You're Only as Sick as Your Secrets

A Memoir in Pieces

By Jake Orlowitz

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining me on this journey through the pages of *You're Only as Sick as Your Secrets*. I hope my story resonates with you, offering connection and deeper understanding. It's dark in places, but there is light…

Jake Orlowitz

Foreshadow

My blue electric motorcycle is in pieces, unscrewed, wires dangling. I took it apart out of curiosity and have no idea how to put it back together. My parents won't replace it, but I don't learn my lesson until years later when I do the same to my psyche.

This time my wrestling rival has nothing on me, and for our third showdown I handily beat Festa. My coaches know what it means to defeat him; the crowd knows. I walk the halls of the school, my soul pumping out of my chest.

As an advanced exercise for the graduating seniors, they pile us into a room, 60 kids at a time, and give each student a brown paper bag and a stack of magazines. "When you go into the world, you have to know who you are, or it will make you into something you don't want to be." I decorate with lacrosse sticks, mindfulness quotes, pictures of mountains. Then I place a cutout of a boy my age, curly hair,

young and innocent. I paste it on the bottom of the inside of the bag, face down, hiding.

I'm covered in streaks of yellow and red paint across my chest and arms. I'm wearing nothing but a tie, completely bare in a throng of similarly unclothed students. We're bouncing to MGMT rocking out with only instruments to cover them. The mood is animalistic rather than sexy. We march out into the nude night and take over the school's tower of a science library. Within minutes there are naked bodies climbing on top of the stacks. We are animals. And we are *free*.

I call my dad crying from college senior year. I am inside my room's closet, petrified. It was a misunderstanding, I tell him, but T. cried for hours. He drives up the next day to surprise me, takes me out to dinner. It's the last time I'm sane when I see him, until I'm hospitalized.

I invite my friend Stephen, Sippy we call him, over to my house in Colorado one time before I move out. I want him to see it. I want him to see how I never unpacked in an entire year. I want him to see the cups filled with pee, the trash piles, that pillow of old clothes. I want him to see it, so I will not have to hold the secret myself.

Dressed up like a madman with a penchant for cleaning, I line up two rows of six portapotties under a clear blue Colorado sky. For $14 an hour, I am left alone to suck out, wipe down, refill, and tidy

plastic shitcans one after another. They even let me use the forklift to knock them into place. The smell is noxious behind the over-the-counter 3M mask I am wearing, but it's more the heat mixing with gasses of weeks-old urine and feces that makes me happy to take breaks at my car, eat convenience store snacks, and not worry too much that anyone would think it odd that the valedictorian is spraying hydrochloric acid onto bathroom walls to remove graffiti.

I am high on some combination of spices from our kitchen, dripping tears as shimmering raindrops fall on the skylight in the therapist's office. "Look," he tells me, "there are only three rules: don't hurt yourself or anyone else; use every tool you can; take care of yourself so you can take care of others."

In the late evening my father walks in on me in the bathtub, completely nude, plugged-in laptop perched precariously on the back wall of the tub. He is distraught, thinks I am going to die under his watch. He thinks I'm absolutely mad. He doesn't know I'm helping lead the Egyptian Revolution.

A lovely Black woman is sitting across from me at a table in the intake room of the mental hospital. There are books and a piano. It's designed to calm you down, to get you to consent to payment, to subtly start the treatment. Everything you do is monitored and processed, because mental hospitals are psychological emergency rooms, designed to stabilize, course-correct, and get you out on your

own as fast as possible. "Listen," she tells me. "You've got to protect the ball." She's in sports analogy mode and we're fluently negotiating. "But I want to put the ball down. Can I at least pause?" "You only get one ball," she says. "It's your ball." Metaphors aside, I know exactly what she wants me to do.

The next day inside the George Washington grand ballroom I make my pitch. She's Siko. I know that. She runs the Grants departments. I know that. I need funding for my Wikipedia projects. I know that. I don't know that I will marry her five years later, but I sense something shifting as the room disappears around us and we talk for days and days and days.

On the drive up to the mountains, Siko tells me something curious. During my dad's visit two days before, he pulled her aside for advice. "What would you think if I weren't here in two years?" he asked...

Childhood

"I believe that maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up: that an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived."

– Ursula K. Le Guin

Ray pushes me over when I am one, and my head hits the floor. I knocked over her tower. She never wanted a brother.

It was a rude awakening into the world. Of course I don't remember it precisely, but it was a symbol: everyone is building their own tower, and if you knock someone else's over, they're going to be pissed. I also imagine a degree of parental absence in which I was unprotected. My sister was only three, too young for accountability, but I wonder, in this moment, why I wasn't safeguarded from her anger? In another sense, this is my first recollection of a sibling rivalry for excellence, mostly centered around sports. And when I finally did reach puberty and could out-wrestle my sister, there was no one left to fight. She had moved on to calculus and boyfriends and didn't want or need to submit herself to my new moves and strength. Sometimes rivalries are like that—you devote your life to them, and then the rival vanishes. All you're left with is memories and battle scars.

I build a city of wood block buildings in my basement. I price them, each one, depending on height and complexity. My dad spends $45.

My father was generous and doting, to a fault. A loving interpretation of this moment is that he was rewarding me for my creations; a more biting critique is that he was teaching me that the reward for creativity is external, or that validation is conflated with material wealth. That's certainly a lesson my father learned from his own dad. I can still remember those beautiful buildings, and yet how I feel about them is mired in the dollars I received rather than their colorful, eclectic designs.

The first thing I look forward to when I get off the bus is a floral couch, my mom and I under a tan and purple afghan blanket that my Bubbie had knitted, and the ensuing game of war, the card game. This is a protected hour, free from my sister, free from worry.

In a very bonded, emotionally intimate family with three kids, sometimes what you crave most is space. I mean private space, free from the distraction of everyone else's moods and feelings. I got that in those moments under the blanket. It was also a simpler time, when you could block out the world with only a lovingly hand-made covering and a deck of cards. There comes a time when even 1,000 miles and a cabin on a mountain won't keep the world, or your feelings, at bay.

My dad comes home from work in the summer evening, takes off his white button-down, and comes outside to throw baseballs until the sky turns to dusk.

My father must have been exhausted physically, so these sessions were a true expression of love. I've worked full days before—mentally fatiguing, or stressful, or just long—and the last thing I want to do is have to engage more. What's remarkable about my father is he wanted nothing more in the world than to just throw a ball back and forth with me. He never complained. The ball always came back.

I'm wandering around my backyard trying to figure out a spiritual puzzle that's racking my brain. Finally, I crack it: "You can never live up to your own expectations when you're following someone else's standards." I'm six. I won't know what it means for decades.

Honestly, it made me think I was a genius, that I could manufacture insights at will, and that I was in way over my head analytically. What would it even mean to think this thought before anyone had expectations of me, when my standards were simply to run fast and get good math scores? But I was right, despite my precociousness—being right just matters a lot less when you don't know how to apply it in the world. It echoes the expression by E.F. Schumacher: "An ounce of practice is generally worth more than a ton of theory." A drop of action is worth an ocean of thinking.

I'm playing baseball when my dad tells my older sister and me about the great shortstop Honus Wagner. "Honer Boner," my dad says, and we fall to the grass laughing so hard I can still feel how much it hurt.

Our intense family enmeshment required humor to survive. The tension between my parents and the financial stresses of being a struggling upper-middle class family meant that we were always joking. It wasn't mean humor: it was very silly. Mike Myers from *Wayne's World* says: "Silly is you in a natural state, and serious is something you have to do until you can get silly again." We practiced that as much as we could, as a break from all of the interlocking individual struggles and ambitions in the house.

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Curiosity is a gift towards learning, but you don't always know what the lesson will be. I had an itch to examine and deconstruct anything I came across. The stakes are lower with a toy than with your own mind.

My five-years-younger sister Bec has captured my father at her plastic table and is putting him through drawing lessons, for hours, in chairs only a foot tall. Bec directs, instructs, creates, and teaches the whole time. She's three.

I was impressed that Bec could corral my father into a subject he wasn't naturally interested in: art. I appreciate that my father doted on her the same way as he did on me, but Bec was more of a planner, a controller, and even a manipulator to get the attention she wanted. That's not to say all kids don't do whatever they can to earn their parent's affection, but it was more natural for me somehow, even to the point that I was literally told I was a 'favorite' child (which is really fucked up). Bec showed she had an advanced design for life, with sky-high expectations for herself and others, and that's something that drove her well into adulthood.

I squat, leap, and arch for the fifth rung on the monkey bars from a platform four feet in the air. Jonathan Christmas went first, easily crossing the chasm. I handily miss, grab air, and land hard on my left wrist. It swells so much they put an air cast on it, then a real cast. It's my first athletic failure, utter and complete and so jarring I don't even know how to account for it.

A good rule of thumb in life is not to compare yourself in physical feats to the future lacrosse All-American star, a kid so fast he runs with the middle schoolers, so quick on his feet he makes fools out of huge college defenders, who whips scoring balls past near-professional goalies. In a phrase, be careful who you compare yourself to. Be careful who you try to emulate rather than just use as an aspirational role model. We're not all Jonathan Christmas—at least I wasn't.

I remember her yelling at me. I forgot I had a homework assignment, and now it was late at night. I sobbed. "Don't do that again, Mom," I pleaded. She doesn't.

To say I was a sensitive kid would be a huge understatement. I couldn't handle big emotions, from myself or anyone else. This early encounter with a parent's anger terrified me, and I broke down. I disliked it so much that I didn't see anger from my mom again, not in that direct, scolding way, for decades.

Mom comes home late from running the social work department at the hospital and there's no dinner ready. We three kids make untoasted bagels and mushy fruit salad, and set the table before she walks in the door. I've never felt so appreciated.

Helping my mother, who was overworked running a hospital department while my father was away Monday through Friday for accounting firm travel, was a moment of both pride and shame. I recognized that we helped, or tried to in our childlike way, but I also grieved the awareness of my mom needing support, which to a kid echoed a kind of helplessness. I was raised thinking parents didn't need help and children shouldn't give help, so it was both triumphant and sad to break that barrier.

Lee is over and we are in a fierce door-pushing competition with my older sister Ray when the thumbtack I'm flitting between my lips goes down my throat in a perilous gulp. I run downstairs screaming, feeling its sharp spike against the inside of my neck, wondering if it will puncture me and I will die. Then we wait for six hours in the emergency room before I'm told to 'poop it out.'

'Oral fixations have consequences' is a definite theme of my life. This incident spurred panic in me, terror in my parents, and ultimately faith in what the body can literally digest and 'pass.' The doctors actually wanted me to bring a plastic bedpan and rubber gloves to *elementary school* and fish around looking for the diamond in the rough. I declined. Sometimes you have to just trust the process.

The local 'bad kid' spits at me from across the street as we're walking home from school. I spit back, a few feet in front of me. He darts towards me, pushes me to the ground, and despite my confidence in self-defense, punches me square in the head.

I didn't feel anger as Alex got off me and walked away casually. I didn't feel anything but shame, that I had lost, that I had been hit, that I was now carrying a backpack and an odd lump between my eyebrows. I didn't feel anger, and wouldn't again for fifteen years.

At eight years old I'm on the porch bench as my mom, whose motto is literally 'better dead than divorced,' once again laments some fault she perceives in my father. He's unreasonable with finances, spends too much on little things, doesn't see how tight things really are. I try to reason with her, help her see the other side, that as an entrepreneur he needs her support, encouragement, cheerleading. She is not open to the idea. I continue counseling their marriage until I fall apart in my twenties.

I was elated to be the helper, the interlocutor, the problem-solver, the mediator, the negotiator, the empathizer, the chosen kid. At first. I probed, I listened, I countered, I questioned, I took the other side and point of view with clarity and compelling reason. But it didn't work. Of course; how could it? And the longer I did it, the more it felt like a job, an interminable burden, a weight I could not bear. Years later it filled me with resentment and even disgust that I would be allowed in that position, put in that position, kept in that position. To no one's detriment but my own. It created a dynamic in me to be the selfless one in every area of my life. This was, as time revealed, a time bomb slowly but steadily ticking away.

I'm never scolded as a child until I throw my birthday present, a plastic auto-retracting toy yo-yo, across the street in frustration. Mary, my loving, floor-mopping, laundry-folding, from-the-other-side-of-the-city Black housekeeper, tells me to go pick it up, stop acting like a baby, appreciate what I have, and not petulantly misbehave. I am speechless, and I go get the yo-yo.

People bring in 'help' for many reasons, most of them mundane and having to do with deep socioeconomic inequities and piles of dishes. An unexpected side-effect is exposing kids to different levels of privilege and different levels of tolerance for behavior that may be permitted in the suburbs but will not get you far where priorities are food, work, and safety rather than the hottest clothes, SAT scores, and college admissions. I loved Mary as a kid, but I did not understand that we lived in different worlds, until that day, when she let hers collide with mine and taught me a lesson I can't forget.

He's a gross and widely disliked kid, Lee, but our moms are friends, so I have to have playdates and put up with his public exhibitions of disgusting behavior. One day when I'm six he starts fondling me under a blanket while we're watching a movie. Another day at eight, he shows me how his vibrating snow globe feels good on your shorts. When I'm twelve he comes over and we take turns tying each other in a chair with a long rope. When he's a board-certified doctor with a girlfriend in his thirties he's convicted for possession of child pornography, and I wonder if I was being entertained or preyed upon all along.

Danger exists and one role of parents is to watch for it. Another role is to teach kids what boundaries are, especially around sex and strangers. Far less clear is the kind of typically innocent experimentation kids engage in, the kind that can be healthy and normal. I don't know what was what here, but I do know I lacked any language around sex, sexuality, abuse, predation, pleasure, or appropriateness. I never got 'the talk,' not at sixteen, and certainly not at six.

The collars on my shirts are chewed through at the neck. My tic of twisting my head to hear my vertebrae click is so pronounced I get weird looks from kids on the bus. My headaches are coming on more intensely, so the doctor prescribes steroids. I get a nine-year-old belly from it; my sister makes fun of me for being chubby.

I was a happy, normal, high-achieving kid in elementary school, but my body knew something I didn't: stress kills. All of the love I felt from my parents couldn't mask the high-anxiety, low-affection situation between them. Watching them fight in frustration and exasperation, wondering how they loved us so much but didn't treat each other the same, feeling a constant grind of financial misalignment and emotional misdeeds—I couldn't put those things into words, but my cells were learning a different language, one of despair.

"I'm not coming home for dinner," I tell my mom one day after fourth grade. "I walked to Adam's house." Adam lives in a mansion minutes from school. I skip the bus, eat his cereal, play stupid games for hours. I repeat this every day for the rest of the year.

Adam was freedom. Adam was fun. In comparison with my tight house packed with emotions, Adam's abode was a sprawling seven-bedroom, seven-bath playroom. There was something transgressive about just not going home. It reflected a need for my own third place, an escape from routine, normalcy, intimacy. In that space a friendship grew that was 99% silliness and 1% insight. And that was just what I needed.

Our dog Jasper is on a leash. It's the last time my dad will see him. Dad cries for the first time I can remember. I'm ten.

I wasn't surprised to see my dad crying, I was just sad. He was heroic to me, athletic, muscular, driven, all-capable in my eyes. I didn't know he had weaknesses, although I would learn much more about that. I also was beginning to learn that it was through animals that he could most capaciously express emotions, that only with animals did he feel truly loved and safe.

I am the pitcher. Don is the catcher. He doesn't speak, but he catches everything I throw and shakes his head if he has to chase after something I chucked into the dirt. I throw a no-hitter and win pitcher of the league. No one mentions Don.

I was too young to care that Don wasn't acknowledged. I thought I threw the pitches, so I was the star. What Don symbolized for me in that early success was that there were always people backstopping my wins, always people striving to make sure I was in the spotlight, always people watching, watching, watching…

The first time my mom picks Adam and me up at the tennis courts I panic because the cloth seats of our Camry are filled with kid crumbs and dirt. I quickly try to brush them off before Adam gets in the car. He doesn't notice, or say anything. He already has a Lexus; he wants a family.

There's a 'leaving the garden of Eden' quality to feeling a lack of status for the first time. In the incredibly well-heeled area where I grew up, that meant meeting someone with more money, nicer cars, higher-paid parents, country clubs instead of apartment pools—in a word, the luxury of wealth. You feel naked, exposed, a bit worthless, and terrified you'll be judged. I wasn't immune to judging others financially 'beneath' me, but I got my turn at the status merry-go-round with Adam. Luckily, he didn't give a shit. We were having too much fun. He might have even thought those car crumbs were novel, or a sign of a family that was too busy living and loving together to make everything they owned shine.

My younger sister drags me upstairs to her third-floor bedroom, the one neither of the older siblings wanted to move into when she was born. She opens her piggy bank and hands me a twenty-dollar bill. "If I give you this, will you and Ray play with me?"

One of the saddest moments of my life was when Bec propositioned me for her siblings' time, company, and attention. I was much closer in age with Rachel, and much closer in interests and emotions. In Bec's bedroom I felt shame and real failure in my role as a brother. I also realized for the first time her pain of loneliness, of being left out. Lastly, I realized she thought a viable path out of her pain was, again, money.

Home from fifth grade, I run up the stairs to watch TV. "Where are you going?" asks my mom naggingly. "Jeez," I say, "don't be such a psychoneurotic." She winces. It's the first time in my life I pierced the armor I didn't know she was wearing.

I don't know where I got that word, or that neological amalgam of insult, but it stung. My mom *was* neurotic; that was a defining feature of her psyche, and her mothering, and her managing three kids and a chronically underfunded household. Neuroticism was a style she was born with, and it gave her a sense of safety, control, management, and predictability. This was the first time I can remember that I threw a punch back at that regime, and it hit, and it hurt.

Friends are over for Adam's tenth birthday, in his finished basement watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. When it ends, Adam and I joke to the other kids that there's a secret buried. The kids are confused, but Adam and I don't reveal the punchline. The secret is his mother. Dead from cancer when Adam was two.

I learned that there were secret griefs, but that a shared grief was defanged of its most isolating and agonizing qualities. In fourth grade, Adam appeared exceedingly normal and happy. Underlying this person, or persona, was a chasm of loss. I was so glad to be able to join him with humor, knowing he was not alone in his pain.

My father brings home a purple baseball glove for Bec, to initiate her into the family league of athletic excellence. She cries for hours.

There's nothing quite as traumatizing as having the people you love want you to be something you are not. Bec's reaction was one of being rejected and misunderstood. She never wanted to be the third star pitcher: she was an artist, an aesthete, and a rogue designer. My dad was trying to welcome Bec into our fold, our team, but she wanted to play another sport, or just go dance and ride horses. We learned then that there would never be a trio of siblings, and Bec wanted to and would find her own way.

I have discovered a new hobby with my penis, and go a little overboard with a robust technique, puffing up like a croissant taken out of a pastry tube. My dad takes me to Doctor Jerry, an eighty-year-old retired physician. "Could it be…mastrubation?" my dad asks, as an aside. "Not unless he was really *hacking* at it," says the distinguished World War II vet. I try to remain completely still. *Who, me?*

Self-exploration is part of growing up. Sometimes we go overboard. Sometimes we are not rewarded but shocked at the results. Fortunately, mistakes fade, swelling recedes, and time moves on with more knowledge, and better utilization of lubricants.

Before I know who Don really is, he drops off a package on my birthday: twenty dollars stuffed inside a Robert Louis Stevenson tome, along with an elementary school picture of my sixth-grade girlfriend. All I think is that it is weird and I'll never be able to finish the book.

Don's gift was odd, impressive, even a little ominous. There's something uncomfortable about someone you barely think you know going out of their way to give you something special. It reflected an innate imbalance in our relationship—he wanted something I didn't, but he was determined to gain my friendship, or admiration, or something else I couldn't articulate at that age.

"Are you with anyone?" asks the girl's voice on the phone. I pause in my steps. "This is Emily, right?" I ask. "Yes, Emily." "Um, not at the moment," I say, as the laughter of two girls erupts on the other end of the line. It's not my childhood crush. It's my older sister. It's a prank. "Not at the moment...." they tease. "Not at the moment!"

My older sister could be loving and kind, but she also had a mean streak, hanging with the cool girls, showing off her incisive intelligence. Here, she used it for pure evil, fooling a drooling fifth-grader into thinking the blonde soccer player was asking him out. It was cruel. It was cunning. It was sibling torture at its finest.

I'm twelve when my mom tells me my paternal grandfather was an asshole. Now I can picture it: my dad collapsed in the doorway of his childhood home pulling on his father's leg, begging him to stay home and play instead of golfing. His dad steps over him, leaving him sobbing.

As a child you imagine every family is built on solid foundations. As you grow up you learn the cracks of intergenerational trauma. In this reflection, my mom was certainly slamming my grandfather, whom both I and my dad still looked up to. She was also setting me up to understand my father in a different way: as a victim, as a survivor of neglect and perhaps emotional abuse. What I take from it now is that we can never understand ourselves fully without understanding our history, and the history of a person is their ancestors, angry, broken, hurt too.

Remote in hand, I swirl through channels like I'm seeking subliminal input. I sit on the same floral couch, in the same spot, for hours upon hours, TV-dazed, dopamine dripping like an IV, thoughts held at bay by the flickering screen.

