thought I had the potential for psychosis, the doctors in Kansas had to be right. Five minutes, all the time it took to become a schizophrenic. That hadn't seemed real. At first, it was cool—the title, the romantic notion that I was different. That luster faded quickly. All I wanted was for Delesante, who had seen me since middle school, to laugh at the young doctor's hubris, rip up his files. If nothing else, interrogate me in her own way, give me a diagnosis all her own. She accepted his verdict dogmatically.

“Yes,” I said finally. Since I'd returned to Minnesota, I'd written my side effects in a notebook. It was important Delesante knew about them.

“My brain has stopped working,” I said. “Like, in school, I can't concentrate on what the teacher is saying. When I get home, I have a hard time reading.”

“That sounds similar to the problems you were having when you were living with your parents,” she said.

“It's worse,” I said. “Sometimes, I can't understand what people are saying. Well, that's not true. I understand the words, but I can't piece them together, if that makes sense. Sometimes, like when I'm in class, we'll be dismissed and I will have no idea what we talked about.”

She nodded silently as she wrote in her notes.

“I don’t feel like my life means anything,” I said. “I get up and I go to school and if I can’t understand what I’m being taught I don’t care about it. Like, even when it sinks in I wonder if it was worth having put in the time to acquire the knowledge. I get to thinking, sometimes, that I am just taking up space. Do you ever think about that? If you walked out of your office right now and got hit by a car, you’d leave behind a world that would just move on. Your job would be filled immediately. Next man up, you know?”

Bad example. I wanted to apologize. She was still writing and nodding, clearly not offended. My opinions didn’t carry enough gravity to offend her.

“What else?” she said.

“It’s been hard for me to trust people,” I said. “I don’t know why. I like this girl in Kansas but I don’t feel right about it. I wish I did.”

Delesante wasn’t writing and I could tell she thought I was just being a boy. She wanted psychological meat to bite into. I told her my sex drive was down, but I became embarrassed and changed the subject. I told her I was gaining weight even though I exercised every day. When Delesante wasn’t writing she kept a distant eye on me, looking at my face but not my eyes. I never noticed that before, or perhaps I had mistakenly perceived it as constant warmth. She asked about the symptoms, her words; the side effects, mine. I listened to the mini-waterfall contraption on her table. It made me want to pee. I scratched my face.

I wanted—needed—her to tell me who I was. What’s wrong with me and how can I get better? I clung to her words. Delesante had transformed from the chubby dispenser of Adderall into an Oracle.

“The documents I received from Kansas say that you have begun drinking

heavily,” she said. “At what frequency do you binge drink?”

“Frequency?” I said. “Frequently.”

Dr. Delesante explained how drinking on anti-psychotic medication could be fatal. Her words—brain chemistry, chemicals, development, neutrons, poisonous, monoamine oxidase inhibitor, spikes in blood pressure, MAOIs, isocarboxazid, phenelzine, tranylcypromine, motor skills—floated out of her mouth, into the fog between us, and fell to the floor before they could order themselves into sentences.

“You obviously haven’t acclimated to your medication as well as we would have hoped. This is not atypical, unfortunately. It is possible that there was an adverse reaction to the combination of Risperdal and Effexor in your system. We see this occasionally. I will add, again, that the addition of alcohol to these medications is foolish. It could be lethal. That is a behavior I implore you to stop.”

I nodded. But I wasn’t going to stop. I just nodded, happy she didn’t know I smoked pot as well.

“But I do have good news,” she said. “If one medication does not seem to be working, often there is an alternative that will. I am going to switch you off Effexor. It is the anti-depressant I am most comfortable with, but it is clear at this time that a change is prudent. I am going to write you a prescription for Wellbutrin, which should mix better with Risperdal. We will try this for a bit and see how it works. Give it a couple of weeks and I’m confident you will feel better.”

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When Mom drove me back to the airport, I could only talk about Krista. She was all I’d thought about since I returned home. Before I flew home, I thought I was over her.



I hadn't called in a month and I was dating someone else.

"I shouldn't have broken up with her," I said.

Mom looked concerned and I thought about telling her I didn't appreciate being patronized, but I needed to get this off my chest.

"I was confused when I broke it off, I think," I said. "I just did it because I was going to college, you know? Such a dumb mistake."

"Thor, I want to say something to you," Mom said. "And I don't want you to get upset. Your father and I talked. We're not sure that it's working out for you in Kansas. Dr. Delesante thinks moving closer would be good for you. We are supportive of whatever you want to do, but you're a 10-hour drive away. We miss you. Have you thought about moving back?"

Of course I had, but pride prevented me from admitting as much. I wanted things done on my terms, but at a certain point I lost track of what my terms were. Returning to Minnesota was tantamount to throwing in the towel, admittance that the moving-south-for-college voyage capsized shortly after the ship left port. But Kansas had given me schizophrenia and handfuls of pills. My terms had changed.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll file transfer papers next week."

Mom wasn't used to easy resolution with me and she waited a few beats to see what sarcastic barb was coming as the punch line. When I stayed quiet, she squeezed my hand.

Sarah was waiting outside the Kansas City airport.

"Did you say hi to Minnesota for me?" she asked as we drove back to Lawrence.

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I finally told Sarah I was moving back the weekend before finals. I hadn't wanted her trying to talk me out of it. Sarah squeezed my knee, bent her chin to her neck and gave me a resolute look she'd undoubtedly seen in a movie. She brought me to The Plaza in Kansas City for a last date in December. That's what she called it, "Our last date." We went to an expensive Chinese restaurant and held hands. She picked out a winter hat for me at the Gap. I wore it the rest of the night. Sarah took a picture of me riding a pig statue in an empty playground. I still have that picture.

Everyone obsessively studied for exams. I smoked pot and played poker. Right before tests, I opened my textbooks. I focused on bold terms in the margins. My head throbbed during those exams. I have no idea how I passed.

I decided to transfer to North Dakota State in Fargo, a two-hour drive from Brainerd. My dad and brother arrived to help me pack. I told four people I was leaving—Adam, Dane, Donnie and Sarah. I thought the effect would be better if I didn't tell everyone. At some point I went to Dane's room. He opened and extended his hand through the door in a *Nice to meet you* way. I locked him in a bear hug.

"You Canadians are into the fag stuff, aren't you?" he said.

"Only with cute guys," I said, winking.

We slapped hands and pulled each other close for a bro hug.

"Be good, buddy," he said. "Stay safe. Call me if you ever need anything."

I knocked on Sarah's door as Dad brought my last box downstairs. She opened the door slowly like a country song, halfway, hiding behind it.

"This is it?" she said.

I jokingly extended my hand, stealing Dane's joke. She slapped it away and

pouted at me. Sarah wrapped her arms around my neck.

“So North Dakota next, eh?” she said. We had watched *Fargo* the week before.

“Ya sure. You betcha. Have fun dere, OK now?”

I kissed her on the cheek. I couldn't think of what to say, so I said, “Have a good break. We'll talk soon.”

I hugged her one more time and released too quickly. I turned too soon and walked too fast. I forgot to turn in my key at the front desk. I scanned the parking lot one last time because that's what you do. You contemplate the pavement and you remember getting punched in the face and dropping hard and getting kicked in the gut. You recall good memories and for the first time you're thinking about them in the past tense. You're uncomfortable about it so you impress upon those memories all the pain you have, you give those portraits black frames. You spit on the pavement and look purposeful and trust you've made good decisions and will be rewarded. You pretend you're in a movie and climb into a car, even though that car is a '97 Ford Taurus and its red frame is the same color as the stretch marks expanding on your belly. You believe yourself strong-willed as you shift into drive and leave behind the only friends you've got left.

The snow started in northern Missouri, falling softly like dust in sunlight. In southern Iowa we were in a snow globe and soon we drove through white curtains. Flipped cars littered the ditches. All I could see were their red brake lights through frosted windows, like the beady eyes of a polar monster. Dad called and said *Should we pull over and get a hotel room?* I said, *We can't, I need to get home.* I blew into cupped hands and pulled the sweatshirt's hood over my head. I leaned forward and focused on the flashing emergency lights of Dad's Jeep as we hurtled through the storm.

## 5. SECOND SEMESTER

Baxter, MN.

Friday December 19, 2003.

11:00 P.M.

I assumed it would be sunny in Minnesota, though it was December, that I would return to the let's-hit-the-lake weather I'd left in August. Whatever had made me crazy was hundreds of miles in my rearview mirror. Misguided as that optimism was, categorical hope and doom—otherwise referred to as black-and-white thinking—are two phylums of problematic logic my brain accepts dogmatically. I make decisions about my life based solely on what's happened and what I believe will happen next.

Self-help books recommended by psychiatrists implored me to exist in the present, but I'm incapable of that. The present relies on a heightened awareness of the senses and I never trusted mine. I rely instead on memory and intuition. Catalog, dissect, correct. Build your reality, don't respond to it. High school parties were filled with people who lived in the moment. Those guys considered what they forgot on Friday night a vital part of their existence. I eavesdropped on them getting debriefed in study hall on Monday mornings about what happened after they blacked out. *Dude you don't remember? You slapped Amy's ass, puked on Joe's dad's TV, and passed out in your boxers in the kitchen; Jordynn drew that dick on your chin.* I wanted to be the one delivering the news, not receiving it. The ass slapper thought blacking out and forgetting was normal, maybe even transcendent. There's nothing I fear more. Memory dictates

reality. Lose that, your world shrinks.

After months of not returning phone calls and instigating nasty instant message conversations, my friends in Brainerd were hesitant to see me and awkward to be around. They thought I'd changed for the worst, that college had revealed my true character. No longer bound to my old persona—the affable teetotaler, the mild-mannered editor of the school newspaper—I could be whoever I wanted to be. And what I wanted most was to be cool. At no point in your life will you get more cachet for being a walking contradiction as in college. At no other point will your vanity be as insatiable, either.

Each night that month there was a different party, parents out of town. House parties were my favorite. Explore new spaces, look at other people's stuff, steal booze from the liquor cabinet, and consider the utility of decorative plate sets hanging on the walls. But there were my nerves, doused in kerosene awaiting a spark, which I treated with Jack Daniels, sitting silently until the amber liquid massaged my scalp.

“Kansas was fucking nuts,” I slurred to a high school girl on a ratty basement couch. “So great. Had to transfer back here because I partied too hard. Didn't make grades, blah blah blah, all that shit.”

“I heard you got in a big fight down there,” she said.

“Who told you that?”

“I don't remember. But they said you were arrested.”

Did she also know about the mental institution? She looked at me as reporters do, engaged but calm, hoping the subject will flesh out a story without perceiving pressure to do so. I wasn't going to do that, even if it was better for me if she had heard about the institution.

“Yeah, there was that,” I said. “Look, it was a good time. But I had to return to my people.”

I excused myself for a refill. Three hours later, we were fooling around in a hot tub overlooking Perch Lake on the back porch of my parent’s house. I unhooked her bra, but she asked me to drive her home when I reached below her waist. She got out of the tub and I slammed the lid shut with a masculine pettiness for which I felt so guilty afterwards.

We never talked again.

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During the drive to NDSU’s campus in Fargo, I considered my parent’s point of view for perhaps the first time, sick with worry that their eldest child was woefully unprepared for manhood, disturbed by the discovery that a little boy grows up, grows tall, and that you can’t keep him then, you have to relinquish him to society. Did they worry they hadn’t sufficiently prepared me for this leap? Was my failure their own? Years later Mom would wonder why she ever thought a change in geography would cure my deteriorating mental state, as if NDSU was a giant reset button. We shared that buoyancy at the time.

I got out of my Taurus and was immediately punched by Fargo’s tag-team of blistering cold and knock-you-on-your-ass wind. The old brick dorm building I dragged my mini fridge up to was nothing like the Holiday Inn-run dorm in Kansas. No maids would come every Wednesday to vacuum and scrub the sink. There wasn’t even carpet, just sludge-blotched tile. My room was smaller than our home kitchen. A bunk bed canvassed the left wall. Across the room, two dilapidated wood tables were decorated

with sketches of naked female torsos. Paint peeled from the walls. Mists of snow eddied between cars in the parking lot outside the window.

My new roommate Jake pulled a golf-ball sized marijuana sphere from his suitcase. Our room smelled like Snoop Dogg's Cadillac. Jake reminded me of my buddy Peel, with his olive skin, thick head of unruly black hair, and *whatever bro* disposition.

"I used to smoke quite a bit," he said. "I'm quitting. After we finish this. You smoke?"

I nodded, breathing through my nose. We spent the next two nights burning through the golf ball. On the first, we ordered Chinese food and giggled our way through *Billy Madison*, which I brought from home. Jake chewed on the marijuana stalks and seeds as he loaded the bowls, instead of discarding them.

"Why do you do that?" I asked.

"Why doesn't everyone else?" he said. "Just because the THC levels are lower in the seeds than the smoke, it doesn't mean there isn't THC altogether. Don't hate."

"You're weird," I giggled.

On the second night, I realized Jake's favorite subject was Jake. Since he didn't like sports or movies, we didn't have much to discuss anyway. As he droned on about his pet lizard Lizzy, I tuned out, focusing on my hatred of Fargo: Cold, grey and windy. The NDSU campus was nothing like Kansas'. Its buildings weren't unique, brick monstrosities designed to insulate students from the cold. You could walk to class counting on two hands the people you passed en route. I missed KU's historic buildings, I missed Allen Fieldhouse, I missed the crush of students pushing through campus between classes, I missed Massachusetts Street, I even missed the predictably warm weather. I ate

a sleeve of Ritz crackers smothered in Cheez Whiz and went to bed early, told Jake I was trying to be responsible. I had an 8:00 A.M. class and a promise to keep with my parents that I would make the “independence thing” work this time. I dipped my head under the communal bathroom spout, washed three Trazodone down with copper tasting water and crawled under the sheets.

Moaning startled me awake. Pitch black except for a faint glow coming from Jake’s computer, my alarm clock read 2:17. Jake sat at his desk, wearing a t-shirt and boxer shorts. His right shoulder pumped in rhythm.

On his computer, a brunette with fake breasts bounced on top of a man with a shaved head, yelping through Jake’s speakers: “Oh, fuck. Yeah yeah, right there.”

Four months remained in the semester. I pressed a pillow over my head.

“You’re a good little whore,” the bald man said.

Never could convince myself of the high road’s efficacy. I threw a pillow as hard as I could at Jake’s back. He swiveled around, as though it hadn’t occurred to him that I might wake.

“Are you kidding with this?” I said. “I’m trying to sleep, man.”

Vaguely menacing, unresponsive in the shadows, I thought I noted bemusement on Jake’s face. He made sure I was finished and then slowly turned and muted his computer. Jake leaned forward, chin resting on his right fist, and continued watching.

I wouldn’t fall asleep for two hours, long after Jake climbed into the top bunk. When my alarm went off at 7:15 A.M, the sun had yet to rise. Jake’s computer was still on, the video application open: “Big titted HouseWife Whore FUCKED HaRd!!!” I pressed play and left.



I skipped classes that day, walking around a dense, deserted campus that seemed condensed enough to be in debt to the idea of Space itself. *This is North Dakota*, I thought as I walked. *All they have here is open space. Who designed this place?* The squat brick buildings were the color of rust, having taken years of abuse from the snow and wind. In three minutes time, I passed Schuett Hall, the Mechanical Systems Building, Horton Hall, the Mildred Johnson Library, Old Main, Barnard Hall, the Heating Plant, Haverty Hall, Burch Hall, Riley Hall, Forkner Hall, Schulz Hall and Walton Hall, along with several small buildings without identification markers. At Kansas, you needed all 10 minutes between classes to rush to another building across campus. You did so wedging between girls in sundresses, walking beneath white flowers blooming off thick branches. There were almost 30,000 trees on KU's campus. I remembered that tidbit from orientation—*We have almost one tree for every Jayhawk!* Students were referred to as Jayhawks. I wanted to be a Jayhawk. Kansas had trees. And flowers. And green grass.

I trudged through the NDSU campus bundled up, snow biting at my ankles as if shot from a jet stream. Eventually I found myself in front of the Student Center, which promised a gift shop, a food court and a game room. I sat at an abandoned table across from the gift shop, opened an anthology of T.S. Eliot and flipped to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. I remembered liking that poem in high school. I also remembered loving lines that the A.P. teacher didn't discuss. I found them in the text. *Do I dare disturb the universe? I have measured out my life with coffee spoons. By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown, Till human voices wake us, and we drown.* I especially loved the coffee spoons line, connecting with it like I did with Eminem's best lyrics. They spoke to me, or maybe they spoke for me. I re-read the poem several times and strained to

remember what my high school teacher had said about it. Something about how the smart, bald protagonist had too much self-awareness for his own good. He couldn't hit on women because he overanalyzed everything. Of course, that is why I carried Eliot out the door with me in the morning. For this very moment. Eliot used lines from *Dante's Inferno* in his epigraph. I loved watching fire, something of an amateur pyro, and the Minnesota Vikings' quarterback was named Daunte Culpepper. I loved that title—*Dante's Inferno*. I remember sitting in that A.P. classroom, wanting to say something about Eliot's poem, feeling a kinship to Prufrock, but not wanting to be lumped in with the nerds who always interrupted the teacher to educate the class on symbolism they inferred from the text. That day, as Mrs. Niemi lectured, I was looking out the window, onto the playground of an elementary school across the street. A boy was hanging upside down on the jungle gym, knees wrapped around the bars.

“Thor, what did you think of the poem?” Mrs. Niemi said.

I pretended not to have heard her. Not trying in high school was the easiest way to seem cool. Since I preferred reading books to drinking, I didn't have access to the second easiest way. Mrs. Niemi repeated the question.

“Prufrock isn't built for the world,” I said. “Neither is Eliot. They think too much. An artist is only as good as the way he perceives the world intellectually, right? A successful pimp—sorry, Mrs. Niemi, I meant Lothario—is only as good as he navigates the world with his senses. You communicate successfully with intuition and cleverness, not by analyzing your subject and being hyper self-aware. Eliot and his character are both doomed because they can't shut their minds off. There is no symbolism or metaphor in this poem. That's all it is.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” Mrs. Niemi said. “And why do you suppose I showed a poem to this class if it contained no secondary meaning? Or, as you imply, the meaning is so obvious that it can’t be perceived as secondary?”

“Because Eliot is a badass,” I said. “So is Prufrock. You have a class full of over-thinkers, here. Rob and Pat back there still don’t have dates for prom. I think you recognized that Eliot was their kind of cat. Maybe T.S. will help ‘em in the courage department. As for showing it to high school seniors, that too seems obvious when you read *Time* and the *New Yorker*. Our age group—we’re called Generation Y or something stupid, right?—is reaching its mid-life crisis stage far sooner than previous generations. That is an infallible journalistic conjecture-fact. Pat’s boy Prufrock had the luxury of not developing manic, paralyzing self-awareness until he started to look like the dude from *Kojak*. Everyone in this room had it five years ago when we were able to send instant messages to girls on AOL and text friends in class. Dustin is doing that right now, Mrs. Niemi, by the way.”

As I sat in the NDSU Union, I could only remember fragments of that interaction. I couldn’t remember why I liked the poem so much. I opened my laptop and went to SparkNotes to read the commentary. Apparently I was to take from the poem that Hamlet is still relevant. I hated SparkNotes sometimes. I closed my laptop and spent the next hour starrng into the gift shop. Cashiers rang up purchases, NDSU Bison key chains, Bison T-shirts, Bison fur winter caps, as I thought about coffee spoons and life. A cute blonde in a Bison sweatshirt walked past me. She looked at me and I dropped my head back to the book. I was worse off than Prufrock. I didn’t even have the capacity to measure with coffee spoons.

A ten-dollar poker game, blinds a dime and quarter, broke out that night in the first-floor common room. I told them about the games we played at Kansas.

“They would have laughed at a game like this,” I said.

I raised every hand. They called me down and eventually I lost \$50.

“Wanna buy in again?” a guy in a polo shirt asked. “Please?”

I walked out without saying a word. The light panel in my room flickered and buzzed, reminding me of the mosquito zapper my ex-girlfriend’s parents hung on their porch. I hated my transfexion with that bluish light, how I always seemed drawn to it, the perverse pleasure I took when a large insect flew into it and melted, the way I imagined hearing wings flap for the last time right before the buzz.

The chipped walls surrounding my mattress moved in concert with the ceiling, slowly inching closer. One of the melting gnats lodged in my throat. I hacked to dislodge it. I felt a smoldering heat beneath my breastbone that spread into my face and ears, burning like wildfire. I clutched my throat as if being hanged. My heart pirouetted, spinning and bouncing between ribs. The door pressed against my bunk, slanted and blurry. I reached toward the handle but couldn’t quite reach it. Oxygen retreated into the vents. My hands frantically danced across the bed, searching for my inhaler. My wheezes sounded like a low-pitched whistle. Turkey slices and chocolate pudding shot into my throat, esophagus wide open. The walls encased me, top bunk pressing against my head. Blade in my ribs, I yelped to dull the pain. I pushed a forearm into the wound. I squeezed my lids shut, *It’s not real*. I counted down from 10. I threw myself forward. Feet tangled in blankets, I fell to the tiled floor chest-first, an anvil into the heart. My throat snapped shut. I scrambled up and burst through the door, into a hallway filled with oxygen.

After five minutes spent sitting in the dorm hallway, staring at my door, sweat dripping down my clammy cheeks to the floor, I found my inhaler and took several long pulls. I sat down on my bed and called home. I remember Mom picking up on the first ring, as though she had been waiting for my call.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“I can’t breathe here, Mom. I feel claustrophobic. I have to come home.”

I moved out the next day. Jake half-heartedly offered to help. I declined.

In graduate school, eight years later, in Iowa, I returned to therapy. I received the only diagnosis I’ve ever truly believed—*Anxiety disorders are normal, easily treatable*, the psychiatrist said. *We’ll treat it in three ways: Therapy, medication and prevention techniques to avoid triggers*. Somehow, between thousands of hours of counseling, psychoanalysis, group therapy and institutionalization, nobody had ever taught me how to prevent a panic attack. During the intake meeting, when asked by the Iowa therapist if I had ever had a panic attack, I quickly responded *No*. After half an hour, she returned to the subject and explained the symptoms. *If that’s the case*, I said, embarrassed, *I have them often*.

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I unpacked my car, lugged my TV and books into my childhood bedroom. I shared the downstairs with my brother Will, 12, and my sister, Quinn, 17. They didn’t ask me questions when I returned. I assumed they’d been told not to bother me. Your family is a mirror. After 18 years, you understand them better than you understand yourself. When Quinn sulked, I knew she had been insulted at school. When Dad didn’t talk at dinner, he’d been in an argument at work. When Mom, always the conversational

facilitator, chewed more than she talked, she'd likely been in a fight over the phone with one of my aunts. Nothing ever bothered Willis, who always crafted interesting stories from recess and lunch period. Forced to live with them again brought an assault of judgment, none of it intentional. Dad often asked about my mood. Mom was a little too enthusiastic in allowing me to choose the menu for dinner every night. I was their patient. I understood. I didn't resent them for it, but the schism between the way I was treated when I returned home as opposed to the way I was treated in high school, where I argued for autonomy and was granted a great amount of freedom when I intelligently reasoned with my parents, was jarring. *I'm the same person as before*, I wanted to say, but we all knew that wasn't true.

All my hope of recovering revolved around getting Krista back. I focused on her face, a soldier taking a sweetheart's picture out of his rucksack. I couldn't stop pandering to my anguish. I didn't care that she was all I talked about with my family, didn't care how stupid I looked at dinner with red eyes and dried tears on my cheeks. At that point, I thought about her obsessively, my mind rarely straying elsewhere. Maybe my brain, fending off daily handfuls of medications designed to alter it, was protecting itself, clinging to my last memories of total happiness, focusing on a solution to return to it.

Even though I knew it was a bad idea, sometimes I just needed to hear her voice. In my bedroom, I shimmied into a sweatshirt, always less anxious with the hood over my head, a barrier.

"You shouldn't be calling me," Krista said.

"I know," I said. My words sounded distant. "I will be in town for the semester. It didn't work out in North Dakota like it didn't work out in Kansas. I'm back now. I want

to see you.”

“It’s not a good idea,” she said.

“Why?”

“I’m not comfortable talking about this with you,” she said. She pitied me, I realized for the first time. I was a person who elicited pity from someone he loved.

“I can take it,” I said, exhaling the words. Her pity scared me, like I would have to wear its burden going forward.

“Well, I’m serious with Nate,” she said. “I’m happy with him. He treats me well.”

“I’m different now, you should know that,” I said.

“Yes, you’ve told me that,” she said. “I need to go.”

“OK,” I said. Realizing I would have to deal with the frustration alone of failing to convince her to take me back and the annoyed affectation with which she brushed me off, without Krista to comfort me, I said: “Hey, you know if you ever need to talk to someone you can call me, right?”

“Yes I do,” she said.

