

The panic

by

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ABSTRACT

I had my doubts about finishing grad school. Churning out a thesis didn't seem feasible or even necessary to my future. I could lie on a resume. I shrugged off the confused looks of friends and family when I explained my decision. They didn't understand how I could stand inches from the line and simply walk away.

I tried two different times to cobble together a thesis. I wrote crisp fiction without much soul. Non-fiction was too easy and frankly not interesting. I wrote to escape my world. I wanted to create strange places I could control.

I spent a lot of time reading. I had a professor once who only told me one useful thing. His advice was to read everything. I dove into genres I used to ignore. I fell in love with books like *Knockemstiff*, *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Ant Farm*. I loved fresh takes on old themes. I felt drawn to books with big ideas and strange characters.

I pulled away from "literature." I don't care about exploring family dynamics or the inner turmoil of a protagonist coping with his or her droll life in suburbia. I only find this interesting when it's done like *40 Stories*. Basically, I want weird.

This project was never meant to be my thesis. I started writing *The Panic* as a form of therapy. I needed to let out my frustrations and I needed to tell certain people what happened to me. I chose to create a blog.

I didn't have much structure. Really, I sat down and started typing. I kept going with a particular section until I felt that part of the story was over. The decision to use roman numerals stems from a desire to keep things clean and simple.

I'm not a fan of excess. Florid language and long sentences feel showy and shine the light on the author, not the story. Give me blunt, short sentences loaded with meaning. I think this is

why I'm a big fan of Raymond Carver. He takes a scalpel to the normal tropes of "literature." He gets to the point with fewer words and more meat.

Humor is important. *The Panic* is depressing at times. No one wants to read a story about collapse without a few laughs. I believe good storytelling accesses all human emotions. When I read I want to be happy, sad, angry and content. We live this way. In any given day we can cry and smile. Aimee Bender seems to get this point. She's a master of the black comedy, of finding the ridiculous in the serious.

I didn't want this book to be a clinical breakdown of what happened. I do use some medical terms but for the most part I chose to focus on my experience and not those of others. There is some research in *The Panic*. I felt it necessary to give the reader a basic understanding of anxiety. However, this isn't a medical textbook nor is this a self-help book.

I hope by reading this you will come to understand how many people struggle with mental health issues. This area of medicine has long been ignored or written-off mostly because of sexism and fear. Anxiety and depression were thought to be a woman's natural state. Bullshit. Lots of men suffer, they just don't say anything. As for fear, no one wants to be seen as the "crazy" one.

The anxious and the depressed are everywhere and most of us function pretty well. There are others who struggle to maintain a life. In the end, I think I wrote this for them. The response to my blog was so overwhelmingly positive that I felt it needed to be shown to a wider audience. *The Panic* became my thesis after I saw the good my story could do for others.

CHAPTER 1
STARTED ONE DAY

Started one day in a literature class during my final semester of graduate school. I remember feeling nauseous, dizzy, hot and out of body. At one point I thought I would faint. I held onto the table, I think out of a need to feel anchored. My heart pounded in my chest. I became disoriented and yet I still tried to look composed. It worked. No one knew any better. Class ended shortly thereafter and I stumbled to the bathroom. I splashed cold water on my face and in a few minutes I was fine.

I went to my next class. I ate a sandwich. Maybe I hadn't eaten enough? God knows it's possible in grad school. Ten minutes later it happened again - only worse. I fled the classroom, this time in terror. I knew something was seriously wrong. I called my then girlfriend and she took me to student health. The doctor took all my vitals. My heart rate was a large number that I don't recall at the moment. I slurred my words and couldn't remember half of what the doctor told me.

Into the ambulance. I convinced myself I was having a stroke. I was dying.

The doctor at the hospital looked at all her fancy instruments. None of them said I was dying. I had a migraine or possibly a panic attack. Go home she said and get some rest.

Liar. I knew better and I proved my point. Over the next few weeks I continued to have these episodes. I'd be fine and then I wouldn't. Soon, I just wasn't fine all the time. I couldn't go to the store or to school or anywhere without feeling dizzy. I had a brain tumor or something

awful. I went back to the doctor and she ordered a CAT scan of my brain. Nothing. No weird growths or leaky veins. Just a brain and it was playing tricks.

The doctor gave me medication. The cousins Clonazepam and Citalopram. One for anxiety and one for depression. I had to take them every day. Nothing changed. I couldn't leave the apartment. The hallway just outside my door rolled and gyrated. I had to walk with one hand on the wall. Here was my proof. The medication didn't immediately fix anything. The doctors had missed something.

Back to the hospital. This time to an Otolaryngologist (ENT). He tilted, rotated, shook and spun me every which way looking for signs of an inner ear problem. Nope.

I spent most of my time in the apartment. Other TA's had been assigned my classes and I was allowed to do my schoolwork from home. I couldn't do it. The computer screen gave me a headache after only a few minutes, so did the television. My eyes were constantly searching. I tried to focus on everything and, as a result, could focus on nothing.

I became afraid to leave the house. I couldn't trust my body. The couch, bed and floor were safe places. The mysterious disease had no effect in these areas. My rational mind could not or maybe would not put two and two together. I wanted so bad to have something that showed up on an x-ray or MRI and I was determined.

Lying in bed. Computer in lap. I was attempting to grade speeches that had been recorded by another TA. I wanted to be normal and so I pushed. My girlfriend lay next to me. I started shaking. My arms and legs twitched and lunged. I made guttural, hopeless cries. Here was my proof.

Lying in an emergency room bed. Still shaking. Unable to stand. The doctors asking me all sorts of questions. I could answer intelligently. I couldn't control my limbs. I was hooked to monitors and sensors. Heart rate normal. Oxygen levels normal. Speech normal.

Lying in a hospital bed. Blushing. I had just peed on the orderly. He was helping me into the bed and I started urinating.

The doctors told me to rest. They came in every hour to check my blood pressure and other vitals. I told my girlfriend to leave. She had seen too much. She had lain on top of me while I seized, trying, in vain, to keep me calm. I didn't sleep that night. The room twirled and I held tight to the side of the bed.

Around two in the morning an urgent voice piped over the hospital PA system. Code red. I heard the rushed patter of soft shoes on carpet. Someone was dying and I was reminded, this is the place where some people die. Some don't make it. I was convinced I wouldn't and so I kept my eyes open.

The next day I was treated to a chest x-ray, an EKG and an EEG. All normal. A Neurologist came by to watch me seize. He asked me more questions as my body heaved up and down. Once again I answered them. Then he gave me a list of three things to remember. Cat. Orange. Automobile. We talked about the Super Bowl. I was happy the Saints won. We chatted about school. Then he asked me to tell him those three things. Cat. Orange. Automobile. He said I was having pseudo seizures. He said people

experiencing real seizures often slip into a form of unconsciousness. I had snapped. My body had simply revolted. This was its way of releasing stress.

I stayed in the hospital for two days. Friends came to see me. Good people. I was given a card signed by most of my students. I took calls from family back home but had to stop because I would start shaking half way through the conversation. The doctor had flat out told me I wasn't dying. I had severe anxiety. This sounded easy. It isn't.