TV addiction wasn't unique in the nineties, and screen addiction is common parlance now. But for me TV was more of a self-medication than for most. With TV, I found a way to short-circuit my brain's obsessive, analytical, concerned processes and just let it run in the background, fed by junk television and mindless musings. Some people used drugs for that, but drugs conflicted too much with my brain itself. So I used TV, to sedate what was swirling inside me.

Adolescence

"Healing may not be so much about getting better, as about letting go of everything that isn't you – all of the expectations, all of the beliefs – and becoming who you are."

- Rachel Naomi Remen

One weekend, Don comes to my house and slips his hand up my shorts. I came immediately, hoping he didn't notice. I am terrified of what it meant for years.

I didn't know anything. I had never been told about consent. We didn't talk about sex or sexuality. I couldn't understand how you could experience pleasure but not own it. I carried a fear I was gay for decades. It wasn't the only sexual encounter with Don, always him pursuing me, but at some point I accepted that pleasure and orientation were on different axes. Sex and intimacy were different. Behavior and identity were different. And at the end of the day I had to face my fear of being gay. That fear, especially in the nineties, was horrifying, but like looking into a mirror in a dark room, if you turn the light on, you just see yourself.

It's late middle school when Cory Fischer Hoffman dumps me. "Adam is too annoying," she tells me. She's not even wrong, but I'm not mad. She's not my type, and he's my best friend.

I barely remember this being a hiccup in my friendship with Adam. There's a crude and misogynistic saying, 'Bros before hos,' and it speaks in gross generality about the wisdom of prioritizing friendship, often enduring, over romance, often fleeting. Of course one day you might hopefully find a partner worth putting ahead of your friends, but the bigger insight is that it need not be a choice. If your partner in a relationship ever asks you to cut out friends from your life, that's a warning I learned the direness of too late.

I win the middle school speech competition, the one where we have to pick a famous figure, read their biography, and then tell their story to the entire auditorium, as if we were them. My choice is Moe Berg, a brilliant, daring Jewish renaissance man who was a polyglot scholar, a professional baseball player, and then a WWII spy. For each of his roles, I don a different outfit, culminating in a trench coat and sunglasses. The crowd rings out in applause.

Moe Berg was three people, at least. I wasn't sure I was even one. I played his tri-fold character, none of them me. I was not sure anyone was me. But I was surrounded by praise, full with it.

I'm thirteen when my dad takes me out for a walk in the park at night with a cigar. "The thing about limits," he tells me, "is you only know you've hit them when you've gone too far."

This whole scene is a tender, touching clusterfuck in retrospect. I was given my first cigar alongside a vague and tautological life talk, impossible to implement. My dad was trying, and he knew that one could exceed their limits without foresight, but this was not an actionable insight! I would have rather heard, "If you think you are exceeding your limits, check in with someone you trust. It's hard to see how far you've gone until it's too far."

My mom 'finds' a letter on my desk from Don, a deep confession of love, like I am his best friend, sole target of admiration, and savior. My dad gives me a very brief reassurance that, "If there's anything you want to tell me, it's ok." My parents deliver me to a therapist without instructions. I write a note explaining what's going on. We don't talk about Don, homosexuality, or anything. He simply tells me his favorite aphorism: "Think too late, must do."

What I didn't know is that despite my father's reassurance, a few years later he would lament that lesbians had to hold hands in public rather than keeping their affection a private matter. The therapist was brilliant, if a bit circuitous, and he surely sensed my over-analytical nature; I didn't know that he had molested several patients and would eventually be put on trial and lose his license. I was a lost kid looking for guidance, and I didn't get any.

I'm sitting on my bed with my dad when he says something surprisingly sincere. "You know, my life has no value besides to be there for you and your sisters."

My father's endless affection was a conundrum. He wanted so much to love, but its purpose was to fill the void of his own self-worth. My father was *incredibly* loving, but there was a dark underbelly to it, as with any codependency. He needed to love us. And he needed us to love him back. But that wasn't the lesson he was giving, which was that we mattered, and he didn't.

End of middle school, twelve of us hanging out in a friend's basement, I make an audacious suggestion. "What if we all go into that spare room, turn off the lights, and see what happens every two minutes."

What happened was a lot of kissing, fondling, groping, and quick moments of embarrassment when someone flicked on the lights. If middle school was a hookup gym, this was boot camp for kissing and…. more. In the darkness we were free to explore, experiment, try new things and new people. And when the lights turned back on, we pretended nothing had happened. But we all remembered 'the pit.'

At camp, Jew camp, they harshly announce that there will be no more standing during our beloved song session after dinner. We will sit quietly, not mingle, sing politely, and be manageable. I write a scathing and inspired letter, organize 700 signatures from every camper, and hand-deliver a stuffed envelope to the leadership table at dinner. The next night we are back on our feet, rising with *ruach*, with spirit.

The impact of Jew camp on my life cannot be overstated. It was a camp, like many, where we played outside and ran around and competed and dated each other. But it was also a different, unusual, special place, where we sang and danced, and debated and protested. A common thread of social justice wove through us, and in moments of collective outrage, we practiced our nascent activism, we practiced being citizens, and we became heroes.

A brown-skinned man is wiping down the high-school cafeteria tables with such speed it looks like a dance competition. He's completely in flow, but also smiling to himself. That's Jim. He's going to be my high school wrestling coach.

I grew up with an appreciation for athletics but not manual labor. My dad was many things, but a cleaner, yardworker, or handyman he was not. To see Jim making no distinction between cleaning and sport, moving with efficiency and joy in his task, was a beautiful revelation. What I learned from Jim over the years is that any job could be conducted with elegance, intensity, and joy.

Adam and I are watching Letterman before bed when his dad bangs on the door. "NO TV!" his dad fumes. Adam weeps in the bed next to mine, wanting his father's affection more than any TV show. I could tell him it's ok, but there's nothing I can say that will ease that pain.

I almost never experienced parental anger, so this moment felt shocking and degrading. I couldn't imagine getting reamed out by a parent over staying up watching TV, and never in front of a good friend. Adam's dad's desire for discipline and success stood in contrast to his relative lack of presence and care. This hurt Adam to the core, and I could only witness it, and rejoin him in our usual hijinks when his hurt had eased. The wound, however, remained.

After a few weeks of my fumbling around with the older kids, Jim decides I'm ready for his evaluation. He approaches me on the mat without a word and waits for me to make a move. The next thing I know, Jim dips below my knees, shoots out a hand behind my ankle, and plants me flat on my back.

To be defeated handily by the coach was an honor. To even be worthy of his attention was a sign I had potential; defeat was the compliment. Even as Jim turned into his fifties, body starting to ache, he was difficult if not impossible to best. He always had a ready countermove. He was fast and agile, and battle-hardened from daily work and years of teaching wrestling. When we practiced, Jim practiced, and it showed in his graceful dominance.

When I am fourteen Ray unexpectedly puts a sopping wet towel on the dry T-shirt I am comfortably wearing. I slap her. It takes me two hours to apologize.

Despite facing bullies at school on occasion, this is the first time I can recall that I ever actually hit someone. The fact that it was my sister, my confidant, my closest rival, was shameful. It revealed that there was a part of me that craved comfort so much I would lash out at someone who took it away. I also learned that apologizing was a skill, one which I had not practiced. It took tremendous effort to articulate any remorse for what I did, but with time, I forced it out. Luckily, she forgave me.

It's late Friday night in early high school, that critical time to make plans for a social life. I'm stuck at Adam's house with no ride, and he has to babysit the neighbor kids. My tentative plans to go see a basketball game in the city with Steve are falling through fast. Steve complains to his dad, "But Jake doesn't have anywhere else to go if we don't take him." And then: "Steven, I don't give a flying FUCK about Jake!"

This was the first time anyone had ever not cared about my interests. Deprioritized my needs. Disregarded my preferences. And cursed flagrantly while doing so. I was taken aback. I also took notice. This, too, is possible. I will not always persuade everyone to get what I want.

One wrestling practice I swing my arm recklessly, and my elbow slams into Don's nose. His anger erupts, and I wind up with his hands against my throat.

I was scared. Don, though a bit shorter and a bit lighter than me, was ferocious. His outburst contained a depth of anger that was foreign but terrifying. He could have hurt me if he wanted to. He didn't want to, but I felt exposed. I also felt chided for my lack of control with my limbs, my evident carelessness as an opponent. Still, this wasn't about me, and it probably wasn't about wrestling at all: it was about Don's hidden rage. This was one place he could express it.

A new cerebral puzzle has emerged freshman year of high school, something I can barely verbalize but repeatedly flip between, some kind of mode-switching between two states of thinking I call IN and OUT. I don't know what they are, or what they represent, but I go back and forth thousands of times, trying to use my consciousness to examine itself.

I was adamant that I would figure out my own mind, obsessive in pursuing self-awareness, and tortured by the quest to explore the most esoteric angles of perception. This was OCD in another vein, a highfalutin form, little different from intrusive thoughts, or counting steps before entering a room, or ruminating to the point of nausea over something someone said. In its highest form, my quest for knowledge, beginning internally, was just extremely premature. I had the world to explore, and I was stuck in my head.

My nemesis, Jamie Festa, who has handily embarrassed me once already, is in the lineup for sophomore year postseason competition. I've just had the flu for three days: coughing, wheezing, fever. I'm back at practice but have no 'lungs' and decide I'll just sit out the extra matches. "There's the easy way, and there's the right way," Jim tells me. Festa pins me in two minutes, but I've come away with a lesson. In wrestling, and beyond, a bad excuse is the worst punishment.

The only truly bad match is the one you skip out on, the worst challenge the one you dodge. I was so used to excelling that I thought it pointless to expose myself to likely defeat. Jim put the kibosh on that logic and gave me a new framework, which framed relief from having to fail as far suboptimal compared to the glory, and the duty, of having to at least try.

Junior year Adam and I sled down the huge hill behind the tennis courts on a winter snow day. Ice coats every blade of grass. We glide fast towards the drop at the end of the field, amazed we are going to make it across. As our sled accelerates we realize there's nothing to stop us but a metal fence and a clay gutter. We hit the fence, crack the gutter with our sped-up bodies, and limp home, bruised and elated.

Sometimes you do get what you want, and it's excruciating. This journey down a massive hill, across an icy plain, to the ultimate cliff-drop onto hard metal and clay, was a great metaphor for life. It thrills you, surprises you, and beats you the fuck up. I wouldn't trade that memory for the world. I can still remember the change from, "Look what we've done!" to "Oh no, look what we've done!" We were kids, we did something wild, we got hurt, we were ok. It was a simpler time.

There's a new hole in my wall the size of precisely half of a lacrosse ball. I run downstairs and tell my parents, "I hit my head on the wall and it dented." They come upstairs to look, then look at me, narrow their eyes, and start laughing.

I was so afraid of getting in trouble, I lied, a pathetic attempt to dodge yelling and judgment. There was no consequence for this rule-breaking or the associated credulity-straining. Uncle Andy patched up the hole with spackle and my parents broke out the story at family dinners with glee. Still, I was riled by the incident, that I would be so afraid of scorn that I would make up anything to spare myself its teeth.

From the outside, the scene is utterly inappropriate, and absurd. My sister Rachel and I are holding each other in bed on a hot summer night in our underwear. We're crying, sobbing almost, at the feelings we don't understand—the way our family swirls with emotional codependency and constant overwhelming care for each other in dramatic, neverending waves.

The oddest thing about this scene is that it wasn't odd to me and my sister at all. It was the epitome of our bondedness. With one shared bathroom for five and a fascination with fitness, bodies were normal and regularly at least partly exposed. We spent time at gyms and beaches, we talked about each other's problems ceaselessly. But of course it was odd, to be a teenager embracing your sister in boxer shorts, to be clinging together in order to not drown in the water of a family's intense wake.

This time my wrestling rival has nothing on me, and for our third showdown I handily beat Festa. My coaches know what it means to defeat him; the crowd knows. I walk the halls of the school, my soul pumping out of my chest.

I was better than him, so I beat him. I believed I was better than him, so I beat him. I had practiced more than him, so I beat him. I knew how to handle his tricks, so I beat him. I set my sights way beyond him, so I beat him. The triumph of this moment was partly defeating a rival, but more the realization that I was on a different track with more advanced skills, more disciplined execution, extra coaching, and harder, more extensive training. I deserved to win because of what I had put into my craft, and that was the glory of the moment. The obstacle wasn't just defeated, it was now in my past.

"Why don't you stay and sit with me for tea," I tell my mother. "I'll tell you about my day." My father is upstairs reading a book about his hero Muhammad Ali.

I wasn't a typical kid, and my parents didn't have a typical marriage. I loved my mom's attention and conversation, even though in some ways she should have been talking to my dad, and I should have been talking to my peers or girlfriends. Still, there was a magic to sitting down with a hot cuppa, and just sharing the day. We both needed that, and it was a respite from everything else that didn't work, was stressful, or failed to make sense.

I come home from four weeks in the Rocky Mountain wilderness brimming with wisdom. I sit my dad down in the backyard and tell him I'm proud he was a good father even though his dad wasn't.

Every word I said to my dad I meant with heart and sincerity. I just didn't understand how deep my childhood wounds were or would become. I didn't know I would resent my dad for decades after college, that I would reappraise him in light of what he did not or could not teach me. But in this simple ceremony, I absolved him of a generational trauma, and I identified him as the thing he wanted most in the world to be: a good dad.

Don storms into my house and runs into my room junior year. He locks himself inside. His dad had some outburst, kicked something, broke something, hit someone, I couldn't tell exactly, and Don wouldn't talk. I order him sushi and leave him alone for the night.

I was out of my depth with Don's struggle, but I knew enough to give him space. He was fuming, overcome with animus, at something or someone. I couldn't understand that, but I knew not to interfere. Sushi was what I could offer, and that was my gesture that his safety and his sustenance mattered to someone, even when his life was out of control. Still, I was uncomfortable with this figure locked in my room, too disquieted to talk, too hurt to do anything but seek refuge.

I call my mom to tell her I had beans, tofu, oatmeal, kale, soy milk, walked around the neighborhood three times, did yoga, and went to the gym. "It's a good day," I say, as if I get points for each superfood, each step, each rep. The points don't add up to happiness.

I grew up reading whatever was in the house. That included the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Yorker*, but also *Shape*, *People*, *TV Guide*, *Men's Health*, and *Seventeen*. I was inundated with nineties self-improvement culture, and the bulk of it centered around body and image. I wasn't conscious of my body; I aspired to a holy health of a different kind. But it was all from the same playbook of the materialized self. I was trying to improve my body, not enjoy it. I was trying to be perfect.

I'm sitting on a stone wall listening to Bec tell me her tortured secrets. I couldn't be more enthusiastic. I accept her. I welcome her. I tell her it's ok, and I'll love her no matter what. "You don't understand," she tells me. I don't understand her fear.

OCD ran in our veins. The nature of that beast is not the thing you're afraid of, but the crippling fear itself. The thing *cannot* be, or life is over, something horrible will happen, there is no point in going on. This is OCD's twisted logic. In my generous acceptance of my sister with whatever terror she was conjuring, I missed what she really needed to hear: "Those are just thoughts, and you can ignore them."

Five teenage guys pile into the black Jeep Grand Cherokee I inherited from my father. We fill the car with drinks and snacks and head off from Philadelphia's tree-lined suburbs miles into the deep New Jersey forest. We're going off-roading, in a real off-road vehicle, but with no knowledge of the craft, no way to get unstuck when the behemoth of a vehicle straddles a five-foot pit. No one to call, and no way to get out.

We got out. We shouldn't have, but we rocked the truck back and forth until it caught traction and surged through the sand. In the suburbs they teach you how to excel, not how to survive. We made it through with the luck of a deluxe vehicle designed for these exploits. So much was like that as a teenager: escaping dangers we shouldn't have because of luxury or privilege or inherited cars or wealth. We should have been stuck, but we sailed home like conquerors.

My sixteen-year-old dream girl at camp finds flower petals leading from the front of the bus back to the two seats we are sharing. We kiss under the dramatic Middle Eastern stars in the Negev desert. And as soon as our lips touch, I know it's wrong. I know I can't be attracted to her, even though I am in love.

I can't explain who I am attracted to. Why some of the most appealing people to my heart or head do nothing for my…. 'middle parts', as we call them in our house. There are brilliant, beautiful women to whom I can't muster up bedtime attraction. And there are other women, with whom for whatever reason I can allow myself to experience pleasure or desire, something sexual without it feeling off or too close or not right. I wonder why, but it doesn't seem to have to do categorically with gender. It seems to have to do with intimacy, and shame.

It's senior night at the wrestling match and every graduating student gets to give their mother a rose. My mom walks across the mat to meet me. I grab her and spin around with the rose and her in my arms in front of the whole school. Aws and cheers overwhelm the auditorium.

The twirl represented the peak of who I was at the time and how I wanted to be seen. I was magnanimous, a bit of a show-off, and an enviable over-achiever. I don't want to take away from the greatness of that moment: it was a joyous personal, familial, and community celebration. It was a festive win, a private and public ceremony of connection, an exultation.

My first taste of nicotine is strawberry, flowing like a dragon's breath from a glass hookah, sweet like the smooth mouth of the girl I am kissing in the Israeli night. Assaulted by stimulation and pleasure, I never forget the flavor of her lips or that drug tingling in my brain.

Infatuation doesn't last, but addiction does. In both cases intensity fades and you're left with something far more ordinary and challenging. My new romance from Israel lasted a few months, continued on and off for a few years, but ultimately couldn't sustain the sparks. I flirted with nicotine for years before a long drive from Philadelphia down to Miami in one day led me to buy a pack of menthols. That summer I smoked two a day, religiously. At college it was four, desperately. By Colorado I was smoking six a day, heretically. And after my release from the mental hospital it was ten, compulsively. Nicotine has accompanied every triumph and disaster of my adult life, no longer sweet but still flowing like that dragon's breath.

I write in my college admissions essay that as the blankets covering the burning coals steamed to a stultifying 180 degrees, I rose up to breathe in the hottest air of the sweat lodge, as we chanted Hopi songs to celebrate the end of our five-week hike through Colorado's canyons and wilderness. That was a lie. In truth, I put my lips to the wet grass beneath my knees and sucked the coolness in like it was the only source of life. Survival is all that tells the truth.

My favorite book, when they finally let us read contemporary literature in high school, was called *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. It's a poignant, brutal, beautiful book about the Vietnam War, written as short stories. What begins with a litany of the actual physical and emotional burdens they hauled evolves into a meditation on the nature of storytelling itself. O'Brien concludes that a story must evoke the truth, not tell it literally. And so I evoked the miles we rafted and eighty-pound packs I flipped onto my back each morning, the meals we cooked with blocks of butter and cheese, the time half our crew got lost without water miles from help and we had to go rescue them, the sunsets in New Mexico, the blocks of red rock we carried to make a traditional oven on the reservation. That's all true. But I did not breathe the hottest possible air in song. I did what I needed to do to get to the end of each route with my gear and my friends. That's true.

I'm a senior-year star, pinning opponents with verve and little effort, when I come across a surprisingly fit and ready wrestler. I try my moves. He anticipates them. He takes me down. I spin out and grab his leg. He sits back and pushes my head into the mat and waits for the ref to stop and restart the match. "You played it too close to the vest," Jim tells me afterward.

Some Olympians describe a regression, where their hard work pays off so greatly they start expecting matches to get easy. But this is not how competition works. The better you get, the harder people come after you. Real opponents don't roll over and lie down just because you have been in the elite wrestling club for a year. And moves don't complete themselves just because you initiate them. I was expecting easy, and I got beat. Jim's counsel was to stay wild, expect nothing, and scramble til you bleed.

My younger sister Bec's Bat Mitzvah brings me and Ray together. Ray is wearing a luminous light blue dress, brown hair blown back like a princess. Every boy wants her at school, at camp, at college. When she leaves freshman year I put forty notes around her room that say "I love you.' So many she finds some months into the semester.

The first thing I have to observe is that this was my *younger* sister Bec's special occasion, but I was enamored with my *older* sister Rachel. I had a platonic love affair with her, and she was easy to love. I had a habit, sometimes excessive, of doting on girls I was interested in, of wowing them while wooing them, and this was of a similar nature. The notes, however, were a stroke, literally, of genius. We were all nervous about how college would be, about the loneliness of leaving the family nest. The fact that she found those little yellow papers for months gave me a great sense of glee, that I could delight and accompany her, even from afar.

Senior year I skip a month of class to go to an ashram. My mom warns me that some people go so far they don't come back. While I'm there, I ask the stretching instructor if it's ok to do both yoga and jogging. "You can do two good things at once," he tells me. I follow his routine for years each morning at college, until it's impossible to sustain.

I was fortunate to be in a high school that recognized late senior year was a time to look outward. They allowed and selected some students to do an independent study in a pilot program. My choice, to go to an ashram, was natural for me. I thought that's where insight, growth, depth, and truth lay. When my mom warned me about the risk of, basically, cults, I was insulted. How dare she rain on my spiritual parade with restraint and caution? But I remember one resident at the ashram in a frenzy because she had misplaced her only precious flashlight, and for a moment I thought, maybe it's not so great to flee the world and be dependent on little electronics you couldn't afford to replace. My questions to the stretching instructor were searching for dogma, and like a wise teacher, he refused to let me pigeonhole my search, or myself.