Memories of happiness are far worse than malnourishment, which just kills you. Yearning and resentment gnaw at you forever. Envy is worse than both. Envy doesn’t attack. Envy’s most insidious characteristic is its ability to control, a parasite that will meddle with your reality until you can only view the world bitterly, coveting the good fortune of others without the means to achieve it yourself. You are either a jealous person, or you aren’t. If you’ve weeded jealousy from your heart, you will live a happier life. You just will. I knew I created that situation with Krista, but I still hated her for making me that way. Hated her for not doing more. Hated her for not talking me out of it

when I broke up with her. Hated her for not coming to see me in Kansas. Hated her because my life no longer had a purpose.

I hung up the phone, lay in bed, and closed my eyes. I looked up at Krista. She always looked perfect in my memories. A Glade plug-in made her bedroom smell like a rainforest. Her door was off its hinges and leaning against the wall. Her mom's boyfriend, Skinny, got upset when Krista wouldn't check-in when I was over. *You want the fuckin' thing back on, have Him fuckin' do it, Princess.* Krista's hands were on my chest and she was moaning. I focused on the red Thunderbird poster on her wall, saw a little Thor wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses climb in and rev the engine. I wondered whether Dan Marino's career was more impressive than Steve Young's. It was the only way I could last longer. *Marino holds every passing record. His release, arm strength and talent are all better. Young was on better teams. Marino on the '9ers? Shit.* She convulses, my name *Thor Thor Thor* just like that. I clench my eyes shut. *Young won six passing titles. He won two MVPs. He won a Super Bowl.* The sound in Krista's throat like an engine full throttle. Listen to that slapping, that slurping, pleasure so intense you want to hook your thumbs on her throat, those endorphins coursing, you, *You*, you're the strongest motherfucker that ever lived. Feel that surge in your chest like you're plugged into a socket. Your grandfather felt it raining bullets down from the sky in Germany. Your great, great grandfather felt it crossing the ocean from Sweden, looking up at the Statue of Liberty. And *You* now. That light growing in your torso. I tap her leg, our sign. Her hand is around me just as quick and her strokes quicken when they need to and Dan and Steve are gone. I put my hand between her legs, my finger sliding into her like a miracle.



I opened my eyes to an empty room. I would probably never be in that rainforest-smelling room again. But I couldn't accept that. I wouldn't. I believed she was my cure. To give up on the idea of *us* was to give up hope, isolate myself further.

At Kansas, I went to bars and parties, played poker and video games, smoked pot, drank beer, watched football and had a girlfriend. In Brainerd, access to chimeras—mirages I believed would alleviate my agony until I was reconciled with the healthy boy hiding deep inside me—dwindled to two: Krista and liquor. In Brainerd, without Dane and Peel, without Sarah, without drugs and gambling and all the social opportunities dorms provide, I fixated on Krista, my avenue out. Most nights I drank until drunk, collapsing onto my childhood bed with my sweats still on, unable to fend off the idea that Krista's 20-year-old boyfriend was fucking her at that precise moment. The best nights were when I passed out a few minutes later. On the worst nights, when I couldn't fall asleep, I would get up, take a shot or two, and slash at my wrists with a box cutter until I wasn't thinking of anything at all.

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### **Psychiatric Note**

Date: February 4, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Talked to Thor's mom, who says that he is very despondent. He talked to his parents last night, admitted that he is sleeping a lot because he just can't face getting up. He has been

on Wellbutrin for awhile and they're not sure that they're seeing any response and Thor is not reporting that he feels better. When he was here on Friday we were hoping that he was going to kind of turn the corner because he had been able to have a resolution of things with his ex-girlfriend. What he tells his parents is yes, he did have resolution with her. Unfortunately, he feels that there is nothing now and that there is just sort of an emptiness. At this point, what we're going to do is change him over to Prozac. Mom does say that her sisters take Prozac and do very well. We'll have him discontinue Wellbutrin, go with Prozac 20 mg. for a week, then 40 mg. Also, he does have an appointment next week and we will double check on that when he comes in. They will call back with further questions or concerns.

Elizabeth Delesante

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My parents told me I could get a job or take classes at the local community college. I chose school. I signed up for two English classes, introductory Spanish, and a one-credit course called Bicycling 101. My high school friends were all away at college, except for Derek, one of my best friends, who also went to Central Lakes College. We argued over the phone a few months back. Details were hazy, but he held a grudge. I bumped into him on campus, told him we should hang out. He said *Maybe* and hurried off to class.

I slept 15 hours a day, tacked a beach towel over my window to block sunlight. Wore a sleep mask, wax earplugs jammed into my ear canals, white noise machine

cranked to maximum volume. I hadn't dreamt in months. At my weekly meeting, I told Dr. Delesante I was concerned that I drifted off to blackness.

"It's nothing to worry about," she said. "Completely normal."

I took 150 milligrams of Trazodone a night, the max dosage, prescribed when I was in high school. I was always tired.

"Do you think it's blocking my dreams?" I asked.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You're experiencing a temporary transition period. You'll be dreaming again in no time."

She thought it was a silly question, but I missed dreaming. Missed that moment when you are halfway between asleep and awake, no difference between reality and fantasy. Missed believing with all my soul that the dream was real and then waking to a world where it wasn't possible. Like living two lives, having access to another world. Without that portal, I was stuck. If I could just get my hands on some pot or cocaine, maybe I could access that reality where I was the star, capable of anything. I was always amazed by movies like *The Matrix*, where Keanu Reeves is asked: Would you live in a fake world that feels real, or the real world, which will be torture. Reeves' Neo is a god inside a computer-generated society. He chooses reality, which never made sense to me. The film explicitly pounds at the idea that ignorance isn't bliss—the character that outright refutes that idea, Cypher, is perhaps the most well rounded character in the film; "If I had to choose between (the real world) and the Matrix, I'd choose the Matrix," he says. "All I do is pull a plug (in the real world), but (in the Matrix)... you have to watch Apoc die."—but the movie misses the point, and I imagine that's because the Wachowski Brothers were never suicidal. Ignorance presented in the script is the reality of every

other character inside the Matrix. Neo isn't altruistic for choosing a more difficult state of being. Everyone would choose Neo's deity-status "fake life" over the *Terminator*-esque computer-ruled "real life" dystopia in which he's just another man. I still watch *The Matrix* a few times a year, though, because most characters besides Neo behave realistically. "Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real?" Morpheus asks. "What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" While on anti-psychosis medication, I always felt as though Morpheus was addressing me. That's exactly what being on them felt like.

Existential films only work with a flawed protagonist, because philosophy isn't a subject Jesus would study—it was created to help the rest of us figure our shit out. *Memento* was one of my favorite movies for that reason. Having lost his short-term memory after his wife's death, Guy Pierce's Leonard can only provide context for his life by selecting information that will help him navigate forward. The film suggests that memories and the logistical narrative through which we structure them mold who we are. Leonard deliberately deceives himself, manufactures memories in his notes and Polaroid pictures, so he can hunt down his wife's killers, over and over again. Leonard is depraved, egocentric, full of rage and perfectly willing to lie to himself, because his purpose in life (blind revenge) is more important than his life's goal (finding his wife's killer). In that way, he is like all of us.

I rapidly lost faith in therapy. Each new medication worsened my condition and I had nothing new to share. Conversations bled into each other, highly specific yet vaguely identical. None of my shrinks wanted to talk about movies or sports, why they helped me

understand the world better. They wanted to talk instead about *incidents* and *feelings* and *connections* and *why do you suppose that is?* Delesante remained convinced that I was schizophrenic. It was important to her, I think, as I look back. I confirmed her worldview as she shaped mine. When my mood didn't improve, she increased doses and I stormed around the house sleepier and angrier than before.

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### **Psychiatric Follow-Up**

Date: February 12, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Thor says that he just got to feeling so bad that he talked to his parents and that's when his mom called me about the medicine. He is on Prozac 20 mg., due to go to 40 mg. today. He'll do that tomorrow. He says he actually feels a bit better. He says that he just isn't having the same level of negative and suicide thoughts. He doesn't think the medicine is doing anything bad.

He has not noted any particular improvement with the Concerta, but admits he hadn't been taking it very long. He continues with Risperidone 3 mg. at bedtime and Concerta 36 mg. in the morning and now Prozac 40 mg. a day. Thor does think that this so far feels better than anything else he has taken, but it is quite early.

He says that he is not having obsessive thoughts about his ex-girlfriend. The only obsessive thing I could get him to admit to was counting. He says that school is going reasonably well.

On exam, his mood is less depressed, his affect seems more level. He is still jiggling his leg, which I think is him. He appears to have clearer thought processes and he provides direct eye contact. He seems to track well and does not seem internally distracted or preoccupied.

Elizabeth Delesante

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Every day began with the alarm clock's blonk-blonk-blonk-blonk at 9:30. Peering from beneath my blankets, so warm it was like being buried beneath a grizzly, I questioned if I could go through the ludicrous routine of another meaningless day. Why do people get out of bed? What could happen over the next 10 hours that would be an improvement over lying on something very soft, and beneath something very warm, wearing only boxers, doing absolutely nothing, all by myself? My mattress was a nest made of roasted marshmallows. When my legs touched the cold floor, the only perfect aspect of my life ceased. Back in the real world, I would be forced to answer if life was worth living and thereby answer "the most basic question of philosophy"—or so I read on blogs written by suicidals, which read like bad fiction. But *those people* weren't truly suicidal. I read these blogs because I enjoyed considering the motivations of human beings who televised their loneliness to strangers. These people were worse off than me, I

believed, both mentally unstable and urgent to brand themselves as such to the world. Sometimes maudlin posts cheered me up for 10 minutes before I flipped on the television and forgot about them. To be suicidal is to protect your thoughts like hoarded gold. Albert Camus turned every depressed attention-seeker with an audience into a faux intellectual. “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy,” Camus famously wrote. “All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards.” No, Albert. You pull the trigger or you don’t.

Instead, I lived out the days. I took a piss, put on sweats and a baseball hat, and swallowed pills over a bowl of Reese’s Puffs. Delesante wanted more protein and wheat in my diet, less sugar. I always told her I’d start eating healthier “soon.” Classes started at 10:00 AM. I stared at the clock on the wall, watched seconds tick by, clenching muscles in my lower body in a pattern: two for the calf, two for the thigh, two for the knee, two for the groin, two for the ass. Two times five equals ten. I did sets of 10 to make 100. Had to complete the cycle, even if interrupted. If a muscle spasmed on its own, I clenched the corresponding muscle on the other side and then clenched all the other muscles in order. I had been doing this since before I could count. I liked symmetry and order. When I clicked my tongue, it was in sets of twos. When I bounced my feet, the toes and heels had to come down the same amount of times. When I tapped my fingers on the table, I tapped in symmetrical twos, forefinger and middle finger first, then the other three fingers two times, then the forefinger and middle finger back down to finish the pattern. I did five variations of this; my fingers touched the table 100 times.

It came as no surprise in grad school when the Iowa psychiatrist told me I had

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. My psychologist in downtown Iowa City disagreed—*Don't worry about that. You don't have OCD. Your anxiety disorder manifests itself in obsessive thoughts; it allows you to cocoon yourself, in a way.* I still don't know what the difference is. I guess it doesn't matter.

I was pleased by the OCD diagnosis—I guess I'll never learn—in that it absolved my manic fixation on Krista that escalated as my dosages increased. A few years back I was in Brainerd over Winter Break from grad school when Krista tapped me on the shoulder at the Blue Ox, a local bar. She asked me how I'd been, told me she'd kept tabs on me. I barely recognized her. The interaction made me uncomfortable, so I excused myself when I deemed doing so appropriate. A few days later, she wrote me on Facebook and invited me to the home she shared with her husband for dinner. I had no interest in that, but I did want to apologize for the stress my fixation must have caused her eight years before. I suggested Grizzly's Grill, a chain restaurant she waitressed at, as a meeting place instead. She never wrote back.

Community college was easier than high school, but I couldn't concentrate and labored to write simple sentences. Subject, verb, thought, I reminded myself. I received an F on my first paper. After that, I hired a friend to write the assignments for me, \$40 for every A, \$30 for every B, and \$20 for every C. An English teacher passed back graded assignments one day. My poem, written by my buddy, got an A and a note to see the teacher after class.

“You're really talented,” she said. “You should try to publish this.”

She listed a few literary magazines that might take it.

“Thanks,” I said. “I'll think about that.”



After the semester, I wrote my friend a check for \$130.

I didn't work out. I inhaled junk food. The medications lived up to their warning labels, halting my metabolism. I didn't brush my teeth, shower or wear deodorant. I smelled like a locker room laundry hamper. After class, I stopped at Wendy's for lunch. Gobbled four junior bacon cheeseburgers, two medium French fries, chased it down with a Pepsi. It cost \$7 plus tax.

I napped from 1:30 – 5:30. My brother woke me for dinner. I napped for another few hours after we ate. I played online poker until Conan's show started. I ran my account up to a few thousand dollars. One night, in the middle of a tournament, the Internet went out. I frantically turned my wireless connection on and off. When that didn't work, I went upstairs, found Mom reading in bed.

“Why isn't the Internet working?”

“I don't know,” she said, flipping a page.

“You turned it off, didn't you?”

She squinted, studying a sentence.

“Turn it back on!” I said. “I'm in a tournament!”

“I don't know what happened to the Internet, Thor. Go to bed.”

The next day, she admitted to turning it off.

“You're a liar,” I said. “You lied to me.”

“The Internet will be going off every night at 10:00 PM,” she said. “You'll have to do whatever you want to do on it before then. Your father and I talked and we don't want you playing online poker anymore. It isn't healthy for you. Since we pay for the Internet, it'll be going off when we go to bed every night.”

When I ask Mom about this years later, she's the one apologizing, not the other way around. *I'm sorry*, she says. *I don't really want to talk about that*. She refers to this timeframe as a *nightmare* a few times, says *I didn't know what to do. I thought I'd failed you*. It's my turn to apologize, not only for the obvious regrets about the person I became, for the way it affected my family, but also because I keep calling her with questions about my past. Instead, before I hang up, I thank her for her time, finish typing my notes, and take a pink pill of Clonazepam, an anti-anxiety medication, with a finger of Jameson. I whisper at the ceiling, ask God to forgive me, hope Mom in some way gets the message by proxy. Sometimes I start writing her an email, an elaborate apology, but I always save the draft and exit the browser before I send it. It's the past, I think. She's watching *Project Runway*. She doesn't want to read this before bed.

A week after the Internet incident, Mom found a pack of cigars in my desk drawer and threw them away. When I couldn't find them, I walked upstairs for another confrontation.

"I don't allow tobacco in my house," she said.

"I am legally able to smoke cigars! Deal with it!" I said. "Replace them or pay me back what I paid for them."

"No, Thor," she said. "Don't bring tobacco here and we won't have this problem."

I stormed into the laundry room, snatched her purse off the washing machine. Mom reached over my shoulder. I ripped the purse away from her, elbow striking her bicep on the follow-through.

"Where's your wallet?" I yelled. "Give me the money!"

“You’re scaring me,” she said. “Thor, you’re scaring me.”

“This is fucking horseshit.”

I hurled her purse against the wall. Coins, jewelry, discarded tissues and coupons scattered across the floor. We stood in silence for a moment as Mom stared vacantly at the mess.

No matter how nasty I was to Mom, she’d leave little envelopes on my pillow once or twice a week, neatly addressed to *THOR*.

*February, 23, 2003. Dear Thor — The recovery road is long and hard but never forget that the alternative is much worse. Just keep walking forward one step at a time. Here’s a Bible verse to fit our analogy. “Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress.” Hebr. 12:1. Know that you are loved by those who know you best. The older I get, the more I see life as a roller coaster—crazy ups and downs, joy and fear, but the illusions of destruction is just that—the car stays on the track and eventually brings us home by God’s hand. We love you, Mom.*

*March 16, 2003. Thor — As you struggle with the past, wrestle with the present and view the future with trepidation—I thought these words of truth from Joshua would help you as they help me. This is what I glean from it: 1. God has a plan for each one of us. 2. He promises to go with us. 3. The journey will be difficult and circumstances might even seem impossible. 4. Follow the leader by obeying God’s Rules. Thankfully instead of having to obey the 700 regulations from Bible times, Jesus has reduced the commandments to TWO. 1.) Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. 2.) Love your neighbor as yourself. Be strong and courageous! God is with you*

*and for you. Know that I pray for you every day—asking for God’s presence, peace and power in your life. Love, Mom.*

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My father booked me into weekly sessions with his counselor who ran a private “Christian psychology” practice. Nick Gammello spoke in a whisper and nervously brushed his bangs off his forehead while thinking.

“Are you a Christian psychologist or a Christian who happens to practice psychology?” I asked during our first session.

“Would it matter to you what my answer was?” he said.

I hated when shrinks responded to questions with questions.

“Yes,” I said.

“I once heard that psychology and biblical counseling were ‘fundamentally incompatible,’” he said. “I like to think that God’s work and my work are one and the same when I’m having a good day.”

He asked the same tired questions and I responded with the same tired answers. I didn’t care for him or his gentle Bible-pushing, so I didn’t speak much. When he talked about Jesus’ love, I tuned him out and stared at the diplomas on his wall, clenching my muscles in order. I hated him and Jesus, wanted both of them to leave me alone. I didn’t like Christians, though I never would have told that to Nick. That would have opened a wormhole, multiple sessions devoted to self-loathing and bringing me back to the flock. Religion is the same as reading and writing, I thought. All are solitary experiences. Mom stopped reading to me when I was seven, because I could read books by that time. Should be the same with God, I reasoned—no need to discuss my beliefs or hear yours. Churches

were packed with people who were as arrogant, nasty, judgmental, and hypocritical as I was.

Sick of honesty and genuine internal probing, I exaggerated improvement so Nick wouldn't compare me to Job again. In the world of psychiatry, everything is an allegory. If it can't be explained in metaphor, it isn't real. Every fragment of experience becomes tangible, tangibility is converted into the abstract. It's like an athlete talking to the media. Pretend to sound interesting, offer nothing. Honesty is human, vapidly divine. I told Nick about a good grade, an encouraging phone call, a good new movie. Once, I spent three minutes discussing an especially delicious Culver's Butter Burger. He attempted to sell me on the idea I was getting better. Sometimes I agreed that maybe today was better than yesterday.

"I don't think you are schizophrenic," he told me once.

"Yeah?" I said, suddenly paying attention.

"I think you are depressed. I think you deal with your depression in unhealthy ways. I think you need to cut down on your drinking. I think you should probably stop gambling and take school more seriously. But I don't think you're psychotic. You have nothing in common with the schizophrenics I've treated. Mainly, you have a firm grasp on reality. Even if you hate that reality, you actively engage with it and understand it. You have a level of self-awareness that schizophrenics aren't capable of. While I can see you struggling with bipolar-like symptoms, I don't think you have that either. I hope you don't mind, but I talked about you with my wife last night."

Probably a violation of privacy law, but I couldn't have cared less. At least he was forthright, often using his personal life and checkered past to relate to me. As a kid in

Pittsburgh, Nick ran with a faux-gang of teenagers who broke into local stores and ransacked houses for fun.

“I told her that I was concerned that you were being aggressively treated for a disorder you didn’t have,” he said. “I’ve seen it happen before. It can be dangerous.”

I nodded, not particularly buying what he was saying.

“I think I’ll call your psychiatrist and talk to her about it,” he said.

It was the first time since my diagnosis that I’d heard it questioned. When I was finally told, definitively, that I was not a schizophrenic, many months later, one of my first emotions was apoplectic anger toward Nick. Yes, he had been the first person to contradict the diagnosis. But his milquetoast attempts to follow up on that instinct were ineffective. As far as I know, he mentioned it to Dr. Delesante, my psychiatrist, just once, over the telephone, but the conversation didn’t go further than that. He never suggested that I switch shrinks, never gave additional advice. I met with him years later, to request my psychiatric documents, and Nick blocked off an hour of his schedule to speak with me. He’d read about me on the front page of the Brainerd Daily Dispatch after I won Rolling Stone’s college journalism contest.

“I knew you didn’t have schizophrenia,” he said. “Remember? I told you that. I knew it. I knew it.”

I nodded at him, tried to muster a thankful grin. In truth, I wasn’t over my rage. I still felt that he could have prevented much of what was to come if he’d demanded a change of my treatment plan. Orange rays of setting sun clanged around my ears as I walked out of his office, turning my windshield a milky white. I clutched the cross on the chain hanging around my neck and mouthed: *God, please help me to forgive.*

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The hallucinations started after the diagnosis. When I flipped off the lights, ghosts ran across the walls. *It's not real, Thor. You're sick.* When I turned my head quickly toward the mirror after a shower, I saw a fat man glaring. I listened to the ringing in my ears and heard a murmur. Tried to make out words. Sometimes it told me to kill myself. Other times it was just a commentary about what I was doing. In Spanish class, the whisper translated the teacher's Spanish into English.

“Hoy te enseñaré a hablar en tiempo pasado,” she said.

*Not one of you did your homework last night, I heard, I am very disappointed.*

Disjointed thoughts drifted unpredictably, without prompt, commands from the ether. Hate in my head was from Satan. Mom, Dad and Nick said so, too. It wasn't mine.

Late at night, sitting in the basement after my family had gone to bed, I fantasized about the shotgun in our neighbor's basement. It called me from its case, told me *Come on.* I reminded myself of simple things—*You really like reading, you really like summer, you really like baseball.* The gun demanded I break in, take it out, lay it on the table, and load it. Press the barrel under your chin. *You love your family. You love watching Conan O'Brien. You love steak and Dr. Pepper.*

I drank cheap whiskey purchased by an old friend's brother, mixing it with Tab, my father's favorite soda. The possibility of suicide gave me hope. I had options, autonomy over my life. I didn't have to go through another day if I didn't think I could handle it.

Every night before bed I prayed: “God, take me tonight.”

I found out later that one side effect of Geodon is “depression, suicidal thoughts.”

In the not-yet-developed mind of a teenager, especially one who became an abuser of alcohol, side effects are exacerbated.

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### **Psychiatric Follow-Up**

Date: April 2, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Thor is seen for psychiatric follow-up alone, and then with his mom. He says that there is still about a 50% improvement. He has only fleeting thoughts of suicide. "Well, about once a month for a minute or two I think about all my pills, but I've never actually come close to doing it." He says he no longer sleeps so much. When his mother joins us, she is concerned about his lack of activity and schedule. Part of this, I think, is choice and age; part of it, I think, is his illness. Thor tends to stay up quite late, gets up just in the nick of time for his two classes. He has ten credits, which is really minimal.

Thor is still saying he wants to return to Kansas. However, mom and dad raise very valid concerns about whether that is going to be possible or not. I told Thor I think he needs to have a better functional level if he is going to return to Kansas. He acknowledged that right now, it seems too difficult to even think about doing more than he currently is. His plan is to work during the summer. He said he thought he could do that, including getting up if he needed to in order to be to work by 8:00.



Mom also mentions that Thor will go several days without bathing. This is very unlike him. Thor sits today and is fairly flat. Certainly his presentation today and information from mom is more consistent with a major psychiatric illness such as schizophrenia or schizo-affective disorder. Also, Thor seems to just have a much lower functional level than before. He also describes a great deal of amotivation.

At this point, we have agreed to neuropsychological testing. I'd like to get an idea of what Thor's abilities are, which would be very helpful with educational planning. Also, something might help us in any way with diagnostic planning would be helpful.

Elizabeth Delesante

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The stench drifted into my bedroom like a rancid car fart. I tasted it on my lips. I opened the door to a pile of turds, Ruby's collar jiggling as our terrier fled up the stairs. My brother Will had been warned repeatedly, hadn't he? Only yesterday I'd asked politely that the downstairs door remain shut to keep the dog from her favorite dumping ground, the circle of shit-stained carpet outside my bedroom. I knelt beside the pile and breathed in the stench, so intense as to seem evil, the shit curled and soft, set in a puddle of piss. Now the anger was where it should be, in my chest, in my cortex, foulness in my nostrils. I staggered up the stairs appropriately crazed to end this nonsense for good. I intercepted Will in the hallway.

“Clean up Ruby's shit, now. It's all over the floor by my room.”

He leaned against the wall, shrinking away from me, disappearing into my shadow. I grabbed him by the collar of his Brainerd Warriors Football sweatshirt, my former number, 77, affixed to the chest. I threw him against the wall, old black-and-white framed photos of downtown Brainerd shaking on impact. I had a 100-pound weight advantage on my baby brother.

Will, his head smelling of Johnson's baby shampoo as he crawled into my bed as a four-year-old to hug me goodnight. Will who would knock his little hand on my door, at risk of one of my all-too-frequent explosions, to ask me if I wanted to watch *Saving Silverman* again and make a Red Barron pepperoni pizza. Will, who I watched sleep peacefully from his doorway so I could find the motivation to put off a suicide attempt for one more day. Will whose birth I remember, a first grader allowed out of class until his delivery, at which point I returned to school toting a box of blue bubblegum cigars. Will who was diagnosed with diabetes when he was five, my heart stalling as I walked into the hospital room and saw him hooked up to a machine. He just smiled and told me his room had a Nintendo. Will who wouldn't jump off the toboggan at age six as it hurtled downhill toward a towering elm in our backyard, Will with a gash on his head that required 24 stitches to close. Will who never said a harsh word when his angry older brother moved back in. Will who was the only person on earth who still thought I was cool, who never explained to his little friends why his older brother, who graduated high school six months prior at 190 pounds, was now 250, a dangerous proliferation of fat threatening to rip his gut and spill onto the floor, storming around the basement and muttering to himself. Will, whom I promised my grandmother would be my best friend someday. He never knew it, but he was. Our seven-year age difference made me the cool

older brother he could swear around, but also granted me an air of authority in the advice department without the damning formality of being his father.