CHAPTER 2

I HAVE A FRIEND

I have a friend who is terrified of elevators. Hates them. Given the choice of walking up fifty flights of stairs or taking the elevator and he will always choose the former over the latter. This same friend came to visit me in the hospital. He was there when I was discharged. I had to be taken out in a wheelchair. My friend offered to push the wheelchair while my girlfriend got the car. Wheelchairs are not meant for stairs. We went in the elevator. I could see the fear in his face even though he tried to look calm for my sake. Tiny (monumental to him) acts of courage.

I had circles all over my chest and stomach from the various medical instruments suctioned to my skin. They left behind tacky glue which ripped at the hairs when removed. I spent the next two days in bed looking like a pepperoni pizza. I slept, broken slumber. I had become afraid to close my eyes for fear they would not open again.

The psychologist said I needed to push myself. The medicine would help but I needed to get out of the house. She said I had agoraphobia on top of panic disorder. Agoraphobia roughly translates to fear of the market place. Grocery stores were the worst. So many people and sounds. So much to look at, an entire aisle full of cans. Thirty different kinds of spaghetti sauce. My eyes darted from one thing to another without ever settling. Panic disorder is basically fear of fear. A person (me) is terrified of having another panic attack and that fear causes another panic attack.

She explained that my base instincts were working overtime. The flight, fight or freeze response had taken over. This is great if you are primitive man or are in a dangerous situation. Your body needs to protect itself against threats. The problem was my brain saw threats everywhere. I couldn't drive. The constant rush of cars passing by made my palms sweat and my heart race. I had to pull over. It once took me thirty minutes to go two miles. There was no traffic.

I was told to exercise and meditate. I tried walking our dog. This happened once. I got about a half mile from home and had a panic attack. What if I blacked out and hit my head? Would anyone find me? These types of questions were always on my mind. I have a pervasive fear of passing out. I think this goes back to my first panic attack. I remember the tunnel vision and the feeling of watching myself from outside. This is the form of my terror.

Yoga. I chose it because I didn't have to leave the house. I bought some DVD's and a mat. I think I gave my girlfriend the money because there was no way I was going into Target. Shame was the dictating emotion by this time. I felt stupid for not being able to do a simple thing like go into a store.

I didn't understand the point of yoga. The moves were difficult and I found it impossible to relax. I tried meditation. I bought an app for my iPod. I owe a lot to Andrew Johnson and his thick Scottish brogue. His whispery voice infused my muscles with stillness. I would lie on the floor and listen to my breath. Shallow at first and then deeper and deeper.

It seemed like the atrophy had ceased. However, I became so obsessed with self that I lost sight of everyone else. My girlfriend had been very supportive but the constant stress took its toll. I would get angry and frustrated at my situation. I wanted to be healed. I never hit or

yelled at her but I was a drain emotionally. I was in many cases a toddler. I needed constant attention and freedom at the same time.

CHAPTER 3

FEBRUARY 4TH

A specific day. No reminders on the calendar. I don't need any. I used to dread February 4th. This was the day I could point to and say "here is where everything fell apart." Life was good on February 3rd. February 4th of the previous year was probably fine. Hell, my February 4th was decent for a few waking hours.

Is this rare? I no longer fear this day. This was the first year I forgot about it until it had passed. I didn't work myself up for weeks in advance like I had previously. What concerns me is that I can't remember too many happy dates. I know when I first met my fiancée (July 16th) and that's about it. Sure, there are the standard days - mostly holidays and birthdays. I don't know when I rode a bicycle for the first time. I don't remember what year I had my first kiss or even when I had sex for the first time. I remember all kinds of bad stuff. I was twelve when my dad had his heart attack. I remember waking my roommate on the morning of September 11, 2001 to tell him something horrible was happening. My grandmother died on October 14th.

There will be good days to remember. I will always know August 3rd and the day our imaginary child is born. Is that it? I know life before February 4th wasn't great but it wasn't terrible either. Ups and downs. Perhaps I am too focused on the aftermath. Anxiety limits the vision, allows breadth and not depth. Maybe there will be a specific day where everything magically fixes itself. Something random - October 17th, June 21st, February 4th. Who knows? In reality there will be no such day. Call it what you will: happiness, stability, contentment. Good things take time. Instant gratification is unreal. Why then does instant unhappiness feel like a possibility? I guess I want to know who took my rug and why on this

particular day? It's important to me now. I don't know whether to remember or to forget. Either option has its good and bad.

CHAPTER 4

DID I MENTION

~~I've been told by a few people to keep writing. I am flattered and a little embarrassed. My story is really our story. Many people have sent me messages telling of similar situations they've experienced. I will keep going as long as what I write is helpful.~~

~~So.....~~

Did I mention I couldn't sit in a chair? For whatever reason sitting in a chair made me woozy. I felt like I was looking over the edge of a cliff. I would squirm and fidget. I clung to the sides, knuckles white with exertion. People made it worse. Friends would come to visit. We sat at the dining room table. They'd talk and their words were disorienting. I felt drunk on their language, like someone had filled the conversation with grain alcohol. Only this wasn't fun. I would gradually slink down the chair in a desperate attempt to find stable ground.

Here is some pure speculation. I had my first panic attack while sitting in a desk. Maybe this explains my early problems with chairs and tables. I can dig deeper. I never said much during grad school. I felt outmatched. I longed to be better, smarter than everyone else. I told my ideas to people who fed my ego. Grad school is legal assault. You are judged not on your ideas but on the strength of your ability to sell those ideas. I had so much to say but lacked the confidence to open my mouth. I paid a price. I think I was viewed as aloof or maybe standoffish. In reality I didn't want to look like a fool.

What happens when you have a lot to say and never speak? I told my thoughts to the shower head or the wall. I'd replay situations in my head over and over again. This is where the OCD would take control. I would say the same little speech to an imagined audience until I got it perfect. How would I ever know? Inanimate objects had no opinion and I preferred it that way. I was always right.

I can sit in a chair like no one's business. I own it. It's fair to say I am an artist in this particular area. One of the many interesting things about anxiety is that now I have no choice but to speak. Suppression only feeds the beast. I must act, must speak or risk detonation. Much of what I do comes out as wiry showmanship. This is the release, the valve. Frankly, I can be annoying. Just ask my fiancée. I need to find a way to better alleviate the tension when it starts to rise. Acting like an idiot in the grocery store is only *so* funny. I recognize I can no longer be silent but I don't need to shout. There is middle. I just need to find it.

CHAPTER 5
BEFORE I MOVE FORWARD

Before I move forward I need to take a step back.

I need to tell you about my OCD. I am a counter. What does this mean? Well, as a kid I used to turn the lights on and off repeatedly until I reached a sense of enough. This could be two times or it could be twenty seven. I never knew. I would count the number of steps from the front door to my bedroom or the number of ceiling tiles in my dentist's office. I felt pressure from within to do these routines.