My college decision goes down to the wire, to the literal dawn of the day postmarked acceptance letters are due. I'm deciding between fashionable and sporty Duke, which represents success and empty fun with basketball and raucous stadiums, and crunchy, progressive Wesleyan University, which is like moral summer camp with deep reading and LGBT rainbows everywhere. I decide to be moral. I decide to leave the door open. I fear I'm committing to a path I can't or won't want to live up to.

In my town, college was the *raison d'etre* of growing up. We could recite our resumes. We aspired to have a horrible thing befall us for a juicy college essay topic. Choosing a school felt like choosing a future, an identity. I wasn't sure who I was or wanted to be, but I knew I didn't want to be boxed in. So I chose a bigger box.

I walk into the kitchen at eighteen and tell my older sister I am feeling anxious again. She tells me she is in a good place and doesn't really want to hear about it. It's the only time in my life she's not there for me.

Boundaries were an affront, a shocking rejection, an inexplicable violation of the rules of enmeshment. If my problems are not your problems, too, then what are we? Individual human beings, I was learning, but it stung all the same. That bite, however, showed me a new maneuver: I could return a rejection if I was not in a good place. This language speaks to our lack of fluency with or even knowledge of how boundaries worked. But sometimes you need to feel an action firsthand to understand that the concept even exists.

Russel Crowe and Jennifer Connelly portray mental illness in the movie *A Beautiful Mind* so daringly, so poetically, and so devastatingly, that I sit in the theater as the credits roll just crying and crying. I don't have delusions, or schizophrenia, and I'm not a hallucinating economic genius. But I know the feeling of your own mind working against you, of your mind being the enemy.

There were periods, long periods, often from the fall into the spring where I was beset with constant thoughts and endless self-analysis about those thoughts. It was often so distracting I could barely get out of bed. Sometimes, most days in the winter, it wasn't until the late afternoon when my mind seemed to subside and I could just *be*. Before then I was trying to function in the world with concerns spinning in my head, thoughts attacking from every angle.

As an advanced exercise for the graduating seniors, they pile us into a room, sixty kids at a time, and give each student a brown paper bag and a stack of magazines. "When you go into the world, you have to know who you are, or it will make you into something you don't want to be." I decorate with lacrosse sticks, mindfulness quotes, pictures of mountains. Then I place a cutout of a boy my age, curly hair, young and innocent. I paste it on the bottom of the inside of the bag, face down, hiding.

There was something about my interior and exterior that didn't match, but I didn't know what it was. Depression? Loneliness? Homosexuality? Imperfections? I just knew that what the world saw of me—a smiling, magnanimous, active guy—was, if not a shell, only half of the story. So I put the boy in the bag to mark it for myself as something to check in about later, some time, when the world wasn't watching.

College

"Growth is painful. Change is painful. But nothing is as painful as staying stuck somewhere you don't belong."

- Mandy Hale

Aaron is running next to me at early crew practice. I think he's loud and obnoxious. I went to bed at 8 pm to be ready, but he was out partying. Still, he's running faster, laughing, and telling boisterous stories.

I was really anal about health, wellness, and performance when I got to college. It was a crutch, something I could control before I met good friends and figured out my place. Still, I judged those who were breezily enjoying activities without going to bed at sunset on a freshman Friday night. I was not light, not feeling sociable, and I resented the lack of discipline from the kids just having fun. I was more than a little tightly wound.

Bec starts therapy before any of us. I hate that she brings back a jargon of 'boundaries' to our seamlessly intimate household. It's only fifteen years later that I realize she had found the key.

Boundaries were taboo, downright mean, something other, less kind and trusting, people needed. Bec was invading our family field with fences that felt like towering walls. I had no idea boundaries were *for her* and not *against us*. I didn't actually embrace boundaries, their language and their usefulness, until after I was hospitalized and absolutely needed to limit intrusions into my mental health. Now I buy my kids books on consent and boundaries, because life without boundaries is like a car without a horn, or brakes.

After what would now just be called 'bad sex,' I tell three wrestlers about my odd encounter with a girl I met at the team's gathering at one of the few fraternities on campus. They saw me smooching her in a corner. They saw us leave. I will omit details of the night, but I felt many things were just *off*. And I told these wrestlers about them, each one, in detail. Then they told the girl, teased her mercilessly. It's the worst hookup I've ever had, because I just didn't keep my mouth shut.

This was literally locker room talk, and I saw its damage first-hand. I thought I was above it, but I felt comfortable with the wrestlers at first, and I wanted their respect. I didn't know what to do with the memory of a bizarre night, but I did the worst thing possible by letting it out for someone who didn't deserve anything but silence to be attacked. I didn't do it out of malice, but intentions don't matter when someone gets hurt.

I'm deep over my head, knees behind me, feet touching the wrestling mat, when resident team stud Jonas walks through the practice room. Eyeing me inverted, chin tucked to my thighs, butt upside down, he just says, "You're weird," and walks briskly away.

Wrestling was my sport but the wrestling team were not my people. They were the more prep-school side of Wesleyan: less left, less politically curious, less emotional. Good guys all the same, but not *my* guys. Jonas embodied a muscular version of manhood, tight in every way, from biceps to expressions that I detested. I didn't want to be around it, and I knew it wouldn't be long before I wasn't.

I'm returning to college, wracked with anxiety and loneliness. Freshman wrestling season is not coming together, I haven't met people I like, and I'm thinking of quitting. I call Jim from the lobby of the hotel where my parents are staying to return me to school. I don't remember what Jim tells me. I eke out the rest of the season and tell my coach I'm not coming back. I never wrestle again.

My college wrestling coach was an uptight, precise guy. We did not vibe. He wasn't shocked I was quitting, despite the future loss to the team. He knew I didn't fit. He also knew something about me that I refused to acknowledge. He accepted my resignation, and he gave me a parting caution I would ignore at my peril. "Just don't drop everything you're accountable for," he said as I was leaving his office. I dismissed him as too strict for my loose and wonderful vision of life. I remembered what he said when it was far too late.

Freshman year, the girl with the dragon breath, whom I kept kissing for years, has her life destroyed when her dad dies suddenly of a heart attack. I speak to her, offer what little I can, and then we go months without talking. She calls me at the beginning of sophomore year and lays out an ultimatum: "Either you check in on me, or we can't be friends." I reject the choice, I reject the pain behind the choice, I reject her. We still haven't spoken.

In my principled stance that ultimatums were indefensible, I heard the words but not the context. I was deaf to the heartache, loss, grief, suffering, longing, confusion, and pain behind her words. I thought this was me turning a corner in my relationships, embracing free-flowing bonds without coercion or forced expectations. But I chose the wrong moment to stand on principle, and in doing so I abandoned not just a phenomenal kisser, but also a dear friend in desperate need of support.

I'm smoking pot again, on a lark, because my beautiful stoner girlfriend gave me some nugs that I kept in a metal box for over a year. I put one in a bowl and rip thirty-second puffs that I hold in using yogic breathing techniques I learned doing Ashtanga on the mat since I was fourteen. When I start to feel the high come on I know it is bad. Time is slowing down, at adramatic rate. By the time I make it inside to the kitchen I'm literally terrified my parents will find me passed out on the floor.

After his trip to Amsterdam, an adventurous cousin had shared that sugar is an antidote to being too high. I was on my way into the kitchen to get trail mix, to salvage my mind, to avoid catastrophic catatonia, to eat sanity back into my brain. It worked enough to get me upstairs to call my friend, who seemed to be inside of a television. From this night on, I could never smoke pot again without feeling a dread that time itself was slowing down, closing in on me.

To this day, my friends call her 'Summer Girl,' a moniker she earned because we fell in love in June and she went off to school in August. She was tall, blonde, flirtatious, kind, thoughtful, irresistible. I ran into her at a Starbucks in the city and left the store thinking, "So... light," as I munched down pizza from next door on my way back to the train. I was more than stoked to see she was only covering a shift in the city, that she worked in the same store I was training for in the suburbs, that she was living with her aunt two doors down from my best friend, was a runner who would pop in dappled in sweat just to see me as my shift ended, a former underwear model, a generous and moral person, a divine singer, and it turned out, a devout and absolutely genuine evangelical. We loved in sin: she said God brought me to her as a test. I set her up at college, then got a $450 ticket speeding to the airport to catch the flight that would take me away from her. Her name is fitting, because I never loved anyone as intensely, as naively, and as briefly, as Summer Girl.

First love is the deepest cut, so deep I still can recall standing outside an air conditioned bedroom's sliding doors at 2 am, driving around parks with the top down, running endlessly on the beach at sunset, putting together furniture for a new dorm, going out dancing one last time. The ache and lure of those moments never dissipated, although they faded with time. They're still with me, like gems showing what pure, unadulterated love can feel like. Of course, that love was impossible: it could not have endured the fall, let alone the winter.

Aaron moved in next to me in the same hall sophomore year. His room is decorated with art from all over Europe. He's starting to grow on me. We play stupid games in the hallway and wake up our neighbor by shouting jokes.

Perceptions change, often with proximity and exposure. I learned that Aaron was not dumb, not frivolous, not low-brow, not unsophisticated. He was hilarious and ambitious. He wanted to enjoy the best things in life, he had infectious energy, and he loved being silly. As soon as I allowed myself the same, we immediately clicked. What Aaron did lack was a certain empathy or self-reflection. It was part of his composition, though I wished for him to go deeper into life along with his hijinks.

Sophomore year I carry a piece of plywood back to my dorm room. Facilities management offers them if you find the cot-style bed frame and prison-style mattress too saggy. I put mine on *top* of the mattress.

Something ascetic was brewing in me. I was fixated on my lower back, which hurt after nights on the shameful excuse for a bed. But my reaction was extreme, and unforgiving. I wanted so badly to be in alignment, that I was willing to sacrifice comfort, willing to sacrifice myself.

I'm sitting lotus-style on a green meditation cushion, a book held open on a reading stand made of snap-together toy rods, a cup of green tea in my hand, and the constant alert of a metronome pinging at 120 beats per minute, the pace my eyes shift across each line, left-right, left-right, left-right, mainlining words from dead philosophers whose mere ideas changed the world.

College was a feast for me intellectually. There was nothing more satisfying than devouring tomes full of new ways of seeing the world, analyzing them, and coming up with clever formulations to express what I had learned. I was full of questions, and I began with the old dead white men—eminent thinkers and political economists, from ancient Greece through the 1960s radicals. I didn't learn everything from them, far from it, but I learned how to learn.

T. is laughing so loud it's almost an explosion. I want to be with her, with that energy.

I wanted the best, the most vivacious, brilliant, exuberant romance. When I saw this electric person erupting with joy, I frankly thought, I have to have *that.* I didn't know her at all, but her limitless capacity to express joy was something I was magnetically attracted to. I craved it. I got it. Then I had to figure out how love—mixed with trauma—worked.

I'm walking around New York City wearing fleece and hiking boots as Adam's girlfriend Laura asks me if he'll ever change. "I don't know," I say. "He's never changed so far."

I was supposed to be the Adam-whisperer, as his best friend. The truth was I had wanted Adam to change, or evolve, for ten years, and he'd barely budged. Adam was adamantly himself, fulsome with humor, sarcasm, wit, and defense mechanisms around every vulnerability. He wasn't going to change for me, and he wasn't going to change for Laura, and maybe he wasn't even going to change for himself.

In a height of college hysterics I still can't explain, 'the boys' play two games between our dorm rooms: 'meat fight' and 'urine cup.'

As we shoved pepperoni in each others' faces and aimed a tennis ball at a glass of someone's piss, we discovered a grotesque and disgusting disregard that I now think of as a simple celebration of joy without fear of consequences. This, I suppose, is what college is for. This, I suspect, is what life at its finest, most inane, most revolting, is really about.

My parents wouldn't have found the giant soda bottle piggy bank transformed into an enormous bong with neighborhood hardware store engineering had I not left the window open. They wake me with a sudden, severe, and confounding lecture about the litany of people in my family history who went through addiction, suicide, and mental illness. I don't understand. I've never heard this before. Why have I never heard this before?

Someone asked me once, "What could we have done differently, or was this your destiny?" I know enough now about genetics and mental illness to think that I probably should have been annually screened from the ages of 10 to 20 for any signs of disorder. I probably shouldn't have counseled my parents. I probably should have been told, rather than "You're perfect," "You don't need to be perfect and I'll love you just as much if you're not," "You're going to fail, and that's not just normal but necessary," and "You're going to lose, and come out ok."

I'm covered in streaks of yellow and red paint across my chest and arms. I'm wearing nothing but a tie, completely bare in a throng of similarly unclothed students. We're bouncing to MGMT rocking out with only instruments to cover them. The mood is animalistic rather than sexy. We march out into the nude night and take over the school's tower of a science library. Within minutes there are naked bodies climbing on top of the stacks. We are animals. And we are *free*.

Once every year *Art House* threw the infamous naked party. Its remarkable nature was that it was not an orgy, a bacchanalia: it was a writhing seance, conjuring something primitive and primordial. The harmless, shameless, commonplace of that nudity reminded us that most conventions were an illusion and when *everyone* stripped them away we were all better for it.

Bec is fifteen when she takes my dad's Lexus convertible and goes driving with her coke-addled friend. Neither has a license. The $100,000 coupe makes it home almost unscathed except for a few scratches on the hubcap.

Bec grew up in a different era of family finances. My dad's insurance work had picked up, and we inherited some money from his father's death. Suddenly there were shopping sprees and boomboxes and ever-fancier cars, much to my mom's chagrin. The Lexus coupe was a work of art, which makes Bec's escapade all the more galling. She's lucky she wasn't arrested, the car wasn't totaled, her privilege to drive wasn't eternally revoked. Wealth in the area I grew up in was both a privilege and a cancer, a luxury and a moral (or mortal) risk.

At the end of sophomore year, Aaron is lying in bed with the girl I start dating two years later. I take her from him. One day junior year, I tell Aaron that I used his deodorant. He grabs me by my shoulders and slams me against a wall. It wasn't mine to take.

Clearly I had not learned my own lesson about boundaries, and others were going to have to teach it to me. At the time I thought sharing was an unalloyed, unlimited good. If I'm out of deodorant and you have some, great, I'll use it. If you love T. and I think I'll be better for her, swell, she's mine. Some would call that greedy, disrespectful, rude, and egotistical. It turned out life teaches you your own lessons: when you get something, then it's yours, and that can be the most trying outcome.

In Nepal I trek to 18,000 feet. I watch the sunset on Mount Everest. I play badminton in the monsoon rain. I write my language teacher a scathing critique of their model of grammar acquisition despite their wonderful and effective teaching, an inexplicable mistake I still regret.

I was searching for the exquisite, and I found it in Nepal on study abroad junior year. I was fantastically lucky to eat fresh mango and sip sweet milk tea under a thatched hut shading the afternoon sun while learning about the history, culture, and challenges of this new and different place. What I couldn't grasp was what that privilege conferred upon me: namely, do not be a dick to the people whose hospitality has smoothed every bump and hurdle. *Do not be a dick* is the number one rule of travel, and in my wholly unnecessary teaching critique I revealed that as much as I grokked the mountains and the language, I still knew nothing about where I was.

After three hours of brilliant and tedious language instruction, I heap a plate of noodles and ketchup so high it almost topples over. I already have my summit pack, two Snickers, and as many bottles of water as I can carry. I head up towards the statuesque mountain, first over dirt, then gravel, then at the base, stones that are starting to look like they careened down the 19,000-foot peak. I've been hiking for about three hours, straight up, but I'm out of water, and that's my turnaround sign. Except the path back looks nothing like what I remember scrambling up. I take turns that lead me into dense brambles, and wrapping my wrists in my shirt, I push through them and downward, sure that I can never go back if this doesn't work. Then, like an idiot lost in a map store, I realize there are centuries old paths worn sure by yak herders, and all I need is to meet up with one to go right into the center of the town. After downclimbing twenty feet into a rocky ravine, I manage to cross over to something akin to a Nepali highway, and head home at dusk surprisingly alive.

The foibles of youth can kill you. I got lucky, hiking alone, in unfamiliar terrain. I didn't tell anyone I was going, or where. A simple twisted ankle could have condemned me to a very cold night with no food or water. But I saw the peak and I went for it. I had tried three times before, and each day I ate a little more pasta and brought a little more water and candy to power me through. I hadn't even conceived of a return plan, or an injury, a weather event, someone needing to get in touch with me. I just went out alone in nature seeking majesty, and that is the brilliance and the danger of youth.

I can picture T. on her bed, studying, so calm, so enraptured with learning, so unaware of what's to come next.

This being had a range of laughter, focus, and engagement that I had never seen before. I liked to just watch her. I learned from how fully enveloped she was by every moment. She was like a virtuoso actor in the plays she would come to direct, careful and richly alive. Knowing little about people, trauma, and art, I didn't know that some of the most wildly creative, dedicated, capacious people were those who had experienced depths of discord and pain I couldn't fathom.

The smartest kid in the hardest class, unpretentious but absolutely professorial in his understanding of every subject and humorously humble in his Simpsons t-shirts, consults me outside his junior year house. "You should be careful," he tells me. "T.'s last relationship was volatile and maybe violent. The whole floor listened to them fight. Just watch out." Of course I ignore him and run head-first into T. believing I am different, believing we will be different.

I like to think that ignoring counsel, red flags, and a stern warning was an act of faith. I truly believed that love was possible for any two good people, that if done right it could be magical and even predictable. I thought I knew the formula. I knew nothing about trauma, about mental illness, about the hard-fought battles that stake out common ground in a relationship, about what love looks like in practice rather than in theory.

An old high-school fling visits campus and seeks me out, eager to meet up. I decline. I go tell T., "Look, I want to be with you, not some hookup." She seems confused at my candor, but we spend the next two years together loving and hurting each other beyond measure.

I was trying to take the high road, in romance, and in life. I had an easy night of fun ahead of me, but I chose something I thought was deeper, more enduring, more important, and more meaningful. I wish I could say I never look back and imagine I had just enjoyed myself in that tempting moment, but I know I was looking for more. I got it.

During 'senior week,' we watch *Terminator 2* and drink White Russians. I had promised T. Ingmar Bergman and *Sophie's Choice*. She goes upstairs early. "Don't even say goodnight," T. fumes. When I follow her up the stairs I find her shaking under a blanket. She accuses me of telling my guy friend I didn't want her there. I can't reason with her. I walk around the block seven times barefoot in the summer night, searching for understanding.

This breach foreshadowed every problem we had the next sixteen months. I made promises I couldn't keep. T. suffered from severe mistrust. Episodes where she felt betrayed kicked off an involuntary incapacitation from overwhelm. I took the whole reaction as a false accusation and grievously unwelcome verdict of my guilt. I felt a moral chaos erupt that threatened not only our relationship but my character. Then we didn't talk about it until it happened again, and again.

At the end of summer T. comes to visit. We have sex. It's my first time, and afterwards my world collapses. I cry by the riverbank in the afternoon, feeling like adulthood has nothing but doom in it and I've just entered a world where intimacy is more of a danger than a reward. I'm right.

I had been 'saving it,' so to speak, which was kind of a feat since I'd had a non-stop string of girlfriends from eleven to twenty-one. What was I waiting for? Love, most likely. The apotheosis of connection, elation, and bondedness. I thought that came before sex, or had to. So having sex when I *didn't* feel that, on a night I had smoked pot, in a creaky bed at my parent's house, just felt like a complete failure. It's not that the night wasn't funl it was just also *tragic*. I felt like something had been lost, some aspiration or standard I had held so tight. Perhaps I also felt in my bones that as far as building trust through intimacy goes, something was just not right.

In fall, T. is doing homework downstairs, and I go up to join the boys for a hit from a bowl. She sees me from the top of the stairs. "Are you high?" she asks, shocked. I chase after her, and she spends two hours sobbing in my arms. I hold her like a frightened child, thinking this is what love entails.

There are two sides to this scene. In one version, I was punished for an innocent time hanging out with my friends. In another, T. thinks I've just shunned her as the nagging girlfriend in front of my mates. The third story, one that I didn't know, is that her former partner was a stoner and abusive, and seeing me in that state triggered a spate of reactions so strong all she could do was collapse. We didn't talk about any of that though. Just sobbed, and held, and sobbed and held.

We're sitting calmly back in Connecticut after a five-day Thanksgiving trip through Rhode Island. I'm reading the *New Yorker*. T. is preparing for the week's biology lesson. It feels peaceful and hopeful. If, after the weeks of sudden threats of breakups, and the crying, and the yelling on street corners, we can only sustain this, we can make it. We can't.

Any relationship can survive the honeymoon, the vacation, the summer. What comes next is the true test of its mettle. When life is busy, stressful, chaotic, and intense. When there's not time to explore, to unwind, to repair. Then the cracks splinter into shards.