Now, my distended gut pressed up against his waist as I lifted him off the ground to eye-level. His face, complete terror, the look of unthinkable treason. I still remember the feeling my heart made as I looked into his hazel eyes, like it was being sucked through a vacuum hose. I dropped him and he fell to the floor, his knees buckling as he landed heavily on his ass. He scrambled up and ran down the hallway to find Lysol and rags in the laundry room.

I sat against the wall until he was done and then returned to my bedroom, stepping over the wet spot and disinfectant smell. I collapsed on my creaky wooden bed, crying drawn-out sobs, like the wounded bucks we used to shoot in the woods, whining in the cold air, hole in the abdomen. I longed for a strategy, a vision from above, an example of how to navigate forward. I conceived of my default setting as one of those tacky mile markers you see in a Caribbean vacation town, with one arrow pointing northwest (Dallas, Tex. ~ 1,238 miles), one pointing southeast (Caracas ~ 2,492 miles) and eight more pointing elsewhere. Every time I set out in a direction and was flung back, I studied arrows that had proven poor navigation tools (Pointing south: Life of the Party, Not a Care in the World ~ 676 miles) and vowed not to return. I vacillated between thinking that life was an amalgamation of pinball and roulette, where a metal ball bounced me randomly about and the luck I had in those arbitrary positions depended on a rotating wheel, and believing life was a huge game of poker, which I had the potential to master, to solve the thought process of my opponents. It's just that the former way of thinking—that everything was out of my control and I was destined to lose—made me want to stay

in bed all day. The latter way of thinking—that I could control reality—was exhausting and rarely gratifying.

I wiped my face clean and climbed the stairs. *Boy Meets World* was playing on the television. An hour later, my sister drove Will to my grandparent's house, where he would stay for two nights.

“I'm sorry,” Will said softly before I could speak.

I was seven years his senior and already realizing that not only did he deserve better, but he *was* better.

## 6. BEST FRIENDS

Baxter, MN.

Friday April 9, 2004.

7:00 P.M.

On Good Friday, Bryce, my best friend since the eighth grade, drove us out to Nisswa for a party. On the ride, we reminisced about high school, like the time Bryce told a racist joke to our black friend David at football practice and David responded by swinging his helmet and opening a five-stitch gash on Bryce's chin. Or the time Bryce invited Krista and me over for a party when his parents were out of town. She and I stayed in the master bedroom. I dreamt that Bryce's parents drove home early and were walking into the house; I woke Krista and we hid in the closet for five tense minutes before I realized it had just been a dream. When I was invited to *Adam's Easter Drinkathon* my first was: *This will be the first time you've been back*. My next thought was: *Don't think about that, Thor*. Throughout the week leading up to the party, I tried not to remember the night I'd spent with Krista at the cabin. Of course, when you command yourself not to remember, the memories always begin. Then your only recourse is finding something to do to distract yourself.

The long dirt driveway lined with pine trees leading to Adam's cabin was filled with cars when we pulled in. Minnesota had emerged from its annual winter thaw, which rendered the driveway the consistency of a thick stew, mud and pebbles kicking up from the tires as we corkscrewed around cars to park closer to the cabin. Memories I'd worked

to avoid began playing like commercials in my mind. It was Winter Formal, junior year. After the dance at Cragun's, we drove to Adam's cabin on Sand Beach Road. The cabin wasn't heated and it was December in Minnesota. You could see your breath when you talked.

I pushed the images out of my head as Bryce and I parked. In high school he and I spent Friday nights watching *Spaceballs* and playing *NCAA Football* on the PlayStation in my basement. We wondered what in the hell Chris, the star quarterback of the Brainerd High football team, was doing after a huge win hanging out with us instead of girls. Derek was there, too. No girlfriends. No alcohol. In our peculiar realism, we liked to think we lived in the here and now, no matter how cold it got. Of course, we had the quarterback on our side. It's not tough to believe you are sacrificing status in high school when the cover boy of the local newspaper comes over after football games. The four of us ate Cool Ranch Doritos and drank Mountain Dew in the hot tub. Bryce was tall and chunky, a center on the basketball team and a scout team tight end. Like me, he was fascinated by Chris' apathy towards girls and perplexed that he didn't cash in on his stardom.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Klabo?" Bryce said in the hot tub, steam curling off the water. "You like looking at this instead of a real pair of tits?"

Bryce grabbed his belly, jiggled it.

"You know what I'd be doing if I just ran for three touchdowns and threw for 200 yards?" he continued. "No offense, but I wouldn't be sitting in a hot tub with the three of you."

Chris shook his head. He was the quiet type, uncomfortable with attention. Bryce

and I mocked him for his wooden quotes in the local newspaper.

“What gem did you give the sports writer for tomorrow’s edition?” I said. “Let me guess—‘We had a good week of practice and I’m happy we executed like we did.’”

“No, no,” Bryce said. “He’ll say that it was a team effort and they are taking things one game at a time.”

Chris sipped his Mountain Dew, smiling. He liked the way boiling water softened his battered muscles after games. I was the only one who knew he was being treated for obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. His parents brought him to a psychiatrist after they found the carpet of his room blanketed in yellow Post-it notes, each one full of meticulously diagrammed football plays or notes from chemistry class: *How to decide a third option on a zone read?: Backside defensive end, who will go unblocked in zone-rushing formation (blockers double-team front side). If DE sits or rushes upfield, I hand off. If he chases the RB, I pull ball and look for a crease on the backside. Abegg’s Rule—difference between maximum positive and negative valence of an element is usually eight. Emergence of chemistry in Europe primarily due to plague during the Dark Ages.*

Chris wouldn’t be at Adam’s party. He refused to drink, even after he went to college, even after a neck injury ended his football career. Chris’ uncle died of liver cancer. Because of that, he told me he’d never have more than one beer in a sitting. Bryce didn’t know about any of that and I wasn’t going to tell him. They were probably the only secrets I’d ever kept from him.

Bryce and I had only been in one serious fight. In ninth grade, Amy Benjamin and I were on a date at Andrea Smith’s. As we watched *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, I draped my arm around Amy’s shoulder. After a game of hide-and-seek in the trailer park, I walked in on

Bryce and Amy making out in the living room. *You're a piece of shit*, I yelled at him.

Bryce passed me a note in science class a week later: "Will you be my friend again?"

Circle: YES NO MAYBE." I wrote: "FUCK YOU." Mr. Edinger snapped at us after we busted up laughing. After class I told Bryce that I didn't want Amy, that he could have her. I didn't really mean it, but you survive eighth grade by masking vulnerability with arrogance. That's how you push through life. Passes for compassion.

Bryce was my only friend who knew I'd considered killing myself, a fact that took me months to confide, courage found only after downing several Whiskey & Cokes. One of my friends had to know, I told myself. One of them had to know. It was a cold February night and he was at a house party in St. Cloud.

"Is this about the Gophers?" he said in greeting after picking up. "Because, yes, they suck. It's not something that bears discussion. I think I'm making good headway on this soccer chick here, so I gotta go."

"I've been thinking about killing myself," I blurted, spitting out the words so I didn't choke on them.

"On second thought she isn't really my type," he said. "Let me go outside. Just a sec."

I told him everything, apologized every few minutes for being a buzz kill. After that, secrets spilled out during each call, as though he was my suicide sponsor and I had to chronicle every relapse. He seemed genuinely interested in my depression, maybe because he was an aspiring poet, and asked me pointed questions about it. Imagine, I told him once, that you only perceive the sun shining because you feel its heat rot your skin and not because you know its job is to give light. Imagine that you're always in the dark.



I could only speak of my depression in empty abstractions, because even though he was my best friend, I was afraid of exposing weakness to him. He could know that I wanted to die, but I didn't want him to understand my emotions. I was afraid I didn't understand them myself.

Bryce and I walked around Adam's parent's quaint log cabin and said our hellos. I poured the Jack, Bryce retrieved ice and filled our cups with Diet Coke. We downed two cocktails in silence, playing catch-up.

"Vroom," he said after finishing his second drink.

"Shot?" I asked.

"Did Dale Earnhardt die living his dream?"

I drank cocktails three, four and five as I talked with a guy from Mrs. Reeves' science class. I left the conversation midstream when I saw The Former Dance Team Captain sifting through the refrigerator, looking for a Mike's Hard Lemonade.

"Hey Jordan," I said.

"Oh, hi, Thor."

"I recommend Smirnoff, same alcohol content as beer."

"I'm not really looking to get drunk."

"Of course not," I said, reversing course. "I suppose you are on the cheerleading team at the U of M by now."

"Actually I'm not."

"Yeah, probably a good choice to just focus on school. Minnesota is tough academically."

"I tried out and didn't make it."

“Coach must be insane,” I said, trying to recover. My palms began to sweat and I took a long drink from my cup.

“A lot of girls try out,” she said and took a step back towards the main room.

“Enjoy the Mike’s,” I said. “Best drink for your purposes. The sugar content keeps you from getting drunk too fast. I’m not sure why, I read that somewhere. I think because the sugar level in the blood goes up.”

“Thanks Thor,” she said, her back already turned to me.

I pretended to look at a deer’s stuffed head hanging from the wall as she walked toward a couple former football stars a few years older than us. *Sugar content in the blood? Seriously, dude?* Jordan and the football stars laughed and I assumed it was about me.

I found Bryce, convinced I’d never have a female friend that I didn’t want to sleep with. It was a terrible thing, I thought. Even when I talked to an attractive girl who I knew I had no chance with, I couldn’t stop myself from trying to impress her, trying to compliment her. Maybe that’s why I’d done better with girls at Kansas, I thought. I said and did whatever I wanted without thinking. That’s how Michael Jordan does it, that’s how Peyton Manning does it, that’s how Alex Rodriguez does it: You act, you don’t think. You react, you don’t overanalyze.

“Noticed you got shot down like the Hindenburg,” Bryce said. “Jordan is big game to hunt with a pocket knife.”

“You miss one-hundred percent of the shots you don’t take.”

“Cheers to that.”

We crumpled our plastic cups after our fifth cocktails and got new ones; it was

how we kept track of consumption. I stumbled around the kitchen.

“Hey, hey, nice to meet you,” I said, slapping an acquaintance on the back. When he turned to me, I slapped him lightly on the face. He punched my shoulder. We laughed and hugged. I did the same routine to everyone. It was hilarious.

I didn't fare well at Fuck the Dealer or Circle of Death. I took several shots of Sailor Jerry's rum. Acid splashed into my throat. Adam set up a game that involved a pyramid of cards. You started from the bottom row, flipping one card per turn. The object of the game was to remember which cards had already been exposed. After a certain level, each wrong answer required a shot. Puke Pyramid, they called it.

I exposed a king when I thought that card would be a 5. I took a shot of Karkov. The room spun. All I heard was laughing. My knees went out and I collapsed. More laughter. I staggered up. Adam flipped a card. Nobody was worried about me. I wasn't worried about me. Suddenly my torso felt gummy, as if it were made of acidic maple syrup. I could feel my stomach lining corrode as I perspired something that smelt like vinegar.

“It's your turn Dude,” Adam said.

I saw three blurry Adams. I couldn't seem to grip the table.

“You don't look so good,” he said.

I clamped my hand over my mouth and stumbled out the door, lurched towards a tree with peeling white bark. Vomit came in spurts, splashing on the soft, soggy ground, my body bucking as it ejected. Steam curled off the grass into the cool air. I backed away from the pile as if the fetor of vapor were toxic. Bryce, having crept up behind me, wrapped his arm around my neck.

“Taco Bell never tastes as good on the way out, does it?” he said.

Inside the cabin, I put my mouth under the kitchen sink, rinsed my mouth.

“You’re unbeatable at that pyramid game,” Adam said.

I carried the bottle of Jack to the living room. Even though I knew it would hurt, hurt like hell, I wanted to remember. Two years before, Krista and I slept on the couch where I sat after Winter Formal. We’d dated for less than a month and had never slept together. I was 17, nervous. My friends asked me during the dance if I was going to lose my virginity. I didn’t know. Krista and I had never talked about sex before. Never in my 17 years of existence had sex been an option. Suddenly it was. Adam plugged in a space heater in the kitchen. We drank Mike’s Hard Lemonade on the living room carpet. The floor was colder than the drinks. There were four couples in the circle and two extra guys who hadn’t found dates. Being there made me important, as though dating Krista admitted me into a fraternity. I remember being so grateful for that. I never wanted to leave that circle with a bottle in my right hand and my left arm hooked around her slender waist, my suit jacket draped over the couch. I wore suspenders and a boutonniere over a blue button down.

All the rooms were accounted for, so Krista and I had to sleep on the living room couch under an itchy wool blanket. I helped her take pins out of her elaborately done hair.

“Thank you,” she said, “you made this night special.”

It was a movie line. Or it just sounded like a movie line. But it touched something deep inside of me. For the first time I knew what it was to be in love. I released my suspenders from my shoulders and let them hang to my knees. I kissed her on the neck. She tasted like salted almonds, tanning lotion and perspiration from the dance floor.

I helped her out of that sparkling pink dress. She loosened my tie and unbuttoned my shirt. Little streaks of moonlight poked through the shades and outlined our naked torsos as we stood in front of each other exposed. I had never seen a girl naked. I stared at her breasts and then her tight stomach and then her panties. Her skin was caramel except for a white Playboy Bunny right above her waist, a sticker she used while tanning. I wasn't ashamed as I got hard. We lay on the couch. She reached into my boxers carefully, as one might remove their glasses before swimming. All the nerves in my body popped like kernels of corn in the microwave.

“Does that feel good?” she said.

I couldn't respond, just sort of bobbed my head to a chorus only I could hear. There was something about the way Krista wrapped her fingers around me, delicately but assertively. When I remembered it years later, what entranced me was not just that Krista was sexually adventurous, it was that she had shown such resolve in exploring. There was no indecision, not a hint of coyness, not even as she stood in front of me naked. She must have understood that I had to experience this alone, that I had to concentrate on every little detail and store it in the deepest recesses of my mind. I needed to be inside my own satisfaction so that I could emerge from this experience with some new kind of understanding. Savoring the pleasure she gave me could only be done in solitude, greedily and unflinchingly accepting her gift. I came violently in her hands, biting my lip so as not to wake everyone when I cried out. Seeing her examine with a surgeon's scrutiny the mess I made on my stomach, and to study my penis as it began to deflate in her grip, fused me to her. We slept on the couch, keeping each other warm under the sandpaper blanket.

*It's been two years*, I thought as I sat alone with my bottle of Jack, enough time that I shouldn't be haunted by memories. It's just that I was, remembering the Playboy Bunny and the purple thong and the poised cadence of her breath as she slept. After eight hundred consecutive days of personal regression, I had no chance of reclaiming what I'd given up. All I had was a whiskey bottle. On Monday Bryce would be back in St. Cloud and I'd be in a classroom. I poured a shot into my plastic cup, threw it back, grimaced. People walked by, laughing and smiling.

I thought about the psychiatrist, how I'd have to keep all this from her unless I wanted another talk about the dangers of drinking while on anti-psychosis medication. I was through with those talks, tired by knowing what she would say, knowing what I couldn't. I flinched, realizing that someone was sitting next to me, a girl from my graduation class. She was trying to talk to me. I looked at her apologetically and offered her a shot. She might have raised an eyebrow; it was difficult to tell. I assumed she declined. And then I just wanted to go home.

I set the whiskey bottle on the ground, grasped the couch's arm, and pushed off. I watched my feet inch forward as I entered a dimly lit connecting room. I squinted to see Bryce, who sat on a bed, cradling a beer. Paul flirted on an adjacent bed with a girl in fishnet leggings that I couldn't identify in the faint light from the kitchen.

"Can you drive me home?" I said to Bryce.

He laughed.

"I'm fucking drunk, I need to go home and sleep," I said.

He laughed again. Maybe he couldn't understand what I was saying. I tried again, careful to pronounce each word articulately.

“No,” I said. “I’m serious. We need to get the fuck out of here.”

Bryce squinted and used his “slow voice,” a shtick he generally reserved for imitation and mockery. I used to ask him to impersonate Coach Stolski, our football coach, shorts hiked up to his thighs, arms crisscrossed and hands in his armpits: “Tonight, boys... we have to become one heartbeat. No one can beat us if we’re united.” Because of the room’s darkness, Bryce could barely see me, a dark silhouette in the doorway. He laughed hard, looked at Paul. Paul was laughing, too. I looked back at Bryce, still laughing. Twelve years of friendship and the motherfucker was mocking me. He’d probably told everyone I was suicidal.

Years later he would tell me that if the room had been lit and I could have seen him I would have known that it was a joke laugh. *I would also like to think that if I could have seen where you were at and what kind of state you were in I could have diffused the situation somehow. Sometimes you wonder what could have happened if...*

I charged Bryce, hurling myself on top of him. I cocked back, tried to punch through his face.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he yelled from behind his arms.

My fists hit his forearms, thud thud thud.

“What the fuck?” he screamed, equal parts surprise and anger.

I threw a punch under his arms that connected with his jaw. When he lowered his arms, I punched him in the eye. His head snapped back.

Hands grasped me from behind, ripping at my sides. I lost my footing and fell backwards onto a bed. Three friends looked down at me as though they’d caught me screwing their sister. I laughed, a chuckle at first and then a full-fledged howl. I saw fear.

They were scared of me. The room filled. My former classmates gawked as Bryce yelled. Why was everyone looking at me like that? Little disagreement between chums. Laughter echoed through the cabin. Got my dick tugged for the first time right over there in that room, let me tell you the story. I wasn't always like this. I laughed and laughed.

Paul, Jared and Kyle grabbed me by the shirt, pushed me towards the door.

"Fucking kill yourself for all I care," Bryce yelled as he spit blood from a torn lip in my direction. "I'm done with you."

I lost many friends that night.

Paul drove me home. *Fucking kill yourself for all I care.*

"You going to be all right?" Paul said.

"Thanks for the ride," I said and slammed the door.

My mom and sister were in the kitchen. I didn't acknowledge them. My bottle of sleeping pills was half full. I shook out a handful, in the downstairs bathroom, and swallowed them in a giant gulp. I heard a knock at the door. I shook out another handful and swallowed them. I studied my reflection in the mirror, disheveled and pale, heavy purple bags under both eyes. I punched the mirror. Nothing changed.

"Thor?" my sister Quinn said. "Thor!"

I opened the door.

"What did you do?" she said.

I studied the wall beyond her shoulder.

"Thor what did you do?" she said. "You look awful."

"I... took the pills."

Quinn sprinted upstairs. She returned a second later, grabbed my arm, and pulled



me toward the stairs. Mom was on the landing. She said something I couldn't understand and led me to the bathroom.

“Throw them up,” Mom said. “Put your finger down your throat. Do it now.”

I knelt, did as I was told. I heaved out waves of small white pills that floated in the toilet bowl. When I was done Mom helped me to my feet.

She hugged me. Her voice broke.

“Please don't ever do that again.”

I woke up with a throbbing hangover. I ate breakfast thinking about what I would say when I called Bryce. I stared at the sports pennants on my bedroom walls and turned on the stereo, played Eminem softly. It didn't loosen the snarled knot of muscle in my neck. I laid down in bed and took a puff of my inhaler. My fingers twitched as I dialed.

“I don't know why I did that,” I said, struggling to articulate what I was feeling. I was used to that, but never with Bryce. I could always talk to him. “I just want you to know that I'm really sorry. I wish I could take everything back.”

“I talked with my dad this morning,” he said. Mr. Cloutier, Bryce's father, taught at the high school and was one of my favorite teachers. “I agreed with him—I can't accept your apology. What you did was unforgivable.”

All I could muster in response was, “OK.” After a few awkward seconds, he said “Goodbye,” and hung up.

I didn't blame Bryce. I hated me, too.

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*April 11, 2004. Thor – This is your home, your sanctuary—a place where you can be yourself and know that you are loved completely. We are overjoyed that you are here*

*with us. Easter is a time of hope. Just when there seems to be no way out—when all avenues of escape are slammed shut—when everyone and everything has crumbled, The Rescuer arrives in a blaze of light. I am thanking God for His power to heal the sick. We will support you always. I LOVE YOU. Mom.*

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### **Psychiatric Note**

Date: April 27, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Spent some time talking to Thor's mom on the phone. They really are not seeing an improved function with the Prozac. Thor has talked to the Dispatch about getting a job, which is positive. Unfortunately, on Good Friday he went out with friends, ended up getting intoxicated, beat his best friend up. Came home, swallowed a bottle of Risperdal that his mother made him throw up. They did not elect to take him to the emergency room, but understand that they should do that in the future. At this time, Thor continues to flounder. Talked with mom about the diagnosis of schizophrenia, which I am tending toward.

Elizabeth Delesante

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### **Psychiatric Follow-Up**

Date: May 13, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Thor was seen with his parents. We decided to get together as there have been a number of crisis calls, and to make sure that everyone was on the same page.

Thor has core symptoms of depression, which includes anxiety, hallucinations which are under good control, gambling and alcohol. He hasn't drunk since the incident on Good Friday with his best friend. He is still trying to make amends about that. He had a gambling and alcohol assessment. Both were found to be problems, but he hasn't elected to do anything about the gambling. Did point out that since he doesn't have a job, parents are essentially supporting that. Recommended they not do it.

Thor is still sleeping 12 hours. That is slightly less than before, but certainly more than when he was in high school. He admits he hates his life. He says that he wants to feel better about himself by being successful. His goal is to go back to Kansas. We talked about the short-term goal for the summer. Thor thinks that if he goes back to Kansas he can be more functional. I told him that my recommendation is that he becomes functional before he goes to Kansas. I think if he can hold down a job, keep a schedule, not drink, not get in gambling trouble, then I don't see any reason that he couldn't return to Kansas. However, if he can't do those things, we're going to need to reassess it. I noted that parents are funding college, so they have the ultimate control over whether he goes or

not, and they should not hesitate to exert that.

Thor is less depressed than he has been. Parents agree with that. They say that in many respects, it's been a joy to have him home. Dad was concerned because he takes his Adderall so late. I noted that if he sleeps until 4:00 in the afternoon, that is his morning, and even if he didn't take Adderall he's not going back to sleep until 3:00 or 4:00 at night.

At this time, he is on Prozac 60 mg. a day, Adderall XR 30 mg., Trazodone as needed, and Risperdal 3 mg. a day.

On exam, his mood is actually level. He has some anxiety, some mild obsessive symptoms in the form of counting and flexing the muscles in his leg, but not significant or impairing. There are currently no psychotic symptoms. There is no suicidal ideation.

**Assessment:**

Depression with psychotic features vs. schizophrenia-like illness such as Schizo-affective Disorder

Elizabeth Delesante

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“This will be the last time we speak,” I whispered in the dark from bed. I stared at

the ceiling, as though making eye contact with God, as though he was glaring down right back at me. I imagined His huge blue eyes, His lifeless pupils, giant black saucers. “Fuck You for turning Your back on me. Fuck You. I used to ask for help every day. Nothing. Not a fucking thing. Listen to me motherfucker. I will ask You once more. End me. Tonight. Please. Send me wherever You have to send me. I really don’t give a shit anymore. I’ll go to Hell.”

## 7. GRADUATION DAY

Brainerd, MN.

Thursday May 27, 2004.

6:00 P.M.

On the night of my sister's high school graduation, I died in the backseat of Mom's SUV, rags stuffed in the exhaust pipe, garage door shut. That morning, I slapped off the alarm clock, untangled myself from my comforter, and shuffled upstairs for breakfast, eating Reece's Puffs, drinking orange juice and reading the sports page, just like every other morning. Studying the tiny black print of baseball box scores, hours away from a suicide attempt that should have ended my life, I thought of little else besides reconstructing the events of the Minnesota Twins' game the night before. What transpired later that night wasn't premeditated.

I was trapped in a cycle I couldn't even comprehend at the time: My medications created side effects, which psychiatrists perceived as symptoms, which compelled them to increase dosages, which in turn exacerbated the side effects that I was now describing as symptoms to my medical team: The suicidal fantasies, the weight gain, the sexual dysfunction, the skin tremors, the depression, the uncontrollable anger, the inability to concentrate, the loss of memory, and on and on. As side effects worsened, I increasingly leaned on the psychiatrists and psychologists to form my self-perception. That kid pouring a third helping of Reece's Puffs on a bright May morning was going to continue his daily routine—pills, therapy, gorging, drinking alone in his parent's basement,

gambling, watching Conan, passing out—for years unless the sequence was unexpectedly shattered. No part of his personality wasn't dictated by that cycle. That kid, sitting at the breakfast table, was already gone. What happened later that night, in the garage, circuitously set him on a path to find himself again. His real self.