I was great at making excuses. The light switch was stuck or my shoes simply wouldn't stay tied. Kids are weird. I can see how these explanations made sense to others. I ran into trouble in high school. I think the combination of OCD and hormones pushed me to my limit. I could only be *so* strange. There were two thousand people in my high school, four thousand sets of eyes. The deceptions became more elaborate. I had to run back to my locker again because this time I forgot my book. In reality I needed to turn the dial on the lock.

I finally told my mom. She took me to a therapist. I still have OCD, only I don't manifest my behaviors anymore. Instead, I think and think and think and think.

And yet I don't. The hyper focused mind has a tendency to fixate. The early days of my anxiety were all about me and about how I was feeling. I forgot about other people.

My girlfriend agreed to drive me home from Iowa to Washington. I couldn't finish grad school. I couldn't work and consequently I couldn't pay my bills. I still couldn't drive so that meant my girlfriend would have to do it. Two thousand miles. Two thousand miles to think about what had happened.

I used to be normal. I used to be a fancy pants TV News Producer. I used to teach at a major four year college. I used to kayak and ride bicycles. I used to give speeches in front of hundreds of people. I used to have money. Now, I was just some fidgety, unemployed, scared, flaccid thing.

Two thousand miles of thinly veiled irritation. My girlfriend saw this as duty and not something to be done out of love. This was her last act. Get me home and forget. First, she had to deal with my food poisoning. I decided to eat a hot dog from a gas station. You know the kind, the one rolling in grease and a black crust you hope isn't dead flies. I filled a plastic bag with vomit. Later that night I pooped my pants. She threw them away.

We got stuck in a snowstorm. Early May in Wyoming. The roads looked like peeled oranges. I puked and micromanaged and told her to keep going. We had a fight when she decided to stop for the day. She told me I could drive if I wanted.

We arrived on empty. I had reached the bottom of my stomach and she the end of us. She left a few days later and we broke up over the phone the next week.

I used to have a girlfriend.

Now, I lived with my parents. They ran a daycare out of their home. I slept on a bunk bed in my old room. My worldly possessions fit inside a suitcase and a couple of boxes. The first night alone I lay awake and thought about "used to" and "couldn't." I counted my heartbeats.

Remember the hospital? I knew I was dying. I needed something to distract my mind. I could hear my hurt thumping against my chest. I started counting until I hit fourteen. During the night I kept counting to fourteen and then would start over. This kept me going, offered me continued proof of existence.

CHAPTER 6

DREAMS ARE FUNNY

Dreams are funny. As a kid I wanted to be a ninja. Later, I imagined myself as an award winning journalist. Now? I don't know. Everything is abstract, splatters of paint on a canvas. I know I want to work a job I love. I'd prefer a job helping people. I don't need a lot of money, just enough to help raise a family. Maybe that is a lot? The exact title of my future profession remains a mystery. But this is a big dream.

You know what I really want? A day without worry. I want to not think when I walk into a grocery store or any crowded place. A little vacation from my current reality. I want to linger in an aisle or stand patiently in a really long line. I don't want to scan for the exits. I'd take my time, an obscenely long time. I wouldn't break out in a sweat. Hell, I wouldn't even wear deodorant. Unnecessary. I'm Joe Cool. Hace friio.

The malevolent side of me has different plans. I'd run down the aisles with my arms outstretched knocking jars of Ragu and Newman's Own to the ground. Splashes of glass. A red chunky goo, onions and garlic, the insides of some Italian man soaking the floor. I'd rip off the tops of bananas, bite apples and put them back. I'd dump gallons of two percent into the bins of bulk nuts. I'd move the price tags around. Confusion everywhere. A little payback for the past three years. Just for spite I'd fill cart after cart full of stuff and then get in the speedy checkout lane.

I'd love for my mind to be a beach. White sand, diamond water. Sunshine every day. Delicious iced beverages. There'd be big tennis rackets on either side of me. We're talking miles high and miles wide. These rackets would swat away any clouds. No gray. No mountains

or valleys. Flat as far as the eye can see. The horizon clearly visible. No obstructions. Easy to spot trouble coming. A clear future. So easy to reach for the stars when you know where they are.

Instead, I have this rusty jalopy. A glacier rubbing against nails. One cautious step after another. Sometimes I'm not sure if the steps are going forward or backward. I guess this is life. We all struggle. No one has it easy despite what we might think. Still, I have to keep dreaming. I need to feel that warm sand between my toes. I need a really long line to be just a really long line.

CHAPTER 7

I HAVE DAYDREAMS

I have daydreams where I'm the blood soaked, gun-toting hero. I grew up without strong male role models. I filled in the blank with Bruce Willis jumping from the roof of the Nakatomi Tower attached to a fire hose. I'm the quarterback making the last minute glory toss to the end zone for the win. I'm the president brokering a deal to save the world from evil.

I am none of these things.

Limitations are hard, learning them is even harder. I want to in a future without ceilings but that's simply not true. I know this because I spent a few weeks sitting on the floor listening to speeches with ice packs pressed against my head.

The last semester of grad school I volunteered to teach four lab sections of speech. That's roughly 90 students. Put another way, that's six speeches from each and every one of those 90 people. Six speeches to listen to, take notes on and grade. Hours of "Imagine" and "In closing" of trying to find the good in the awful and pointing out the excellent in the already great.

I took this extra section because I needed to be the hero. After all, I'd won a teaching award. My students loved me. I had the respect of my peers. I was quiet cocky.

I kept trying to do my job even after the panic attacks started. People were relying on me. I couldn't let them down. Since I couldn't sit in a seat, I sat on the floor. I smothered my head in ice packs to dull the headache and cool the skin. The classroom made me sweat. My

body temperature rose when I opened the door. I soaked through shirts and coped with moments of raw terror when I thought I'd simply float away. I crouched in a corner with ice dripping down onto my shirt offering advice.

When I finally gave up I didn't feel relief, I felt shame. Other TA's stepped up and took over my sections. I made their lives harder. My boss, a caring and patient woman never pressured me. We talked often and her only concern was my well-being.

I assumed the worst of my fellow TA's. I believed them to be angry with me or secretly thinking I was faking it, or worse – that I was insane. I judged them because I believe they were judging me. Gratitude means admitting vulnerability which by extension means admitting you need help.

Time is only really useful when you use it. I've thought a lot about my foolhardy attempts to deny the truth. I did real damage to myself and to others. I can see through the fog now. My limitations and faults are clear. I would never want to be president. You have to sacrifice too much of yourself. I don't have a strong enough arm to be an NFL quarterback and I think guns do more harm than good. Besides, all that shooting and blood would induce a panic attack.

CHAPTER 8

BACK HOME

Back home. The Fourth of July every day. The lit fuse firecracker children spinning and jumping. Explosions of laughter. The booms of heavy feet down a hallway. Joyful chaos punctuated with moments of sadness. The syncopated sobs of hurt. A deafening cacophony of a house full of gun powder and matches.

And me - a thirty-one-year-old with panic disorder.