"What *are* your political views?" T. asks me, months into our relationship. She's befuddled that a seemingly good guy like me studying political science hasn't expressed a single one to her. "I'm still figuring it out," I tell her cautiously. "But I want people to have good information to make good choices." I don't know at the time that this will become my life's work.

I was not a centrist in college. I was not left or right. I was absorbing views from radical feminists and conservative historians. I was taking it in, and trying to see the bird's eye view of how differing philosophies yielded varied opinions on complex issues. I was studying politics itself, and leaving my own views to come together later. They did. I am an information activist, a mental health advocate, an ally for culture change, and a proud and inclusive progressive. I just didn't know it then.

My friends and I opt for a Christmas road trip and I invite T. "Are you sure you don't want to just be with the guys?" she asks. The question rankles me for hundreds of asphalt miles. Before we get to the hallowed hostel in the Georgia woods, I tell her a thought, a horridly persistent rumination that I can't get out of my mind. "I wish you were more confident," I say to her, with no context or warning, doing more to hurt her confidence than years of prior abuse.

T.'s question unleashed in me something I wasn't letting myself allow: doubt. Maybe I would be better off just having fun without her. Maybe something was wrong. Maybe I didn't really love her. Maybe we were already beyond broken. The way this unraveled in my brain was as a furious rumination and an obsessive discomfort so terrible that I began to say what I was thinking, no matter how unhelpful, no matter how harmful.

We walk into a senior dance. I eye the red dress draped over the women's soccer team's star player. I can't take my eyes off her. It matches T.'s. "I wish I was here with her," I tell T., like a demonic confessional robot. Later that night she punches me in the stomach, the red dress in a pile in the corner of her room.

My OCD had probably reached clinical levels of disorder by this point, but I was so unaffiliated with mental illness terminology, so bothered by my thoughts, and actually convinced that I was being *unfaithful* by not disclosing them, that I. Just. Kept. Going. My mind was inflamed with thoughts, and the more I tried to keep them at bay, the more they raged; the more I shared, the more hurt I caused. There was also, to look atypically at the dynamic, a frankly insane courage in speaking these things I couldn't contain. I was forcing myself to say things I would, a year before, have never ever ever voiced. Finally, one day, I asked permission *not* to share. And graciously, T. agreed, after it was far too late.

They bus a few hundred drunk college seniors to an empty hall deep in the Connecticut backroads. To prevent drunk drivers, no one knows where it will be in advance. It's always somewhere that looks half-abandoned, dark and empty until bodies flood in and start drinking and vibing. T. and I are in our zone, moving in rhythm with each beat like no one else is there, trading moves and trading leads, swinging, bouncing, matching each other's energy like there's a pulsating cord between us.

Over a year and a half of constant conversations, daily intimacy, arguments, and basically cohabitating, we have developed multiple common languages. One of them is dance. Though neither of us is especially skilled, there's a chemistry and magnetism in our focus and relations with each other. There's an insider's instinct that makes it look seamless, intense, fun. It's hard to leave all of that behind, even when your life depends on it.

I call my dad crying from college senior year. I am inside my room's closet, petrified. It was a misunderstanding, I tell him, but T. cried for hours. He drives up the next day to surprise me, takes me out to dinner. It's the last time I'm sane when I see him until I'm hospitalized.

Isolation commiserated with trauma. The worse things got, the less I spoke to anyone. I felt like I was trapped, almost cult-like, in this world where I couldn't speak my real feelings, or say how bad things had become between T. and me. One of her triggers was violation of privacy, and combined with my obsession and guilt about betrayal, I locked myself into my own mind. It was not a happy place. And my dad's heroic gesture was not enough to unlock that prison.

The image of me sitting at an empty desk in an empty room in an empty house haunts me. If I leave her, that's where I'll be. Nothing to do. No one to be with.

I couldn't imagine life alone. I just couldn't.

"He raped me!" she screams into the hot Miami night, T. and I on the edge of the beach, feet away from throngs of tourists, minutes after we danced salsa together for hours. I have to get her home, before she hurts herself, before she ruins me forever.

I assume it was a flashback, a drunken confession, a regurgitation of trauma, but I knew for sure that it sounded like she was talking about *me*, and a stumbling girl alone with a man late at night screaming 'rape' had disastrous implications. I also knew that whatever was lurking in T. was darker than I thought, more than slung insults and bad fights, worse than I could imagine.

It's a tradition at college to arrange surprise dinners. For my brilliant roommate Kumar's twenty-first, I clumsily attempt to gather a half-dozen friends and his family at the local Thai restaurant. We sit down together in revelry when Kumar's acerbic mother announces that she foiled my plans by telling Kumar in advance that it was a surprise, and that my preparations were inadequate and sloppy. In front of a table of our closest friends. I'm stunned, and then a hand reaches out to my leg under the table. It's T. in her kindest gesture, consoling me privately, grounding my anger, connecting like only she still can.

An empathetic partner knows all your buttons, when to push them, how to push them, and ideally why not to. But not every button is a trigger for dissension. Some are buttons of pleasure or humor, hilarity or honesty, comfort or compassion. T. knew in that moment the burn of shame, and short of me erupting in front of my best friend's birthday dinner, she gave me a way to deescalate my inner rage. She gave me peace with just a gentle hand.

T. has done the only thing I couldn't handle, and compared me to my best friend, her ex, Aaron. I storm out the door in the middle of the night to flee, enraged but empowered by anger. T. chases after me, grabbing my arm. I swing it around in front of me and she trips hard into the dirt. I pick her up, not to help her, but to avoid the label I fear I will carry with me forever: abuser.

Eventually I began to relish when T. blew up at me, because it gave me an excuse to leave, to abandon her and our suicide pact of a relationship. This is around the time when we started taking 'breaks' from each other, sometimes for a few days, but over and over. I was emotionally sick and relished the relief and freedom I felt when we were not around each other. But we kept repeating the cycle, because despite the morass we were in there was *something* there. Not love, but a mutual infatuation, maybe a kinship over what we had endured. I just knew that I needed more and more time away to process the toxins building up in my spirit.

In college, the shower is a refuge. I clean off the trauma there. It is the only safe place. I shower every day, twice a day. After college, I don't take one for six years.

To be honest, I still struggle with this. I take baths. Baths are ok. Baths are not associated with college, with her. Baths are warm and lazy and feel good but don't scrub away anything. You soak in your protective shield, you don't wash it off. Showers are still too close, too effective, too tied to days I try to forget.

It's a senior year party at our five-bedroom house, and we're serving up rum, apple cider, and pies, like college gods, to underclassmen. T. and I laugh uncontrollably on spinning chairs, engaged in our public mode where everything is forgotten but giggles and innuendo. The chairs spin, as my mind begins to unravel.

T. and I were great together: dynamic, engaging, playful, and interactive—sometimes. We didn't stay together just out of pain; there was levity too, and addictive pleasure, constant in-jokes, and a shared searching for a common world to inhabit. The relationship was hard to leave because of its highs, not just the shame of its lows. The further we distanced from each other, the more free we felt, and the more fun we had. But there was no fixing the grief or the pain of what came before.

I don't know what we're even arguing about but I just want it to end so I can go have a cigarette. That never comes.

Years later, on the curb in front of my childhood home, I tell my four friends, 'the guys,' that I just want to go on the porch and have a smoke, that if I could only do that, I could go back and everything would be ok. That's not how it works, they tell me. You can't go back.

I walk past T. on a sunny spring afternoon headed towards campus mental health. "It's like a roller coaster," I tell the school psychologist. "Good and bad, up and down." "The only way to avoid a roller coaster is to get off the ride," he says.

The conundrum was simple, and my illogic damning. I wanted to get out of the relationship on a high note, which is like leaving a roller coaster as you're flying down its slope. One, you're moving too fast, and two, no one wants to leave the *good* part of a ride. But that obsession was driven by a fear of having failed this relationship so terribly that I'd be branded and marred by it forever. The therapist knew that cost had already been sunk. I wish I had seen more of him, I really wish. But there were only three weeks left in the semester of my senior year, and I didn't get back into therapy for six long, tortured spins around Sol.

From being broken up to rushing down the hill to her house, I find myself suddenly in the shower with T., lathering up laughter like months of anguish haven't happened at all. T. is following my high, playing with the invincible mood I feel at times when we are together and nothing seems wrong. When it feels like I have my best friend back, before she warps into my best enemy by the end of the night, as can happen, as always happens.

Trauma evokes many responses, some of which are far from sadness. A willingness to experiment, a loss of inhibition, a desire for excitement or intimacy, an overriding sense of hilarity—all can be present as the inside burns. There have been infamous murder convictions based on the odd, even manic behavior of a girlfriend doing cartwheels as the police survey the scene. Trauma can take months or years to look like what we expect it to: illness, sadness, madness. Choosing to laugh rather than sob is the body's way of protecting itself, of distancing itself from what it cannot handle without breaking.

T. and I are on break. We're broken up. We're taking time away. I've said sorry, deeply, and cried to her. But her parents are here for graduation, and her dad has just called T. a fucking idiot or something horrible. T. calls me to come over, and for the first and last time I tell her I can't. I can't help her. I can't kiss her. I can't. Anymore. I can't.

I remember lying on my bed taking a blissful nap before a dinner with T.'s family and mine. We were graduating, and I was feeling glimmers of inner peace. But I could not escape the turmoil. After I denied T., she erupted. I cried on my dad's shoulder outside the car leaving for the restaurant. I was so exhausted. I just wanted to rest. There was no partial removal of this cancerous pairing; it had to be excised, at great pain, and with the eventual benefit of moving on to a new life.

Colorado

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what the storm's all about."

- Haruki Murakami

I'm sitting in a car. It's raining. I'm crying. "I just want to know why it went wrong," I moan, seeking non-existent answers to why my college relationship fell apart. "How could I tell you about a good marriage," my mother says with exasperation, "when your father and I..." She trails off, leaving me in immense frustration.

I was distraught, not just that my relationship had ended, but that no one could help me unpack it. No matter who I asked, no matter how detailed my recounting, I was stuck. When my mom failed to help, I saw the failure of my parent's marriage looming over my own relationship's tumult. I wanted answers that didn't exist. I wanted resolution. There was finality, but no resolve. I thought and thought and thought but I didn't even know yet how deeply I needed to heal.

It's the fourth of July in Philadelphia, balmy and festive, when I call up Aaron to see if he's doing anything in New York. "We're... with T." he mumbles.

This is the beginning of my rage. A sordid anger brews inside me. It was one thing to miss out on a gathering I would have easily sped ninety minutes to the city for, but it was unconscionable that it would happen in my absence, with *her*. I think about this all summer, every day, on every walk, with every step, until it eats me alive.

After graduation, after July Fourth, I sit down to write out my thoughts on what went wrong and how there was a double standard applied to my behavior. I give examples, I list reasons, I make an argument like it is another prolific college essay. T. never read it, she tells me, but she printed it out: it was twenty pages long.

I was still treating relationships as an object of logical evaluation. I was looking for the order in the pain, anger, confusion, and senselessness of our suffering. New scholars of PTSD note that it is not just the physical or the emotional injury that causes PTSD, but a sense of systemic moral failure. The system broke, whatever was supposed to inform or protect us, and I was still grappling with the fact that I was twenty-one years old, there was no system anymore, and the family dynamics I had grown up with were wholly inadequate for these treacherous conditions.

After college Don takes me to a restaurant and a gay club. I try to dance like I belong. It feels transgressive but out of place. I never go back.

I gave gay a try and it didn't fit. I had defanged it of fear, but attraction didn't rush forth. Still, I had come to terms enough with the *possibility* of my sexuality that I could experiment. And not for Don, for once, but for me. The fact that I didn't immediately fall in love with Don was partly a disappointment, but mostly a huge relief. I wasn't gay, I wasn't destined to be with Don, I could go someplace new and see if I fit in. That was a new skill, a new gift.

Feeling an opportunity to connect with Ray after her graduation from Duke, after her transition to Wall Street, we go to a suburban Starbucks in the chilly fall, on a gray day, and sit in a store with music and decorations as generic as a thousand other outlets. "How are you doing?" I ask. Ray reaches out and touches my hand. "This isn't real," she says.

Before mental illness gripped her, the cult did. It wasn't a *bad* cult. They loved art, were intelligent, and deeply admired their polymathic guru. But the thread was starting to unravel, beginning with my sister's detachment from reality. I wanted to follow her, like I always had, but I knew she was on a path I couldn't go down, and I had no idea where it would lead.

Aaron visits me in Colorado after college. We talk about what happened senior year. How he took 'her' side after the breakup. We try to make peace. I take him skiing. Then I don't talk to him for another six years as I descend into winter madness.

My biggest regret from college, initially, wasn't my ruined relationship with T., but the year that I had missed as a senior living with 'the guys' but never actually seeing them, and never being happy enough to enjoy their company when I did. Aaron was a flashpoint for all of my resentment, but in careful dialogue, we negotiated a truce. I had, after all, dated his crush and love interest, something he later thanked *me* for after seeing how it turned out. That conversation set a template for navigating much harder and more trying times, when I was crazy, when *he* was crazy, when life was too much for either of us to handle.

In Colorado I drive Adam's car to the house of a student I am tutoring. We're not talking because he leveraged his dad's rent down payment into a claim on the master bedroom and then blocked us from getting a stipend to move when the landlord got a high-dollar offer to sell the condo. I crash Adam's car into a ditch and land on a boulder. I write a legalistic, rambling email assigning the insurance claim to the owner of the car, not the driver. My father later slips a check for the damages into Adam's dad's pocket at a fundraiser.

Money is a funny thing. Like power, it enables, and it corrupts. My growing tension with Adam was the first in an epidemic of trust-breaks that hit me like falling bricks. The divergence of my friendship with him was also a long time coming. I had studied classical philosophy and Adam, business. We wanted different things, we cared about different things, we valued different things, and we were impressed by different things. So I dropped him like a brick, until he picked me back up years later.

I ski sixty days in Colorado before tackling the 'drop-in,' a perilous cliff edge that falls thirty feet down into a stand of trees. My skis grip beneath me, and I shoot across the side of the mountain, sliding between aspen trunks under the bluest sky I've ever seen.

Colorado had its high points, before I descended way low. I taught at a school for Junior Olympic skiers that had a ski lift right on the back of Vail Mountain. It was jovial spending time in nature, testing myself, pushing my gear, and getting braver and more accomplished. By the end of that year, I did what I hadn't thought possible. After the end of the season I bought new skis, high-performance all-terrain 'sticks.' They were never worn.

Adrianne is regretful but honest about kissing someone else. We weren't even exclusive, but I was falling in love again for the first time since college, and from the day I broke up with her I didn't sleep in a bed for seven years.

Adrianne was a blessing and a curse, wrapped into a fiercely smart, athletic, and beautiful redhead. I liked her; we went down off-piste trails on skis and snowboards; we were a fun and smart fit. I needed the excitement of that new love, and I beamed at the conquest over my past relationship, but I had no idea how deep my wounds were. When Adrianne made a mistake, an infidelity of a small sort, I couldn't recover. I tried. But in some ways it was a move of equal magnitude for me to break up with her *before* things got bad. Inside I was broken. When I left her, the cracks started to surface.

After I am asked to cover both high school history and AP psych, I tell one of my student's mothers who worked in the counselor's office of my coup. "There go your powder days," she says, cruel, blunt, and terribly accurate about my lack of access to freshly fallen snow on the ski slopes. I worked my way into the education system, and am now committed to the Monday through Friday routine with the rest of the workforce. I never wear the black and gold all-mountain skis I bought at the end of the last season, the ones I wore in the living room each day to break them in, and I never buy a ski pass, and I only leave my apartment that winter to teach the worst semester of school I can imagine. The mother is right: there are no more powder days.

I hate people who tell you what you hate to know. They are Cassandras. They often can't resist, were raised that way with harsh truths flying around like daggers. Her words spoke to me like a curse, like I had been hexed, when in fact I had made a choice without thinking of the tradeoffs. That is another fault of youth: to take what comes along without realizing what you are passing up. Of course there's no reason I couldn't have skied on the weekends. All the same, I couldn't get those words out of my head, couldn't give up the plunging feeling like I had lost something irreplaceable. That's the way words curse.

Like only a teenage girl could, Bess informs me in no kind terms that I am teaching badly. I am calling on the same kids, ignoring others, talking too much, repeating activities, and generally not anywhere as good as the teacher I replaced. I supposedly deserve this lashing because I had asked her, firmly, in the middle of civics, to put her phone away. I think I can brush it off, but it sticks in me like a nail, growing rustier and more abrasive by the day, until my zeal for teaching turns into a terror. Within months I am being laughed at by kids who once looked up to me. They talk behind my back, about me, spread rumors, all true, that I didn't shower, wore two pairs of pants at the same time, lived in my car. I couldn't teach anymore.

Hell hath no fury like a teenager scorned in front of their friends. I was barely attuned to myself, let alone the vacillating and fierce moods of the kids in front of me. At this point I was teaching out of desperation, to not quit, to not fail, to not lose the reputation I had already mostly squandered. I was flying by instinct and making a fool of myself in front of young people who could spot a fool from miles away. I never forgave Bess for finally destroying my passion for teaching large classes, but that's just because it was already on fumes. Those would soon ignite.

There are new rules in Colorado: no mixing good and bad, no good coming from bad, nothing that reminds me of college, nothing that feels whole, no healing, no quality, no nature, no pleasure, no friendships, no being fully at rest, no peace.

I was on a quest to separate myself from my past, my pain, and any reminders of either. I was ascetic in bizarre ways. Because seeking good with T. had gone terribly, I no longer sought out quality in anything. I ate middling Chinese food, and only the most average dishes. I wouldn't listen to any song I'd heard before turning twenty-two. I was adamant in my dogmatically life-positive philosophy that good *could not* come from bad. So I sliced away piece by piece until I was left sleeping on a carpet, browsing conspiracy YouTube videos. I was bereft. I was depressed. I was OCD beyond imagination. I was sick.

I'm lying on the floor of my bathroom in Colorado, tutoring my sister over the phone on how to write essays. We go through every word, which is awkward because her own OCD has her avoiding any use of the letter R. I have nothing else I want to do more. I have nothing else to do. I have no one else I am talking to.

It was a gesture of love and care on my part to help my sister learn, and also a desperate attempt to escape the isolation and boredom I had imposed on myself. A theme that will repeat: I excused my joy and made exceptions to my rules as long as I was simultaneously helping others.

I first discover Wikipedia outside a Starbucks where I am squatting for WiFi. In my car I have a sudden yearning to know how it works. But I don't edit it, I go right to its policies. And I discover that Wikipedia is not just an encyclopedia but a body of law, like we studied in college, but it has been made by thousands of hands, not crafted by a power on high or an elite cabal. Its rules are unbelievably reasonable, richly detailed, and most importantly, ever-evolving. It is alive.

For me, basically a pre-law graduate who skipped law school, studying the literal innovation of a body of law and its evolution was like an addict finding a heap of crack on the sidewalk. I was hooked. I've never heard of anyone else discovering Wikipedia this way, but that was my entry point, and it blew my mind wide open with what was possible when smart people collaborated rather than competed. Then I made 40,000 edits to make it better.

I'm the perfect roommate in Colorado once I abandon my friends. I never leave my room. I even tidy up the communal bathroom. One morning my alcoholic electrician hallmate accuses me of using his toothbrush. It's absurd, but he's somehow wiring high-voltage lines during the day and putting down two six-packs at night. He begins to come after me more often, making passing feints and then direct threats. I record one of his outbursts where he swears he's going to attack me. I call 911 and then play the incriminating evidence for the concerned cop who arrives at our house. After my belligerent bully is given a stern warning, the cop tells me I need to come with him. I have a warrant out for a parking ticket I never paid and never went to court for. The verbatim charge: *failure to appear.*

Sometimes life has a wicked sense of humor. Here you are getting one over on your bully, and the next moment you're in a holding pen with a man going through withdrawal seeing demons on the walls. I was demoralized by being captured, by tricking myself into the trap, by walking face-first into a cell I could not open no matter how much it bothered me. The next day they marched us into common court in leg shackles because Eagle County Colorado is enamored with the police state. The judge simply says, "I think you've learned your lesson." I hitchhike home with the owner of the best barbecue place in town, a real local, who doesn't ask any questions, and doesn't treat me like a vagrant or a delinquent. "What did you do?" I imagine him asking. "...I didn't show up."

One night in Colorado I am in the bathtub, and Bec calls me thinking she can't go on. The phone disconnects. I can't reach her in New York, so I call the emergency line in Vail, and they tell me I should just hope for the best. Hoping is against my rules, but I hold out the possibility that this isn't the last time I talk to her.

This is one of the scariest moments of my life, and also a reckoning with how little control I had over Bec's extreme emotional episodes. I did what I could, and then finally I went to sleep. In later years, Bec's swings would prompt less worry and more sternness: "If you can't go on, go to the E.R." I refused to witness her depths of agony and be put in a waiting spot as to her ultimate fate. I found that once I stopped offering my company for suicidal ideation, I stopped hearing about it. I was under no impression that it was gone, but Bec knew my response would be tautological: Suicidal? E.R. Go.