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Mom spent that afternoon coaching my father on the speech he would deliver to the graduates as chairman of the school board. Every time he practiced, he teared up. Mom tried to help him by cutting out emotional sentences. Soon, it became clear to her that almost every line was emotional. My father: The cagey businessman who cries during movie trailers. Born into a middle-class Brainerd family, Dad's nurse mother worked overnight shifts while Dad's father chopped trees 10 hours a day, six days a week. My father will die in Brainerd as a member of the upper class. He earned his pharmaceutical degree at the University of Minnesota and moved back to town, buying a local pharmacy at the age of 24 with the financial backing of my mother's father. When Dad burned himself out 15 years later turning that pharmacy into a multi-million dollar business, he sold it to Thrifty White Drug and filled his spare time with the school board. The day of his daughter's graduation was his first chance to publically address townspeople, many of whom he knew on a first-name basis.

My dad wasn't the only Nystrom speaking that day. Quinn, president of the student council, would give the day's last speech. As the former National Youth Advocate of the American Diabetes Association, Quinn was a seasoned public speaker. Earlier that day, Mom asked Quinn if she wanted to practice and Quinn performed one flawless rendition from memory before heading off to spend the day with friends.

Waiting for the ceremony to begin, I slinked down in the bleachers of the football stadium wearing a crumpled red knit shirt, my uniform at Video Galley, where I worked part-time at the checkout counter, weighing 60 pounds more than I did on my own graduation day. I tried to blend in, dissolve into a mirage of popcorn-chomping children and proud parents. I would see Krista soon, marching onto the field. I wondered how I would deal with that. I hadn't seen her in months, but that wasn't exactly true, was it? The mind creates its own reality and she was ubiquitous in mine.

One year before, on the football field, I wore a long gown of shiny royal blue. Mom said it matched my eyes. My friends and I stole each other's mortarboards and flung them through the air like frisbees. We sat in neat rows of metal folding chairs under a blue sky on a sunny Minnesota day. Though we didn't know why it was a tradition, we inflated beach balls and tossed them into the air during speeches.

My father, then vice president of the school board, rigged the ceremony so he could announce the last half of the alphabet. Earlier in the day, I told him: "If you hug me, I will kill you."

"I'm proud of you," he said, eyes puffy, as I shuffled by.

That night the senior class went back to the high school, which throws a Grad Blast every year. We stayed up all night eating pizza and french fries at a casino-themed party, collecting tickets for prizes. I redeemed mine for extra raffle tickets, though I didn't win the big screen TV. We swam in the pool and watched a hypnotist make fools of unfortunate volunteers. Walking out at five in the morning, everyone assumed they would be friends for life, everyone thought they were headed for big things.

One year later, the bleachers were alive with chatter, everyone discussing me, I



assumed, the ungrateful son who barely made it through one semester of college after his well-to-do parents paid his expensive tuition to a fancy out-of-state university. *The president of the school board has a schizophrenic son. Heard he got the shit kicked out of him, got arrested, asked a policeman to shoot him. They locked him up and sent him back.* I saw it on the faces of my mom's friends when they climbed down the metal steps to say hello before the ceremony began. They said it was a beautiful day for a graduation and reminisced about the little girls coming over for sleepovers, watching *The Little Mermaid* and playing *Pretty, Pretty Princess*. Before saying goodbye, the parent would nod in my direction and say, "Hello Thor, it's good to see you," as if confirming they still recognized me behind that bloated skin mask I wore for a face.

I spotted my ex immediately, strolling down the hill in her gown. Inside of me there was a sudden collapse, as if I were on a plane that had been shot out of the sky. Krista broke from the procession of marching seniors, jogging in high heels to her new boyfriend, who stood beside the fence, clutching her mortarboard, flashing him a lover's smile under blonde bangs. At that moment I understood why people say *You might want to sit down*. She pecked him on the lips, struck a pose I recalled too well, bit lower lip, hands on hips, head cocked right. I should have looked away; looked at the baseball field off in the distance, looked at the crying baby behind me, looked *anywhere*. But I'm the type of person who never looks away. She went to him once more, clutching his neck, pulling him to her mouth, kissed him as if a crowd of people were trying to pull them apart.

My father stepped to the podium to begin the ceremony.

"Good evening and welcome to the Brainerd High School Class of 2004 and your

supporting cast of family and friends,” he said.

Beach balls flew through the air.

“It seems like yesterday that I was sitting where you are... well, okay, it was a few years ago... 1975 to be exact,” Dad said. “But I still remember the thoughts that were going through my head and I’ll bet you’re thinking the same thing tonight. Something like: yeah, yeah, yeah, old man... blah, blah, blah, just get on with it... and let the celebration begin! See, we’re no different after all.”

The crowd politely laughed.

“Graduates,” Dad said, “I hope you feel the flood of love coming from your families and friends tonight...”

Behind sunglasses she gave me for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, I stared at the pile of blonde hair collected on Krista’s shoulders. She looked back, smiling, and for the briefest of moments, as though we were together again, I thought that it might be for me. But she was looking at Nate, who waved, which made her smile more.

My hands shook and I pinned them between my knees, closed my eyes and shivered. I had spent most of my life in Minnesota and never been so cold. All I wanted was to go home and sit in a warm bath, fall asleep for a few hours, escape the racing thoughts—Krista throwing her mittened hands in the air when Quinn wasn’t announced as winner at a figure skating competition in St. Cloud, Krista buying a Minnesota Twins jersey in the kids section of Target and wearing it with me to the Metrodome, where she feigned interest as I tried to teach her about defensive alignment, pitch selection and correct bullpen usage, Krista giving me an excuse to skip church services by volunteering with her in the nursery.

Quinn was introduced, walking to the podium with her shoulders back, eyes on the stage.

“Isn’t it perfect that we are gathered here on the football field tonight to celebrate our graduation together as the class of 2004?” she said. “After all, this is where it all began for us, on this very field. It was way back in 1992 and we met here together for Kinderfriend Day. I was thrilled Baxter School got to wear one of my favorite colors at the time, a snappy teal green. Just like tonight, our moms and dads were in the bleachers blinking back tears.”

The air felt thick enough to bite and chew. I swallowed acid remembering Krista in that short skirt asking for a putting lesson so I would wrap my arms around her waist. If I couldn’t slow my pulse, I might vomit on that child wearing a Kirby Puckett jersey sitting a row down. I squeezed the bleachers, inhaled mouthfuls of air the consistency of foam.

“...I’m talking about changing yourself from the inside out,” Quinn said. “Would you like to be a better listener or a better talker, more self-confident, kinder, or more disciplined? What are the parts of you that you would like to leave behind when you graduate tonight? Maybe a bad temper or dishonesty or a terrible tendency to talk about people behind their backs? We have the power to change.”

Mom sensed my pain in the way mother’s do. She tried to catch my attention, but I stared straight ahead.

“Let’s leave this place tonight, determined to be our best,” Quinn said. “Not the brightest or most beautiful, but the best. You deserve nothing less. May God bless each member of the Class of 2004.”

Quinn received a standing ovation. Dad took the microphone to officially ordain the Class of 2004 high school graduates. Mortarboards flew.

“Mom,” I said. “I have to go.”

“I want to take a family picture, first.”

“I’m going to be sick, I have to go.”

As a parent, she was used to splitting herself into as many fractions as were necessary to fulfill all obligations. I was a hindrance. I saw it on her disappointed face, even as she tried to sympathize. That night was Quinn’s, not mine. Every other day was devoted to my illness.

“Okay,” she said. “Go.”

I ran down the bleachers and across the parking lot, sweat forming an adhesive between my skin and work uniform. Once in the car, I punched the dashboard, slapped the driver’s side window with the back of my left hand, and spiked the sunglasses on the floor. I peeled out of the parking lot. Crossing the Mississippi Bridge, I contemplated jerking the steering wheel, jumping the curb, crashing through the metal railing, and freefalling to the river below. I’d panic for just a second as the car sunk, water seeping into the cabin. I’d try the door handle. When it wouldn’t open, I’d punch the window a few times. And then a calm would settle over me as water reached my chin and the car rested on silt. *Last swim in the Mississippi*, I’d think as my head went under.

I sobbed all the way home, the future a terrible weight, its insufferable force pressing down on me. I opened the medicine cabinet, studied all the pills, turned around and eyed the steak knives glinting from the block. I considered our neighbor’s gun

quietly waiting on its stand. But my family would be home soon, to celebrate Quinn with cake and presents, and I wouldn't have enough time.

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Mom cleared desert plates. Quinn left for Grad Blast. She hugged and kissed each one of us, Mom, Dad, Will and me, aunts and uncles, both sets of grandparents, thanked us for our presents. I'd only given her an old photo of the two of us as children. It was taken on Halloween when I was seven and she was five. Quinn was dressed as Minnie Mouse. I was a pirate, a costume that was slightly more original before Johnny Depp starred in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, but not by much. My favorite family pictures were of Quinn and me at Halloween. I always wondered how those disparate costumes had come to be. One year I was Dick Tracy and she was a princess. Another year I was a Minnesota Viking and she was the Little Mermaid. Another year, I the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, she, Daddy's girl, the little pharmacist. We never could coordinate our costumes. Mom and Dad let us be whatever we wanted to be. That picture—Quinn as Minnie and me as the pirate—was my favorite picture. It had been hanging on my bedroom wall until I framed it and wrapped it for her. As she hugged me, I was happy I had. It was worth more than money to me.

I went to my bedroom and gambled recklessly on Party Poker. I cleared the last several hundred dollars from my online account. The money was better off with *HoldEmJoe*, *Poker\_Prodigy\_42* and *CaliCardChick*, I thought. *Goodbye guys*, I typed into the chat box when they busted me. First time in my life I had been a magnanimous loser. I'd more or less given them a gift, but I wanted to believe I'd finally learned to be a good sport. It was a pleasant thought. I wouldn't die a sore loser.

It was past midnight. Out of whiskey, I sat alone in my bedroom, thinking about my psychiatrist's office and the thousands of dollars spent there bitching about my life. I thought about the handful of pills I gulped down every morning, each of them costing hundreds of dollars per month. The price of my depression was astounding. What right did I have to feel this anguish, with such genuine misery in the world around me? All those malnourished kids and you're driven to suicide living in a six-figure home. You're a weak thinker. It's chemical, I reminded myself. I didn't choose to be schizophrenic. It was as far outside my control as skin color or height.

As suicide moved from the comfortable space of fantasy to the terrifying domain of reality, all I wanted was to talk to my mom one last time. I opened my parent's bedroom door, paused for a second as my eyes adjusted to darkness.

"Mom?" I whispered.

"What is it?" she said, tired and alarmed.

"Can we talk?"

It wasn't an unusual request. My pain spiked when the sun set. Only under the cloak of darkness would I confide in Mom. We assumed our customary spots in the living room. Mom, wearing pink pajamas, sat on the small couch facing the window overlooking the lake. I sat on the large couch facing the fireplace. Positioned at a right angle, we could make eye contact or not.

"I feel miserable," I said, "like I have nothing to live for."

"Don't leave right before the miracle," Mom said. "God will rescue you."

I longed for real advice. Not Bible drab. Sometimes I put up a wall immediately—  
"I don't want to talk about God, Mom, I want to talk about how my life fucking

sucks.”—but tonight I would let her talk about whatever she wanted. She deserved that right. Tonight I would listen and nod.

Mom said God’s promises were the only thing that provided her hope. She knew I would pull through, because God was benevolent and would answer her prayers. He would save me through her faith. She wrote down scriptures on note cards and carried them in her purse. She taped them to the dashboard.

“Let me read you a verse we read in Bible study this week,” she said. The page was bookmarked and highlighted. “We were under great peril, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from deadly peril and He will deliver us. On this we have set our hope that He would continue to deliver us.”

We were so wildly divergent on our opinions of religion at the time that I regarded her as having been brainwashed by a cult. Her God was a merciless tyrant, I thought, a heartless terrorist. At best, He was a deadbeat, a runaway father, abandoning His children when they were most in need.

Mom deserved none of this vitriol, nor did God. Several long months later, a new psychiatrist finally expunged my schizophrenia diagnosis. We expect apologies when a friend forgets to hold a door open, but you’ll never get an apology after living through a misdiagnosis. Simultaneously there are too many people to blame and no one to blame. You eventually understand that you are as culpable as anyone else. But that comprehension doesn’t happen until after you can grow a beard, after you consider marriage and babies, after you’ve experienced loss. When you’ve been told you are

schizophrenic, required to swallow handfuls of pills each week, you don't blame yourself. You accept the diagnosis. You blame friends that don't return your calls. You blame your parents for their genetics, you blame them for having you. You blame God for turning His back. Mostly you do that. Easier to direct anger at faith. God couldn't respond when I told Him we'd never speak again. Couldn't respond when I told Him that He was a fucking asshole. Similar concept to punching a pillow.

"I'm so beyond relying on myself or anyone else," she said. "I can't see a way out of this but trusting God with you."

"I've trusted God, Mom," I said. "Look where it's gotten me. I've told you this before, but I feel abandoned."

"Do you remember when you were a young boy?" she said. "You told me that you were playing a video game when you felt a calling from God. You said you asked Jesus into your heart at that moment. He hasn't left you. He never will."

Throughout the conversation, Mom conducted her own conversation with God. "Save him, please save him," she thought over and over. "He is Yours. Save him." Mom comforted herself by remembering that God himself had allowed his Son to die on the cross. This made her feel closer to Him, a kindred spirit.

I told my mom goodnight, but not goodbye. She told me later through tears that this hurt her deeply. I walked down the stairs, leaving her to turn out the lights.

As I waited for Mom to fall asleep, it occurred to me that our conversation was inherently cruel. Someday she'd look back with great regret that she hadn't seen the telltale signs. What she wouldn't understand was that nothing she could have said that night would have changed my mind. It was time to go. Sometimes you just know. I



hastily wrote a suicide note on my laptop. Didn't do it because I had anything special to say. I wrote it because that's what people who commit suicide do. Can't kill yourself without writing. Perhaps that idea set the course for the rest of my life.

My note began and ended with, "I'm sorry." It told my family they shouldn't blame themselves, that there was nothing they could have done to help me. It told them I loved them very much. It told them I was going to a better place. It was banal, second-hand tripe that didn't sound like me at all. A shit-stain of a final message, a final fuck you. Couldn't even muster an ounce of emotional resonance in your own suicide note. Wouldn't even picture your brother's face until that last *I'm sorry*. You erased him, focused on those two words, in all their hollowness, and convinced yourself that he would understand someday. You refused to picture the rest of Will's life, the misery and shame a 12-year-old would suffer after his older brother's suicide. You wouldn't consider how that would stunt him, questions he would have to answer in the middle school cafeteria, because even you weren't despicable enough to enforce that fate upon your baby brother if you considered your situation rationally.

I swallowed 30 pills of Trazodone, 10 times the maximum recommended dose, enough to induce deep sleep but not vomit. Suicide requires movement and depression weighs more than a semi. You need a spark of mania to initiate the plan, handcuffs for the nerves. I counted 15 pills, wiped them off the counter into my hand, and tossed them into my mouth. The first time around, the pills clotted in my throat as I tried to wash them down with water. I clamped a hand over my mouth to secure them as I gagged, swallowing furiously. I chewed the next 15 pills into a foul-tasting paste. That was easier.

In the medicine cabinet, Dad had literature from the drug companies. I wanted to

make sure Trazodone was the right choice. Trazodone increases serotonin in the brain, a natural substance that is supposed to maintain mental balance. Developed in Italy in the 1960's, Trazodone was first sold as an anti-depressant and then as an anti-psychotic. Later, ostensibly when more effective anti-depressants were developed, psychiatrists began prescribing Trazodone as an off-label sleep aid. The medication's "potent  $\alpha_1$ -adrenergic blockade" causes sedation, which, along with "5-HT<sub>2A</sub> antagonism," can produce a hypnotic state.

The air was chilly and stale as I stepped onto the wood landing. Mom's SUV took on a pinkish hue from the tiny red light of the garage box. I packed rags into the exhaust pipe. I peeled off a strip of duct tape, the ripping sound shattering silence. I used the entire roll to seal the rags in. The silver Mazda Tribute roared to life inside the lonely garage. I killed the vehicle's lights and put my hand over the exhaust pipe. The seal held.

I curled into a ball in the backseat, pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. I blinked for the last time and tried to remember my life in it: Baseball-themed eighth birthday party, Dad being dragged across the sand in Florida as his parasailing adventure went awry, Macy's Day Parade in New York when I was in grade school, Snoopy crashing into that huge building as I held onto Dad's leg, certain that the building would topple over, Mom making "T" shaped pancakes the first day of every school year, my job emceeding beauty pageants Quinn and the cousins put on for the adults every summer, walking on the grass of Fenway Park with Dad, watching Will, as a four-year-old, run off our tour boat in San Antonio because he couldn't hold it any longer, peeing in the bushes beside the River Walk. I smiled. I'd lived a full life, I decided. I'd lived.

Suicide was a decision I'd made for myself and I found it hard not to respect that.

Once you lose all autonomy from your life, even the option to commit suicide represents freedom. I knew perfectly well that it didn't much matter whether you died at nineteen or eighty, since either way everyone else will go on living for thousands of years. What used to disturb me was the idea that I had 50 years of life still to come.

As I ruminated about my life, a prickly, plummeting sensation flooded my torso, as though I were being pumped with laughing gas. A shadow washed over me. The garage was pitch black; shadows need light to exist. The cabin lost air. Woozy from pills, I tried to convince myself that I was having a schizophrenic episode. But I knew it wasn't a hallucination in the same way that you know whether a loved one is being truthful with you, a conviction that washes over the mind, stains bones, settles in the chest. There was a hollowing sensation in my chest, as though I were being gutted by an ice cream scoop, a warmth all over like I was pissing myself, the feeling of being watched so acute that I wanted to melt into the leather seat, disappear. An updraft of static surged across my body. There was something there. There was something there.

The shadow outside the window wasn't in the shape of a man. It was tall—I couldn't see the red light of the garage box above it—and thick. In health class junior year, the teacher told us that having a heart attack felt like someone standing on your chest, pulling up on your arms, crushing air out of your lungs. I was having a heart attack. This is why you are given an easy number—911—for emergencies, because when the doorknob is shaking in the dark and a window shatters you won't remember any numbers. I yanked on the strings of my hoodie until there was but a small opening to breath through. That's where my memory ends.

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You've either had a supernatural experience and believe, or you haven't and won't. It's the reason I don't talk about it. I could confide it in a co-worker, who might say, "I see ghosts all the time—we're lucky." And then I would question her sanity. If I got drunk at a party and let it slip, I might hear: "I wish I'd seen one." But you don't want that. Don't ever hope for it. I didn't blame the researcher who told me: "All the people I've ever interviewed who survived an attempt have a story similar to yours. I don't know if it's the lack of oxygen or the pills or the endorphins." Instead of telling him the duct tape was found snarled in a neat ball on the garage floor the next morning, as if 11-year-old Thor had winked at me by bunching it up as he did his stick tape after a hockey game, I replied: "I wouldn't believe me either." It took years to acquire that confidence. Trusting perception of what can't be explained takes years, I think. And those who put unwavering faith in the unexplainable are mocked, called crazy. Eventually that label became my biggest fear.

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"Thor! Thor!"

A hand shook my leg.

"THOR WAKE UP!"

Swam upward, ripped at water.

"THOR!"

Every muscle screamed. My sister Quinn pulled the key from the ignition when it hit me: I had failed, become an "attempt" instead of a statistic. I looked out the back window. The garage door was open and it was dark outside. The vehicle's clock read 5:16. Quinn had just gotten home from Grad Blast. I staggered out of the car. Calves

asleep, I wobbled forward as nerves sputtered to life.

“Thor! Wait!”

I climbed into bed and fell asleep immediately, carbon monoxide coursing through my veins. The door flew open. Mom talked over Dad, hysterical. Dad squeezed her shoulders. They moved in fast-forward, waving arms, voices blending together.

“Leave,” I mumbled. “I need to sleep.”

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Dad saw them when he left for work, three oil-soaked rags behind the Tribute lying next to a snared bundle of duct tape. Sometime during the night the tape broke. The rags dislodged.

I slept for hours, woozy from gas. When I finally woke, in the afternoon, I stayed in my fortress of solitude, which had two televisions, a PlayStation, a stereo system, a DVD player and basic cable. Mom knocked.

“I called Dr. Delesante’s office to talk to her about what happened last night,” Mom said. “She scheduled an emergency session with your father and I. You’ll have to get dressed, it starts in 30 minutes.”

I was careful to appear as far removed from a suicidal mindset as possible with Delesante. The session took an odd twist when she turned on my parents, outraged that they hadn’t called an ambulance. Delesante threatened to report them to social services if it happened again. It wasn’t their fault, I wanted to say. Each of them would have traded spots with me last night. These aren’t derelict parents. You can’t blame them for who I am.

“I’m going to give you two choices, Thor,” she said. “You can be immediately

hospitalized at a local psychiatric facility, or you can attend an outpatient program for manic-depressives at a hospital in St. Cloud, four days a week. If you choose the latter option, you must graduate from the program. Failure to do so will require me to hospitalize you myself.”

“I’ll go to partial hospitalization,” I said. I never wanted to be locked up again.

“I am also going to require that you undergo an extensive neuropsychological evaluation with an expert named Dr. Tinius in St. Cloud,” she said. “I know his work. He’s very good. I will call down there and get you an appointment immediately.”

Luckily there was no time to discuss my suicide attempt further. Quinn’s graduation party was that night. My parents busied themselves making hamburgers, potato salad and Rice Krispie bars, filling the deck with tables, and constructing a shrine to Quinn on the dining room table: There was Quinn shaking hands with Senator Paul Wellstone, there was a letter from Tommy Thompson telling Quinn she was the most impressive youth he had ever met, there was the crown Quinn won in the Miss Brainerd pageant.

At 7:00 PM, when the guests arrived, I mixed Whiskey & Cokes and lured Will downstairs with an NBA Live challenge—you can be the West All-Stars and I’ll be any team you want. He giggled as he ran up the score, alley-oop after alley-oop to Kevin Garnett, our favorite player. He had no idea how close he’d come to not having a brother. I kissed him on the head after the game and he went back upstairs. Then it was just me and a screen asking if I wanted to re-start.

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### Psychiatric Follow-Up

Date: June 11, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Thor is seen with his mother and father for psychiatric follow-up. I asked them to come here because of the suicide attempt on the 27<sup>th</sup>. I've had the opportunity to discuss the case with his therapist a couple of times. Nick Gammello says that he has resisted the diagnosis of schizo-affective disorder, but he is going to defer. He can agree that a lot of Thor's behaviors are "crazy." This is a term I've used with him before. He does tell the family that he doesn't see what I see. He does acknowledge that he cannot treat psychosis. ... We did agree that the family piece with the shame is an area that needs exploration and that that's probably going to be very difficult for the parents. The people who matter the most to Thor are his parents and I think he does perceive them as very disappointed and shameful of many of the things that have happened with him. That is definitely a piece to be explored.

Thor continues on Prozac 60 mg. a day, Trazodone 50-150 mg. at bedtime, Adderall XR 30 mg., and Risperidone 3 mg. Thor presents as neat and clean. He appears to be distracted. He provides some eye contact. For portions of the interview, he does appear to have a mostly blunted affect. His speech is clear and non-pressured, but he doesn't offer much. He says that he is not thinking of killing himself now. There are no current psychotic symptoms. He was not anxious or agitated.

Thor himself says that he is working. He got afternoon shift and he is working 20-30 hours at the Movie Gallery. He says that it's going okay. He is showering everyday. It sounds like with prompting from mom. Other than going to work, he doesn't do much of anything. When I asked what were positives things in his life, he said, "Moving to Kansas." He continues not to really grasp the idea that he has to function better and assure his safety before any of us are going to allow him to go to Kansas. He says that he enjoys playing Poker; however, we don't want to encourage that to a great degree because of the addictive potential he has shown.

We discussed the last suicide attempt. It was associated with seeing his ex-girlfriend. He just felt unable to tolerate that. I think she was fairly provocative with her new boyfriend, and that didn't help. Thor says that the entire time he was talking to his mother he was planning on killing himself after she went to bed. He didn't say anything like that to her. Parents note that he was not drinking. Therefore, this was, unfortunately, an impulsive thing that occurred that evening that Thor didn't reveal to anyone, and alcohol was not involved. This is scarier than when chemicals were involved because I think we had all hoped that if he stayed sober he would stay alive.

At this point we have discussed management options. I said we need to have a management and safety plan. Stress to Thor that I cannot keep him alive and his parents cannot keep him alive. He is an ongoing risk until his functional level and depression improve. We also agree that the Prozac has been helpful, but it is inadequate alone. The



Risperidone does control his psychotic symptoms. My working diagnosis at this point is a schizo-affective disorder vs. major depression with psychotic features, severe.