The first few months were a copy of each other. I hid. The kids, like everything, were too much. I spent a lot of time reading in my room or sitting in a chair. The medication made it possible to watch television and use the computer in short intervals. I didn't want to talk to anyone. My friends all lived nearby but I couldn't face them. I didn't want to explain. What could I say? I had no idea what happened. All I knew was ten minutes. Ten minutes of fear in a classroom changed everything.

I wouldn't be lying if I didn't think of suicide. Nothing seemed possible for me anymore. I loved to travel and yet the idea of getting on a plane or driving turned me to stone. This house - this tiny room - was safe. The crap thing of it all is that I still wanted things. I didn't simply give up on my dreams. They seemed an arm's length away. I think that's why I thought of killing myself. I never picked up a razor or a gun. I didn't have to; this was the most extreme I had ever been. I am afraid of dying and so suicide never made any sense. I want to live. This wasn't living. I had limits, felt them for the first time. I couldn't do everything.

I guess this is the point when the hero gets a montage. The triumphant music blasts. The beaten down protagonist makes a comeback. Didn't happen.

Baby steps.

I needed my mother. She spent all day with kids and spent her nights with one. We started with trips to the grocery store. I would stay for as long as I could handle. The average time was less than a minute in the beginning. We took short drives. She would talk and I would stare at the road ahead. In both situations my knees would shake and my head would throb. I had to relearn tasks I had been doing for years. I failed more times than I can count. I had a new definition of success. Staying in a grocery store for five minutes was a gold star day. Taking a walk alone was my moon landing.

My mother didn't push nor did she give some rousing speech. She let me dictate my own recovery. I eventually started doing things on my own again. I hadn't licked my anxiety. Every day presented new challenges. Lines were the worst. Anxiety is motion. A line is congestion, stopping. I willed myself to stay, not because I needed to but because of what others might think. Societal expectations played a large role. I didn't want people to know. I didn't want them to think me a freak, or worse, think I was crazy. I felt crazy, insane because I couldn't explain my behavior. I had managed to leave the house but I was still hiding.

CHAPTER 9

I ONCE HAD A BRILLIANT IDEA

I once had a brilliant idea. Follow a girl.

Island construction. Move with her to Iowa, thousands of miles from home. Look out a lonely window toward the west. The view blocked by endless fields of corn. My friends and family somewhere behind the scenery. Why? Love? Nope. I made my decision on a whim. I wanted out. Sure, I thought I loved her. After all, she'd have sex with me. What's not to love? A man-boy in his early twenties, a self-professed nerd found someone willing to be naked with him. There's something to this.

But not enough. We stayed together for four years, mostly because we had no one else. We were afraid to end the relationship. One of us should have said enough when she asked me to move out. Instead we continued our whatever for another year.

This isn't really about a girl. It's about choices. I made a string of decisions based on a perverse sense of loyalty. I had a chance to back out before we left. Then she started crying, said she wouldn't know anyone. Besides I'd already promised. She spoke to my inner weakness. I didn't want to make hard choices about my own life. I ran in search of the undefined.

I can't blame her for the turbulence of our relationship. She'd had a surgery before we left that didn't go well. It took her a long time to recover from the emotional wounds. We stopped having sex. Didn't have sex for 18 months. I never cheated even though I thought about it constantly. Medications the doctor gave her made her hard to understand. She would be

laughing and then she would be crying about our lack of paper towels. We were two self-inflicted wounds.

Stranded. Away from anyone who could really help. We'd made friends, good friends. However, the nature of our problems made them moot. We slogged through. I'd walk to work most mornings. No sun, negative temperatures, a serrated wind. I crunched along the unpaved sidewalks wrapped in layers of clothes and yet still cold. My skin hurt. I kept going. Kept walking toward a crappy minimum waged job and a beard of pubic hairs on the urinal.

We ended in the car on a drive north to see some of her relatives. I thought we'd come to the decision at the same time. Her aunt and uncle had two beds made up when we arrived.

I should have gone home. Back to the Pacific Northwest, to green and gray. A vertical place. I didn't. I holed up in a crappy one bedroom apartment. I slept on an inflatable mattress - my own breath. Soon I would start grad school. I guess this is why I stayed. I had already been accepted. I was searching for meaning, a rational explanation for why. Getting into grad school was an achievement. I never stopped to think if it was the right kind of achievement for me.

CHAPTER 10

I ENJOY CHAI

I enjoy chai. I specifically enjoy an iced-grande-non-fat-five-pump chai tea latte from Starbucks. Been drinking them for years. I developed a taste when I worked for Starbucks. The beverage is both spicy and sweet. I have cravings, the intense kind that start in the back of your throat and make your teeth sweat. I gladly pony up nearly four dollars for a drink that is half ice.

Here's the problem. Chai has caffeine. Stimulants are triggers for most people with anxiety disorders. I am no different. Chai is my buddy. We have history. I've had great conversations with friends over a cup of Chai. I've road tripped across the country with chai as my fuel. Chai helped me stay awake when I needed to study and was there after every break up. The grande size fits perfectly in my palm. It was as if the folks at Starbucks used a cast of my hand when they designed the cup.

I have decided to part ways with chai and eventually caffeine in general. I don't want to. I've had to let go of so much. There are decaf chai's (sold in grocery stores) that come in smooth boxes but they don't taste the same. They tease with their glossy appearance. Besides, where is the communal aspect? How can I make new memories with a product that is designed to be consumed at home?

This will be difficult. Today is my first day without chai in probably five years - maybe longer. I substituted with a decaf iced mocha. Not bad. Not the same. I am drinking lots of water in an effort to extinguish the intense hankering I have for chai. I have to stop. The

caffeine makes me tense and jumpy even after all these years. That's a testament to the power of anxiety.

Alcohol is also out (mostly). I can have a drink or two every now and again. The big problem with alcohol is my medication. The two do not play well together. I've been told that drinking and Clonazepam could lead to seizures. I love me a pint of Fat Tire or Guinness and I also love not having seizures. You win again anxiety.

What can I drink? Water. I'm thinking of ways to make H₂O sexy. Maybe throw in some glitter or food coloring. Come Forth of July I could put a sparkler in my glass. Fruit in water seems to be a thing. I don't mean to complain and there other beverages I can enjoy. Lemonade is nice as is ginger ale. I was just hoping I could keep this one thing. I can't explain why, perhaps because chai has been through every stage of my adult life. I know I will feel better in the long run and this is for my own good. Still, that doesn't mean I have to like it.

CHAPTER 11

I HAD ONE CLASS

I had one class and a thesis to finish my master's degree. Going back to Iowa wasn't an option. I enrolled in an online literature class. Did I really care about finishing? At that point, my biggest concern was feeling like an adult. My mom basically gave me an allowance. By taking the class I was eligible for financial aid. I took the maximum amount. Racking up thousands in debt sounded better than asking for help.