I invite my friend Stephen, Sippy we call him, over to my house in Colorado one time before I move out. I want him to see it. I want him to see how I never unpacked in an entire year. I want him to see the cups filled with pee, the trash piles, that pillow of old clothes. I want him to see it, so I will not have to hold the secret myself.

Sippy was a good friend. He never judged. He understood why I called him into that room. How I would feel less loneliness, and less shame, if there was a witness. So much of our pain is seeking a witness, someone to observe it, to hold it if possible, but at least to be there and say, "I see this, and I still see you."

There's a woman in the library with a beautiful one-year-old Black baby crawling over her as she tries to file immigration papers on the thirty-minute-limit WiFi. I ask her, calmly, if I can hold her kid and give her a break. She hands him to me and with a big Jamaican smile, says, "Oh thank you so much. I'm Nadine. This is Nicholas." I carry him around the bookshelves on my shoulders.

In the spirit of excusing my joy to help others, this was a giddy moment. I was always unable to hide my affection with kids—their innocence, playfulness, trusting nature, and sweet dispositions cut through my corroded armor. I felt like a superhero walking around that library, carrying a giggling baby, helping a mom, being my best self for the brief moment I permitted.

Don moves to Thailand and calls me regularly. He always asks if I am happy. I hate that because I think Don is intrusive, and he is happy now that he is out and openly dating a guy. I don't know if I really am or will ever be happy. I stop picking up his phone calls.

By this point I had completely given up on trying to please Don, and I was so far gone trying to please myself that talking to him seemed impossible given his insistent, probing nature. Sadly, I missed the peak of Don's happy period in his life, when he was most at peace in his own country, sexuality, career, and joy.

Nadine is despondent, on the steps of a house she is being kicked out of. She was welcome at first, but the baby was too much. I tell her I'll let her stay in the empty room at my rental and that I'll pick her up that night. I race to Walmart and gather socket plug protectors and a baby blanket, formula, wipes, and a few colorful toys. When I show her the room and tell her it's hers as long as she needs it, she nearly sobs. I go back into my cave and shut the door.

Love slips through the cracks. Despite every rule, I was not going to let this charming, vulnerable woman and her helpless child go without help. I felt an immense sense of accountability to safeguard that room, to give them safety, to give them a glimpse of love. It was all I could offer, and everything I could muster.

Fearing all hygienic activities results in one, then another, and finally a third boil. The first on my cheek is novel, and explodes onto the mirror. The second, more worrying, on my hip, is easily lanced after long baths. The third, now routine, under my chin, is a conundrum. I need to prod the thick skin with a needle, but it seeps slowly, and every drop risks toxic contamination in the bathroom for the baby. Sure that I will give him a fatal staph infection, I compulsively wipe down every surface with hand sanitizer in hopes I can spare him. He doesn't die. The boils don't come back.

As I was beginning my descent into asociability, a friendly bartender told me that I couldn't live like a mountain man. He told me this in the middle of an upscale coffee shop in Vail, and he was being very kind. By then my stench already announced my arrival into rooms. When you live on the deep margins of civilization, you discover why things like soap were invented, and the numerous and filthy ways people suffered before it was. I didn't brush my teeth for five years. I wore holes in the knees of pants I kept rewearing and then tried to repair the holes with duct tape. I had no socks and once used newspapers to cushion my feet during a temp job shoveling ice. I was anti-clean, against the feeling you get after the dirt is gone and you're left with raw, naked, unprotected skin.

Nadine needs a ride to work in the morning. She has no car and can't manage the stroller on the icy sidewalk half a mile to where the bus stop is. All I want is mornings to sleep in. She wakes me every day at 9 am, deferential, almost begging. I take her as much as I can, until one day I make her walk.

I said no. No, to someone I was caring for. No, to someone I liked. No, to someone struggling. It was a necessary balancing of Nadine's need for transportation and my need for sleep. It allowed me to continue being there for her without resentment. I was practicing, with difficulty, setting a boundary. And I didn't hate myself for it.

The night I become homeless, Bec calls me raving in despair that our parents are on the verge of divorce and I have to help. I listen to her desperation and give her what counsel I can. Then, rather than moving into the new hilltop apartment I've already paid a two-month deposit on, I sleep in a Walmart parking lot. I don't move on to the phase I had planned, I don't move in, I don't go home.

I was homeless, but not carless. My Subaru and I slept anywhere with distance and separation. My favorite spot was a truck pullout two exits down from Vail where all night cars and semis came through, stayed for a few minutes or hours, and moved on. They idled, as I idled, running my car's heater all night. Afraid I would suffocate on carbon monoxide, my dad called the fire chief to get counsel. What I was doing was not a good idea. I began making sure the tailpipe was clear of snow, the window cracked before drifting off under two fleece blankets, incredibly warm and completely lost.

My older sister is hospitalized when she is twenty-six. The diagnosis: schizophrenia.

I could barely handle my own falling apart, but here was my dear crazy sister locked up, wearing a hospital gown and rubber flip-flops, cracked open and labeled with the worst diagnosis one could receive. I say without judgment: schizophrenia is a beast of a condition, and the prognosis is not good. I struggle to speak with Ray over the payphone at her hospital, but I do. I speak to her, again.

Nadine gets a housing voucher and has a small one-bedroom with a couch and a TV. I've been sleeping in my car for months when I drop by to visit her. Once I smell the food Nadine is cooking and see her face in her own apartment, I am physically unable to go back to the void of night in my car. I sleep in her house for eight months. I help raise her son. He holds my hand when we walk to the doctor for his checkups. I call him 'Nick Nick.'

I didn't ask Nadine for help; I just could not force myself back into the cold, lonely darkness. Everyone reaches a limit of their limits, a period when the draw of comfort and companionship overtakes the corrupt instinct to deprive oneself. I didn't eat Nadine's famous oxtail soup, but I was nourished all the same. I was a small part of a family, and it felt like a triumphant return to a kind of kinship, to wholeness.

My dad has his second full shoulder replacement, and I come to Philadelphia to take care of him for the week. He's unable to lie down, so we prop him up in a big leather chair and I cook him oats, spinach, and eggs. "This is the best breakfast I've had since I separated from your mother," he tells me.

My dad was an exercise addict from eighteen. In his twenties he began running to avoid an early death. He was lean but ripped, and he had a terrible habit of showing my friends his eight-pack abs. By sixty, my dad had four complete titanium replacements of his shoulders and knees, worn down from decades of endless pavement. Seeing him in his solo apartment, barely able to move, was another respite from my self-obsession. It wasn't an easy week, but I knew my job, and I did it. I even had fun with his new dietary hobby of eating raw foods. Then I went back to Colorado, where I continued my chapter in darkness.

The most hurtful thing my mom ever says to me is, "I love you."

I was home from Colorado for a week, lying on the black carpeted floor of my childhood bedroom. I was under a thick blanket curled up in a ball. I wanted nothing more than to be left alone. Her words, spoken to me in that pile on the floor, enraged, because they did two things I could not tolerate: they expressed care for a person I did not care about anymore, and they implied something was wrong with my fractured state. I just wanted to be allowed to be broken, and have no one interfere.

On my return trip to Colorado I make the insane association between Nadine and my sick-loser-lost lifestyle. I drive by her town to the next one over, and never tell her where I am. We don't reconnect for eight years.

Vanity is the enemy of happiness. I confused Nadine's poverty with my severe depression and isolation, even though she was the best thing I had going. "Wherever you go, there you are," says the sagely Jon Kabat-Zinn. What he doesn't tell you is that the first few weeks of a new place feel like heaven, free from associations, judgment, and weakness. It all comes roaring back, though, and *there you are.* I most regret not telling Nadine where I went, how I was, if I was ok. I helped her, I used her, and then I vanished.

My dad visits me in Colorado. I'm not bathing. There are layers of scum on my feet. They stink up the entire apartment. "Please just wash them," he begs. The next day Vicodin falls out of his pocket as he's dropping me back off at the truck stop where I sleep. He's crying uncontrollably. He's far too unstable to offer any help.

We imagine our parents will always guide us, but as adults, it's sometimes fumbling around together with no map, bumping into each other, into obstacles, into life, hobbled and broken. There was something useful about seeing both myself and my father in that state: I knew how bad it was. There was no quick visit that would repair me, or him. These cuts were deep. Dad went back to his pain and addiction, and I went back to my desolate cabin in the mountains.

After he catches me trying to bathe using the sink and nearly shouts at me to get under the actual shower, my Uncle Bruce drives me to the county landfill and tells me he wants to talk to me next to the dumpsters. I am expecting a lecture about discipline, hygiene, getting it together. Instead, he plainly, shockingly, tells me my parents were wrong to be together, had been wrong for decades, and that there was nothing I ever could have done about it. Then we drive home. Confusion is left, but a seed too, something that may one day turn into forgiveness. And freedom.

Bruce's insight, his conceit, was that my feelings of failure, despite all outward success as a child and teenager and college student, traced back to a deep inner despair at not being able to repair my parent's marriage. I was taken aback by his focus on this matter, as I thought it frankly was old news, past. But the past isn't gone, as they say; it's not even past. I was still haunted by my parent's facades of intimacy I had tried to bridge with my internecine communications. I was still chasing a mirage of a perfect relationship in my own life, knowing not at all what a realistic good model looked like. I was still punishing myself for what I ruined in college, having never been given an education in the subject in the first place.

After midnight in a Colorado mountain town I see an unsteady young man trying to clumsily stuff a tallboy beer from the corner store fridge into his jacket. "Hey man," I tell him, "You don't have to do that." I introduce myself. He is Ronnie. He's homeless. It's twenty degrees outside.

Helping was clearly somehow still in my DNA, but Ronnie was a special case. A small, disheveled man, he was clearly homeless, and clearly an alcoholic. But I had neither pride nor shame, so I said hello and invited him back to my cabin.

Lying in a 100-square-foot wood room on the bottom of a bunk bed, I ask Ronnie if he's stable. Ronnie tells me about his anxiety, his temper, the time he hit his brother in the head. I ask him if he has any weapons. "Since prison, I sleep with a knife," he tells me. I don't know why, but I trust him. "It's really good to talk about this stuff in my head," he says, before nodding off above me.

My attempt at basic due diligence turned into a revealing conversation. I knew it was a risk to bring a stranger back to a small, enclosed space. I knew it was against everything I had been instructed. I didn't care, as long as I asked the question, basically, "Are you safe?" I took Ronnie at his word, and his words gave him a long overdue opportunity to open his mind and show that he was neither angry nor chaotic, but deeply, deeply lost and in need of support.

Ronnie finagles a prescription for anxiety meds to blunt his alcohol cravings. He's self-medicating hard, using food stamps to buy sherry wine from the grocery store and get buzzed on salted liquor. I drive him in my broken Subaru, radiator spewing steam, from our cabin to Walmart. We wait four hours to get his prescription. I wouldn't take my first medication for another five years, in a long line at the mental hospital.

Ronnie and I were both struggling, but we were at least partially able to navigate together. He didn't know he was helping me, but I watched him go into a store, get a prescription, take the pills, and find relief. I thought that was for him, not me, but at some point, it became me taking the pills. At some point, someone else was driving me to the hospital. At some point, we all need help to get help.

Ronnie never mentions that my cabin reeks of pee because I've been pissing in trash bags filled with newspaper. He never asks. He never judges. He tells me he's starting to feel good again and is just happy to have a roof over his head. He likes to wear a black t-shirt with a wolf on it. "This is my spirit," he says. "I am a lone wolf. I don't need much, just a shed in a backyard to sleep in and do some art."

Ronnie lived with me for four months and never intruded on my privacy or complained about my living conditions, gross as they were. He offered that as a sign of respect, not just out of having no other options. Ronnie understood that respect, too, meant boundaries, and he was a decent man full of respect.

In the gas station bodega, Ronnie tells me there are only two words you can't say in prison unless you're willing to die: bitch and punk. "So if I said you're a 'punk' you'd have to kill me?" I ask. He backs away, restraining some kind of ingrained rage. "Don't," he says to me. "Don't make me do that."

If you push to find someone's limits, you will find them. Prison had exposed Ronnie to dire consequences for certain slights. People die in prison for far less than 'punk,' and Ronnie carried that ethos with him outside into the world. Whether it was reasonable or not, my teasing had triggered him, badly. I did back away, and I learned that Ronnie, no matter how physically small or stuck in economically precarious conditions, would not put up with a fundamental affront to his dignity.

Summer comes, and the camp director catches Ronnie peeing outside. He's not allowed back. He can't stay with me. "This isn't a shelter."

I had reached the limits of my helping, as a renter myself, and as a member of that hillside RV and camping community. Ronnie wasn't welcome there. Where would he be welcome? The next time I find Ronnie he is drunk again, talking about how he could survive any weather by digging an igloo in the mounds of snow piled up by plows. He was literally in between the sliding doors of a mall—no way to go out, and no way to go in.

Jesus walks into the convenience store. This time I am happy he is there, long silver hair, stacks of notebooks arrayed on the small red table at 3 am. We talk about biblical exegesis, and he gives me special dispensation because I am a Jew. He had been a lawyer before he went mad, convinced the world was heading towards Revelation. We are good until he brings up Israel, and then it gets ugly, his ungodly hatred of Muslims spewing out with drops of spit and soda fountain water. He goes home to sleep in the hills, under trash bags as blankets. One night he sneaks into the mountain home of some millionaire and defends himself in court as a rightful tenant. He was convicted, Jesus himself, and I never saw him again. Raptured into the hole that mental illness sucks us into.

It was occasionally helpful to meet people more crazy than me, more delusional, further into their wayward march towards nothingness. Jesus was in his sixties, entirely estranged from his family; he had lost all possessions and connections. I was aware of my desperate avoidance but I was not floridly, manically out of my mind. I was very much not Jesus, and knew it, and hated to face the world as a mere mortal. I gave Jesus some counseling, even from my removed position in far-out mountain country, and though he rarely took my advice, we both enjoyed the company.

Dressed up like a madman with a penchant for cleaning, I line up two rows of six portapotties under a clear blue Colorado sky. For $14 an hour, I am left alone to suck out, wipe down, refill, and tidy plastic shitcans one after another. They even let me use the forklift to knock them into place. The smell is noxious behind the over-the-counter 3M mask I am wearing, but it's more the heat mixing with gasses of weeks-old urine and feces that makes me happy to take breaks at my car, eat convenience store snacks, and not worry too much that anyone would think it odd that the valedictorian is spraying hydrochloric acid onto bathroom walls to remove graffiti.

One serendipitous discovery I made was that if you didn't care about dirt at all, you could do anything, without revulsion. This included productive pursuits like pulling used tampons out of trash cans at a truck stop during mop-up. Or suctioning communal turds out of portapotties and dumping camping toilets from school trips, filled to their brim. I was even offered a full-time job as the go-to, number one, portapotty cleaner, but I turned it down because they wouldn't accede to a raise. That was the end of setting up deluxe double units at estate weddings. The end of feeling like what I was doing didn't matter in the eyes of others—but I got a hint of it, and while it smelled like shit, it felt good.

"What are you doing?" the crew lead, a gentle father-type from Michigan, asks. We are out building a metal storage facility, which screws together like the biggest Ikea set in the world. "I'm writing an essay in my head," I tell him. Confused, he invites me over with his two work buddies for lunch. We microwave hot dogs in burritos and listen to the drama of one worker dating the other's sister. They let me into their team as much as I will allow, and the last night of our job, they take me out to dinner at a Mexican buffet. They try to dig under my shell, find out what's really going on. I clench. I leave them with nothing. They leave me with the faint and much-needed reminder I'm not a bad guy to have around.

Walking through Colorado in my anxious haze, I met people, over and over, who saw through to something in me I had lost touch with. These grounded, generous men, with their giant nail guns and drills, entrusting me to bolt down walls and waterproof gutters, drove me in their cars, showed me their progress, let me help. The last two days they paid me to pick up pieces of trash from the worksite, though it wasn't needed and a strict cost calculus would have already sent me home. They wanted me around. They didn't want me to fall through the cracks.

The temp manager stops me outside my half-working Subaru, eager to get his tools back. "I left them on the porch," I tell him. "Where did you place them?" he asks in irritation. And then, like someone had relit a mental fire I hadn't seen in years, I retort, "Don't be pedantic," turn around, and drive home, wherever that was.

Each phase of my journey from college through to the mental hospital had a nemesis. A big boss. An enemy. At times it was someone I loved, other times someone who merely stood in the way of my momentary peace. The typically reasonable temp manager hit a nerve with me. He knew I was from a different pedigree than the drunks and undocumented workers who played cards in the workers lounge most days, but he didn't respect me 'slumming it' when I would have opportunities abounding if I would just apply myself. Having done just that with the Michigan guys, I was feeling bold. I was feeling my strength, my worth, my ego. And so I dropped a vernacular bomb on him like a targeted missile, and peaced out of that temp place. I was onto something more, although it would take years to get there.

My friend Chris at the truckstop does meth in the bathroom and lets me clean the whole store during his last hour in exchange for a vital eight bucks. He tells me how his liver is failing from drinking and how he is already under tens of thousands of dollars in medical debt. He is sweet and soft-spoken, enthusiastic, and ill. He's dying, and he doubts he'll have time to reconcile with his father. Still a teenager at heart, one night, wracked with liver pain, he checks himself into the gold-star hospital, rooms lined with wood and a custom to-order food menu placed on every side-table. Chris orders a la carte until his stomach hurts more than his decaying organs. I never say goodbye to him when I left Colorado. He's probably dead now.

Not everyone makes it out. On the margins, some people fall in, can't sustain the damage or the pain. Along the way they may be the kindest, sweetest, most well-meaning people who are slowly wearing away from the inside. Not everyone can navigate their darkest traumas or their most addictive habits, and, despite their easygoing nature and even supportive friendships, are going to wither and break. It's just a matter of time, their life suspended between day-to-day happiness and ultimate destruction. I still wasn't sure where I would fall on the spectrum.

The last time I find Ronnie he is almost dead, frozen in the back of a truck, parked on the side of the road, no gas, no engine. I don't even think it's his truck, just some lean-to from the brutal exposure. He has an empty plastic bottle of vodka at his feet. I want to drag him into my car, bring him back to heat, but I'm homeless now too, and he's resigned to surviving, or not. The stars are crisp in the icy wild night.

Wolves seek solitude in nature when they go to die. When I found Ronnie, he was like a wolf. He was sick, not dying, but he had holed up alone all the same. His confidence in his ability to survive anything, born by having to survive too much, put him at mortal risk. I imagined him finding that sunny shed in a friend's yard, going back to his mom's house, doing art, going to AA meetings, being his spiritual, gentle self, getting help. But I had to go. I didn't leave him to die, I left to live.

There is no plan to go home to my family in Philadelphia, no reason, no urge. It is summer and I am safe in the warmth and internet of three stores, one of which has a TV, the other a soda fountain, and the third multiple laptops on display. I am even talking to my dad at the gas station payphone, musing about the recession and the liquidity of gold, and what happens when bank lending goes awry under an infinitely printable fiat currency. Then Uncle Mitch dies. He is my grandmother's brother, a smart, bookish, unpretentious thinker who practiced psychiatry at a city prison. He was my neurotic grandmother's pillar of reason, and he lived a dignified life full of poetry and partnership. I go home to Philadelphia. I can't not go. I can't stay in Colorado, or else I might never leave.

There are moments along the way but well before hitting rock bottom when you know you can't stay still any longer. There was no expiration on my exile in Colorado, and the pull of kinship, like an ancient anchor, persuaded me, guided me, drove me back for the funeral. When you no longer pay your respects to the dead, you will soon join them. A part of me knew that. I was in a daze as they recounted Mitch's life, barely afloat in my own skin, but I was in the room. That mattered.

Home

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

– Maya Angelou

My friends planned an intervention. Back at home in Philadelphia, they sit me down in the living room with my parents, friends in chairs semi-circled around me on the floor. I'm drinking tea. Everyone opens with a thought. "If your leg was broken you'd get it fixed," says my mom, instantly crushing my spirit. I spend the next four hours coming back to her words, her literal, heartless, diminishing, reductive, stupid, correct words.

'The boys' visited me dozens of times, often without announcement, caravaning down from New York in a bus to surprise and delight me with silliness and laughter. Every visit eventually had a 'talk,' which I dreaded. I put off anything serious as long as possible, and then tried to wiggle out of admissions or commitments. This visit was different: my cousin, a psychiatrist, was there, as were my parents, and there was no silliness. I latched onto my mom's words with a ferocious animus: how dare she?! It was insultingly, disgustingly her kind of statement, and I resent it still, except she was right.

My sister Rachel is dancing at night in the summer listening to music only she can hear. She is ecstatic, and unmedicated.

There is joy in madness, and, when you glimpse it, it reminds you that sanity cannot be the only goal. The manic, the psychotic, the delusional, even the depressed all have some gift they are carrying with them. Rachel's gift was a lack of inhibition—surely a danger if unmediated. But in that moment I was almost jealous that she could dance so intensely, that she could hear the music I could not.

I haven't left the attic at my parents' house in a year when my father slips a CD from his favorite self-help guru into the room. "It's no-nonsense basics, Jake. It can help you." I refuse it despite his pleading. Still, he brings me a plate of seared steak and corn muffins that night and leaves it outside my door.