At this point, we are talking about adding Lamictal as an augmenting antidepressant agent. Dad, a pharmacist, is familiar with this. We are aware of the potential risk for rash. Thor does not fall into any high risk categories and does not have a history of drug use.

At this point, we will start with 25 mg. at night for two weeks and then 25 mg. twice a day. I've explained to Thor the use of the medicine, why I am recommending it.

We talked very upfrontly about the risk for suicide. It is only by the grace of God that Thor is alive now. The parent's inaction with the last suicide attempt in not taking him to the hospital could have been deadly. I have explained to the parents that if Thor attempts to harm himself again and they do not take him for an emergency medical treatment, I will be forced to contact the County for a violation of the Vulnerable Adult Act.

I have indicated to Thor that I know that he feels that he is being treated as a young child. However, considering his impairment in judgment, there are others who are going to take over decision-making at least on certain levels. I want Thor to take a more active role in his own treatment. I want him to work at getting himself better and becoming motivated. I told him that I still agree with him on his long-range goal of going to Kansas. However, he can't go to Kansas if he is depressed and he is still trying to kill himself. He is going to need a period of stability before that is realistic.

Elizabeth Delesante

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Quinn remains convinced that her intervention in the garage that morning was a miracle from God. When she was dismissed from Grad Blast, she was invited to a friend's house for an after-party. The year before, I went to my buddy Paul's house after the same event to play poker until 9:00 AM. Quinn declined the invitation for no reason in particular. *Maybe I just wanted to get an extra few hours of sleep before my party that night*, she says. *I honestly don't know. I almost said yes.* Once she arrived home, Quinn walked past the garage, headed for the front door. She stopped on the path. Just one of those seconds in time, a seemingly meaningless decision amongst thousands of meaningless decisions every day. *I was tired—I decided I should go through the garage so I could put my shoes in the mudroom. I didn't want people to trip over them by the front door if I slept most of the day.* She punched our garage code into the box—3529, the last four digits of Dad's pharmacy's phone number—and walked in on the SUV running. *I still think about that*, she says. *If I'd gone to that party, if I'd gone through the front door, if I'd gone around the back, if I'd gone out to Perkins for breakfast after Grad Blast...* she trails off. No need to finish that sentence, she knows as well as I do what the doctor said later: *With the level of CO exposure you experienced, coupled with the amount of time you were in the garage, it's miraculous you are alive. You had another hour in there, at the most, probably closer to 30 minutes.* If the tape hadn't split, Quinn would have discovered my body.

I realize that people who fail at suicide, especially those with religious beliefs,

search for reasons to explain why they were spared. I've looked back on that night and thought: *Stop being silly. You're suggesting to yourself that you experienced guardian angel hokum, some kind of folklore.* It's romantic to believe that a divine presence intervened. It allows you to think that you're here for a reason, that something out there is watching over you and has plans for you. I wonder why that idea threatens so many people—including me. Why can't I accept it? I guess it's because acceptance of that notion limits what we perceive as freewill. It restricts the control for which we will so desperately fight. One would need to be egoless to accept that. Or maybe that idea removes us from the comfort of our little boxes, forces us to ponder the limitless. We're used to gravity and certainty in our beliefs. We're conditioned for limits.

Ever since that night in the garage, the only thing I'm afraid of is spirits. I will not set foot in a room where I know someone has died. For three nights after I watched *The Sixth Sense*, I couldn't sleep. I left my night light on for a month after that, opening my eyes every few minutes to make certain I was alone. I leave the room when someone brings out an Ouija Board. I won't go into a cemetery after dark.

While I attended grad school in Iowa, years later, I told my friend Mark over drinks about something mysterious—mousetraps set in the basement moved overnight behind a broken vacuum cleaner or between dusty boxes, peanut butter eaten clean off the yellow platform. When I moved in, long after the lease was signed, the previous tenants said it was haunted. A woman in the Writer's Workshop hung herself in the attic. Some people swore they'd seen her in the little attic window overlooking the street. Mark joked that the dead woman's ghost moved the traps. I chuckled because I wanted to be agreeable. Just tell him, I thought, it'll be easy—I *thought I experienced a presence while*

*I was trying to kill myself.* But I knew I couldn't do that. Instead, I changed the subject. His words kept me up for several nights. I heard fingernails scratch walls in the darkness.

What if you had a 9-5 job, I thought at the bar, stirring my drink with a little straw, and no emotional parachute waiting for you back home? Are you lucky to have an outlet—your blank screen, which never talks back or judges you—or has that one-sided relationship turned you into the housewife who doesn't share her feelings with her husband but spills secrets to the priest when she's in the confession booth? Is that the kind of person you want to be?

I flipped on SportsCenter when I returned home, watched a highlight of Ray Lewis cheering on third stringers in a pre-season NFL game. I was 26 years old and nowhere close to being a man. I lacked courage and integrity. I could blame that ghost, or that apparition, or whatever the fuck I should call it, as much as I wanted—but this is who I was, no closer to resolution over the situation than I had been eight years ago. Laying on my couch, watching a montage of moments from the Little League World Series, young boys pumping their fists and crying, I wondered whether I would ever truly recover. They say to wear your scars as badges, reminders of what you've survived. I'll never stop hiding mine. Nothing that needs surviving is best remembered.

## 8. THE SUBJECT

June 10, 2004

1:30 PM

Sauk Rapids, MN

Years after my appointment with the neuropsychologist, Dr. Tinius, I decided it would be healthy for me to finally speak with him. Of course, I'm misusing the word 'healthy.' If my desire were healthy, I wouldn't care to talk to him. I would have long since forgotten him. I'm using *healthy* in the same way an alcoholic would say: *I realize now that I have a problem, and I'm going to quit drinking and start going to A.A. meetings, but it would be healthy for me to go wild tonight, get one last night of partying in before I move on to the next phase of my life.* My desire to call Dr. Tinius was decidedly unhealthy in those eight years after he evaluated me, granting him a ludicrous amount of power over my thought process. I've fantasized about mailing Tinius' office my college diplomas and the issue of Rolling Stone with my picture in it. When I covered the Minnesota Twins for MLB.com, I imagined him reading my byline, his day ruined by incessant thoughts of failure.

Why do I still want him to know he was wrong about me? What will that prove? It could be healthy, I suppose, to speak with him in order to disconnect the control he's had over me all these years. He probably didn't remember my name a week after our last session, but creating fictitious enemies increases my drive to succeed. It's not a new idea. Actually, it's one of our oldest. In rap music, they call motivational constructs "haters."

In Mayan and Greek mythology, they're called Gods.

The first time I called Tinius' office, in the winter of 2012, it rang to voicemail. I left my name and number and asked him to call me back. A week later, I tried again. This time, his wife, Kathleen, answered.

“Hi Kathy. My name is Thor Nystrom. I write for NBC now and I am in the Iowa Writer's Workshop. I'm writing my thesis for grad school as a memoir, I guess, about when I was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic in college. I'm gathering information about some professionals I saw—I was seen by Dr. Tinius several years ago—and had a few questions for him. I'm hoping set up an interview with Dr. Tinius either over the phone or in person. I can drive to St. Cloud if that's convenient for him.”

As I rambled on, my silly credentials poured out of me, as though Tinius would be hurt to learn of them secondhand. I was embarrassed by my pettiness when I hung up the phone. Kathy said she would pass along my message.

“Hey Kathy, it's Thor again,” I said the next month. Dr. Tinius hadn't responded to any of my messages. “I've been calling every week for over a month now—do you know why Dr. Tinius won't return my call?”

“Actually, you've only left four messages,” she said. “And, no, Dr. Tinius doesn't confide in me his reasons for calling, or not calling, ex-patients.”

“Of course,” I said. “Do you think there is any chance he will ever call me back? Will it improve my chances if I send y'all the story I wrote in college that is the basis for my thesis? Or if I emailed Dr. Tinius my CV?”

“It might.”

I sent the email five minutes later and never received a response. I guess I can't

blame Dr. Tinius for ducking me. My desire to talk to him doesn't make sense, even to me. I took an IQ test when I applied to grad school. The University of Iowa didn't require it. I took it because I needed to prove to myself that Tinius was mistaken. I've repeated this exercise often, like the kid who tells God he'll believe He's real if his half court shot goes in. Graduated college? Tinius was wrong. Won some writing awards? Tinius was wrong. Hired for a good job? Tinius was wrong. Accepted into grad school? Tinius was wrong. Scored well on an IQ Test conducted on a website that charges test takers? Doesn't matter if my score was inflated, Tinius was wrong. The problem, I guess, is that I can't prevent this thought from entering my mind. During celebratory moments, I think about Tinius. I'll never be totally happy with my progress until that stops, until my accomplishments become *my accomplishments* and not a metaphorical middle finger thrust toward an amorphous enemy.

I've read over Dr. Tinius' eight-page evaluation hundreds of times. That sounds like an exaggeration, but it isn't. The document is frayed. At various times, I have highlighted sentences for future reference: *Scores in (emotional) range may reflect low ego strength, a lack of insight into one's self-motivation and behavior, and ineffectiveness in dealing with the problems of daily life ... these individuals are often perceived by others as rather odd, peculiar, and unusual, both in terms of their thinking and behavior. They are extra-punitive and accept very little responsibility for their own problems and behavior ... These individuals have a very high need for affection and attention.*

On my Personality Style assessment, Dr. Tinius wrote: *these patients are quite self-centered and expect people to recognize their special qualities, and they require constant praise and recognition.* I suppose he would feel vindicated by my *narcissistic*

desire to contradict his findings. Certainly, this desire is *egocentrically arrogant, haughty, conceited, boastful, snobbish, pretentious and supercilious*. He wasn't wrong about everything.

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According to his personal website, Dr. Timothy Paul Tinius, PhD., Licensed Neuropsychologist, attended the University of North Dakota. He's practiced psychology for 23 years. In addition to his work in the private sector, Dr. Tinius is a professor of psychology at St. Cloud State University. His practice, located on Benton Drive in a first-floor suite in Sauk Rapids, has the outward appearance of a dentist's office, from the strip mall it calls home to the grey door with the plain Dr. Timothy P. Tinius, PhD, sign beside it. Dr. Tinius is the sole practitioner of the office, the CEO of his company, and sees just one patient at a time, each receiving four consecutive hours of testing.

On an overcast day in the summer of 2003, I was ushered into a dim room by a receptionist, who may have been his wife, Kathleen Tinius, MSW, Licensed Social Worker, one of two other employees listed on Dr. Tinius' website. On a grey table sat a NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING QUESTIONNAIRE with hundreds of yes/no statements and a No. 2 sharpened pencil.

I am miserable.

Yes.

I blame my problems on others.

No.

I often think about death.

Yes.



I hate myself.

Yes.

My mind feels heavy or clouded.

Yes.

I have lost interest in most of the things and activities that used to interest me.

No.

Without trying, I have lost or gained weight.

Yes.

I think others are out to get me.

No.

I feel agitated or restless.

Yes.

I have frequent suicidal ideations.

Yes.

I have been sleeping more or less than I usually do.

Yes.

I feel like I am alone.

Yes.

It is hard to think clearly and concentrate.

Yes.

I experience an unusual lack of energy, even after a good rest.

Yes.

I feel worthless.

Yes.

Dr. Tinius, middle-aged, wore a white jacket and sported a neatly trimmed brown beard. He extended his hand to me palm down. I read in a book about social power that this is how alpha males assert dominance—or how the rest of us can fake it. Tinius examined my collar as I looked him square in the eyes. I made sure to clutch his hand firmly during the shake. I knew what he was up to. Tinius spoke very slowly, with an unconvincing authority, as if he were an elementary school teacher on his first day.

Dr. Tinius began our interview with a series of straightforward questions, the answers of which were available in my file, such as if I knew what medications I was taking and if I understand my diagnoses. I referred to this later, when asked about the session by my mother, as “psychiatrist small talk,” an attempt at gaining rapport before the tough questions commenced. Though Dr. Tinius generally presented himself as affable, his overall performance in chitchat was substandard. Although he saw only one patient at a time, Dr. Tinius’ demeanor suggested a more important patient was waiting in the lobby, or perhaps a meatball sub was cooling on his office desk.

Once satisfied with the non-documented portion of the interview, Dr. Tinius clicked on a digital recorder with the muted intensity of a man still pondering the plot details of last night’s episode of *CSI: New York*. He opened a portfolio labeled NEURO-PSYCH INVENTORY EVALUATION – Nystrom, Thor R.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions if that’s OK, Thor. Let’s start with an easy one. Do you consider yourself a normal guy?”

“I guess so. It’s tough to say whether or not you are normal. I really can’t judge that accurately.”

“Do you feel compelled to succeed?”

“Yes and no. I do in the abstract. Motivation is what that question is about, I think. I wish I had more of that.”

“What is one problem you have right now that you wish you could fix?”

“I hear this ringing in my ears. It gives me headaches.”

“What else?”

“My eyes hurt when I read.”

“So you would say that your primary problems at this point concern physical discomfort?”

“Well no, not exactly. But I guess I thought maybe you meant right now, as I sit here. The first time you asked, that’s what I thought. Then when you asked again, I thought you wanted a different answer.”

Although Dr. Tinius presented himself as cordial, warm, even, his quivering fingertips made me think that he was as uncomfortable as I was.

“Do you feel like people are out to get you?”

“That question was in the questionnaire. Like I responded to every other paranoia-related question, no.”

“Right, of course,” Tinius said. “Thor, lets say a support system is a core of the five-to-ten people that love you the most. Outside of that, let’s say on fringes of that core, there are another 50 people. Right? Maybe friends, aunts and uncles, some teachers, cousins, whatever. Do you trust those people?”

“Some of them.”

“Would you classify yourself, generally, as a trustworthy person?”

“I can be trusted.”

“Do you trust others?”

“I don’t know. It’s always difficult to rely on people completely, don’t you think?”

“Do you enjoy social gatherings? Parties and the like?”

“Bigger ones, with lots of people, are tough. At KU, I’d get drunk at those parties and do dumb shit to avoid talking with strangers. Nobody loves talking all night with strangers, you know? Do you?”

Dr. Tinius’ specialty, the Neuropsychological Evaluation (NPE), is designed to acquire data about a subject’s cognitive, motor, behavioral, linguistic, and executive functioning. This information can lead to the diagnosis of a cognitive deficit or confirm a pre-existing diagnosis.

“Thor,” Tinius said, “I’d like to talk to you about late May—your sister’s graduation. Were you trying to punish yourself?”

“I was trying to kill myself.”

“How long did you contemplate the way in which you would make that attempt?”

I focused on my bouncing knees.

“Not long. I mean, I have thought about suicide for awhile. About all kinds of ways to do it. You name it. But I tried to keep going... tried to keep pushing through what I was feeling and stuff. And I didn’t want to do it because of my family. But... it felt right, that day.”

“Explain that feeling.”

“I guess I just knew that it was the right time to do it. Once you reach that point it

doesn't matter how you do it. You choose the way that you think will be the most effective. I thought about suicide for awhile but I didn't know until that night that I would do it, and I didn't know how I would until right before I did it."

"Let's switch gears a bit. Thor... do you hear voices in your head?"

"I guess."

"How many are there, would you say?"

"I don't know."

"But you've said previously that one sounds like the Devil."

"I have said that, yes," I said. I covered my mouth as I yawned. Mom taught me to do that when I was a little boy. It used to be a neat trick, exaggerating a yawn at the adult table after dinner so you'd be excused. I overused it. After three fake yawns at Christmas dinner when I was six or seven, Mom told me yawning meant my brain needed oxygen, not that I was tired. She also said I wasn't doing it correctly when I made a loud *aagghhhh* noise as I exhaled. *Cover your mouth, Thor. It's good manners. Do you know who started that? Confused Roman doctors. They thought babies were—well that's not important. They were confused. Now, we do it to save people from smelling our bad breath or being forced to look down our throats.*

"You've also stated previously that you hear other voices," Tinius said. "Could you explain to me how they sound?"

"They sound like thoughts," I said.

"Thor, are you perceiving the voices right now?"

"Umm... Sure? Yes."

"Thor, I want to get a handle something. You've said you hear voices inside your

head. Do you also hear sounds—be they voices, noises, whispers, anything like that—outside of your head? I’m talking about anything you perceive as external.”

“I told you about the ringing, right?”

“Yes,” Dr. Tinius said. “But would you say that you perceive other voices around you?”

“Not voices, no.”

“Thor, do you experience physical hallucinations?”

“No,” I said. It was an odd question, I thought. If I didn’t hallucinate, which was the truth, I would answer no. If I hallucinated, I would think the figment of my imagination was real and still answer no. Maybe I didn’t understand the question.

“Do you ever feel like you are involved in something bigger than yourself?”

“Not really. Do you?”

“Do you ever feel like you’re being plotted against?”

Tinius wasn’t interested in back-and-forth, but I wasn’t done trying.

“Maybe,” I said in a mysterious tone, insinuating Tinius himself, humoring myself, trying to stay awake. The questions drained me.

“By whom?”

“I guess I meant no.”

“Those are new,” he said, gesturing to cuts on my left wrist.

“From last night.”

I showed him the scab on my left hand from the cigarette I put out on it two weeks back at a booth in Perkins over a farmer’s omelet. Still can’t tell you if I wanted Amy’s attention, or if I just wanted to stop my thoughts. I showed him scars on my

knuckles, hand and wrists.

Thor struggles on tasks that have attention to detail, manipulation of objects, and social sequencing. He has difficulty reading social situations and is likely to struggle with understanding the sequence of steps in a series of social situations. Academic skills were generally in the average range and there was no evidence of a learning disability. When he was tested on a continuous performance on task on medication, his performance was consistent with slowed processing speed.

“Now I’d like to try some tests that should be a bit more fun,” Dr. Tinius said.

He produced several colored blocks and asked me to arrange them in various patterns. Sometimes I would order them based on alphabetical order. Other times, like Tetris, I fit them together to make a larger block. My hands shook and I dropped the blocks several times. Dr. Tinius studied my face under a bright overhead light. My brain felt like sludge and my eyes stung from the glare. I began sweating through my Kansas Jayhawks t-shirt. Anti-psychotic meds aren’t designed to accelerate brain speed. That morning, over breakfast, preparing for the hour-long drive to Tinius’ office, I took 60 milligrams of Prozac, 3 milligrams of Risperidone, 30 milligrams of Adderall XR and 25 milligrams of Lamictal. To fall asleep, six hours prior, I swallowed 150 milligrams of Trazodone, an accomplice to my suicide attempt, but nonetheless deemed safe enough by Dr. Delesante to allow me the nightly choice to pick between ingesting one, two or three white pills. By the time Tinius pulled out a packet of animal pictures, my eyelids drooped, begging for a nap.

The results of Mr. Nystrom’s neuropsychological testing are consistent with significant problems with visual, spatial and right hemisphere dysfunction consistent

with deficits in visual perceptual organization, visual planning, slowed visual reaction time, and deficits with visual memory.

“For this first round, Thor, I just want you to identify the animal,” he said, flipping open the packet.

“Bunny,” I said.

“Rabbit,” he said. “Good.”

“Doggy,” I said at the next picture.

“Yep, dog.”

“Horse,” I said.

“Horse, good,” he said.

“Kitty,” I said, amusing myself.

“Now, this time around, Thor, I’d like you to watch the pictures, memorize the order in which you see them, and repeat that back to me.”

He showed me five pictures.

“Mouse, giraffe...” I trailed off. “Fuck. Dog?”

“OK, no problem, we’ll try it again.”

I successfully remembered the next three animals, so Tinius tried five again.

“OK,” I said. “Lion. Bear. Bird.... Umm...”

“That’s OK,” Tinius said. “That’s fine. Let’s move to the next phase. I’m going to say common words and ask you to repeat them to me in the order you hear them.”

Tinius read from a card: “House. Grass. Electricity. Tree. Sign. Car. Corn. Lake. Potato. Metal.”

“Ok. House... Grass... Potato. Ummm... Truck? Ahh... Lake was one. Boat? I



don't remember the rest.”

“That's just fine, that's good,” he said. “Let's move on.”

Thor will struggle with feeling overwhelmed with auditory and visual information, and may be very behind on the auditory and visual information when it is presented rapidly to him. He also is likely to show significant problems with learning fatigue but again when information is verbal, he is likely to perform significantly better.

Dr. Tinius is trained to vet information, specifically, on a patient's intellectual functioning, academic achievement, language processing, visuospatial processing, attention and concentration, verbal and verbal learning and memory, executive functions, speed of processing, sensory-perceptual functions, motor speed and personality. To do this, he uses a series of popular tests, perhaps including the National Adult Reading Test (NART), the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), the Cambridge Prospective Memory Test (CAMPROMPT), the Doors and People test, the Memory Assessment Scales (MAS), or the Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test. I can't tell you which he conducted on me. That information wasn't divulged.

Dr. Tinius' website says he's won awards for his work. His job asks him to quantify the immeasurable, confirm illnesses that can't be seen. That's not easy. It might be impossible. He's a specialist. I imagine he views himself as something of a conceptual surgeon, probing in search of disorders, and I imagine he thinks he's quite good at it. But maybe I'm just being petty. I don't want to be petty anymore.

Nystrom DSMIV: Axis I: Major Depression with psychotic features; Anxiety Disorder, NOS; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; Axis II: rule out Borderline

## Personality Disorder

I met with Thor and his parents on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 to review the present results.. The most predominant problem that we talked about was the problems with depression and psychotic features that seemed to have developed under his periods of depression. He reports significant emotions on his objective testing and reports symptoms of hearing voices in the interview.

“Thor and I spoke at length over a two-day period; according to those conversations, and his responses to a series of personality tests, he is a social introvert, has high levels of anxiety, and probably has a social anxiety or social phobia,” Dr. Tinius told my parents and I. “His scores on the tests strongly suggest a borderline personality disorder with tendencies to be dependent, avoidant, depressed and self-centered.”

I was voted “Class Clown” in high school. Still have the certificate in the top drawer of my desk. I was no longer that fun-loving guy sitting in Tinius’ office, but how could he so thoroughly misconstrue my personality, brain health and future potential based on a few hours of interviews, a questionnaire, colored blocks, memory tests and animal pictures?

“I recommend that Thor not return to a highly competitive university, which will overwhelm him emotionally and subsequently affect his ability to function cognitively,” Dr. Tinius said. “He will tend to lose touch with reality when placed under periods of stress. My results show that Thor’s academic skills were generally average, but he has a slowed processing speed.”

“I’m not sure I get that,” Mom said, leaning forward. “Thor was the editor of the high school newspaper. He always did well in school. His ACT scores were high.”

“Assume that your mind is like a meat grinder,” the doctor said. “For Thor, it does grind, but it comes out a little slower. The way he processes information is just slower. I know Thor attends a community college now, and I think that’s healthy. If he graduates beyond that, I would recommend enrolling him in a smaller, liberal arts school. As I said, I don’t believe he will be able to succeed in the environment of a big state university.”

“You’re wrong,” I said.

Thor did not like to hear the information and seemed to want to use the strategy of ignoring the information and returning to school and everything will be all right. Although you could not use words such as defensiveness, he seems to lack some insight and awareness into his presentation and insight and awareness into the effect of the psychiatric symptoms on his level of functioning.

It seems obvious to me that Tinius was attempting to get me to confirm my diagnosis for him through repetitive use of loaded schizophrenic phrases like “paranoid,” “voices,” and “perceptions.” He didn’t brand me schizophrenic. Someone else did that. Maybe he viewed me as an open-and-shut case, an easy day at the office. At the time, I probably was, strung out on drugs, wrists scabbed, speech slurred. I labored to complete articulate thoughts as the interview dragged on. I did the best I could at the time. I’d like to think he did, too.

## 9. STEALING

Brainerd, MN.

Thursday June 26, 2003.

10:15 A.M.

Garrison Keillor's soothing baritone drifted from the black stereo as my mother wrote at the kitchen counter, warding off silence in the empty house. Garrison, her former coworker at Minnesota Public Radio, was spinning another tale about the folks from Lake Wobegon. She tuned in not for the story, but for the soothing nature of his deep voice, the effortless cadence with which he spoke. It was background noise for a letter she never thought she'd write.

*I am returning this boxful of merchandise that our son shoplifted from your store. He has been going through a very difficult time. He's getting help.*

As she wrote, the people of Lake Wobegon seemed more innocent to her than they ever had before, their fictitious town a snow globe incapable of corruption.

*His actions were nothing against you. He spoke kindly of you. We know what he did was wrong and at some point he will understand that too. We just wanted to return all of this to you and tell you how deeply sorry we are.*

Mom tucked five crisp \$20 bills inside the envelope, closed the box and sealed it

with duct tape. The box was heavy, awkward to grip. She carried it to the car, set it on the passenger seat, and drove to the post office.

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It was a lazy summer afternoon in Minnesota, the kind of day where you swear you can smell the cattails on the beaches of Gull Lake even as you lean against your bumper on the sticky cement of a Target parking lot, miles from Eminem blasting out of boat speakers on Squaw Point, a beer in one hand. Miles from all that.