I spent most of the money on various forms of therapy. I still somewhat believed (hoped) the source of my problems could be removed during a surgery. My almost constant headaches were an enabler. This pain provided me an excuse to avoid dealing with the real issue. I went to an acupuncturist, massage therapist and chiropractor. I still did yoga and meditation. I tried church for a short time. I went to a dentist who made a night guard for me. I saw a neurologist who ordered an MRI and an MRA of my brain.

The money went quickly.

These different approaches provided short-term relief. This relief fueled my obsession with not wanting to have a mental illness. I turned a blind eye to the progress I was making. I could drive by myself. Grocery stores and other crowded places were getting easier. I took walks alone all the time. I spent time with friends and didn't want to run screaming down the street. I helped out with the kids. None of this mattered because I didn't have panic disorder. There had to be another test.

And so I did something stupid.

I talked with my neurologist about coming off my medication. He didn't think I had a problem with anxiety. I seemed so normal to him. We agreed I would wean myself off the drugs over a period of two weeks. Then, he said, we would find out what was really going on because the medication I was taking could be the cause of my problems.

I loved this man.

I spent the next two weeks sweating and falling down. I cried a lot and hallucinated some. I had terrifying dreams that woke me in the night. I shook. My kidneys and heart hurt. My eyes blurred every time I moved them. My head swooshed like there was an ocean of sand inside. Progress.

I retreated to my room - to my bed. I stayed there even after the two weeks passed. There were several low points during this period. The first was on New Year's Eve. I was alone in my room (too afraid to leave) eating a pizza pocket. I started crying and the tears fell on the crust. I actually ate my own tears. The second was when a good friend came to take me to her house. I ended up in her spare bedroom hiding on a mat insisting that she take me home. The third happened back at my parent's house. I punched several holes in my closet door. I wanted to be taken away. My mom cradled me in her arms as we sat on the floor. My dad told me I would be okay. I wanted to be taken to a mental hospital. At that moment I

believed I would never be well. I would end up a drooling, rambling mess that people pointed at on the street.

CHAPTER 12

A FEW PEOPLE

A few people have told me to simply "get over it." I would love for this to happen. I long to wake one day to find that I am cured. Poof! The panic came on quickly so why *can't* it simply disappear? No one wants to be this way. I didn't want to find myself curled up in the bottom of my shower. That wasn't a life goal. I didn't want to slink naked across the bathroom floor to the bed because I couldn't stand. Who would choose to live this way? I won't chastise these people or call them out for being misinformed. Instead, I'm going to relay some information I have garnered through books and through therapy.

How does a panic attack work?

Good question. Well, there is something called the autonomic nervous system. The ANS (it's okay to laugh) regulates things like hormone secretion and heart rate. Still with me? Well, the ANS is divided into two systems: the parasympathetic and the sympathetic. The parasympathetic is in control most of the time because the default setting for most people is, believe it or not, calm. The sympathetic system takes over whenever there is some kind of perceived threat. Let's say you're enjoying a nice peaceful bath. The water is warm. Cinnamon scented candles flavor the room. The bubbles are thick and frothy. Your parasympathetic system is content. Then a bear bursts through the door. Uh-oh. The sympathetic system puts down the potato chips. Adrenaline is released. Your heart rate increases, you start to sweat and your muscles tighten. What to do? This conundrum is called the fight, flight or freeze

response. We've developed this process over the years in response to our environment. Without this system humans would have died a long time ago.

The fff or f cubed response is a great tool to have. However, problems arise when there is no threat. People with anxiety disorders are stuck in a constant state of vigilance. The sympathetic system is a skipping record. The body believes danger is everywhere.

Why does this happen?

There are many competing theories. Some believe genetics are a factor. Others believe brain chemistry plays a role. Serotonin (pretty name for a girl) is a neurotransmitter responsible for calming the brain. A lack of serotonin receptors in the brain could mean a person is more likely to be anxious. Stress could be a player. Honestly, no one really knows. I believe it's a combination of everything. Think about how we live. We're bombarded with sights and sounds. We are capable of really complex behaviors - think driving. No, really think about driving. There are two ton metal beasts barreling down a highway at insane speeds. The only thing separating one car from another is blind trust and some little plastic things. We're constantly scanning the environment both internal and external. It doesn't seem like a big deal because we do it daily.

Who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks?

Women are the predominant group. I think this is why anxiety disorders are so easily eschewed. Women for a long time were classified as the inferior sex. Women were (are) told

they're "overreacting" or "being irrational." Silly women. So delicate. No wonder we don't talk about this stuff. No one wants to be seen as weak or crazy. Sometimes it sucks to be a man because we are not allowed to suffer (mostly from our own doing). We need to "man up." I don't know what the hell that means.

CHAPTER 13

BACK ON THE PILLS

Back on the pills.

A sobering reality. I could not function properly without the aid of pharmaceuticals. I had a crutch. I could only achieve what they would allow me to achieve. My future was no longer decided by my effort but by a complex series of interactions between chemicals.

The crusty lady at the Social Security Administration agreed. Out of money and insurance I applied for disability. The process involves a fair amount of paperwork and a one-on-one interview with a state psychologist in a drab little office with mold colored walls. I imagine the people at Social Security see and hear a fair amount of hard luck stories. They no doubt deal with individuals who are out to defraud the system. Fair enough. I wasn't one of those people. I didn't want to collect disability. I wanted to work. I liked having something to do, something to achieve on a daily basis.

Mrs. Perpetual Scowl, as she is now dubbed, didn't see it that way. She saw a perfectly healthy thirty something male. I explained the reason for this was the medication. I relayed my experience over the past year and some change. She thumbed through my medical history and asked me a series of questions.

"What does it mean when I say people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones?"

I had heard that countless times over the years but never stopped to think. I had no idea. I told her that and she took offense. How could I not know what that meant? I must be pulling her leg. She checked a box.

"Are you able to work?"

I wanted to answer with an emphatic yes. Instead, I cowed, slump shouldered, head down. She checked a box.

"Do you know what year it is?"

I did. Good for me? She checked a box.

She checked boxes for thirty minutes. She kept her same emotionless expression the entire time. At the end she told me something. She said I would likely have these problems for the rest of my life. She said I would never come off the medication. Then she told me to have a nice day.

A few weeks later I got a call from my case manager at Social Security. I had been approved. I was now officially disabled. I would get a lump sum of back pay plus a monthly check of around a thousand dollars. I remember being happy, genuinely happy. I had a pulse. Money is freedom, isn't it? I would be able to pay my bills and, even better, stop worrying - at least about this one thing. I was disabled! Break out the champagne and party hats. Plan the parade route and get the ticker tape because I had arrived.

Disabled?

I didn't see it that way. For all my denials I never once considered myself handicapped. I had an anxiety disorder. This was the first time I admitted this to myself. Mrs. Perpetual Scowl made me angry and so I got out my copy of Jock Jams. Eye of the Tiger! Time to do some one armed push-ups.

CHAPTER 14

WHAT TO PUT ON A RESUME?