I was so opposed to getting help it was cruel, to myself for sure, but also to those around me watching me hide and wither. I was in a kind of ill hibernation, trying to pause the world and expecting no one else to mind. My father's gesture, and my rejection of it, was a last straw in his attempts—he simply did not know what to do. All he had left was to treat me, in the way he always had. And despite my devolved state, I ate up that steak and corn muffins, because even when you're crazy, you gotta eat.

I am high on some combination of spices from our kitchen, dripping tears as shimmering raindrops fall on the skylight in the therapist's office. "Look," he tells me, "There are only three rules: don't hurt yourself or anyone else; use every tool you can; take care of yourself so you can take care of others."

Self-medication eased my mind of its intense rumination. I don't understand the chemistry, but on some walks the flower petals started to sparkle, and my morning 'smoothie' suspended particles of glowing nutmeg that put me in a blissful, near catatonic state. I could walk around enjoying the beauty, or lie down with a tingling sensation. But I could not feel without falling apart. My therapist's words, so simple, so clear, so instructive, so wise, did not resonate with me until years later. But now I repeat them as mantra, for myself and for others who are struggling. They are a pocket manual for containing the damage, for opening up to healing, and for transforming life into a journey rich with service.

Despite my total retreat and isolation in the attic, I am urged to shovel snow from the winter storm. I haven't been outside in weeks, but my father's shoulders can't handle the digging. I trudge downstairs with a fleece blanket over my head, like a magician's cape concealing something far from magical, and I clear a path for the car and the sidewalk pedestrians. My parents are ashamed of how I look. I'm hiding in broad daylight. The cape is not working. They can see right through it.

Part of the illusion of mental illness is that your internal problems don't have external manifestations, though they are sometimes extremely obvious. But to the person suffering, it is all happening inside, all rational, all protective. The cape was an aspiration: to be unseen, to be sheltered, to feel so much less discomfort, anxiety, agony, and pain.

Max is dying, my sweet, intelligent, loving Tibetan spaniel. I have her on a tight regimen, five times a day, of food, water, walks, and medication. There's an impossible tradeoff between kidney function and heart function, two drugs playing a tug-of-war with her little life. I have latched onto Max, sure I can prolong her, sure I must prolong her. My mom remarks, "You're being a little... obsessive." I feel like ripping her face off for challenging the only love I can tolerate, and will soon lose.

After Max died, after they put her down gently in the arms of my father and sister, my mom apologized too late. "You loved her so much," she said. "You were doing everything you could." I was quieted but still enraged that she could take my delicate, dedicated, careful, systematized care and stigmatize it. I was shocked that she could say something so hurtful to me with the intent to shut down my efforts. My mom has never been one for extending life past its carrying capacity, never one to hold back words that could explode someone else's world.

In the darkness, a man comes to my attic door wanting to talk to me about the devil. He isn't a missionary. He is an emeritus professor of psychology at an Ivy League university. He thinks I might know how to help him with the book he is writing about good and evil. How did he know I had embraced the devil into my heart?

I'm not a Christian, but if I was, I would profess that one must accept Jesus AND the devil. One must hug the shadow inside, the fallen soul as well as the fount of salvation. One cannot pay with half the coin. Man cannot live on bread alone. We must, too, digest our poisons.

Aaron is sitting next to me, by the fireplace back at my parents' home. I'm barely there. "My mind is on the edge of an abyss," I tell him. He just listens.

Aaron's soft, steady, silent presence was a tremendous gift. He didn't express any fear for me, or try to pull me back from danger. He just let me tell him what I saw from where I was. I was far away, far gone, but at the same time just sitting there, with my friend, relaying the view of a chasm from the rim's edge. And he just sat right along with me. I'll never forget it.

In the late evening my father walks in on me in the bathtub, completely nude, plugged-in laptop perched precariously on the back wall of the tub. He is distraught, worried I am going to die under his watch. He thinks I'm absolutely mad. He doesn't know I'm helping lead the Egyptian Revolution.

It undeniably sounds insane, but in the bathroom/bedroom/office I now occupied, my Wikipedia volunteering had taken on global importance. The Arab Spring reached Egypt, and I and a disciplined, vigorous cadre of other expert editors were monitoring every piece of news that came across the Wikipedia article. We checked and double-checked sources, references, and rumors. As my psyche was crumbling, my mind was churning like a well-oiled sports car. But a car can't run without a steering wheel, and eventually something was bound to crash.

I'm getting ready to go out to my Bubbie's eightieth birthday party, a fashionable affair at a kosher restaurant in New York City suitable for the Orthodox wing of her family. It's bitterly cold in the city, so I coat my body with Vaseline, every toe, joint, patch of skin, and muscle. It takes hours, but when I walk outside I can't even feel the cold. I probably should have died from suffocation, but instead I feel a shelter with me, and I nosh along with the rest of the people there to celebrate my Bubbie, so precious I slathered my body in industrial byproducts to make sure I could show up for the trip.

Another moment of family gathering draws me in, despite, well, bizarre behavior. But it made sense to me. I couldn't stand sensations, so I blunted them. My skin was too reactive, so I turned it into an impenetrable shield. It *did* feel better. I *did* feel able to function. I suppose I was self-medicating, but with petroleum jelly instead of the pharmaceutical interventions I still refused.

Mom is throwing a fit with a vacuum, refusing my father's pleas to leave me alone hiding in the attic bathroom. The sound is so loud to me I start screaming, not all at once, but in spurts like I'm being struck suddenly with a rod, over, and over, and over. She persists through the disturbed protest, and then my parents get divorced.

This was the day the family vase finally cracked into pieces. It was already fractured along multiple lines, but it hung together, in some semblance of a ceramic bond, always for the kids. With Bec gone in New York City, and Rachel gone in schizophrenia, my denial of all attempts to help me erupted into a final fissure, and each separate shard fell onto that attic carpet my mom was dragging her desperate and insistent vacuum over. One piece that fell was my mother, another piece my father, and they were never reunited again.

Before she officially divorces my dad, my mom comes back to visit the house. "I just want you to know that I started taking an antidepressant," she tells me. She is giving me permission to seek help. "And the divorce wasn't your fault." "You don't blame me for you and Dad separating?" I ask. "You didn't cause the divorce, no," she tells me. "But you took advantage of it."

We were a family obsessed with wellness, with exercise, with coffee and herbal teas, with antibiotics, and with good doctors—but not with 'mind meds.' Those were for other people, broken people, weak people. When my mom confessed her antidepressant use, it was further wrenching open for me a door that I had closed with ideological bolts. I even thought my mom was so sad about the divorce that she's taking drugs, and I felt guilty. My mom was clear I hadn't caused the divorce, but she didn't let me off without a stinging rebuke—as my parents were cleaving in two, I idled in the rift.

I'm lying on the carpet upstairs in the attic when Adam surprises me, literally lays on top of my body with his heft, and remarks that the room has quite an odor. I confess my distance from humanity, and Adam, now educated as a social worker, is enthused that I might actually be antisocial. "That's so cool," he asserts with love. "You're like a real outcast."

Adam had evolved through years of psychology and counseling training. He wasn't a suddenly empathetic, sincere mensch, but he had a broad and forgiving framework for abnormality and deviance. With curiosity, even excitement, about my aversion to society, he was treating me as a specimen to observe, even reveling that I had gone so far to the fringe that I was now *interesting*. He still loved me, maybe even more for it.

Aaron's father gifts me a religious book, near Kabbalistic in spirit, as I wither away in the dark attic. I hesitate to open it, but I browse one page. It says, "When you do the wrong thing, it's 'Aah', then 'Ooh': when you do the right thing, it's 'Ooh', then 'Aah.'" This is the most divine spiritual summary I've ever heard. So simple a child could understand it. So profound that most adults ignore it at their peril.

We mostly chided Aaron's dad for going from being a prolific insurance salesman in New York City to a newly Orthodox Jew. He studied profusely, took copious notes, gave lectures, and prayed for hours each day. He knew many things, including just the right entry point for me. He gave me a template to test out my choices, and I didn't always follow up, but at least I now knew why my attempts to find escape before resolution were bound to be of the Aah-Ooh kind.

I crack the computer monitor in the dark of night, shattering the screen, my only lifeline to the intellectual and human world. I use the broken screen for weeks, fractured and distorted like my own perception.

There are moments you realize you've lost it, and this was undeniably one of them. My disfigured emotions were beginning to lash out. My knuckles made the colors drip, my fists made the wall behind the bathroom crumble, my slamming the punching bag in the basement made the whole house shake. Maybe I was angry. Maybe I was powerless to control it. Maybe I was beyond helping myself.

The two large men stand outside my parent's attic bathroom where I've been sleeping on the floor next to the toilet for six months. They are here to evaluate me, but I don't wait. I race out the door past my mother, who I know is to blame for their presence.

The end game was closing in. I bolted. I stared both parents in the face as I went out that door, to let them know they were complicit—they signed the court documents, which produced the emergency mental health alert. My father nearly crumbled under my stare, but my mother was the architect of my recovery. She probably saved my life.

After my day on the run, I settle down enough to realize that going to a homeless shelter in the city is a bad idea, and I should just go home to sleep. It was too late. The warrant had already been signed for my involuntary commitment. A cop finds me at my childhood park, sitting calmly on the bleachers. "I have to take you in," he says, almost with remorse. In the car on the way to the hospital I dissect my parent's pressure on me with devastating logic and clear elocution. The cop is puzzled why I am being punished by overbearing guardians when I speak well and am making jokes like a goodhearted citizen. When we arrive at the hospital the cop is not amused. "Why didn't you tell me you've been sleeping in the bathroom?!" he rails.

To be a 'functioning addict' requires at least two personas: the sick one and the one able to interact in the world. I was showing my cop the public me, a performance worthy of an Oscar. I was also leaving out every bit of incriminating evidence, like a good defense lawyer. I was leaving him befuddled, tricked even, and he did not like it. If I needed to get help, I wasn't going to make it easy.

When I arrive at the mental hospital, a fit gentleman in running shoes says he needs to pat me down. "I do not consent to this search," I say, using my best civil liberties script. The man has little patience for my ACLU proclivities and proceeds to check every pocket and inch of clothing on my body.

When losing control of one's agency, one sometimes attempts to maintain a sense of dignity in little ways. I imagine this is not uncommon in prisons, and mental hospitals are at least in part places of involuntary confinement. My protest at the welcoming committee was one of the few remaining objections I raised to helping myself.

A lovely Black woman is sitting across from me at a table in the intake room of the mental hospital. There are books and a piano. It's designed to calm you down, to get you to consent to payment, to subtly start the treatment. Everything you do is monitored and processed, because mental hospitals are psychological emergency rooms, designed to stabilize, course-correct, and get you out on your own as fast as possible. "Listen," she tells me. "You've got to protect the ball." She's in sports analogy mode and we're fluently negotiating. "But I want to put the ball down. Can I at least pause?" "You only get one ball," she says. "It's your ball." Metaphors aside, I know exactly what she wants me to do.

You meet a variety of people in treatment, and each one offers something, some nugget, some point of view, some tool, or option. At the time many seem trite or useless or irrelevant. Looking back, nearly everybody I met in the mental hospital helped me out of my hole, out of my head, and back into the world. You only get one you, you can't put you down, you can't walk away from yourself or stop the game. *It's your ball. It's your life. You only get one.*

The therapist in the mental hospital accosts me with questions. "I don't want to dig into what's going on," I assert, trying to set a boundary. But her pace of interrogation is withering, and she is relentless. I don't know that this is a controversial form of intervention called *psychodynamic therapy*, which is basically a full-frontal assault on your defense mechanisms to achieve rapid results. As the stress inside me builds, I tap twice on the arm of the chair. She notices every move. "If you want to tap for the rest of your life, you can." I am caught. I run out the clock and manage to reveal little. It feels like a win, to hold my ground. It feels like I've been exposed all the same.

To say I was not expecting this level of therapeutic aggression is an understatement. It was quite destabilizing, which was largely the point. People with mental illness have complex delusions and layers of defense mechanisms filled with partially true or outright false stories backing them up. To break a person down in two weeks can require psychological warfare. I didn't allow it, but I also revealed my secret code. The taps, to me, were a blanket *undo*, a way to mark and disregard any uncomfortable truth. She cracked my password, and I had one less defense to hide behind.

There's nothing to do at the mental hospital that's any fun, so four times a day, at 8, 12, 4, and 8 on the dot, the cigarette room opens. Crowds gather outside beforehand and rush in, grabbing a light from the aide on their way. It is a mad cacophony of smoke: forty people puffing away in a room with no windows and just an exhaust fan in the ceiling. I smoke two each session, sucking down menthols. I even see a man, so beset with lung disease that he's hacking coughs, drop and then pick up his butt from the floor while on his knees. We are desperate people. We are not choosy about our drugs.

There's an over 80% correlation between people on serious psych medications and smoking. It's a deadly side-effect of already debilitating conditions. Why so much nicotine? One theory is that it replaces the dopamine some drugs restrain. Another theory is that it relieves anxiety. My theory is that when life makes no sense, any sense of relief is more than welcome—it's essential.

In the mental hospital, the aide chastises me for climbing on top of a bench to catch the very last rays of sunshine before going inside for the day.

There's nothing like being locked in an asylum for two weeks with eighty nutsos (myself included) to make one appreciate the finer things in life. The cigarette vending machine, the single daily packet of instant coffee, the freedom to skip 'classes,' the retro movies playing in the lounge each night, the heavily iced cake in the dinner buffet, and of course, one hour of daily outdoor time. I went from not stepping on grass for eight years to gulping down every ounce of sky I could. And when I was reprimanded, I actually gave the aide a talking-to, informing her that this daylight was important to my health and I didn't appreciate the way she demanded I get down. Now I know that she was trying to prevent a two-foot suicide jump, but at the time I was not going to let it go. I was going to fight for my sun.

I'm sitting in a locked room with a very different kind of psychiatrist. He's slow, portly, gentle, and without any presumption or pressure. He listens to my spiel for a bit and then he lovingly hits me in the face with his words. "You know, it's not too late to have everything you want, but one day it will be." I have been on perpetual pause, hoping to resolve tensions and demons as if time were stopped. The psychiatrist's words unlock the springs and wheels, and my life starts ticking again. If I am going to change, it will just have to be now.

A mental hospital psychiatrist is in the trenches of crazy. It's not an easy job, and this man looked beleaguered as he trudged down the hallways from case to case. In him, seeing nothing fancy, I sensed a true devotion to his work, to his patients. Maybe because of his lack of pretension, maybe because of the extra time he spent with me despite his overloaded schedule, maybe because of his soft exterior and softer voice… I listened.

When I walk out of the mental hospital fourteen days later, the same fit man who had searched me upon entry says something that I will never forget, something that leaves me aghast: "Don't hesitate to come back."

The disgustingly friendly, ingratiatingly positive salutation grated against every intention I had to *never*, *ever* again go back to that place. Why was he welcoming me to return? Because he knew something I could only see in retrospect: mental hospitals were places of healing, not punishment; they were a refuge, not a prison; they were sanctuaries, not dungeons. He was completely right, but still… once was enough.

The next time I see my mom, we are screaming at each other through the backseat window of my father's car. It's after my hospitalization, and I only want to go to New York, to visit the college guys. She called them up and blocked it. She fucking blocked it.

I knew my parents were to blame for my hospitalization, and I accepted that. They did what they had to do. What I didn't expect is that my mom would try to continue to monitor, manage, and manipulate my treatment after I got out. I deemed that I could not both establish an independent, healthy life and stand for that intrusion. I was enraged in the car, and it set off years of distance between my mom and me, to keep her from meddling in the recovery that she herself had initiated.

My adopted uncle and tenured psychiatrist Chip has lured me to the New Jersey shore—in his private prop plane, no less—to an old-school diner with a fatburger and a milkshake. Then he tells me we are going in the ocean. This is against all of my rules. Water, cold water, reaching the end of a landscape, immersion in nature, literal immersion. We walk to the beach and wade out to tolerable depths. My feet are wet. I think I'm done. "No, farther," says Chip. I recoil in panic, wade slowly up to my hips, then my chest, then my neck. "Now dunk," he says. He wants completion. I am under pressure against all of my fear-laden instincts. I simply *do not go all-in*, not since college. "Dunk!" I quickly dip my head, up to the crown. Chip is greatly satisfied. I am gripped by panic that I've crossed some irreversible threshold, and then I feel that I am still wearing my hat. I hope that the top of my head has somehow remained infinitesimally dry, negating the fulfillment of the ritual. It's a distinction without a difference. I went into the water. I survived.

Chip was a periodic voice encouraging me to deny the self-imposed boundaries that had enslaved me. He was blunt, direct, at times unyielding. This was his love, to nudge me *hard* out of my interminable stuckness. I remember the burger from that day. I remember soaring over Philadelphia's panoramic skyline. I remember the panic. I remember the water. Chip's message was that there was no threat in the ocean, no danger in completion. It wasn't a death sentence; it wasn't death. It was swimming.

The night before my childhood home is sold, after moving all our belongings into my dad's new apartment, I go back one last time. I go back to my bedroom, to the black carpet, and I lie down beside the bed, like I had once before. I let the floor hold up my body. I recount the thirty years of memories from that space. I say thank you. And then I leave it forever.

A painful goodbye needed some ceremony to mark its ending. It was a return to the spot my mother had tried to interrupt my downfall. To the place where my father and I played soccer using the doorway as a goal. Where I made Don sleep on a futon instead of in bed with me. Where I told T. I wished I hadn't brought her back to my house. Where my sister and I banged on the wall between our rooms. Where Summer Girl and I kissed against the wall. Where I grew up, and where I fell apart.

There are only two goals in my life after release: don't fuck up Wikipedia and get a real relationship. When my dad drops me off at my coffee shop office, he wants to tell me, "You're great." "Don't say that," I correct him. "Tell me to work hard."

I made good use of my time after the hospital, and I learned the art of ruthless focus. If I wanted a life, I had to lean hard into Wikipedia, my projects, my potential funding, my daily bouts of ten to fourteen hours of productive editing. Also, I knew I could not go it alone in this life: some form of companionship was going to be essential. I cut out anything and anyone that didn't align with those two goals. I set boundaries to advance those goals. I wrote down to-do lists with hundreds of opportunities I could pursue, and each day I got closer to my future.

I first see Siko on the steps of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. at a gala hosted by Google for Wikipedia's annual global conference, Wikimania. She's wearing a black dress with red roses on it. We don't speak. She will change my life.

I almost didn't go to Wikimania, but hopped on a bus to a hostel the day before it started. You can't always see what's coming your way, whether it's a truck barreling down the highway in the wrong lane, or a bag of bullion washed up on the beach you're combing, or a person so important to your destiny that you are absolutely clueless as you stand mere feet from them, wearing your only suit, eating shrimp canapes, unaware you're about to get absolutely fantastically whalloped by a life-changing encounter.

The next day inside the George Washington Grand Ballroom, I make my pitch. She's Siko. I know that. She runs the Grants departments. I know that. I need funding for my Wikipedia projects. I know that. I don't know that I will marry her five years later, but I sense something shifting as the room disappears around us and we talk for days and days and days.

There are moments when the ocean of consciousness parts, like a sea under uncommonly strong tides, and something just short of divine waltzes in. That was Siko. She was my magical dancer, tangoing with me around the ballroom, talking about everything and nothing, wondering what this feeling welling up was, what this wide awareness splitting open was going to let in.

Back home in Philadelphia, Siko in California, I spend hours on the couch watching a little pencil animation on Skype tease at a message from her. I slip into a giddy trance, the only sign of which is something my dad calls 'Siko face.' Stupid grin, eyes glued to that little pencil writing my destiny.

I kept Siko close, as in private, and as in all-day texting back and forth. Little quips, icons that said tomes, talk of work and politics and silly banter. What I couldn't keep close was how I was feeling every time I sat down at the computer: engrossed, infatuated, emboldened, elated.

In my upstairs office, with a computer perched high on a bookshelf, I load the webinar and find *seven hundred* people waiting for my talk on "Wikipedia and education." I have five minutes before we go live. Then four minutes. Three minutes. Two minutes. I've given this talk before; I'm ready. One minute. Thirty seconds. And then, like a small water balloon poked between my legs, I SHART, sending a stream of warm shit down both thighs and onto my calves. There is no time to react. There is no time to do anything but say, "Hi, I'm Jake Orlowitz and I'm going to be speaking about Wikipedia's transformative potential for learners today..." I give the talk, like a boss, like a pro, like a special forces soldier undeterred by any circumstance. It's a hit. Then I go take a bath.

There are moments when you graduate, when you realize your steeliness, your strength, your adaptability, and your *grit*. Sometimes it's literal *shit* that gets you over the hump to realize with enough focus and purpose, you are—at the core—indestructible. With my core spilling into my socks, I didn't flinch. I knew what I had to do, and I did it, because when you show up, you do the job, and then you clean up afterwards. We're here with a mission: we don't fuck around.

We don't talk about the wedding ring Siko was wearing in D.C. We don't talk about sex, or romance, or love. We're on the edge of flirting, sharing stories about life's insanity and inanity. One day Siko calls me and tells me she's separating from her husband. Guilt floods my chest. "No," she tells me. "This was not about you. This was not at all about you."