I had never stolen so much as a pencil, but that morning at breakfast, reading an article about a Kum & Go burglary, I wondered what it must feel like to walk out of a store with merchandise you didn't purchase. Utterly exhilarating, I decided. I fixated on that idea as I watched several episodes of *Saved by the Bell*. I'd been sitting and sleeping and eating and getting fatter for months. I needed to move.

When my suicide attempt failed, an emergency exit door bolted shut. Death seemed safe and reassuring, even though I knew suicide would guarantee me a ticket to Hell. God's Rule. You wonder if that part of the Bible has been exaggerated over thousands of years of translations. You wonder if God will understand, make an exception for you. Suicide was no longer an option. It was as though I'd spent months plotting an escape from prison and been caught. The warden had scolded me, slapped me on the wrist, and told me I would spend the next six months in solitary if I pulled a stunt like that again. Even if I wasn't terrified of the consequences of another failed attempt, it would be years before I could step foot in the garage without thinking about The Mass outside the window. From time to time I thought about that Mass. Remembering made my muscles tingle, like Alka-Seltzer tablets were dissolving in my joints, an effervescent

tingling in my scalp. I tried not to think about it. I met my parents on the driveway when I needed a ride. They could back out of the garage by themselves.

I was resigned to living, but I was done following Their customs. Everyone became They after I woke up alive in Mom's SUV. I wouldn't smile or tell Them thank you. The formality of it all. People died every day for reasons outside their control—heart attacks, brain aneurisms, plowed down by a drunk driver, knifed in the gut by a thief—but here I sat on the hood of my red Ford Taurus, a failure at even the simple act of stopping my heart, nonetheless trying to think like a thief: *Can I outrun a security guard? Does Target have detectors that beep when products are lifted? Where are the security cameras?*

The blacktop's heat made my shoes smell like melting rubber baggies. I looked up at the sun, so bright my ears watered. Remember when you were happy under it? In a varsity football game a few years ago, our coach called a counter. I played right guard. The ball snapped, I pushed out of my stance, sprinted down a blue line of teammates and exploded into a defensive end, my helmet ramming into his heart, just below his shoulder pads. He didn't see me, his attention in the backfield. I tripped over him as he fell, forearm breaking my fall on his sternum. He hacked a cough as I looked up. Our running back barreled downfield for a touchdown. The sun dropped beneath our school on top of the hill as my teammates slapped my helmet. That moment stuck. Or two summers ago, jet skiing with my girlfriend after a brief break from each other, long enough that everything seemed new when we reconciled. The sun shined high and white that day. Water vapor shot out of the engine as she grasped my waist. I took a turn too sharp, showing off, attempting the 180-move they did in television commercials. The watercraft

flipped and we were bucked off, engine cutting as the key attached to my wrist submerged with me. Our life jackets bobbed us to the surface a few feet from the green Sea-Doo, lake silent as if we'd just dipped a toe in. We inspected each other's faces for a moment, looking for scratches. We kissed as the sun beat down, waving our arms furiously through the water to keep our heads close.

No joy in remembering joy, I reminded myself. I entered Target through automatic doors thinking about all the time I'd wasted worrying about a lack of safety. We don't walk down dark alleys—*what if I'm attacked?* Some keep mace in the purse, some triple-lock doors, some keep handguns in the nightstand. We protect ourselves with daily vitamins, insurance policies, vaccines, and jiu-jitsu classes. We protect ourselves in churches, family, and friends. We protect ourselves with the police, the FBI, and the government. We protect ourselves with lawyers and judges and jails. We protect ourselves in memory, in imagination, in art, practically and impractically, tangibly and abstractly.

There's euphoric liberation in breaking free from the idea of safety, but the only way to do it is by deciding life is no longer worth living. So what if a policeman arrests me? After suicide, what is jail? I was on a conveyor belt waiting to die behind the lucky ones with terminal cancer and inoperable illness. Apparently I didn't have the skill to accelerate my spot in line. Or maybe my suicide attempt was doomed from the start. The day after my sister found me in the garage, I did some research. In 1975 the EPA tightened regulations on auto exhaust, which forced car companies to introduce catalytic converters to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 99%. I'd solved that problem by trapping the toxins inside the machine's frame. What saved me was that newer cars were

engineered to make exhaust pipe plugging a near impossibility.

I'd had it with this fucked-up world. I put up with hypocrisy for the first 18 years of my life, the good kid, and it was my turn to be bad. My right. I had been stolen from, my wallet twice lifted from locker rooms in high school, my cell phone another time. I called my number and a woman picked up. I told her to give me my phone back. She laughed, hung up, and that was that. I had been vandalized, my tires slashed. Drove home on the rims after the rubber frayed, sparks shooting behind me. Made it halfway. No justice in any case. This wasn't rationalization. I was no longer on speaking terms with rational. Was I lashing out against psychiatrists? No. If anything, I was vindicating them. If caught, it would be their job to explain to the cops that I was schizophrenic.

We put up with indignities every day and then, with equal frustration, bump up against a system whose job it is to say no. Take that first plunge into temptation, you don't realize you'll plummet forever, slave to gravity. You'll never forget that endorphin rush unique to reckless chance, like those times in high school when your friends convinced you to be the driver and lookout when they blew up mailboxes, gasoline-soaked cardboard taped to spray paint cans. They lit a fuse and ran back, laughing all the way. You watched the explosion and felt like you could drive through a brick wall. Grab your buddy's neck, kiss his hat, howl at the moon.

Since childhood, I felt a tension between me and the rules that governed me. My parent's rules, my school's rules, my coach's rules. As I grew older, the rules of government felt just as stifling. Me vs. Them. When you're a stupid kid detonating mailboxes, there aren't serious consequences. There's very little risk. Sure, if we'd been caught, we would have been arrested, brought in front of a judge who would have



ordered us to pay a fine and undergo a little counseling. Our names would have been in the Brainerd Daily Dispatch and we would have received a tongue-lashing from our parents. But our records would have been expunged a year later. We would have pled ignorance, told the judge we were stupid kids, employed the hubris defense. When you turn 18, lenient, understanding parents are no longer the arbiters of justice. If I were caught jamming flaming spray paint cans in mailboxes now, I'd spend time in jail. I disconnected The Government's power, but doing so trapped me. Now, it was Me vs. Me, a game with no winner.

I forgot to look for security cameras or guards as I walked in. An old man next to the red shopping carts said *Hello!* but I barely heard him. I strolled past the cashiers and entered the last row on the left, where they kept the baseball cards. Never thought about stealing anything else. I collected as a kid, carrying my \$5 allowance across the street from Dad's drugstore to buy two packs at CBC Cards. I filled thick binders with baseball cards, memorizing stats on the back. On the playground at Baxter Elementary School, I was the eight-year-old know-it-all swapping Cal Ripken's Topps card for Ken Griffey Jr.'s Upper Deck rookie card, citing Ripken's two MVP awards but knowing full well that Griffey's card was more rare and valuable, that Griffey was already a more popular player and would have a long career. I knew that after that career ended his rookie card would be worth hundreds. I had a rebuttal for every counter-point my trading partner made, explaining that Ripken hit .323 the year before with 34 homers and 114 RBI. He was the best player in baseball. *I can't believe I'm willing to do this trade with you*, I'd say right before he handed over Griffey's card.

Some boys wanted to trade basketball cards, or hockey cards, which were particularly popular in northern Minnesota. I didn't mind hockey. I watched it. I liked football and I tolerated basketball. But even as a little kid, I perceived those as disorderly sports. Players could become valuable merely by hustling and working harder than other players. Determination redeemed a lack of talent. Baseball was different, more pure, a series of isolated contests of skill instead of refereed chaos. A little boy understands batter against pitcher, fielder against ball, runner against defense. Baseball players didn't stomp around the diamond, screaming and slapping each other, the way the Vikings did on Sundays. The Twins waited patiently, anticipated the next pitch. Baseball players always seemed deep in thought, as though every night they were administered three-hour exams. Football and hockey players just looked crazed, wild-eyed, ripping off their helmets, yelling as sweat caused eyeblick to run down their cheeks. When a sharp grounder was finally hit to the Twins shortstop, Greg Gagne, he had to be ready, because if Gagne screwed up, everyone knew whose fault it was. Baseball recorded that callous stat, the error, the only sport honest enough to post a player's blunder for all to see. As a child, that level of accountability spoke to me. When I began to play the game, coaches placed me at first base because of my size. I was bigger than the other kids and I was expected to hit. After I was plunked by a pitch, and came to fear fastballs, I became a no-hit, all-glove first baseman. That deviation from baseball theory—that all first baseman must carry their teams offensively because their defensive position isn't important—appealed to me until I began muffing ground balls. Then I quit. Couldn't stand not being a contributor.

I knelt beside the card rack in Target, staring at the iconic faces of Alex Rodriguez, Alfonso Soriano, Barry Bonds, Albert Pujols and Randy Johnson. I wanted to be winners, like them. I needed to win. I hadn't opened a pack of cards since before I had a driver's license. When I got the Taurus, my hobbies changed. But I missed the feeling of opening up a package of baseball cards, not quite knowing what to expect. You might get 10 worthless cards of middle relievers and fungible reserve infielders. Or you might find an autographed card or the rookie card of a future All-Star. Opening a package of baseball cards as a child, in other words, combines the innocent love of sport with the exhilaration of playing the lottery before you're legally able.

I didn't look around as I unzipped my backpack. Maybe I thought I'd chicken out if I did, or perhaps I thought I'd draw undue attention to myself. I picked up a box of Donruss cards and put it in the backpack. I took four more. I walked nonchalantly behind the bored line of cashiers to the sliding doors, almost wanting to brag about my accomplishment to the greeter. And then I was gone.

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Two weeks later, after I was dismissed from day treatment in the St. Cloud Hospital, I cruised around town. I didn't want to drive back to Brainerd. I stopped at Taco Bell, downing a Gordita, a Chalupa, four soft shell tacos, two Nacho Supremes and a large Coke. There were a list of side effects in my medications to be abhorred, but one positive is that they gave me a bottomless pit for a gut. I fantasized about entering the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating competition on Coney Island on July Fourth, thinking I could beat the undefeated Kobayashi, the Japanese sensation.

I burped as I put my car in drive. An L-shaped strip mall caught my attention. One

shop, The Dugout, had an electric swinging red baseball bat above the door. A dusty concrete staircase led to a thick wooden door, DUGOUT ENTRANCE painted in blue. To me, breaking the law meant winning a nuanced game. The fact that sports memorabilia wasn't as valuable as, say, electronics, only added to the allure of the sport, like a hunter who shoots a pheasant out of the sky, and, pleased with his aim, leaves the bird to die in a field.

Once inside The Dugout, a musty odor hits you immediately, hanging about the shelves like smog, the smell of non-ventilated dampness. To my right were rows of gloves, bats, hockey sticks, footballs, baseballs, pucks, tennis balls and rackets. To my left were pennants, clocks, banners, towels and jackets adorned with sports logos.

“Hello!” an old man standing behind the counter said. I was his only customer. “If you need anything just holler.”

He smiled. The old man's reading glasses sat on the bridge of a large, dimpled nose. His thinning grey hair was meticulously parted to the right. He looked like the type of man that tended closely to his lawn. A lawn befitting of a meticulous man who spent summer nights watching baseball, closely groomed, like the grass of Wrigley Field. I imagined a modest house on the edge of town in a quiet neighborhood, a kind wife to cook macaroni hot dish when he returned from work. The wife would ask how work was, giggle lovingly at the idea of his business. His shop was a boy's fantasy, the kind of place I'd want to own when I was his age.

I walked through the apparel section, picking up a hockey stick, putting my right hand near the butt and my left halfway down the shaft. I held it at my waist, remembered my glory days. I put the curve of the stick to the ground and mimed a slap shot, almost

heard that sweet sound of a spinning puck hitting white nylon, *whoosh*.

Placing it back on the rack, I moved to the pennants. My bedroom walls were covered by nearly one hundred of them; I ordered them by sports, then by leagues, then by divisions, then by alphabetical order. Kneeling, I stole a glance back at the old man. He was sitting on a stool with his head down, perhaps reading one of the store's sports magazines. I picked out 10 pennants and slid them into my backpack. I moved to the next row, grabbed three banners and six vanity license plates that joined the pennants. I flipped through college football previews and fantasy football magazines in the far corner of the store. I took a few of each, as well as new editions of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine*.

I zipped up the bag and walked to the counter. The old man dog-eared his page in the magazine, stood and put his hands on the glass countertop.

"Finding everything OK, young man?" he said.

"I am, yes," I said. "You have an awesome store. I was actually hoping to look at some of those football cards you have behind you."

"Of course. Which would you like to look at?"

I pointed to a box, each pack of which cost \$15 and guaranteed an autographed card of an incoming NFL rookie. He retrieved the box, set it on the counter.

"Can't beat one autograph per pack, can you?" he said. "It's not our top seller because of the price, but it's always exciting to see which autograph you get. One customer got Carson Palmer's, another got Andre Johnson's on a limited-edition gold card. We looked it up together—he was so excited—and it was worth about 200 bucks."

"Could I also take a look at that box of Topps? Right there."

“Of course.”

He turned and I took five guaranteed-autograph packs and slipped them into the front pouch of my backpack. The old man turned back with the new box. I did this routine with two more boxes, slipping packs into my bag, telling him they were out of my price range, though I really wanted them. The last box I requested was from 1996, old Donruss cards on clearance for \$.89. I took two: “I’ll take these.”

“Perfect,” he said, ringing me up. “So you’re a big sports fan?”

“Yes,” I said, handing over \$1.86.

“I want to show you something,” he said, passing me a small brown sack with my purchase. The old man walked around the counter and brought me into a back room.

“Wait there one second,” he said and opened an office door.

Four televisions sat on a table, security footage from cameras at every corner of the store, the old man protecting his solitary card shop. The screens were as lonely as the shop. As I stood there, nobody was browsing the magazines, no one was running their finger down the grain of a Louisville Slugger. The shop was as deserted as the moment I’d walked in. I cared less about getting caught than the old man discovering that *I* was the thief. I was mortified, embarrassed. My actions were on film, a tape I hoped the old man would never watch.

The old man returned with a bat in a glass case.

“Look at the signature,” he said.

*Best wishes, Kirby Puckett, #34*

“Won it at an auction,” he said. “It’s game used—Puck got a hit with this bat.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, running my finger over the glass encasing the signature.

“You looked like the kind of guy who might appreciate this,” he said.

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Mom paid the teller extra to guarantee the box would reach its destination overnight. Dad insisted on including the money, withdrawn from the bank the night before, to cover anything that might not be in the box. He once owned a store of his own and fired a deliveryman for taking a Hershey’s bar and not paying for it. When I was a kid, I asked him why. “Pay attention to the small things, Thor,” he said. “Usually you don’t have anything else to go off of.”

*I wasn’t courageous enough to put my name in the letter or include a return address on the box, Mom says years later about returning The Dugout’s merchandise. I didn’t want him to know who we were and call and try to arrest you. I thought hard about driving it down to him, so I could look him in the eye and apologize to him for you—for us—but I didn’t have the heart.*

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The old man stayed with me long after I left his shop. I still see him now, the way the left side of his mouth curled into a mischievous grin when he asked me to go to the back, as though he’d been waiting all day to surprise me, the way his eyes glazed over as he held out the signed bat. Maybe I reminded him of someone. His grandson, perhaps. I’ve looked up The Dugout’s phone number, gone as far as to type it into my phone. I don’t remember the old man’s name, but Google says the current owner’s name is Kevin. I have not gathered the courage to make that call. Until I apologize, his light-bearing eyes, his kindness, will eat at me. My anxiety bubbles up when I consider it. If I call—*when I call*—I want to say more than sorry. I know I won’t be able to articulate to the old

man what he did for me that day. Inside The Dugout, the old man not only represented baseball, bringing me back to my untarnished childhood, but he exuded a jarring authenticity. Between my contrived personas with friends, my anger at home and my formulaic interactions with psychiatrists, it had been a long time since I'd had a real conversation, made a connection with someone. I defiled the old man's kindness. I wish I could go back to that storage room, dump out everything I stole as he emerged with the signed bat and beg for forgiveness. I can't. Nor can I find it in myself to dial his store, almost 10 years later, and tell him I'm still heartbroken.

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Although I pictured the old man's buoyant grin as I unloaded his merchandise in my bedroom, guilt wouldn't prevent me from stealing again. Medications are not ice picks. They are memory erasers, emotional sterility. As I stacked my pennants on the floor, it was easy enough to detach from the remorse I felt. I'd just swallowed a handful of pills, and, like a child, I focused on what was in my line of vision—stacks of baseball cards, magazines and banners. I couldn't remember what we'd had for dinner the night before or where I'd stopped on the way home for lunch. Expunging the old man happened naturally as I began to open his packages of cards.

I drove to St. Cloud's outlet mall a week later and entered another sports card store. A pimply-faced cashier stood behind the counter. A Wednesday afternoon, the store was deserted. I moved to the back, shielded by a rack of magazines. I found only a hamper of ninety-nine cent clearance packs. I shoved a handful of packs into both pockets of my jeans. Pockets bulging, I browsed the magazines. Satisfied, I walked toward the entrance, the young clerk eyeing me.



Adjacent to the card store was a Target. I walked under asinine signs of the dog with a red circle around its eye. I walked to the sports card section just beyond the checkout counters, same as in Brainerd. Such creativity in chain stores, cookie-cutter designs for cookie-cutter people. I picked up two boxes of baseball cards and carried them past the cashier at the 10-items-or-less counter, past a security guard with hands in his pockets, through a door with a red MENS sign and into a bathroom stall. I opened the packages, sifted through the cards and dropped them onto the grimy bathroom floor. I didn't want to keep them. I just wanted to find something valuable, a laser-cut card, or a limited-edition autograph, individually numbered to prove scarcity.

There was a knock on the stall door. I ripped open another package, dropped those cards on the floor without looking at them.

“Sir, could you open the door?” a man said.

The metal lock clanged as the man pulled on it. The door quivered.

“Sir? Please open the door immediately,” he said.

“I'm taking a shit,” I said. “Gonna be a few minutes.”

I heard the inflection of boredom and disinterest in my voice. I tore open another pack and another. I yawned, suddenly very tired. The door stopped shaking.

Over the door, I saw the guard's eyes. His fingers were wrapped above the frame. He balanced himself on tiptoes. *This is all so ridiculous*, I thought.

“Open the door,” he shouted through the door, his mouth not tall enough to clear it.

I ripped into more packs as I heard the *Chhwwooooo* of radio static, the guard frantically asking the operator to call for help. I imagined him unholstering his gun and

firing round after round through the plastic door, filling my body with bullets. *In tonight's top story, a notorious baseball card thief is gunned down in a Target bathroom stall after refusing arrest. More at 10.*

"The police are being called," he said. "I suggest you come out right now."

I flushed the toilet, which I thought was funny. I laughed. I stepped over the pile of baseball cards and unlocked the stall. The door jerked open to a fat, red-faced man wearing a uniform a size too small for his frame. *Show time, highlight of his career*, I thought as he yanked me from the stall.

"Empty your pockets," he said.

I pulled out the packs I stole from the other store.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"Next door."

"Give me your wallet."

He grabbed my wrist and marched me out of the bathroom, past wide-eyed cashiers and customers. *Look at me folks, I'm a criminal, I'm the bad guy!* He dragged me out of the store. Another guard, shorter, skinnier, caught up to us. The fat man released my wrist, said he was going to talk to the manager at the sports card shop. His partner secured my arm.

"Don't you move," he said nervously. "Cops are coming."

I jerked away from him.

"Fuck you, loser," I said. "Keep your hands off me. I'll stand without your help."

He reached for my shirt and I slapped his hand away.

"If you resist, or touch me again, it will be added to the police report," he said,

voice scratchy.

The skinny guard stepped toward me with his hand out and I smacked it away with a closed fist. The sound echoed up to the ceiling. He raised the hand up and I didn't know if it was to inspect the red mark or to take a swing at me, so I bent my knees and shoved him, palms pushing through his chest. His legs crossed and he fell hard on his ass. A crowd of women toting plastic bags watched, whispering amongst themselves. The hefty security guard heard the skirmish from the card store and locked me in a bear hug. He pushed me onto a metal bench in the hallway.

“Don't even think about running,” he said, wheezing. “I have your wallet. The police will be here any minute.”

I had passed the obese threshold months ago. Outrunning two security guards was probably out of the question.

“You're so fucked,” the small guard said.

The cops put me in cuffs. They asked questions as I stood awkwardly, arms behind my back. Twenty minutes later, a middle-aged man tapped one of the cops on the back. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but he was adamant about something, nodding his head tersely, pointing at the piece of paper in the cop's hand. He nodded, mouthed *Yes*. He asked the cop something and the cop nodded. I was standing near the bench, flanked by a cop and a security guard. The middle-aged man's narrow hazel eyes closed to incisions when he addressed me, the black pores of his nose expanding as the skin of his forehead creased.

“My name is Luke and that is my store,” he said, pointing at the card shop. “I want you to know something. I want you to know that you have stolen from a person.

You've stolen from me. You've stolen from my wife. You've stolen from my two kids."

I dropped my gaze to his flannel collar.

"It is hard to run a business," he said. "I scrape by. My family scrapes by. I do the best that I can. I want you to know that you make me sick; you disgust me. People like you disgust me. This is my livelihood. I want you to know personally that I'm pressing charges against you. I had the decision not to, but I'm going to."

He waited for a response. When he realized it wasn't coming, he stomped into his shop, probably to berate the pimply clerk.

Ten minutes later, the cops took off the cuffs. Target decided not to press charges and the short guard didn't tell the police I shoved him. I was written a citation for petty theft of the card shop and given a court date.

"While they aren't pressing charges, you are banned from any Target in the United States for the next year," one of the cops said as he handed over my wallet. "You're also banned from this mall for life. If you violate either of those conditions, you will be arrested."

"Seems fair," I said. I meant it. I've never returned.

"Leave immediately and don't come back," he said.

I showed up for my court date a few weeks later. The room was crowded and I sat between a black man with a skullcap and a skinny white man in an undershirt who smelled of body odor and cigarette smoke. When my name was called, I walked to the pulpit and was told by the judge that I was being fined \$250. He repeated my temporary ban from Target and permanent one from the St. Cloud mall.

I wore a denim shirt and khakis, a red tie dangling from my neck, showered for

the first time in weeks. My hair was gelled and teeth were brushed.

“I just want the store owner to know that I’m very sorry,” I said, voice cracking. As I spoke, I thought about the old man in the lonely card shop in the basement, though I wasn’t being punished for that crime. I cried outside the courtroom as I made out a check to the State of Minnesota.

\*\*\*

Mom found the pile of pennants, license plates, sports cards, banners and magazines next to my dresser a few days after I stole them from the old man.

*It was this huge pile of junk, she told me recently, a pathetic collection of chotchkie. It seemed like you had dumped it on the floor and not looked at it again. You didn’t even try to hide it. When I asked you about it, you said you took them from an old card shop in St. Cloud. You portrayed the owner as likeable. You said: ‘He seemed like a real nice guy.’ You didn’t seem overly remorseful, detached I guess, but didn’t object to me sending it back. I was sad for you, but also sad for the man with the shop, that it had been taken from him. You told me he was kind to you, that he had a nice little shop.*

So she gathered the pile and fit it into the brown box with the cash and letter. Each piece of memorabilia was affixed with a sticker that had the store’s name and number. Mom called, probably talked to the old man. She asked for the store’s address, wrote it in block letters on the box after she hung up.

*It made us feel better, sending it back, she says. It was our first sense that your situation had impacted an innocent person, someone who hadn’t done anything. He was so nice and trusting. That really hurt. I remember talking to your father afterwards. He*

*told me that one of your medications had the side effect of impetuous, risk-taking behavior. I don't like to think back on it.*

I couldn't escape the idea that life was a series of meaningless events that comprised a game in which competitors accumulated wealth to stave off death. I couldn't understand why the homeless or poor continued to play. I often read about suicide and was stunned by how low the figures were. In 2002, there were only 31,655 suicides in the United States, 86.7 per day, just 1.3% of all deaths. If I wanted to kill myself, surely there were millions more who wanted out, too. The only thing comforting about the statistics were that white men easily led the standings, 23,049 of them making the leap into the unknown, compared to 5,682 white women, 2,360 non-white men and 564 non-white women. Made me feel less alone; predisposed into a fraternity. The best part of commonality is it doesn't cost as much responsibility.

“Your actions aren't rational,” Mom said after she found the pile. “You can't keep doing this.”

At least someone here is thinking about the pointlessness of it all, I thought as I glared at her. You've chosen ignorance. That's fine. We need people to do that. You go through the motions, get through the day, complete the work society asks of you, maintain. Think it's for God's Purpose. I choose a different kind of acceptance, the one that acknowledges that it doesn't matter who lives and who dies.

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Mom exited the post office, free of the box, and walked to her car, parked beside a meter. She had six minutes of park time left. She spent them crying silently, head down, hiding her tears from the faceless pedestrians going about their days.