What to put on a resume? Any guesses? I'm clueless. There's a gap in my history. I started grad school in 2007 and still don't have a degree. Suspicious. I have spent the past two years working at my parent's daycare. I have sexed up my job title but that doesn't mean much. I need to explain and yet I can't. There isn't room. The standard resume and cover letter don't have spots for my experience. This is an infinite edged sword. I may benefit from being able to tell potential employers what happened, then again it could hurt me. This assumes I somehow got my foot in the door. I don't fit the mold. I fear there are too many gaps to plug.

Should I lie? Maybe I say I completed my master's program. I manage a daycare. I do the payroll, write curriculum, and fill out forms. I can pile on the adjectives. I can wow with a hurricane of language. The economic downturn supports this narrative. I am just a hardscrabble youth who fell on hard times. Give me a chance. I work this job not by choice. Forces beyond my control forced my hand. At least I have a job. I expanded my skill set. Spin, spin, spin.

What do I do? I don't want to work in a daycare forever. I'd love to work for a nonprofit or become a grant writer. Who knows? For a long time I felt my options were narrowed because of my anxiety. Now I feel they are limited because there isn't enough space on a page.

This is not a rhetorical question. Please help.

CHAPTER 15

A GOOD THERAPIST

A good therapist is someone with big ears and a little mouth. They say only insightful things. They don't tell you to do anything. They offer possible solutions and let you choose. They unearth the tiniest, most miniscule detail and wait for you to discover its importance. I went through a few before I found the right one. She had been like me. In the early 1980's she started having severe panic attacks. The doctors told her there was nothing wrong. It was all in her head. They handed her some Valium and told her to calm down. She had a husband, two small children and a career. She became an agoraphobe. She went back to her doctors and they said the same thing.

Flash-forward twenty-five years. My therapist has a degree in Psychology. She is well-respected in her field and she also happens to be part owner of a local bookstore. She hasn't had a panic attack in twenty years. She no longer takes medication. I could be her.

Only I can't. The best advice she gave me is to go with what works for me. Forget social stigmas. The next best thing she said? Most people will never know what it's like to be you, to feel the world at such an intense level.

I took her words and put them in my pocket. If you have no strength, borrow someone else's for a while. I saw her once a week and also went to a behavior specialist. I had Social Security but no insurance. Medicare wouldn't kick in for a year. Lots of bills and not a lot of money. I made it work - barely.

What did I learn? Mostly how to relax my body. For over a year I had been walking around with muscles knotted by a sadistic group of Eagle Scouts. For practice I would stand in

the middle of a busy place - like a grocery store - and release my muscles, group by group. I got more than a few strange looks. I practiced this routine in the car, at home, when talking with someone face to face. I needed to condition my body to relax its primitive urge to seek out danger. I learned to breathe from my stomach and not my chest. Simple things that I made complicated.

I progressed enough to help at the daycare. The constant noise and movement of children no longer made me nauseous. I felt good and bad. I could do this work and wrangling a group of kids is no easy feat. However, I was still at home. My bedroom was twenty feet away. I could take a nap if I got run down or step outside if I needed a breather. Would I ever be able to work outside of this house? Furthermore, would any woman ever take me seriously? I know women can take care of themselves. They don't need a male "bread winner." There is a difference between needing a man financially and needing a man to pull his own weight. What kind of chance did I have?

Imagined conversation with a woman:

Woman: So tell me about yourself.

Me: Well. I am thirty-two. I have an anxiety disorder. I live with my parents and I don't have a job. Did I mention I haven't had sex in over a year?

Woman: Umm.....

CHAPTER 16

LATE 2011

Late 2011.

I met someone. Rather, she happened to walk right into my life. She came through the front door and signed in her kid. Yes, I dated a daycare mom. The idea was sort of a perverse fantasy. Forbidden fruit – attractive single mom who didn't mind my circumstances. In the end I think she liked that I was good with her son.

We dated off and on for eight months. I forgot about my problems. I adopted hers. Doing this allowed me to forget for a while. I could play fake husband and fake dad. I did "manly" stuff like mowing the lawn and changing the oil. I felt good for a while. I was needed. I had purpose. I loved her son and he loved me. I could see myself teaching him how to throw a baseball or how to make lasagna. I wanted so badly for something to work in my life that I didn't see I was forcing it. She wasn't ready. She had been separated for two years but not divorced. Her dad died right when we started dating. She was messed up and that made me happy.

Around the same time my elderly grandparents moved to Washington from Montana. My grandmother grew up in the Depression. She saved. My grandfather spent. My grandmother's memory started to slip and grandfather took over the bills. My grandfather had no money. He invested in get rich quick schemes that never paid off. When they arrived in Washington my grandfather had managed to bury my grandmother in almost half-a-million dollars in debt.

Their monthly bills came to over seven thousand dollars. They had four homes, two paid for and two not. Late notices came in the mail daily. What followed was a soul draining experience. My already fractured family imploded. My grandmother made my mom and I mom Powers of Attorney (against our wishes). This is a misnomer. There is no power, only burden and constant second guessing by yourself and by others.

I spent my days wiping butts and my nights trying to fix my grandmother's finances. Both were shitty. My grandfather misled, told untruths. My grandmother called every day. She wanted to know everything. By this time her memory was hit or miss. I reassured her each time. I went over the same material every day for seven months. I told her we needed to sell some of the houses to get rid of debt. First she agreed then didn't then did then didn't. Sometimes she would hug me and tell me thank you and sometimes she'd point her bony, misshapen finger at me and call me a thief.

Once again I forgot about my problems. I could fix *this* situation.

Then April 20th, 2012 happened. My grandfather was in Montana. He was going to fix the plumbing in the Stevensville house. My aunt came to help with my grandmother. She stayed for a month. My grandmother was happier than she had in a long time. She was eating well and taking walks. We joked and talked about hummingbirds. Then my aunt left.

I don't know how it started.

My grandmother hit my mom in the face. My mom was holding a toddler at the time. My grandmother tried to hit her again and my mom blocked. Grandma took a step back and tripped over another child. She lay on the floor kicking and screaming. I helped her up and she started again. I had to get her out of the room before she hurt herself. I held her from behind and she flung her body around trying to get free. She knocked over a lamp. Kids were crying. My grandmother yelled and dug her fingernails into my hands. I got her in the back bedroom. I let her go. She spit in my face and took a swipe. She cursed me. I set her on the bed. I sat over her, held her wrists and tried to talk to her.

I was investigated by Adult Protective Services and by the Sheriff's Department (cleared by both). My grandmother claimed I had jumped up and down on her. Later, she claimed I had raped her. The Sheriff said the story changed every time. I didn't know what to do. I never hit or yelled at her. Yet I feel guilt so powerful I don't know how to describe it. My grandmother died six months later in a hospice. She fell and broke her hip at the retirement home where she was living. The last time I saw her she couldn't speak or hold her head up. I ask myself everyday what I could have done differently.

CHAPTER 17

HOW IS IT

How is it that a person with a pretty severe anxiety disorder ended up being a Power of Attorney? This is a big responsibility. "Crazy" people aren't supposed to be capable. Well, I wasn't able to fix anything so maybe that says something. My grandmother's decision to pick me might also say something about the people in my family. Out of all of them she chose my mother and me. Yikes. Then again my grandmother did have Alzheimer's.