I honestly had no plans for Siko, no aims, no mission. I wasn't trying to win her or even date her. I was just taking her as she came into my life. When she separated, I centered it around me, knowing little to nothing about the thirteen-year marriage she had that wasn't working, or for that matter anything about thirteen-year relationships and their trials. Little changed after Siko left her husband. I didn't jump at her, I just kept talking, kept listening, kept letting her into my heart.

On a drive across the Golden Gate Bridge Siko nearly skids into the barrier when I tell her Wikipedia is just a means to an end for me. "You're the reason I'm doing this," I tell her. She swears to this day she didn't know I was into her.

I learned the value of making my feelings known. I had no expectations, but I was not going to pass up a momentous possibility, or keep my attraction a secret anymore. Siko is very bright, shockingly smart, and I believe her that she didn't see my emotions coming. I have no doubt, however, that underneath her logic and her systematic organizing of work and life, she felt them.

On the lawn outside Giants Stadium I kiss her. Lips touching, filling me with a new sensation, smell, and taste. "I might be gay," I blurt out as I pull my face away. Siko is unphased. We hold hands on the way to a hotel for the night, and for the next twelve years.

OCD has two potential components. The 'O' stands for obsessions, which are thoughts; the 'C' stands for compulsions, which are actions. When fused, these can brew a lock-tight nightmare of fear, ritual, relief, and repeat. I was more of an 'O' guy, but I did want to make sure that *just in case* the girl I was rock hard for was kissing a gay guy, I wasn't going to be hiding it from her. Full disclosure assuaged my guilt, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Adam meets Siko for a sushi lunch, a sit-down of powerhouses in my life. Adam can be probing and sardonic; Siko is used to dealing with all varieties of cocky men and bullshitters. I go to the bathroom. Then Siko goes to the bathroom. "What do you think?" I ask Adam. "She's.... solid."

I recommend if you are going to make someone your rock, that they be made of sturdy stuff, that they will go to war for you, that they will be an outright mountain to climb in terms of intimacy and understanding. Adam's word choice spoke volumes about not only his inability to unsteady Siko, but about Siko's rootedness on this earth. If you're going to choose to spend your life with someone, choose well.

Half put back together, I visit Jim at my old high school. He's head coach now, head of all maintenance for the district. "I still teach your swing and stack half nelson from the knees," he tells me. "You really had that dialed in." "Do you like your new fancy role?" I ask him. "I prefer to keep my world small," Jim tells me.

Jim lived a life of quiet excellence, performing out of the spotlight, and he preferred that. He didn't want praise or social approval. He connected with wrestlers, he took care of his family, he kept our high school looking manicured and superbly clean. A part of me didn't understand why he wasn't looking for more acclaim. He was a hero to me; I just thought everyone else should know it too.

My finest memory: picking shells out of the warm South Florida waters, filling my pockets with sundials and other treasures. I bring them to my mom sitting proudly on a beach chair and show her my discoveries. "You were easiest to parent when you left me alone, like at the beach in Florida," she quips one night at dinner. I rage away into the night.

There was a phase where I was holding on to the past very carefully, and my mom was unkind. This phase usually looked like an errant comment, a verbal bullet, striking my memories and sensitivities, and then me getting up from wherever we were, and walking home, sometimes for miles, to get away from the negativity. The phase didn't last long, but it hurt.

Adam and I are eating hummus at the strip mall when he tells me I won't be invited to his wedding. "It's just too much," he says. Too much history, too much meaning, too much.... he can't decide on saying love, or loss, but he returns to the point: "If you were there, it'd be all I could think about."

People ebb and flow out of your life, even critical ones. When the weight becomes too much to bear, it's easier to let go, even if it hurts, especially if it hurts. Adam's decision stung, the thought of missing out, but I knew it was right for him. His friends were jovial and sarcastic; I was trying on new modes of saving the world through better access to information. I didn't have an answer for Adam, but I accepted his choice and let him have his day the way he wanted it.

The first year of our relationship I move Siko's hands, constantly, irregularly, off my body. Something is too much, too close, too reminiscent. "Why do you do that?" she finally asks. It takes me years to tell her, "My body still remembers college. My body holds that pain."

Trauma is not just mental; it lives in us, in our cells, on our arms, through our nerves connecting the hands of an eager lover to our worst memories. Many experts have studied how to rewire those pathways, coming up with results ranging from exposure therapy, to EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing), psychedelic integration, and plain old talking it out. These patterns are sticky, but unlike gum on the underside of a desk, you can't just scrape them off. They're your thoughts, your feelings, your skin.

California

"Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

- Leonard Cohen

After my testicular cancer diagnosis at thirty, after my radical right orchiectomy, after coming to terms with being a one-balled baller for the rest of my life, I sink into a cozy slump at home in Philadelphia's gray November. I am being taken care of hand and foot, kombucha is brought to me daily, I cackle at dozens of Key and Peele videos. When Siko asks me about our next visit, in California, I balk. I'm not ready, I argue. She senses something is off, and she confesses something I was not expecting. "I want a local boyfriend," she says.

Siko was underlining the unspoken: if I can't be physically present, we can't be a couple. We have a hard talk; we come inches from deciding to 'see other people,' inches away from losing the love of my life. I get on a plane in January, and by June I don't buy a return ticket. Love is precious, but it is never guaranteed: it must be tended to, it must be grasped.

Siko cautions me that her three-year-old Zara can be shy to strangers. I'm visiting for the first time, in a magical January week when winter forgets and beach walks resume. The door opens. I drop down to my knees. "JAKE!" Zara yells, and runs straight into my arms. "She never does that."

I was wary of entering a relationship without the approval of Siko's precious kid. I knew Zara through Skype calls we shared while Siko was cooking dinner. I knew her through silly pictures we messaged back and forth. I didn't know her embodied reactions. I was simply floored when she embraced me, like my whole world was wrapping together in an exultant warm blanket. My relationship with Zara changed over the years, evolving into dad jokes and eye rolls with a teenager. That first moment is a highlight that set our new course for our coexistence.

Zara wakes me early one morning on my second trip to California. "Jake...." she whispers. "I puked." Zara is four, and I crawl out of bed so as not to disturb her mother. I clean up the puke, and we play for the next two hours so her mom can sleep in. Years later, Siko tells me that was the moment she knew.

I appreciated so much that Zara trusted me, enough to ask for help. She was not sick, but even as a proficient kid-puker beset by frequent motion-sickness in cars, she still didn't know how to remove throw-up from a fine imported carpet. I did, however, and together we made a great team. With her mom, we made an unbeatable one.

Aaron calls me while I'm in the supermarket shopping for my wife and stepdaughter in California. He is in a mental hospital. He made a mistake, he admits. He cheated on his wife. Three times. He had been abusing Ritalin, and his mind went crazy. He wants to know if I can read his thoughts. He wants to know if he can get his wife back.

The flip in Aaron, from vaunted friend to suffering addict and psychotic, was sudden and severe. In the weeks he spent at the mental hospital, the new screenplay of his life was drafted: it would involve constant intramuscular medication injections; it would involve many rounds of hospitalization and hallucination; it would involve divorce. I was there for him, like he was there for me, and that was all I could do as my friend's life fell apart.

The all-staff meeting for work is almost finished, two days of conversations and planned entertainment. It's the open mic night, and I have prepared my essay, "Journey of a Wikipedian," to read to the whole organization. It's my crazy debut, the official revelation of the morass I escaped and how Wikipedia nurtured my return to sanity, intellect, and community. I don't recall the crowd rising to their feet, clapping, yelling. I remember looking to the seats for Siko, walking, sitting down next to her, and grabbing her hand tightly.

This, to be totally honest, was my plan. I was quiet about it, only revealed it to myself. I set out to get better, so much better, that one day I could write a new narrative of triumph, share it with the world, and get back the self-esteem I had lost or discarded. In that room, reading the piece of nonfiction I cried over writing, I felt something deeper than success. I felt wholeness and acceptance and excellence. But not excellence for achievement—excellence for sharing transparently what a life can look like at its worst, and how it can shoot back up like a rocket, raining down little sparks of truth and destigmatization on anyone watching.

We are in the desert—me, Siko, her half-sister, my stepdaughter—swimming in a Joshua Tree motel pool along with another couple—mom, dad, two kids, sunglasses, magazines. "This would be a good place to take a family," I say. "This is my family," Siko responds. "I know, but a real family," I answer. It hurts her so deeply she can't even speak.

There are gaffes, and then there are galling acts of prejudice that reveal the smallness of one's worldview. Growing up, I had looked at children with two households and stepparents as lesser. I knew nuclear, permanent, unchanging. I didn't know that family took so many creative, inspiring, intrepid forms. I had to learn that. Unfortunately my learning painted Siko's family tree, so complex and intertwined it took months to remember it, as invalid. I never made the same mistake again. More importantly, I learned the deeper lesson.

On the way home from a weeklong library conference, I'm on a plane in front of a quiet Asian college student returning to his family for break. On either side of him are macho American dudes who decide to interrogate the young man about his stances on everything from engineering to immigration. The student becomes increasingly tense. Panicked, he retreats to a bathroom. The plane charts a course to land minutes later. Four muscled EMTs carry the student out of the bathroom on a blue tarp, dead from suicide.

On that plane, in proximity to crisis, hearing every awkward exchange of dialogue, every whisper of rumor as the sense of despair escalated, every detail from the flight attendants about his collapsed, unmoving state, I sense again the abyss. This is the point in the story where I go back into therapy. I found Sue, a specialist in trauma, told her what brought me to her, and then never spoke of that incident again. It wasn't me on the blue tarp; it wasn't me not making it home to my family. But I had my own story to unwrap, layer by analytical layer. And Sue listened to every word, read every essay I wrote, never forced her perspective on me or probed too much for my comfort. Her style was to let me recall my days, to vent, and then to offer a small gem of insight per session. I have a bag of them now.

At my Bubbie's ninetieth birthday, I write her a poem, as close to a eulogy as I ever came: "*Beser a patsh fun a khokhem eyder a kush fun a nar.* Better a slap from a sage than a kiss from a fool. No one gave a wiser slap. Or as they say... *Oyb di bobe volt gehat reder, volt zi geven a vogn.* If grandma had wheels, she would be a wagon. If Bubbie had wings... well, it's no small thing to have an angel in your corner."

When my grandmother met Zara for the first time, she exclaimed, "My only great-grandchild!" even though she was my stepdaughter. It made no difference to her: she was ecstatic. Once in high school I made the mistake of speaking to both my grandmothers and telling one that she was "glamorous, but Bubbie is really *elegant.*" It was true. Bubbie had grace, from her early days as a telephone operator, to raising two girls on Long Island with a manic depressive husband, to working at a university where she was *everyone's* grandmother. She was good stock, pun intended.

The psychiatrist tells Bec he doesn't use the term 'borderline personality disorder' and prefers 'emotional dysregulation.' I Google the symptoms. This is the diagnosis therapists run from; these are the clients counselors fire.

People with emotional dysregulation feel things far more deeply—tremendous joys, crushing lows, and sudden flips between them that can seem like dealing with different people. They are reactive to an extreme, and it leads to relationships crumbling as the people they attach to cannot handle their intense affection, live up to their unrealistic expectations, or endure their deep self-hatred or episodes of suicidal ideation. Unlike anxiety or depression, emotional dysregulation has a reputation for being untreatable with medications and difficult even for experienced counselors to work out in therapy. Still, it was good to have a diagnosis, a label, a container for the swirling, delighted, despairing tornado that my sister could be.

Siko and I are watching TV after the kid's bedtime, and the fictional drama is intense. Feeling my nerves rising, we begin a conversation that drifts into memories of college. "Let's just not talk about it," I say, trying to shield myself. Siko is suddenly very upset. "It's been fifteen years, Jake! I don't want to be married to this trauma," she tells me before I storm out of the room and out the door.

There were moments in therapy, long before hospitalization, when I marveled at my first counselor's ability to talk about his friends and his past. "Don't you feel that is too special to share?" I asked. I was very fragile, holding on to each memory like a precious treasure dangling in time. My therapist was a nonchalant guy, and he didn't understand where I was coming from. He didn't tell me in words what I needed to hear: that we honor our past by sharing it, that we bring the bright spots into our future by talking about them, and that we can never heal until we can give voice to the moments we are too afraid we will forget.

For years Rachel spoke softly to herself, responding to voices in her head. Finally they tell her to hurt herself.

The end is sometimes the beginning. My sister took a knife to her finger, sliced it open, and then waited outside the emergency room in winter for so long her lips got frostbite. But this was actually the first time of four in a psych ward that she checked *herself* into the hospital. We didn't know it would last so long, be so hard, require such desperate measures. But we learned what was really going on inside her head. It was a prison of false logic, compulsions, delusions, voices, and impossible moral obligations. It was insanity.

When I visit my grandmother Gummy for the last time, I walk in with my dad and two uncles. "You're all here! *Wowie!"* she says. Looking at me she exclaims: "Cute. He's cute! How about that???" "See you later," I say when I depart. "See you later," she responds, as she always did.

My grandmother was the stunning matron of a Philadelphia 'society' family, extraordinarily rich through the family business of selling industrial pipe to the U.S. government and military. She was a consummate host, a mother to the whole neighborhood, and the envy of many husbands and wives. But when the business went bankrupt and Granda Gup went to jail for tax evasion, she was just married to a narcissist struggling to make ends meet. She carried shame like a yoke. But she always showed me love, and when I could talk to no one, I talked to her. And she always responded.

There's a Facebook post with a familiar, foreboding feeling. It's a farewell, an explanation, an absolution, and a final goodbye. It's from Greg, my friend from summer camp, whose marriage had gone awry and custody battles erupted. Greg became aggressive, acted inappropriately, but ultimately was offered equal time with his son. Then he shot himself.

The specter of the abyss presented itself again. Only this time, *I* erupted, slamming down a red pillow on my bed so many times and so hard I did not notice my wife coming into the room, putting her hands on my back, and whispering, "It's ok." Greg was gone; depression killed him. An inability to accept a different future, a deep sense of guilt or shame, I don't know. I will never know. But I knew my job and it was to feel Greg's loss as deeply as possible so it could never hurt me. What else can we do to honor the dead but live fuller lives than we ever thought possible and reach out to those who are alive and lost.

In a river, at the base of a mountain where my wife's family has had land since the 1970s, where my wife played as a child, I swim out after her. She's in a kayak and I am wearing a preposterous wetsuit in the summer water. I have been musing for days. "I have a question to ask you," I say. "Will you marry me?" She pauses, studiously glances outward for an eternal moment, and then her eyes return to mine. "OK," she says.

There's not much more to say about this moment. My friend Matt might add: "Good life choice."

I don't hear from, speak to, or see T. for fourteen years. The day I announce my wedding on Facebook she likes the post. I peek into her profile. She's a doctor now, a cardiologist, like her father, still beguiling, still terrifying, no longer an irresistible threat.

It's not easy to completely avoid someone so consequential in your life for over a decade. To never send a "How are you?" message, or ramble off a reflective apology. That simple ‘like’ on Facebook was a trivial click of a button that signaled much more—that she had forgiven me, that she had moved on into her own successful universe, that she was glad I found someone who was a better fit, that she was happy I was happy.

The day before our wedding, before the crowds arrive, before I lock my keys in our car during our honeymoon, it is only Siko and me on a late September afternoon beach. It is impossibly peaceful, serene beyond measure, and my wife is walking out of the Pacific Ocean to be with me for the rest of my life.

If I could freeze one moment forever and bask in its sunshine infinitely, it might well be this one. I have nothing I can add to its splendor.

The nervous, excited, beautiful morning of our wedding, we go outside into the backyard and find a butterfly trapped in a sprawling spider web. I gently try to free it, and its wing comes off in my hand. I grab a toy metal pot my daughter has been using in the backyard and suddenly bash the butterfly into the ground. My wife looks at me in abhorrence for the omen of destruction I've invited on our special day. "It was already dead," I tell her, "I just ended its suffering."

Recovery, for me, involved a kind of mercilessness—towards the ineffective, the irrelevant, and the needless. In this case, the butterfly was sure to die and my newly honed instinct was to cut short its inevitable pain immediately, no matter the occasion. I had treated myself with a similar kind of scalpel (or bludgeon, whenneeded), to excise the thoughts and behaviors in my life that were increasing my pain and limiting my joy. I was sorry my wife had to witness this, but I knew the natural way of a slow death was far worse than sudden blackness under a kitchen plaything. The wedding was phenomenal; curses only exist in our conscience.

Zara, Siko, and I are watching the penguins in the fog at South Africa's Betty's Bay, with hot morning coffee. Wikipedia has brought us here, to a safari along the western coast of the cape, to an elephant park, and to this rock overlooking hundreds of black and white creatures. We take selfies that look like we are in penguin heaven.

One of the extreme perks of being a Wikipedia expert is that it is a very global movement. Siko and I traveled together, for work, to Hong Kong, Portugal, Mexico, Berlin, London, Montreal… and each place we worked we got to play in these amazing cities. Our last Wikimania together was in Cape Town, and it only made sense to tack on an extra week and go on safari. What made it extra special is that we brought Zara, who got to ogle the elephants and wildebeests with us. Our final AirBnB at Betty's Bay backed up to a wildlife reserve teeming with tuxedoed sprites. Penguin heaven was just that, and we were in it.

My mom is visiting me in California. We sit at my wife's favorite restaurant at a corner table. It's been four days of incessant ranting, to the point we literally hide in the bedroom for respite. My mom begins another tirade about my father, "I told you not to talk about him!" I yell. "Well, I won't silence my story!" she belts back. The waiter approaches. "You know how families can be," my wife interjects. She and the waiter laugh as I scowl into the darkness of the window pane.

Before things got better with my mom, they got much worse. She was unceasing and interminable with comments, complaints, criticisms, and opinions about everything she could attack. I had learned to push back, but something was off about it. It seemed like more than resentment gone wild; it was like a hyper form of logorrhea, and I just wanted it to stop. When she turned her focus to my father, I made a scene, and stood up to her words.

My sister Rachel spends four months in intensive psychiatric care. I visit her every day we are allowed. She won't eat. She suddenly flees the room. I keep coming back. They put her on an impossibly strong medication. The voices quiet. She comes back slowly to herself.

To see someone at their worst, and still love them, is love. My dear sister was so sick it was a mystery to the doctors. "Do you even want to get better?" they finally asked her. They tried a raft of increasingly powerful medications, they tried electroshock therapy (not the old-fashioned torture version), they tried therapy of all kinds. Somehow, gradually, the visits and phone calls started getting longer, the odd compulsions to pull another patient's hair or lick the floor stopped. Rachel started eating again, and from total darkness, there came a crack of light.

I'm sitting in the car on our street, seething, texting something pointed to Siko, breaking our cardinal rule that we do not fight over the phone. Siko said something short and dismissive to me, and I am feeling hurt and criticized. Suddenly, she walks out from the house, opens the car door, sits next to me, and within minutes, we are teasing and hugging again.

There are different styles within a marriage: Siko, at her worst irritable, curt, or judgemental, with an eye for things that are wrong and inefficient—always with a deeper vision I've learned to trust for how they could be so much better; and me, at my worst hypersensitive, ruminating, and distracted, with a visceral preference for calm, even delicate, communication at all times, wanting constant comity and ease in any present moment. Differing personalities do not break a relationship: they can make it thrive. If fights are fair, if there's a mutual effort to repair damage, and if there's ample time to bond and share company, love blooms. What's remarkable, too, is that ten years before, an incident like the car fight would have taken me weeks to recover from, but now takes only hours. Healing is a process, sometimes gradual, always worthwhile.

An email hits my mailbox one morning in Santa Cruz. Don is gone. He had a stroke. A bad headache followed by sudden death. I write the eulogy for our high school Facebook group. I only say nice things. Don deserves that. And he can't hurt me anymore.

I wrote two separate remembrances for Don. One was public, glowing, and showed him in all his unusual strengths and enthusiasm for life. The second contained my private feelings ranging through shame, confusion, and resentment. When Don died, I wrote, "the ghost had become a spirit" in my personal journal. Despite all I learned from him, despite his constant support for me, despite the sexual curiosity and experimentation, he had haunted me for twenty-five years, always lurking, always wanting. When he was gone, I was sad for him, but I was also relieved.

We are eating pizza with Siko's dad in Pingjum, at the best pizza shop in the northern Netherlands, which isn't what it sounds like. He is ecstatic, putting down pie after pie as his liver continues to decay, years of alcoholism taking over. One year later Siko cooks pancakes with him the day before he is filled with sedatives for palliative care and dies peacefully in his wife's house, accompanied by a loving daughter who forgave him.

Siko's story with her father goes back to adventures when she was only four, traveling the country as hitchhikers, living in the woods, spending too much time as a child in bars drinking Shirley Temples. By her late teenage years, Siko had laid a firm line, a boundary that would take decades to recede. As Siko's father got sicker, the opportunity to heal presented itself, and, like the woman I love would do, Siko embraced it. Our charming visits to the far-outside-of-Amsterdam parts of the country gave memories to hold on to through the surprisingly peaceful last days, through the grieving, through the present. My daughter Zara still plays Siko's father's guitar, celebrating not his faults, but his wild zest for music and life with all its complex and simple pleasures.