## 10. DAY TREATMENT

St. Cloud, MN.

Tuesday July 6, 2004.

2:45 P.M.

On the Tuesday of my third week in day treatment, Bev asked if I had plans the next night. She knew I'd been forced to enter the program to avoid institutionalization. Her psychiatrist gave her the same ultimatum. We stood under the blackout shadow cast by the St. Cloud Hospital, nine stories of solid brick and a few city blocks long. The structure squeezed the west bank of the Mississippi River, surrounded by thick green spruce trees, looking every bit the "historic asylum" title it'd been given by a website devoted to such distinctions. In addition to serving the mentally ill, it housed a fully functioning clinic. Its aesthetic was distant and haunting, not regal and cutting edge, as I imagined architects intended during its 1926 construction.

Bev leaned toward my ear and said our posse of four should celebrate Friday's graduation.

"Just three days left," she laughed. "We made it."

As she spoke, I wanted to brush an amber curl out of her eyes. Socializing outside the hospital was forbidden. It was such an obvious rule that the exposition-happy program leaders didn't bother to say it. Adopting a common way of thinking, not unlike a cult, is the goal of group therapy. Psychiatric group leaders are given 20 people with broken ankles and want each one rehabbing the exact same way. Reasonable, but not

necessary logical, I thought. Healing limbs is science, as any doctor will tell you. Healing minds is art, as any psychiatrist will tell you. Asking for submission of individuality is a noble idea, but it never works in practice, even in short spurts, such as the three weeks of partial hospitalization I was days from completing.

“That’s a helluva’n idea, Bev,” I said.

Mike flicked his cigarette, ground it into the pavement.

“Best get moving,” he said. “They’ll wonder if we’ve escaped.”

Emily, the fourth member of our group, stood separated, near the hospital’s front entrance. She said even secondhand smoke causes cancer.

\*\*\*

The partial hospital wing was on the third floor, up an elevator and down several long, empty hallways. I got lost the first time I looked for it. When I righted myself, a smiling receptionist behind a desk of fake wood pointed me toward the psychiatrist’s office.

There are rules one must remember during intake meetings. First impressions are important. Everything you say will be documented. Your demeanor and disposition will be documented. Your voice inflection will be documented. Negative body language such as slouching, disinterest in the conversation, or obsessive mannerisms like scratching or leg bouncing will be speculated upon. Those observations will inform discourse when you are discussed in staff meetings and could very well lead to your next diagnosis.

Though I obsessively considered my demeanor, I didn’t scrutinize my appearance before I walked out the door for my first day of treatment. Fixating on flowers while forgetting the garden is still one of my worst characteristics. That morning, my alarm



went off at 7:00 A.M, hours before I was accustomed to rising, a 70-mile car drive looming. I slipped into grey sweats and a Kansas Jayhawks sweatshirt, both of which were crumpled on the floor, where I tossed them before bed.

Mom told me she was proud of me before I left, gave me money to stop at the McDonald's in Little Falls. She loved me too much to say that my skin looked sticky and smelled of sulfur. As she hugged me goodbye, I could taste my breath, like meat after the flies got to it. I hadn't showered or brushed my teeth in months.

I ejected a yawn and willed a smile to my oily face as I walked past the *Dr. Gerdes* placard. Her office was smaller than I expected, swallowed by a huge mahogany desk. A window overlooked the flowing Mississippi. Dr. Gerdes stood. I extended my hand, careful to keep steady eye contact and a non-threatening expression. She waited to sit until I parked on the upholstered chair.

"Welcome, Thor," she said, rolling her leather chair up to the desk. "We are happy to have you here. First days are tough. I just ask that you give us a chance."

"I'm happy to be here," I said.

One, of course, is well advised to be grateful at this point. Her desk was empty except for framed photos pointed in her direction, probably of family. Over her shoulder, on the wall, were degrees, the room's only decoration. Dr. Gerdes told me the program had a high success rate, that the staff planned activities to keep us active and engender a feeling of community. I smiled enthusiastically. Psychiatrists understand the significance of managing a tense moment with a sense of equability. She told me I was a perfect match for this treatment. Perhaps this was intended as a compliment, but the Wrath of Thor only triggered nauseating cynicism. She hadn't opened my files. In fact, they were

nowhere to be seen. I couldn't recall a time when my documents weren't sitting out while I talked to a psychiatrist. A man without files is a man without history.

Gerdes asked me to describe my mood and I told her it depended on whether the Twins were winning. She was kind enough to laugh. *Encouraging social adjustment, that's Psych 101*, I thought.

My initial strategy, to deceive her, now felt misguided. She used familiar rhetoric—"I want you to know that the only way I can help you is with your complete cooperation and honesty"—but Gerdes almost made me believe her platitudes. Maybe it was because she listened more than she transcribed, or maybe it was because she didn't have a Newton's Cradle on her desk. Whatever the reason, I cut the crap and told her of the medication's side effects, the weight gain and memory loss. I told her that I didn't understand why I cut my wrists. I didn't say this angrily, but with a genuine intonation of sincerity. Even told her I had ludicrously-elaborate suicidal fantasies, although I omitted the falling dominoes, tipped vases of gasoline, struck lint, shooting sparks and fire running across a cement warehouse floor to kindling and crumpled newspaper dipped in kerosene.

"I'm going to change your medication," Gerdes said, "and prescribe you a lower dosage. This should improve your cognitive functioning and reduce side effects."

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### **Psychiatric Note**

Date: June 23, 2004

Patient: Thor Nystrom

Talked to Thor's mom. Thor is currently down in partial hospital. Apparently partial hospital changed his Prozac to Lexapro, took him off Lamictal and decreased his Risperidone, all in the first hour. I'm not sure I agree with that, but he is in their program now. He hated the first day, the second went better. Apparently he has been very upfront as far as his suicidal ideation goes. That is good.

Dr. Elizabeth Delesante

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Three weeks later, Mike and I drove to Bev's apartment complex, a series of low-slung buildings with peeling grey paint. Mike's Suburban smelled of polished leather and factory novelty. On the way we talked about the Vikings offseason transactions, the relative plausibility of the film *Demolition Man*, the pros and cons of selected domestic and foreign beers, and Mike's affinity for poorly reviewed comedy movies.

We walked through a sliding glass door into a living room with two couches, slight upgrades from what you'd expect to see next to the road wearing "free" signs. One was the color of rust, the other of charcoal two minutes before it turned white-hot. A framed photo of Bev and her daughter sat on the television stand. In it, Bev wore a white dress, short bangs falling over her eyes, arms wrapped around the little girl dressed in denim overalls and a long-sleeved white T-shirt. I wondered where her ex-husband was now. Every beautiful woman had a man somewhere who was sick of her shit. Heard that in a movie once.

Bev handed me a Jack & Coke. Mike and I watched SportsCenter as we drank. He told us he was on a diet and had lost 60 pounds. I congratulated him, but thought he was

being an egotist. At the time, I couldn't stand the personal progress of anyone, least of all my friends. Bev spoke loudly, flailing her arms this way and that. She didn't resemble who she had been in the hospital.

Bev directed me toward a hallway when I had to pee. I took the first right when I should have taken the second and ended up in a room with pink walls. The bed's blue sheets were perfectly made and a little brown bear with a big red heart on its chest sat on the pillow. A framed picture of the little girl, her left front tooth missing, was on the dresser. The room was spotless. I walked out wondering when Bev lost custody.

We played "Presidents and Assholes" around the dining room table. Penalty's a shot. Bev fumbled the cards awkwardly as she shuffled. In a show of accord, I took a shot with anyone penalized. Mike lined empty beer bottles next to his feet in a neat row.

Emily stared with a distant intensity into the space beyond my left shoulder.

Slumped back, faces danced through my line of sight. *Raise that glass. There you go. Pick it up. Tip it back. Only edict, make the best of what you're given. But we're past that now.*

The bottle of Jack was half empty and I wondered if I'd drunk it all. Violent retches, like a blender filled with rocks, emanated from the bathroom. Emily, the girl afraid of secondhand smoke, cell phone towers and serial killers she read about in USA TODAY, sounded like a woman in labor. No. More like someone who'd been shot in the gut while choking on soup. I laughed, toasted with another shot.

"To the fallen comrade. Here here."

I felt a squeeze under the table. Confused, I made eye contact with Bev, who smiled, batted curled lashes over those hazel eyes.

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Shuffling through the empty hospital hallway, I pictured myself as Dante approaching the first circle of Hell. Couldn't remember if the first circle was purgatory or if it was one of the ones where Dante got his ass kicked. Or did Dante just have to watch other people get their asses kicked? We'd been assigned the book in KU's English 101 class, but I browsed its Spark Notes page instead of reading it. Wished I hadn't done that.

The therapy room's tight dimensions appeared designed to antagonize patient claustrophobia. Two tiny windows on the far wall, shades pulled, disseminated light like we were paying for it. I would have personally ordered one those corny motivational posters to hang on the wall just so I had something to look at during group sessions.

*Happiness – Joy is very infectious, therefore, be always full of joy.*

A well-dressed bearded man flanked by a petite woman in a red blouse introduced themselves as Paul and Cara. No credentials, just names, as though they were part of the group.

“Why don't our new members each stand and tell us a bit about themselves,” Paul said, gesturing towards me.

“Hey,” I said, without any trace of smart-ass sarcasm, giving a small wave to the room. “My name is Thor. I'm from Brainerd. Ummm... I'm a college student. I like sports and movies and books.”

*And awkward moments of contrived therapeutic breakthroughs with complete strangers!* The idea of making commentary on group therapy in the moment tickles my fancy as a kind of afterthought, which leads me to imagine Group Leader Paul removing a pad from his satchel and writing, “Patient Number Eight's aggressively misplaced show

of bravado was a failed attempt to establish himself as an alpha male and dismiss group therapy as an effective means of healing. Patient Eight has not reconciled his sickness. I see in this act of convoluted self-consciousness a man who does not take his recovery seriously. Recommend an increased dose of Zoloft.”

One guy sitting on the couch across the room looked vaguely familiar. He had white-blond hair and transparent skin, like a puny version of Paul Bettany. His identity gnawed at me and I couldn't concentrate, like when movies are ruined because you *have* to remember the name of a bit actor. Turned out he was the older brother of a girl I graduated from high school with; took me days to piece that together. A week later he sobbed, whispering through tears, “I'm gay.” At Paul's gentle urging, my classmate's brother told us he wanted to cut that part from himself with a cleaver, that if he couldn't he'd rather just die, that he was embarrassed to say this but what he'd rather do is take that cleaver to the assholes he knew suspected him to be gay and hated him for it, remove the toes, thumbs and digits of those motherfuckers who knew his darkest secret even though he couldn't find the courage to come out to his own family.

It was reasonable to wonder if it was appropriate to tell friends his secret, or if implied group therapy laws of confidentiality in some way privileged it.

\*\*\*

Bev's hand crept up to my thigh. Time slowed. We were actors in a silent movie, she Greta Garbo and I Buster Keaton. I parted my legs slowly so as not to startle her. Emily stumbled in, limping toward the living room. She fell heavily onto the charcoal couch, lying on her back. Bev skipped into the kitchen, emerging with a popcorn bowl that she placed on Emily's chest. Moments later, Emily softly snored.

“Let’s run away together,” Bev whispered into my ear.

“To where?”

Bev kneaded the meat of my thigh like dough.

“After all this,” she said. “Where are you going next in your life?”

“Kansas,” I said, pronouncing the word like a question. Was she putting me on?

“In the fall. For school. College. Journalism.”

“Take me.”

“Take you? With me? What about your apartment?”

“Take me with you. I like you.”

She bent closer and I didn’t move back. Those lips.

“OK?” she said urgently. “OK? Thor? OK?”

I nodded at her, but this desperate attention was foreign to me. I couldn’t imagine a beautiful woman being physically attracted to me in such a degree. Mike was looking at us but I couldn’t acknowledge him. I wanted to appear cool, someone who didn’t need his affirmation, someone who made independent and bold decisions all the time. Bev’s hand crept up my shorts. Blood rushed to meet it. She yanked a bit too hard under the table and I cringed.

“I will make you very, very happy,” she said. “I know I can. We can be happy. I’ve thought a lot about you. I was hoping you’d come tonight.”

“Yep,” I said softly, my voice cracking through parched lips.

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*When did you first know you were different? What are your triggers? How can you avoid them?* I begged my eyes to stay open, told them I’d buy a Mega Gulp

Mountain Dew on the drive back if they did.

A middle-aged woman with gnawed-off cuticles across the room admitted to having suppressed suicidal ideations, that the remorse she felt from keeping those feelings secret from her children was worse than a thousand awful deaths she wished upon herself. As she spoke, her eyes focused intensely to the far left, as if held steady by a magnet. Every so often, during a revelation in her story, they would dart from the netherworld to the pupils of an unsuspecting victim, the force of her gaze terrifying even to those not imprisoned in it. I became privy to this tic of hers, and a week later, when she was speaking in graphic detail of what she'd do to herself if her children were ever able to see into her mind, her eyes snapped onto mine. I was ready. Where others had submitted, dropping their eyes to escape her Medusa trance, I refused. I sagged my cheeks and rolled my eyes slightly to the left, subtle enough that group leaders couldn't see a change of facial expression, but direct enough that she was aware I wasn't interested in her histrionics. She flinched. Her words tapered off. I puckered my lips into a question mark, miming curiosity. The group leader asked her to continue, but she just stared at me.

We were dismissed and I had nothing to do, so I followed a tall man with thick black glasses outside. I knew he smoked. He was talkative and I needed a friend. He slipped a Camel from its package as he gazed into the parking lot. I stood awkwardly behind him, pretending to check texts. He turned around.

“Want a smoke?” he asked.

“Sure. Thanks.”

We introduced ourselves. Mike showed me a snake tattoo that traversed his back.



“Where did you get it?” I asked, inhaling, trying not to cough from the smoke.

“In a place of unrest,” he said.

“What does it mean?”

“I’ll put it this way,” he said. “Every dude comes to a grand juncture at some point in life, right? A point where there’s something at stake and a big decision needs to be made. More or less, this tattoo is my reminder of that point in my life and the way I handled it.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I squinted my eyes at him like he had just taught me something valuable.

\*\*\*

Mike was still staring as I seized Bev’s wrist beneath the table. Bev spent the next 15 minutes telling Mike that she and I were running away together. At one point Mike bent down and motioned for me to do the same.

“Dude, you want to leave?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“It’s no problem,” he said. “I’m driving home soon.”

“It’s OK.”

“I don’t want this to get weird for you.”

“It isn’t.”

He eyed me through his thick glasses, unconvinced, waiting for me to change my mind, as though this was a mistake, and not only a mistake, but a mistake he’d made before. I returned a resolute look that was intended to signify my desire for him to leave. He shrugged, stood on cue, picked up his beer bottles and threw them in the garbage.

“I’m going to go,” he said.

“No!” Bev yelled.

“Last chance,” he said, rustling keys in his pocket.

I stood, wobbly, and extended my hand. I remembered when Mike had been the teacher’s pet in group, speaking whenever awkward pauses extended too long. At that time I believed him to have been planted by employees to facilitate discussion. Because he spoke of his depression in generalities and Freudian clichés, I was suspicious of him. Now he was my friend.

“Goodnight Mike.”

As the door slammed, Bev said, “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Secret!”

\*\*\*

Group therapy lasted two hours each day, 120 excruciating minutes. I passed the time staring at a quiet woman across the room. She wore sundresses, crossed her legs and looked at her painted red fingernails. She was urged to speak and said only that she’d hurt her family and let down her kids.

“I deserved to lose them,” she said, looking at the floor.

Half the rooms in this woman’s brain don’t have doors, I thought, and the rest are bolted with steel reinforcements.

“Go on,” Paul said.

The woman was beautiful—beautiful—in the way an abstract painting is beautiful. Beautiful like those melting pocket watches in Dali’s *Persistence of Memory*,

beautiful like a conceptual idea, like Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The woman reminded me of the melting clock hanging over a branch in Dali's painting, its utility lapsing after slowly melting in the sun for centuries, its aesthetic immediately becoming more interesting. Was that an awful analogy? The woman possessed a sort of demure delicacy, though not in the same way I thought I understood the word. Meek seemed too harsh a description for her demeanor, quiet too bland. Of course she was damaged, and this fragility only increased her beauty.

"I made a mistake," the woman said, craning her neck to stare at a wall as she absentmindedly picked at her cuticles. "I haven't been a good mother. I always thought I would do better."

She trailed off. I had an impulse to move toward her and offer a comforting touch of some kind, but that gesture would have been creepy as well as artificial.

\*\*\*

I took Bev's hand and stood. Everything blurred, my knees wobbled. I didn't dare close my eyes. I'd throw up. Grasping the table, I tried to regain equilibrium.

"Come on!" she squealed.

I followed her into a hallway. She turned right, walking past numbered door after numbered door in a long corridor. We reached an L, took a right, walked past more doors. Bev assumed that I was following and never turned back. She reached down with criss-crossed arms and peeled off her blouse.

"We're going skinny dipping," she said over her shoulder.

We reached clear glass doors that led to a swimming pool and hot tub. White plastic beach chairs lined pebble-textured floor.

“Yes we are,” I said, fumbling with my belt. Bev pulled noisily at the double doors.

“Motherfucking piece of shit broken fucking doors,” she said.

“Move,” I said.

The doors were deadbolted. I heaved harder and harder, bending my knees, throwing my body back, my shoulders loosening and howling in their sockets. Clangs bounced down the long hallway.

I gave up, sweat running down my face. Bev was gone. The walls appeared to slant and I felt like I was about to lose consciousness. I dropped to a knee, looked down the hall. And there she was, squatting against a wall, pants at her ankles and panties bunched around her thighs.

\*\*\*

After Gerdes changed my medications, I wasn't quite as moody, not quite as hungry, not quite as absentminded. Our therapy group walked to the Mississippi River with a hippy woman who told us to *Just be* along the muddy banks. *Listen to the water*, she said, pointing to her eardrum.

One day in the cafeteria I had a fluttery feeling in my chest as I approached the beautiful woman from group with short auburn hair. She sat next to a brunette I recognized from group. I felt blood pulsing in my fingertips.

“Can I sit?” I asked.

The woman nodded, giving an apologetic look that I'd caught her mid-chew.

“I'm Thor, by the way, we haven't been introduced.”

“Of course, how rude of us,” the woman said. “I'm Bev. This is my friend

Emily.”

Emily’s bangs clung to her forehead. Her eyes bounced between her tray and mine. Emily only spoke once in group—I initially ascertained she’d received some sort of special privilege—revealing cryptically that there was a guy in Montana and she didn’t want to talk about him.

I pointed at the grey chicken breast covered in a milky sauce on Bev’s tray.

“Disgusting, isn’t it? I made the mistake of ordering that last week.” I said. “That gravy looks like the stuff they load into plungers before inseminating heifers.”

Bev cupped her hand over her mouth to stop it, but milk ran through her fingers and dripped onto her dress as she laughed.

\*\*\*

“Bev, what the fuck?” I yelled.

“I have to go so bad,” she whined.

Beneath her haunches a stream of dark yellow sprayed continuously, running across the floor in my direction. It smelled as though she hadn’t drunk water in 24 hours.

“Goddamnit, Bev. You can’t just pee in the hallway. What about the neighbors?”

“My landlord doesn’t even live here.”

We heard a noise from the end of the hallway, a lock slipping.

“Bev, we need to leave right now.”

A man shouted. Bev panicked and nearly fell in the puddle, but collected herself, pulled up her panties. I ran. I turned to see if we were being followed, but saw only Bev. She half-galoped in a struggle to keep her pants up. We reached her door and slammed it. Bev flicked the lock.

Emily sat at the table, flinching and then turning away as we burst in. Bev wore a cream-colored satin bra, her jeans at thigh level and unbuckled. My jeans hung to my ass. I gasped for air. Emily retreated to a bedroom.

I locked eyes with Bev and we roared belly laughs. I laughed until my throat hurt, stopping when lightheadedness forced me to sit. Bev brought me a glass of water, which I drank in one gulp. She bent down, lips on my earlobe.

“I’ll be in the bedroom.”

\*\*\*

For those three weeks, Bev, Emily and Mike were the best friends I had, the only friends I had.

We sat together at lunch, Bev bragging about her daughter. I taught them card games during gym period. We cracked inside jokes about the group leaders. I referred to Paul as Freud, which wasn’t clever but always got laughs. We screwed around on nature walks, my personal favorite. I would walk next to the flighty leader, as my friends watched me, and ask her ridiculous questions in a serious tone. She always paused, ruminating, before answering me genuinely.

“Marcy, I’m going to be graduating from here soon,” I’d say, as Mike and Bev crept closer to listen in. “I want to add nature walks to my daily routine. I don’t know why, but these walks always seem to make my problems go away. Why is that? Is there an explanation? I know this is a stupid question, I apologize.”

“No! No Thor!” she said. “It isn’t stupid, not at all. A whole lot of research has shown that nature relieves mental fatigue. We all exert so much energy in something called directed attention, right? Nature offers interest, naturally—a childlike sense of

fascination. It removes us from the grind. Reconnecting with nature is supposed to increase our attention span, or, I guess, our attention to detail. Like, after 45 minutes of hard thinking, a walk in the woods will help you mentally recover faster than reading or listening to music. Even looking at pictures of nature will increase your sense of well-being.”

I continued these conversations for as long as 20 minutes as Bev and Mike giggled. I was being an asshole, but it’s tough to judge myself. You do what you can to endure. I wasn’t performing for my friends. I was trying to maintain my sanity.

\*\*\*

My heart hammered as I pushed the bedroom door open. Bev was naked on all fours, ass aimed at the doorway. She looked over her shoulder coyly. I stared and stared and stared.

She tried to speak with a sexy inflection, but her words jumbled, like a boxer at the end of the 12th round. I stumbled, trying to kick off my sweatpants. Bev giggled.

I climbed onto the bed. The covers were soft, white cotton. Bev pushed herself up, turning to grasp my face and pull it toward her. It was a violent kiss, teeth scraping lips.

“Fuck me now,” she said softly.

She resumed the all-fours position. We choked in breaths and bumped back and forth. I thrust as fast as I could, hands white-knuckled vice grips on her hips. Sweat trickled down my forehead and flicked from my stomach onto her back every time we thumped together.

A shadow moved in my peripheral vision. I didn’t know if it was an amelioration of the colored dots that spotted my vision when drunk, a person who didn’t exist—which

might confirm my schizophrenia diagnosis once and for all—or a cat Bev hadn't mentioned. I twisted my neck. Emily stood in the doorway, her face blank. She gazed calmly into my eyes, blank emerald marbles. My thrusts slowed. Bev's head was buried in a pillow, her cries muffled. I waited for a spot of emotion to bob to the surface of Emily's face, waited for recognition, waited for her to talk, for her to do *something*. As I wondered what she was thinking, Bev pulled forward. She flipped onto her back and pulled me down, away from Emily.

I pumped faster and faster as a pressure—pain, happiness, pleasure—built; I held it in, clenching all the muscles in my body. When I could hold no longer, I let go, shuddering and holding on as it exited unrestrained. White light, the world passing through me. I held the back of Bev's damp head as I rode it out. She bit my collarbone, drawing blood. When it was over, I rolled over onto my back. I sucked in air, looked toward the door. Emily was gone.

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I woke in a strange room, body drenched in sweat. Naked, I instinctively pulled covers to my waist. The door was open and I heard the television in another room. I noticed a dark liquid stain on Bev's side of the bed. The stench camped in my nostrils for hours.

My boxers were crumpled near the door. Emily walked through the hallway, watching me without a hint of acknowledgement. I pulled on my sweats and walked into the living room, where Emily and Bev talked at the table.

“Did we have sex last night?” Bev asked as I sat.

Bev was showered and perfumed. She wore a white blouse and jeans. I didn't



know what to say, so I said nothing.

“I woke up naked,” she said. “Just tell me. Did we?”

“C’mon Bev,” I said quietly. I picked up a box of Cookie Crisp and dumped them into a bowl. My hands shook. I doubted my grip.

“I’m being serious, Thor. Did we have sex?”

“Bev, c’mon,” I said, returning eye contact. “You don’t remember anything?”

“No.”

“Well, um... yeah, I guess we did.”

“Shut up!”

I studied the Cookie Crisp box. General Mills offered a plastic Cookie Bandit toy if you sent them five proof of purchase barcodes.

“Thor! How old are you?”

“I’m 19.”

“19,” she repeated, studying my face. Then her features contorted to bewilderment. “19! You’re 19?”

I pretended to consider whether I’d be interested in collecting the barcodes.

“My son is 18!” she said. “I can’t believe this!”

“You have a son?”

“He’s 18 and he goes to high school! I can’t believe that I did that. Thor! I can’t believe that we did that!”

Emily laughed. At this point, it was hard not to join her.

We packed into Bev’s cluttered white jalopy and drove to the hospital. Emily also forgot to pack a change of clothes. Her blouse had been scrubbed to remove strands of

vomit. Mike smirked as we entered the therapy room. I winked at him. Paul and Cara, the group leaders, escorted us into an adjacent conference room.