The experience took so much from me. I don't think I can ever be close with my extended family again. I have lost all illusions concerning my grandfather. He is what I never believed he could be. I discovered angry places within myself. I can be petty and sneaky. I invest too much of myself in others and become bitter when they do what I have deemed to be the wrong thing.

And yet I continue. My mother and I are executors of my grandmother's estate which means more of the same. Except now I have learned to let go (mostly). I have learned that I can have a career. I managed to keep a fiscal house built without nails from crumbling. There will be money to pass around to my family because of me and my mother.

But what about the resume? Three years later and I haven't finished my master's. How to explain in a resume or cover letter? Impossible. I've been helping at the daycare for almost two years. I can only spice up the job title so much. I still wipe butts and play all day. I need to finish my thesis. I look at my stories and see nothing but edits. The only chance I have at getting an interview is to finish, only then will I get an opportunity to explain.

I have little faith. Thankfully I know someone who does. She is the love of my life. My fiancée doesn't care about my anxiety. She sees something else. I can only tell this story because of her. I needed someone to believe in me. Not to say she is my crutch or I only love her because she sees past my issues. I love her for all those generic reasons you love someone. She makes me laugh and think. She is beautiful and smart. These are generalities. The specific reasons I will keep quiet for now. I don't have the words just yet. I owe her the right words. The two of us are very imperfect and I think that's why we work. We are a couple of weirdoes that found each other....on match.com.

The short version of this story goes something like this. I had all but given up on the idea of dating. I always picked the mean girls or the girls who didn't really love me. Screw it. I would settle for sex. You reach a certain age where finding a sex partner is pretty easy to achieve. No one was good at everything and my weakness was women.

I came home one day to find my mother had signed me up for match. She setup my profile. She said I liked antiques and that I made between \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. I told her this made me sound like a rich gay man. I invested the help of some married friends. I told them to do whatever. They wrote a new profile and scanned the profiles of dozens of women. They made a list and told me to look through it. I told them which one I liked - she was their favorite too. I emailed this woman who is now my fiancée.

CHAPTER 18

THE PAST

The past.

A collage of failures and successes. Burn it. There is no relevance for the boys, girls, employers who said no. Someone did say yes. Inflated triumphs have no real buoyancy. You're sinking on the lead of filtered achievements. The mind plays tricks. It will show you what you want to see instead of what happened. The real lessons are not the shame or pride you feel. Why put so much stock in something that cannot be changed? Watching the edited replay over and over will not change the results. It will drive you crazy; drive you to some unattainable version of a person. You'll come to expect perfection in yourself and others. The sunset was just okay. I could have done better.

Lessons learned? Sure. But that isn't what you're using it for. The past has nothing to say about right now. Don't let it tell you what your future successes and failures will be. It doesn't know. Why do we talk about the past like there is no such thing as the future? It's almost as if we don't want one. The present and future are only more past waiting to happen. Grim.

Hyperbole? Guilty as charged. Inertia is a powerful thing. Pulling back a wave takes energy. Momentum needs a catalyst. There is no charge in "let's do this thing half-assed" or "things may or may not improve because you see there are a lot of external forces at play so I don't want anyone to get their hopes up." The collage makes no sense. Why is that lobster wearing a hat? Makes about as much sense as holding onto something that has long ago slipped away.

CHAPTER 19

HERE WE ARE

Here we are. You have read what happened. I've tried to tell you everything I can remember. There are of course small details I am forgetting. Now I feel a need to explain why I decided to tell this story and what I have learned over the past three years.

Why? Putting my story out there was surprisingly easy. It helps to have amazing friends. Lots of you offered insight and kind words. There is a stigma attached to mental health issues. No one called me crazy or weird. No one laughed.

I think telling the truth about my situation was easier than lying. I have been telling a version of the truth. When people ask what I do, I tell them I am a Daycare Manager and that I only work at a daycare because my father had a stroke. This is partially true. My father did have a stroke a few months before I started having problems. It took him a year or so to improve. Still, the main reason I work for my parents is because I felt I couldn't work anywhere else. I don't manage anything. I help run the place. I was holding onto the past and refusing the future. The future was a scary place, an unknown. I could reshape both the past and the present. I could be anything I wanted except for me. I'm a person with anxiety. I need to take medication, sleep well, eat right and exercise. I have problems with malls and grocery stores. I think too much about things beyond my control.

I have involuntarily peed on a person. I have also been a TV News Producer. Neither of these define me. I am a collection of my experiences. For too long I only saw the perceived good. I hated being a producer. The work was stressful and long. I worked a punishing overnight shift. I took pills to sleep and drank coffee to wake. On the other hand I could make a

case that if I didn't pee on someone I would have never met my fiancée. I might have married my ex-girlfriend instead. I would probably still be living in the past, recounting former glories instead of critically evaluating them.

I know there are more like me. Several of you have relayed your stories. Anxiety is fairly common. Exact figures are hard to find because a lot of people never say anything. Various research suggests that between 1-5 in 100 adults have an anxiety disorder at any given time. That's a large number. Chances are you know more than one person dealing with anxiety. So why the stigma? Is it because we associate mental health issues with extremes? I mostly hear about mental health when someone has gone on a shooting spree. Honestly, I don't know why. I felt shame and dread because of an imagined response from others. Turns out I was wrong about people. I have been shown nothing but love. I fear others have not or will not be given this opportunity.

I will never know what triggered my anxiety. My therapist said it could have been anything. My OCD could have been a factor but so could too much caffeine. The medical community understands the basics of anxiety. They know the mechanisms of how it operates. They don't know how the medication works. They know it works but they don't know why. Yikes.

At some point I will have to come off Clonazepam. This is an intense drug. I take only a small amount because it is highly addictive. I don't want to be an addict. The tradeoff is that I have a lingering unease to myself. This is made worse if I don't follow the routine I described above. Clonazepam has some annoying side effects. The most relevant to my future concerns procreation. The drug would make it very difficult to conceive because frankly, nothing happens.

I am concerned but not scared about coming off the medication. This time I will find a doctor who knows what he/she is doing. Besides, I will still be on my anti-depressant - the most important drug. My bigger issues concern being a parent. Will I be able to handle the constant drain? I want to raise our child in a stable and loving household. Thankfully, I can lean on others.

I can't stop thinking about all of those who don't have a support system like mine. I was blessed with caring and patient people. Going forward I cannot forget this fact. I need to help. Maybe this project will do some good but I can't stop here. None of us can.

CHAPTER 20

HEY YOU!

Hey you!

Yeah you. This is an homage. An ode. A gift.