In a session with my new anxiety coach, I probe what it would mean to truly feel at peace. I am experimenting with anxiety-free being, trying to find the niche of my brain that knows ease, exploring my body for crevices where joy can seep in. It is almost the end of my session, and Siko needs our only home office next. I go right up to the hour in a very rare moment of blissful relaxation, when Siko knocks hard twice and barges in, irate that I've left her no time to set up for her own call. Distraught, I desperately message my real therapist, wondering what the hell to do to calm down, to regain that precious serenity I lost. "It's like baked bread," she tells me. "You walk by the kitchen; it smells amazing; you eat it. You don't expect the aroma of yeast and rising dough wafting through the house to last forever, you just savor it. Then it goes."

One of my greatest scars from my college relationship was a reflexive terror that good times would collapse into nightmares. It stayed with me for twenty years, this feeling that the better I felt, the harder the fall would be. Sue's words gave me something I could not have conjured myself. To take the best of any moment, to dig your teeth into it and taste its beautiful nectar, and then to lose it all in a second is *grace*, is *life*.

The first time I confess my intrusive thoughts is to my dad's best friend from college. He's a doctor. "Jake, have you ever acted on your thoughts?" he asks. I am in the car outside the dentist. I'm in a panic because my wife removed her birth control and we're going to start trying to have a baby next week. "Once, Paul. I had a student, a girl, about nine. I touched her arm." Paul pauses. His long sigh turns into an outline of a chuckle. "You're going to make a great dad," he says. I collapse forward onto the steering wheel in tears of relief.

The problem with thinking you're a pedophile is you can't just ask for help. You can't just tell your wife, "Well I want to have a baby, but I fear I'll molest him." This is the sordid trap of intrusive thoughts. The three most common: fear of being a pedophile (check); fear of harming someone else (check); fear of being gay (check). To me, each one was a specter I had to confront, the hardest by far being the one that conflated my affection for kids and love of playing with them with a horrific thought that I was out to sexually abuse them. It didn't make practical sense, but my mind couldn't tell the difference. In a moment, Dr. Paul's reassurance absolved me of all the sins I hadn't committed, and I was free to make love and babies.

Bec is kissing our ninety-pound boxer Bella in the text she sends me. "This is my little girl and I love her so so much." She is content, because Bella will let her love as much as she wants and disappear just as violently.

There are some loves only an animal can bear. Both Bec and my father loved the animals in their lives more than any human. No human could be as loyal, as tolerant, as forgiving, and as giving of affection. But therein lies a sadness: the animals of last resort were symptoms of the human relationships that couldn't be, that weren't sought, that failed to endure.

Aaron is in New York with his parents. His dad calls me concerned because Aaron is talking like a superhero villain named *Bane*. Aaron's voice is angry, fuming, but it's him. He won't take his medication. I listen to Bane. Bane agrees to a deal. Bane takes a pill.

Each time Aaron is hospitalized, they hammer him with such appropriately suppressive doses of medication it takes him six months to start over. So we have one goal: keep Aaron out of the hospital. Help him navigate his own manias, no matter how florid, no matter how out of touch. Bane, for Aaron, is a voice not of anger but of power. He feels strong with or *as* Bane. I am happy talking to that 'part' of Aaron. I am not afraid. I am steadfast. I am ready. I am his friend.

Adam has two new kids and inherited four more from his new wife. Six kids! For the man who never wanted any, for the boy who lacked so much love in his childhood. There is a picture of him being ridden as a horse by one of the children. Adam is grinning and totally game. He is not sarcastic. He is not defiant. He is not lonely. He is a beautiful man with a huge, loving family.

I used to think that I needed to help Adam grow, mature, heal, or change. But he changed on his own, when I was sick, adrift, and absent. I come back to that saying of my wife's: "Life is long." It's so long the person you knew at twenty can accomplish things at forty they never thought possible at ten. Who are we, and what do we become? It takes ages to evolve, epochs of life, but with persistence, support, and some luck, we can change. Adam did.

My mom says to me one day: "It's definitely bipolar, my therapist tells me, if lithium works. I never wanted to take lithium, because my father took lithium. But I'm going to try it."

Serious genetic mental illness most commonly appears in the late teens and early twenties. Not for my mom. The bipolar disorder that crippled her father hit her in her fifties, when the steadying routine of a jam-packed family life was gone, she was living alone in her own apartment with no one else to take care of, and her work as a Pilates instructor left large gaps of time for her anxiety and depression to cycle, way down and way up. After trying several alternative pharmaceutical approaches, she finally bit the bullet and went with the old standby, lithium, one of the first mental health drugs and one of the most effective. It worked. Which meant my mom could live a fuller, more balanced life, that we could begin to repair our relationship, and that she was, indeed, blissfully bipolar.

"You're not my dad!" Zara screams as I try to get her out of the car. There's a problem: her socks are too wrinkled. As stepdad, I am not authorized by the five-year-old to remedy this situation. "If you don't get out, I will carry you inside in front of your whole class." Zara relents. We walk into school together. A half-hour later, I come back to class, and gently hand her better socks.

Being a stepparent is *hard*. You get all of the flack and a fraction of the love and connection. But you still have to be the *parent*. You still have to draw lines, offer guidance, show up, and try to do it with good humor. I believe it pays off, maybe years later, as a bond slowly grows and the wrinkles are replaced with a kind of cozy kinship of the chosen kind.

On the drive up to the mountains, my wife tells me something curious. At my dad's visit two days before, he pulled her aside for advice. "What would you think if I weren't here in two years?" he asked.

My father's critical lack of self-worth left him with an interesting proposition: just die and leave behind his inheritance ahead of time. It seemed logical to him, beneficial, practical. That, too, is mental illness. With a great deal of psychological and emotional effort, I circled the wagons of his closest friends and family, to check in on him, to probe him for plans, to reassure him that any such measures would leave behind nothing but pain.

Siko now pregnant, I'm not allowed to vape inside anymore. I go to Ace Hardware and buy ten feet of one-inch tubing, wend it from the window to the couch, and spend the night sucking in nicotine rather than sleeping with my wife.

If alcohol had been my drug, I would have been homeless and destitute. I was lucky, I suppose, that my father's family's history of addiction did not land on pills or pilsners, but on a socially sanctioned work-enhancing upper with many non-cancer-causing formulations. Still, my thousand-puffs-a-day habit was straining my marriage, and my clever hack to smoke inside the house was not just clever: it was a sign of choosing a drug over family. The day Siko goes into the hospital, I pick up extra-stength nicotine patches, put *two* on my arms, and never vape again. Within two years I'm off nicotine entirely. That is, until one New Year's Eve when I decide to inhale a cigar, and the cycle starts over again.

"Wake up, I'm bleeding," Siko says at 6 am. "Ugh," I moan. "I mean it, Jake, I'm really bleeding." I snap to, see the puddle between her legs on the couch. It's our third try at pregnancy and we've made it 28 weeks. I drive so fast to the hospital that an ambulance couldn't have beat me there. Siko is fine, the baby is fine. When he's born seven weeks later, we name him Coyote: the trickster.

In Indigenous lore, the trickster is a creature of great power and great ingenuity, combined with overwhelming pride and foolishness to boot. Coyote surprised us with seven weeks of near-constant alarm that Siko would hemorrhage again. We kept him in as long as possible, and then when he arrived, screaming and smiling, he gave us the greatest surprise of our lives.

I notice my sister Rachel talking about a latent attraction to women. I look up a good dating app called *Her,* and she tentatively sets up a profile. After two or three dates she finds the right person. Rachel holds down a steady job. She's delightfully warm and caring, the nicest person you've ever met.

Radical love is very easy, if achieved, because you simply do what is best for another person with your whole heart, and of course their consent. That's it. Rachel and I had devoured the salacious *L-Word* TV show, and she was entranced (if not drooling) over those enviable (albeit dramatic) ladies. We didn't push her, but we did increasingly probe to see if it was something she wanted to try. She knew we accepted her; this was about self-acceptance and the boldness to try on a new way of interacting with women. It didn't take long before magnetism hooked her to a phenomenal being, someone full of charisma and energy and care. Work took on a normal cadence and she built competence. With each day her confidence grew and her own radical love shined back at the lucky people in her orbit.

Nadine posts pictures online of her uniform, her crews, her awards. She is a shining airline flight attendant leading the skies with laughter and zest. "Nick Nick" is eighteen, a stud by any measure, homecoming king even. Nadine tells him what I did for them when he was a baby. I am the savior in her story. She is the savior in mine.

If you hang in there, with luck, you get to see the people you knew way back when reach great heights of happiness and success. Nadine's lore about my support for her in Colorado, turned mythic in the narrative of Nicholas' upbringing, canonized me in her life as a secular saint. I never asked for praise, but when you get a win in this life, you have to take it. I helped Nadine and Nick when they needed it, and I am damn proud of that. Then they helped me, and I am damn grateful for that. This is the stuff myths are made of; these are the stories that make us heroes.

It's 5 am in the empty house and I am sitting in a rocking chair with Coyote, talking to him, talking to myself. "I'm learning to love you," I tell his six-pound spirit. "We're going to be ok."

I fortunately learned from my dad-to-be book that not every parent falls instantly in love with their kid. For me this was a huge relief: in my childhood home, love came before everything, before independence, before happiness, before responsibility, before boundaries. I wanted to get to know this new creature, to observe him with tender eyes and an open heart, but to meet him where I was and not where I felt I was supposed to be. I wanted to know I could do job number one and *keep him safe*. It didn't take long before responsibility became snuggles, snuggles became hugs, and hugs became kisses and tickle fights and taking bubble baths together and wrestling matches and loving him to freakin' death. To freakin' life.

Bec is dancing at a BBQ in Argentina, wearing a cowboy hat. She moved there to meet a polo player and now owns a horse and a near-blind fourteen-year-old dog. She's managed to pull off being a digital nomad in impact investing, helping the uber-rich do less harm with their wealth. She's traveled the world to find community. She's found herself a better place to endure her waves.

There's something ennobling about living abroad. And, there's something especially sick about America. In Argentina they stay out late having barbecues and dancing. They drink wine and talk. Work is not the most important thing. Like any country there are other issues, political, financial, cultural or otherwise. But unlike America, capitalism is not the foremost influence; status is not the primary goal; money is not the ultimate good. Even as an investment manager, Bec serves clients with options to minimize or even heal the economy's ills. Bec serves her horse Legend and her dog Cowboy. Bec, in the end, serves herself a better life.

Aaron is visiting me in California to meet the newest member of my family, my three-year-old son. Coyote immediately takes to Uncle Aaron, spending hours playing dinosaurs with him and reading picture books. Aaron and I smoke cigars under the redwoods, musing about the job he's held down for two years as a bankruptcy lawyer, the medications he's been reducing with the help of a new psychiatrist, his apartment that overlooks Central Park, and the growing peace he feels with his past. The ash burns long on the cigars and we put them out in a puddle of rainwater.

It's been four years since Aaron was hospitalized, two years practicing his specialty of law, three months of beginning to taper off his most flattening medication. His social life is expanding gradually as his stability evolves into a new kind of creativity and humor. It's not the exuberant life-of-the-party Aaron from college, but it is someone ready to embrace life, maybe a new love—maybe someone just able to cherish the people who have stood with him through his journey. His journey is not over. I'm so glad he's my friend and we get to write these next chapters together.

My mom hasn't gone more than three months without visiting my son since he was born, and he's three now. She's dating someone who is smart and handsome, frugal and handy. I talk to her on the phone every day. Every day. Every day.

Bipolar is a hell of an illness and lithium is a hell of a drug for it. My mom's moods cycle more smoothly and less drastically. She's not as pugilistic and ballistic, or forlorn and frozen. She's just cool, and I say that knowing she'll read this. I'm lucky to have a mother I get to chat with about some but not all things, and just benefit from that co-presence. To love one's mom is expected; to enjoy them is a gift.

On my dad's seventieth birthday I arrange for two of his heroes, the wrestling great Dan Gable and Olympian sprinter Carl Lewis, to record celebration videos. I organize a dozen more friends to make their video wishes. My dad is overwhelmed with appreciation. I barely speak to him myself.

I have a different relationship with my dad. We barely chat, but when there's a big moment, a momentous birthday, a car accident, a surgery, the death of a cherished pet, I show up. It's my way now of having a relationship with him, using boundaries with the purpose of safeguarding me but still allowing for signals of love, even if from a distance.

Zara writes me a Father's Day email from her other house. "Thanks for being my stepdad. You're a good one."

My attempts at affection with Zara were largely only accepted through wrestling or some other hand-to-hand combat. She offered me hugs on a punch-card for my birthday. She rolls her eyes if I say something sincere. This letter I was getting from her, from a distance, over the internet, at her 'real dad's' house, felt amazing.

"Yellow and blue are for anxiety. White and pink are for moods. Never open this box yourself. If you find a pill on the floor, give it to a grownup or put it in the trash. It's ok if you need to take medicine one day." I'm preparing Coyote for a future I never want him to have, but never want him to fear.

There may be a time, likely between eighteen and twenty-five, when Coyote starts to exhibit bizarre behavior, irrational thoughts, unpredictable moods, or deep, immovable emotions. Symptoms—genetically passed on—of mental illness. And if this happens, I want him to know we have a plan. We get help, starting with a gentle evaluation by a therapist and some medicines from a psychiatrist. I want him to know that I did this and it made my life better. I want him to know that he is not a failure if he has a box of colorful pills, that I will support him no matter what, and that he can live a tremendous life with any diagnosis. I want to be brave for him, by letting him know that I already love him if he's sick.

Watching for signs of early obsessiveness, I am alarmed when Coyote begins struggling to get out of the bathtub. He makes a worrying deal with himself. "Ok, I'll count to 30, and then get out." I am stressing: this is classic avoidant, repetitive, ritualistic behavior. He begins: "1, 20, 29!"And out he climbs. I smile. He may be like me, but he's much smarter.

I'm sure Coyote will surprise me and hurt himself in unexpected ways, probably through means and mistakes I can't even imagine. It's never the devil you know that gets you, it's the devil you don't. But still, there's a profound sense of relief to see him confront early conundrums that some people stick on for a lifetime, and crack them like a whip.

Staring over my shoulder as I text his grandma, Coyote wonders what the blue trailing marks are as I 'swype' words back and forth. Curious, he asks me if he can try to 'draw letters.' I say sure and set him up with a blank message. He circles and curves and zigzags and makes nonsense shapes. Autocorrect settled on a possible word and it pops up in the chat: 'Trickster.'

In Native American lore, Coyote is a figure of tremendous curiosity. Experimental and impertinent, trouble often befalls him. But with his combination of wily ways and boundless questions, he often gets what no one expects. In legend, he is so curious, in fact, that he creates the world.

"**You're beautiful,**" **I tell Siko as she slips on baggy jeans and a faded t-shirt.** "**You always say that, weirdo, cute weirdo, my weirdo.**"

To love, and to be loved for who you are, is the greatest treasure. There is no finer perfume, no aged wine, no vintage gemstone that compares. There is not a billion dollars worth of value in any stock market that can make you feel how it feels to look at someone with admiration, acceptance, and attraction, knowing that they return those feelings. To love Siko has brought me greater joy than I ever imagined, and to be loved by her has boosted me higher than a thousand flying cranes.

That's it. There are no more secrets.

Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for staying with me on this journey through the pages of *You're Only as Sick as Your Secrets.*

I hope my journey gives you permission to recognize and accept your own mental health struggles, whatever they may be. Seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. Therapy, medication, and supportive relationships are pillars of mental well-being, providing the necessary tools and support to navigate life's challenges.

Recovery is not a linear process. Each day is an opportunity for progress, no matter how small. Celebrate every victory, and be gentle with yourself during the difficult moments. It’s important to understand that healing takes time, and each step forward, no matter how small, is significant.

Despite the darkest times, there is always potential for relief and change. The human spirit is incredibly resilient, even when it feels like the whole world is against you. Treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer to a dear friend. Embrace the absolute truth that you are worthy of love and fulfillment.

Dig into the complexities of your past, confront your fears, and seek understanding. It is not easy to examine the shadows within us, but it is a necessary step toward healing. Each chapter of your life is filled with lessons learned and wisdom gained, often through pain and struggle. Through these very experiences, we find our strength and our capacity for growth.

Remember, your past does not define you. Each day is an opportunity to find delight and move forward. Embrace your journey. Life is a series of ups and downs, but each moment, no matter how challenging, is an opportunity for transformation.

It is easy to be hard on ourselves, to dwell on mistakes or perceived shortcomings. But it is through self-compassion that we allow ourselves to heal.

Holding onto secrets is toxic. They create a barrier between you and the world, isolating you from those who care most. Sharing your truth, even if it feels vulnerable, can lead to profound healing and deeper connections with others. Sharing your experiences with those who understand can provide immense comfort and strength. Know that you

are not alone in your struggles, and that there are people who will stand by you.

In sharing your own story, you are not only healing yourself but also offering a signal of hope to others. There is a community of souls who understand, who have walked similar paths, and who stand ready to support and uplift one another.

Sharing is brave. Being open about our struggles allows us to break free from the isolation that accompanies pain and find comfort in the human experience. There are people who care deeply for you and are ready to offer their support.

Setting and respecting boundaries is crucial for maintaining mental health and healthy relationships. Boundaries protect your well-being and ensure that your needs are met. They create a safe space for you to thrive and prevent others from encroaching on your peace of mind. Understand that it's okay to say no and to prioritize your well-being.

Acknowledge thoughts and feelings that surface without judging them. Write down one thing you are grateful for each evening. Reach out to a friend or therapist to talk about the secrets you have been holding onto. Engage in a creative activity that brings you joy.

Never lose sight of the peace and power that lies within you. You have the ability to create a life filled with love, joy, and fulfillment.

In a single formula: forgive yourself for your thoughts and feelings, remember that *something* is good in this world, and go get it.

With heartfelt wishes and enduring hope,

Jake Orlowitz

Jake Orlowitz is a seeker of well people and sane societies, an internet citizen, a digital project manager, and an ally and activist for radical culture change. He is the author of Welcome to the Circle *and* Welcome Back to the Circle.

Jake runs WikiBlueprint, a global Wikipedia consulting company. He founded and ran The Wikipedia Library program, and built The Wikipedia Adventure learning game. He is a native of Main Line Philadelphia and a graduate of Wesleyan University's College of Social Studies.

Reach out any time: jorlowitz@gmail.com. He'd love to hear from you.

"Home is not where you are born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease."

– Naguib Mahfouz

"We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls."

– Anaïs Nin

“Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light."

- Helen Keller

"The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear."

- Aung San Suu Kyi

"Nothing ever goes away until it teaches you what you need to know."

- Pema Chödrön

"The only normal people are the ones you don't know very well."
- Alfred Adler

"Grief and love are conjoined, you don't get one without the other."
- Jandy Nelson

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do."
– Brené Brown

"Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."
- Khalil Gibran

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."
- Maya Angelou

"It's never too late to have a happy childhood."

– Tom Robbins

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

– Carl R. Rogers.

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

- Mahatma Gandhi

"Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope."

- Maya Angelou

"It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves."

- Sir Edmund Hillary

Characters

Aaron
Jake's college acquaintance who becomes a close friend and grapples with his own sanity later in life.

Adam
Jake's best friend from childhood. He struggles to connect emotionally, after the death of his mother when he was two.

Bec
Jake's younger sister, who often feels isolated and emotionally overwhelmed.

Chip
Jake's 'adopted uncle', a persistent psychiatrist and periodic guide.

Cory Fischer Hoffman
Jake's very brief middle school girlfriend.

Doctor Jerry
An elderly physician who examines Jake during an awkward moment.

Don
Jake's childhood friend with whom he has a key but agonizing relationship with few boundaries.

Emily
Part of a prank set up by Jake's older sister Ray.

Festa
Jake's high school wrestling rival.

Jake (Narrator/Author)
The protagonist and narrator, sharing and reflecting on his life experiences.

Jake's Father
A central figure in Jake's life. Emotionally supportive yet marked by his own unresolved trauma.

Jake's Mother
A hardworking social worker who plays an essential role in supporting the family and caring for everyone's needs. An anchor for Jake.

Jim
Jake's high school wrestling coach and a figure of discipline and wisdom.

Jonathan Christmas
A childhood peer with exceptional athletic abilities.

Lee
A childhood acquaintance involved in inappropriate behavior.

Nadine
A Jamaican woman whom Jake helps by providing shelter. She later returns the favor.

Rachel (**Ray**)
Jake's older sister, a competitive and intelligent figure also struggling with serious mental illness.

Ronnie
A homeless man and alcoholic whom Jake befriends during a challenging period in Colorado.

Steve
Jake's high school friend who goes to basketball games.

Siko
Initially a professional contact through Wikipedia, Siko later becomes Jake's wife.

Stephen (**Sippy**)
Jake's college friend and one of the few people who witnesses Jake's chaotic living conditions in Colorado.

Summer Girl

Jake's short but passionate romantic partner one July.

T.

A college acquaintance with whom Jake experiences an intense and highly turbulent relationship.