Paul looked at us sternly.

“Tell me what happened and please don’t lie.”

Nobody said anything so I talked, believing I could reason with him. I said we had gone out to dinner last night and had thought doing so would help us build our relationship skills. But unfortunately we had slipped after dinner when deciding what to do. I cleared my throat and shook my head softly to exhibit shame. He didn’t interrupt. I copped to drinking and sleeping over at Bev’s.

“Was anyone else there outside of you three?” Paul asked.

“Who else was there?” Cara said after a long pause. No one spoke.

“We have no choice but to discharge all three of you,” Paul said. “I think I speak for Cara here as well when I say we think the three of you made good progress here. I want to commend you for that. But what you did last night cannot be tolerated. We don’t allow patient association outside the hospital. In addition, the use of alcohol is a clear sign of regression and, by extension, grounds for expulsion.”

“We are sorry that it ended like this,” Cara said.

My file was open wide on Dr. Gerdes’ desk as I walked sheepishly into her office. She didn’t acknowledge me. Acid burned an ulcer into my stomach, one of those visceral feelings so precise you can immediately place the last time you felt it. When I was seven years old I rounded up a group of boys at daycare. In January, we descended upon a school bus driven by the woman across the street. We pried the doors open and staged a snowball fight, running down the middle row, between plastic seats, chucking snow and

taking cover. I experienced something big that day: The exhilaration of a boy realizing he had choices; he could disobey. My belly gurgled Pop Rocks as a rollercoaster plummeted. My brain went quiet. The other boys walked back to daycare, but I stayed. I packed snowballs tight and shoved them into the bus' exhaust pipe. *Drive now, stupid*, I thought, my heart soaring above me in the frigid air. Later, Mom asked: *What do you think an appropriate punishment for this would be, Thor?* That moment was the first time I can recall wanting to die.

I sat down on the upholstered chair as Gerdes read through my file. I felt as though I was being interrogated even though she hadn't spoken. Dr. Gerdes looked up, her face like I had hit her.

"Start from the beginning," she said.

In similar situations, I'd wiggled by on fake remorse. A default setting. Autopilot. I went with that instinct.

"First, Dr. Gerdes, I just want to say that I'm really sorry. I don't expect leniency or understanding, but I do appreciate you taking the time to listen to my side of this. I've really enjoyed my time here and I think I've learned valuable life skills. This might not be the right thing to say, but I don't regret what happened last night. I don't regret it because I sort of think that I learned a valuable lesson there, too."

This was a hook, something I'd learned from listening to my mom on the radio when I was a little boy. *Keep 'em listening*, Mom said. You said something unexpected, went to commercial. Gerdes stonewalled me, though, tapping her pen on the desk.

"What I think I learned, is that..." I pretended to stumble upon something profound. "...I can't be content with progress; that relapse is possible if I'm not diligent."

“You’re a smart guy,” she said. “I assume that you know that the consumption of alcohol while on anti-depressives is dangerous. Life threatening, even. Your group’s behavior is troubling.”

My mind was back in the elementary school counselor’s office. I knew how to recognize *the moment of inevitability*, the time to shut up. No need to drag out the inevitable. Hope for pardon rested in Gerdes separating my actions from Bev and Emily’s, both of whom she’d already discharged. Vulnerability appeared to be my last playable card.

“Honestly, Dr. Gerdes, I got caught up in the excitement of making new friends. You have to realize how important I thought that was to my development. I’ve lost my friends. There’s no one left. I felt important. I felt valued...”

At this point I didn’t know if I was bullshitting or not.

“...I don’t know. Anyway. I realized my mistake last night. I really did. It was clear as day to me at one point. I wish that I could have extricated myself from that situation, but I didn’t have a car. I’m very sorry about all this and I hope I can continue in the program until I graduate. Obviously I need to work through some flaws in logic. I really thought I’d made significant progress before this whole thing. I need more help and I’d really appreciate it if you guys would give me a second chance.”

She shut my file.

“I’m afraid that’s no longer possible,” she said. “Good luck, Thor. I wish you the best.”

## 11. LAST CHANCE

St. Cloud, MN.

Thursday July 8, 2004.

4:15 P.M.

After I was discharged, I smoked a cigarette in front of the St. Cloud Hospital. First pack I ever bought. No one taught me how to smoke and I was too proud to ask Mike, a man who couldn't afford to go to college. He had an undeserved chip on his shoulder, hid it as best he could. His wife cheated and left, his dad snuffed cigarettes out on his arm as a kid. Mike hadn't had an easy life but he was a good man. Seemed like my father in that way.

Dad grew up in a two-story, pink stuccoed home in downtown Brainerd. When Dad was a kid, his older brother, my eldest uncle, forced his younger brother to perform oral sex on him. Details were hazy—Dad didn't like to talk about it—but it happened in the basement of a two-story Brainerd home when my father was 14. My older uncle had Acne Vulgarism, scaly pinkish skin covered in zits. Years later that skin scarred. In high school, my older uncle didn't have a girlfriend. My younger uncle was in middle school. He had long brown hair, cut like the Beatles. It was the 70's. Those were the only details I was told. I didn't want to hear any more. When I was six, we visited my older uncle in California, went to the San Diego Zoo. I remember reaching over the barrier and trying to touch a zebra's nose through the cage. Mom and Dad kept close watch of Quinn and I around my uncle. I didn't notice.

The incident fractured Dad's family. Dad's younger brother wanted my grandparents to banish the older brother from the house, the older brother denied it happened and my father tried to repair their relationship. Didn't work. Both my uncles resented him for it. Nobody respects the man who won't take sides, even if there isn't a side to take.

Dad has spent the rest of his life trying to reunite his family, but optimism only led to a disenchantment I sometimes see on his face. It manifests in his gut, where an anxiety disorder burns ulcers into his stomach lining. He can't eat spicy food. You'll never see him at an ethnic restaurant. When you see Dad reach into his pocket and flick his left hand toward his mouth, he's chewing Tums. He needs three before each cup of coffee. He takes Ranitidine, over the counter, at breakfast and bedtime, to counteract the acid pushing toward his heart. Those ulcers damaged his esophagus, cause bloody stool and nausea. A few years ago, my grandparents took both of Dad's brothers out of their will. Dad begged them not to, said he didn't need their money. He probably realizes the death of his parents will mark the end of his dream to have one last Christmas morning with his brothers.

Rare that combination, remaining good despite a tough upbringing. The harder the situation you come from, the more screwed up you became, the more rancid a person. What did that say about me? How does one coming from good become bad? Maybe the rich had it worse. Maybe I didn't understand life or people. Maybe I didn't understand myself. Maybe I viewed the world through a damaged brain, unable to empathize or interpret social dynamics. Maybe that's what my sickness really was, an inability to connect. My family jokes with me. They say I have no common sense. Despite my

protestations, I know they're right. I needed to ask for directions to our church that I'd attended since birth when I got my learner's permit and I require Mom's help to preheat the oven. Quinn tells me I don't "get" girls. And I never understood her position that it was important to tell Krista that I really did want to see Julia Styles' new movie or that I should appear enthusiastic when Krista asked for help choosing a purse before we went to a party.

Kicking at a tuft of grass in front of the hospital, I improvised with the cigarette. I held the butt as the Marlboro Man did, almost like a pencil. I never inhaled in a crowd, afraid of a coughing fit. I wanted to look defiantly tough, like Tyler Durden. I pictured Dr. Gerdes looking out her third-floor window, wishing she could take me back. She knew I was a bad man. How many people get kicked out of a mental institution? Better to buy into that narrative than consider the repercussions for my dismissal. Dr. Delesante said that she would commit me if I didn't graduate. That decision was out of my hands.

I was misunderstood, I thought, a teenager looking to have a good time during a rough patch. Nothing wrong with that. Hell, I had been wronged. What self-respecting psychiatrist gave up on an apologetic invalid? I had explained my mindset, promised to change. I was, more or less, a model patient prior to the episode. And what of the episode? Was I actually sorry that I got drunk and had sex with an attractive older woman? Of course not. When would I have that chance again? Not one of my friends would have turned that down. Not one. I was being punished for human nature, the whim of any 19-year-old. In the deepest recesses of my Swedish heart, I refused to get better, at least by the definition written on a form sheet by a shrink. I would take their pills, go to their appointments and answer their questions, but they had no right to punish what

couldn't be changed. You can't stop a 19-year-old from drinking and having sex, just like you can't stop a baby's crying.

My mother asked Quinn to pick me up as a favor. Quinn, the middle child, always playing peacemaker, asked our cousin Becca to come along for company. That's how she spun it—*We'll make a day of it*. Quinn and I weren't speaking much at the time and she wanted a buffer in the car. They ate at Chipotle in St. Cloud because Quinn was told to pick me up at 3. When Quinn got the call to pick me up early, she knew something had gone wrong. Mom instructed her to bring me right to Dr. Delesante's office, where an emergency session had been called.

Wanting to be in the act of smoking when Quinn arrived, I burned through most of the pack. My tough-guy routine was getting tedious, but I was compelled to keep it up when a situation could potentially affect my pride. In this case, I wanted Quinn to know that I didn't care what she thought. I flicked my Camel onto the manicured lawn when she pulled up in her green '97 Sentra, a little tin box.

"Hi, Becca," I said. I didn't acknowledge my sister. Quinn used pleasantries and compliments like gasoline, fueling her through the day.

Quinn pulled out of the lot and I recounted everything that had happened the night before. It was a great story—drinking, pissing on the carpet, sex with a woman in her late 30s. Becca and Quinn sat in silence, which, to me, meant I had a compelling narrative. We reached the highway as I attempted to remember verbatim the conversation Bev and I had that led to the hallway peeing incident.

In my misguided enthusiasm to tell the story, I slid into the middle seat and poked my head between Quinn and Becca to accentuate key details. The story seemed quirky



and fascinating to me: This is what happens at institutions when the shrinks aren't around. Novelty entertainment only I could offer. I couldn't make sense of Emily and decided her inclusion in my story would unnecessarily complicate the central plot: Thor as the wise-cracking renegade, flicking his middle finger to the establishment, getting drunk, banging a MILF, and getting tossed from the program because he forgot to pack a change of clothes. Silly Thor. The hero of my story couldn't be bothered with planning. I paused during that part of the story to allow for laughter, but it didn't come.

*All I kept thinking as you talked was obviously you hadn't gotten the help you needed, Quinn told me years later. I was embarrassed for you and for Becca. I thought: If this program can't help him, who's going to be able to help him? I just kept thinking to myself—I know this isn't Thor. I wanted to hold onto the person I grew up with. Sometimes I didn't know if I was dreaming or if this was really happening. I couldn't believe it had gotten this far.*

Becca mustered a pity laugh when I finished. Quinn kept staring straight ahead, expressionless. Probably thinks I should kiss her ass, I thought, because she shuffled her busy summer schedule to pick up her brother from the hospital. Gave up an afternoon at the beach. Never had a sip of alcohol in her life, still a virgin. Held those cards up her sleeve so she could play them whenever a moral debate broke out.

"I'm going to sleep," I said. "Didn't get much last night, obviously."

Quinn and Becca felt comfortable talking when I began snoring. Quinn, particularly engaged in a story about a potential upcoming engagement proposal by one of her friend's boyfriends, drifted onto the tread marks. My head bounced off the seat as the car vibrated. She corrected with a swift jerk of the steering wheel and my knee

banged the door. Fifteen minutes later, Quinn strayed onto the tread marks again as she was discussing her favorite show, *American Idol*.

“Oops,” Quinn said jokingly to Becca.

“You’re not funny,” I said, sitting up.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She always tried to avoid conflict. Her apologies were peace treaties with no concessions.

“You’re sorry? About what? The fact that you can’t drive? Or the fact that you don’t care that I’m trying to sleep?”

“I didn’t mean to do that. You can go back to sleep.”

“So that you can wake me up in five minutes by steering like a crash test dummy into a median and kill all three of us? What is wrong with you?”

“Thor, please calm down.”

“Here you are picking me up from the mental institution, so you can write in your diary about the good deed you performed today and tell your friends how supportive you’re being. You get that smug feeling of satisfaction and you can’t even let me take a goddamned nap in the backseat.”

“Thor, if you don’t calm down I will pull the car over and let you out. This isn’t safe.”

“Right. Got it. You’re the perfect child and I’m the fuckup. Your safety is threatened because I’m calling you out for who you are. My safety as you swerve in and out of lanes isn’t as pressing. I’d ask you to get out so I could drive us home safely, but that would require you relinquishing control. Hold onto that control, it’s the only power you have.”

“I’m serious. I’ll pull over.”

“Am I stopping you? I’ll take the bus to the Cities and start over. That would be best for you right, student body president? No more schizophrenic brother. No more pious acting in front of your friends. You have no idea what my life is like. So if you want to pull the car over and let me out, please do. Because I’m sick of living at home. Most of all, I’m sick of my sister, the one who smilingly tells Mom she will pick me up in St. Cloud because she wants love, who drives me home expecting gratitude because she wants love, who talks about how difficult it is to see me suffer to her friends because she wants love, who wears whatever mask is required to be loved, because she knows she isn’t going to get it by being who she really is.”

Years later, I read online reviews of my favorite television show, *Breaking Bad*, after each episode. At the end of Season 4, critics surmised that an overhead shot through a floorboard of a cackling Walter White, as if in a grave, marked the death of Walt the terminally ill science teacher and the completion of his transformation into Heisenberg, the murderous meth kingpin of Albuquerque. In the last few months I lived at home, I experienced something akin to that. There was no insult too vicious to voice, no word too flagrant to use. I stepped aside, let my illness take over, no fear of repercussions. The terminally ill don’t think about the future. I mistook that devil-may-care attitude for freedom, like a friend I had years later who dropped out of college so he could work at a hotel part-time and smoke pot when he wasn’t on the clock. I asked him why he did it. *Freedom, man. I’m doing exactly what I want to do whenever I want to do it. I like smoking and ordering Gumby’s pizzas and watching David Fincher movies. I make exactly enough money to sustain that. I’m not tested or graded. I don’t have to write*

*papers. My dad stopped trying to change me six months ago. My buddy scored a 30 on the ACT yet never reached his sophomore year of college.*

After my tirade, there was an eerie silence in the car. Quinn's hands never left 10 and 4. She may have been crying. I wanted to think I didn't care, but that wasn't true. I knew what I said was despicable. But I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of admitting it. We drove in silence for the next 30 minutes. Ever since I moved back home, I had acted as though a shield of hatred would somehow insulate me, allow me to focus on the carnage of my interiority. I didn't understand that in so doing I left myself vulnerable. I began to think people were out to get me, that favors were not favors at all, but rather manipulations. In high school, I enjoyed feeling in control of my life. It was becoming more and more disturbing to discover this other thing in me, this stockpile of fury that could suddenly explode and take control. The crazed rant toward Quinn felt preformed, as if a second entity inside had worked on it, ready to vent itself when the proper moment arose, in words independent of my control. Again, I was left to ponder who I really was.

Quinn pulled into the parking lot of Nystrom and Associates. I slammed the door as though I thought I could dislodge it from the frame. I wasn't angry with her. I was livid with myself. Quinn drove Becca home and met a friend at Ernie's Bar and Grill on Gull Lake. Laura listened as she cried. Forty minutes later, Quinn got the call. Mom was hysterical: *The meeting went downhill. He's gone.*

My parents were in the waiting room of Nystrom and Associates. I sat across the room. Mom's cell phone rang. She spoke in a muffled tone, flashed me a look, and hung up. It was Quinn, recounting my explosion in the car, warning her to be wary of me.

My parents shook Dr. Delesante's hand when we were summoned. I took my usual seat and Dad sat in a folding chair that the receptionist dragged in. Delesante smiled, her voice chirpy. She was excessively bubbly, a performance for my parents, I thought.

"How has Thor been?" she asked.

After a pause, Mom said my mood was tolerable and consistent. Delesante asked if they felt partial hospitalization was of benefit. Mom said she was concerned they were not notified that I would be discharged from the program.

"Thor, did you know that you were going to be discharged prior to today?"

Delesante said.

"No."

"Did they cite a reason during the discharge process?"

"Yes."

Delesante knew the answer to her question. But of course she was going to draw out this process for her own amusement and my humiliation.

"What did the psychiatrist say?"

"Something like I had gotten from it what I could," I mumbled. Delesante and I both knew that was a lie. But I would play this game with her as long as she wanted.

"That is encouraging, don't you think?" she said. I swore I could pick up the condescension in her voice. Almost wanted to ask my parents if they could, too. I elected not to answer her question.

"Do you feel that the program helped you?" Delesante said.

I shrugged. Delesante studied my face, waiting me out.

“Yeah I guess,” I said.

“Were you upset when you were discharged?”

“No.”

“Because you felt that you had gotten from the program what you intended?”

“Right.”

She nodded. Perhaps my parents were finally seeing what I had to deal with on a weekly basis. Delesante knew I could dance around these Psych 101 questions for the entire hour. It wasn't about emotional excavation anymore. She was trying to get me to crack in front of my parents. She knew I had spent hundreds of hours in these uncomfortable synthetic chairs. She'd seen me go into autopilot perfect-patient shtick mode. She'd seen me do the opposite—I'd told her I wanted to die, I'd told her I couldn't stop thinking about my ex-girlfriend, I'd graphically explained my thought process leading up to wrist cutting. We were past all that.

“Did they give you a discharge plan?” she said.

“Sort of.”

“What sorts of activities and behaviors did it ask you to engage in?”

“The sorts of activities and behaviors all those programs ask you to engage in.”

“Such as?”

I gnawed on my pinky finger.

“Thor, how are you feeling today?” she said.

“Dandy.”

“How are you really feeling today?”

I peeled the nail off and spit it onto the carpet.

“Thor?”

“I’m feeling like I don’t want to be in this office answering the same sort of boring questions you ask me all the time... I’m feeling like it’s a nice day and I feel like shit. I feel like I spend half my life in this chair talking to you. I feel like I have no idea why my parents have to be here, though I suspect you do. I’m feeling like if you want a report on my progress in St. Cloud, by all means contact them for my chart. My guess is that you have a faxed copy on your desk. My guess is that, for whatever reason, you want me to confess in front of my parents to a program infraction that has already been explained to you by somebody that you trust more than me. So how am I feeling? I’m feeling like I’m sick of being jerked around. I’m tired. You know why. I’m feeling like if you want to explain to my parents why we’re all sitting here, by all means do so. But don’t attempt to manipulate me into giving the play-by-play in front of them. I’m not going to do it.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” she said. “Will you follow the discharge plan they provided to you?”

“No.”

“No?” she said. “Why is that?”

Maybe I was caught up in the euphoria of telling her off. Maybe I just wanted to make the hour as difficult on her as she’d attempted to make it on me. Whatever the reason, I was not going to agree with anything she said from there on. It was her turn to play my game.

“Because,” I said, “the discharge plan was made by academics who’ve never had a mental illness.”

“Will you elaborate for me? Can you give me a specific example?”

“It asks me to jot down my feelings. Daily.”

“You don’t feel like that would be a helpful practice?”

“I’m well aware of my feelings,” I said. “I don’t need the words to remind me.”

“So you have no intention of following the discharge plan?”

*Jesus Christ this bitch is daft*, I thought.

“You said you are actively aware of your feelings,” she said. “That’s good. That’s healthy. I recognize that today you are experiencing a lot of pain. Could you walk me through what you are feeling? I think it would be instructive for your parents as well.”

“What do you want me to say? Besides what I say every time I come here? Do you want me to say that I have nothing to live for? Because that is true. Do you want me to say I hate myself? What do you want me to say?”

She turned to my parents, ran her tongue across her upper lip.

“Mom and Dad, have you noticed from Thor an elevated level of irritation and/or aggravation in the last couple of weeks?”

“I wouldn’t say more than usual,” Mom said. My father nodded agreement.

“I know that he didn’t want to come to the appointment today,” Mom said. “I thought maybe he was upset at having been discharged.”

“The last time we met as a group was after the unfortunate incident the night of your daughter’s graduation,” Delesante said. “Since then, have you noticed any suicidal behavior? Has Thor indicated any suicidal ideations?”

“Not that he has said to me,” Mom said. “Bob and I had noticed a small uptick with Thor, and that, along with the program, gave us some hope.”



“Thor have you been experiencing suicidal ideations?” Delesante said.

I pretended not to hear her.

“Thor, are you currently suicidal?”

“Not right now,” I said.

“Are you feeling like hurting yourself?”

“Not. Right. Now,” I repeated, allowing each word chew the air between us before I started the next.

“Dad, are you comfortable with Thor in the home?” Delesante said.

“I am if he would contact me if he was feeling suicidal,” Dad said.

“Thor, if you have suicidal thoughts,” Delesante said, “will you alert your father?”

I stared blankly at her.

“If you have suicidal thoughts,” she repeated, “will you tell your father?”

“No,” I said.

She nodded somberly, almost expectantly, as if she had just been told a cancerous second cousin had passed. This was my first hint that I had made a terrible mistake. We sat in silence for a few seconds. As the object of Delesante’s resigned gaze, I knew what was coming next. And I knew exactly what I was going to do when it happened. I made that decision quickly, as she slowly opened her mouth.

“Then I have no choice,” she said in slow motion. “You must be hospitalized.”

We stood at the same time. She took a step toward the phone on the wall and I barreled out of the room, running past the receptionist and patients reading magazines in the lobby. I didn’t know how far I would make it. I didn’t have a plan. But I sure as hell

wasn't going to sit in the waiting room as the squad car swerved in.

I sprinted into the parking lot and took a right onto the service drive. My belly jiggled after each heavy step. It was the last act of freedom I would have for four months. I ran a few blocks and slowed to a jog. My lungs burned. Dad yelled behind me. I was less than a quarter mile from the building.

My dad caught up, breathing as heavily as I was.

“Thor,” he panted, “you have to go back.”

“I'm not fucking going back there.”

“Thor, she called the police.”

I considered running into the woods that lined the road. I wouldn't get far. And it would force my father to chase me, which seemed like a shitty thing to do. Then I heard sirens. I thought about the woods one last time. My chest still burned like it used to after hockey practice. The squad car gunned down the road. I walked faster, as if it would disappear behind me.

I remember the sound of tires on dirt, the sound of crunching rocks as the car braked, the sound of sirens dying, the sound of the engine being cut. Those noises stayed with me—I thought about them for the next four months. I remember the sound of opened doors, the sound of two sets of boots pounding dirt.

“Stop! Stop right there.”

I remember boots slapping faster and faster and faster.

An officer yanked my arm violently from behind. My shoulder popped as I was spun around. I jerked away. The cop grabbed my scabbed wrist, dug his fingernails into the cuts. Pain shot up my arm, into my face. The scabs broke and blood trickled down my

arm. I heaved myself backward, tearing my arm from his grasp, and in so doing almost hit his younger partner in the face. The young cop pulled out his tazor and extended it toward me.

“If you resist I will have no choice but to use force,” he said.

“Don’t fucking touch my wrists,” I said. “OK?”

I raised my hands. They put me in handcuffs.

“Is this necessary?” I said. “OK. I have scars on my wrist. Make them loose.”

The older officer clasped the cuffs tight. I gave him an *I-would-knock-you-the-fuck-out-if-you-didn't-have-a-badge* look. It’s easy to act tough when you’re cuffed.

They shoved me into the squad car. The old cop U-turned back towards Brainerd. My mom stared helplessly from the Nystrom and Associates parking lot as we drove past the psychiatrist’s office. I touched the glass. Nystrom and Associates, owned by my uncle, Brian Nystrom, my father’s younger brother. The seventh grader who was forced to perform oral sex on his 18-year-old brother grew up, earned an MSW, and built a psychiatry empire in the state of Minnesota. Governor Tim Pawlenty appointed and re-appointed him to Minnesota's Board of Marriage and Family Therapy.

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Survivors obsess. They run fingers over maps, searing ill-fated journeys into mental perpetuity. Scenarios play in endless loops. You swear you won’t get picked off twice.

It wasn’t waking in the back seat of Mom’s SUV to my sister’s frantic shakes that forced rebirth. It was the realization inside the institution that I would have tried to kill myself again; that I would have been more prepared. No carbon monoxide next time.

A handgun to the temple, clean and easy. Had to be a handgun. People didn't take into account the kick of a shotgun. Put the barrel under your chin, pull the trigger, you might lose half your face on the recoil and survive.

Without getting committed, I'd be buried next to my great grandfather in a cemetery near Brainerd. The stone would read:

THOR REABE NYSTRÖM

1984-2004

DEVOTED SON

My last lie.

Winters would come and the ground would freeze. Mom would visit in her black coat with imitation fur. She'd cry under a gray sky, snow to her ankles. She'd ask me what she'd done wrong, what she could have done different. I'd stand next to her and beg her to resent me to lessen her pain. But she'd keep showing up day after day, fresh roses on polished stone. And I'd die again every day with her. Her hair would turn silver and her bones would calcify and her skin would prune and still she wouldn't give up on me.

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