Electric person. Worthy of a new adjective. You're the reason someone gets out of bed in the morning. Pretty awesome, right? Bette Milder sang about you. An anthem. Those ideas, that potential. An idea held in fingertips. Sunshine on a cold winter's day. The one lifting the fog. The world sits on the ceiling and there you are on the floor. The compass. A reminder to look before you leap and then leap. Safety harness and trampoline. The reason for high fives. The glue you bleed keeps us together. All those cuts, merely paper. Stings but not deep. Won't last, the pain fades into the skin. Holder of gravity. Master of frenetic energy. Making the wild yours, channeling chaos. I bet you draw smiles on sand. Maybe you lick the bowl or fret about telling someone they have food in their teeth. Social norms! The one behind the old lady doing forty-five in the left lane. Kindness personified. You wonderful narrator. A complexity. Science baffler. A theory tested and unconfirmed. The one who remembered to bring the flashlight. The other who remembered the batteries. Electric person. Striding through the dark. Showing others the way.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 21

2004

2004. The day after Christmas.

The low hum of computers. A kind of audio anesthesia lulling me into a functional coma. My eyes burn like someone has been using them as ashtrays. The satisfying clicks of capable fingers across a keyboard. The newsroom is empty except for me and my producer. The rest of the city is asleep. I know. I can see them through one of our many tower cameras. The twinkling lights of countless front porches make me ache. I long to be behind one of those darkened windows.

Late Sunday night blurs into early Monday morning. We're putting together the show, a two hour behemoth composed of anchors, reporters, a weatherman and a helicopter. The beast is full on amazing video and salacious crime. We've got trains running into cars on the tracks, cars being chased by other cars and people getting married on a glacier. Rapists? Yep. Murderers? Sure. A missing blonde co-ed? Check and mate. It's a slow news day. This is typical stuff. Our bosses tell us focus groups want to watch this kind of thing regardless if it has any real impact on their lives. So we do it - and do it well. There is a thrill to pounding out story after story, shaping them into tight 30 second windows. We give you everything - the who, what, when, where and why - in fun size bites. We're speedy and accurate.

We're also a little bored. It's the day after Christmas. Criminals are feeling festive. Violence is content and sleeping under the tree. We shoot the shit. Talk about work, our lives, and the holidays. My producer is a good guy. We're the same age and yet he's years

beyond me. He's learned to let the criticism and incessant second guessing of others roll off him. I take it personally. It's four in the damned morning! I sleep maybe five hours a day and never at one time. I need Tylenol PM to sleep and two cans of Starbucks Doubleshot to wake. My diet is crap. If it's food and in front of me then I will eat it. I spend most of my time in a stupor. I'm edgy and never far away from the "f" word.

The bottom right corner of the screen blips red. This is the AP wire. There has been an earthquake somewhere in Asia. Meh. No great video. The body count is low. We'll slip it down in the "C" block. The worst part? Weekends. The feeling of normalcy. Going to bed at what my body understands to be the correct time. Being outside during the day. Eating vegetables. The pang of Sunday morning. The slow dread, time wasted trying to avoid the unavoidable.

The bottom right corner of the screen blips red. A thousand people are feared dead in a tsunami caused by the earthquake. The story moves to the "A" block. Top billing. This is fresh. And for some reason I started drumming a familiar beat. At the correct moment my producer and I both belt out in a whiny voice the words "wipe out." This is gallows humor. Taking the morbid and making it comical. A necessity in this business. There is just so much horrible. A person has to laugh because crying isn't an option and neither is anger. The stories need to be told by someone.

The bottom right corner of the screen blips red. At least twenty-five thousand people are feared dead. Then fifty then seventy-five. By the time we hit air the count is well over one hundred thousand.

CHAPTER 22

I DEVELOPED

I developed my own unique form of therapy. It involves the bathroom.

I admit to a strange obsession with stall graffiti. There is a kind of juvenile artistry at work. I marvel at the commitment to sitting in a foul smelling place while others defecate around you. The concentration involved, and for what? Typically a crude penis drawing or snarky comment. There's also the racist statements and the rhyming poems involving some part of the female body. A public restroom is the original Facebook.

I started taking pictures of these posts in grad school - before everything happened. Sounds pervy. Creepy. Weird. Yep. A college campus is rife with material. Young men must be constipated or, more likely, bored. I couldn't resist documenting.

My routine was ridiculous. When I went to the bathroom I would check every stall - sometimes this meant waiting. I became a master of the several minute hand wash. I learned early on to turn the sound off on my phone as to avoid the uncomfortable "click." I tried to wait until everyone left. There was an element of danger that I enjoyed. Sometimes the graffiti would be in an awkward place - next to the toilet or underneath the paper roll. I'd stick my face in places no cleaning product ever reached.

I made forays into different bathrooms in different buildings. I'd snap a pic and post it to my blog. Alongside the picture was my interpretation of the art. I analyzed it a la CSI only with more sarcasm.

I stopped when the anxiety started. I forgot all about my macabre project. I took the blog

down and erased the pictures. I didn't see a point. Besides, I couldn't go into public places anymore. I went about my lack of business. I didn't have much to look forward to. I woke, laid in bed for a while, sat in the chair watching television then went to bed.

Hope comes in strange forms and places. When I was relearning how to go into the grocery store or the mall the first place I always went was the bathroom. The bathroom was quiet. I could collect myself, piece together the broken thoughts. And while I was there? Why not look around? I started going out more and more. I went into places I didn't need to go just to check the stalls. Each time got a little easier and each time I was presented with a different challenge. After all, no two stores are alike. Sometimes, the bathrooms are in the back.

CHAPTER 23

I LOVE TO PLAY

I love to play basketball. The heartbeat of the ball, the swish of the net. My hands covered in the grime of the blacktop. Playing until the sun goes down. I spent my childhood on a court. It didn't matter that I was a little kid with no real athletic ability. Basketball has a place for everyone. Muscle gets the rebound. Shorty passes the ball. Skinny shoots. I could shoot.

I would make everything into a basketball. My dad and I used to play sock toss with rolled up socks. The umbrella stand served as the hoop. This was our thing. Dad and I didn't (still don't) understand each other. Here it didn't matter. He taught me the subtle art of the wrist flick. Power comes from the freeway of muscles in the legs. Finesse is a few bones in a tiny part of the body. I was something tiny.

I was the runt for most of my life. I weighed forty-nine pounds for three years. I ate three squares a day plus a two thousand calorie nutrition shake. Didn't matter. The scale wouldn't hit fifty or even forty-eight. I never learned to fight. I realized pretty quickly that most "fights" are really just two kids circling each other while a bunch of other kids yelled. The best way not to get beat up? Have a nice jump shot. The politics of childhood require ability - and not just any ability. I loved to read and write but few would be impressed by my penchant for grammar. Sports provided a manageable violence. I think other kids knew I could beat them at basketball. Sure, they could push me around on the court but that was part of the game. I answered with a flick and a swoosh.

A flick and a swoosh. Dozens, maybe hundreds of times. Lined up at a particular spot. I needed to make a certain and undetermined number. If I missed I started over. I couldn't hit the

backboard or the rim. Net, only net. Frustration. Feeling like it would never end. Throwing the basketball hard at the backboard, watching as it shivered. Hitting the pole with my fist, trying to break those bones so I could have some peace for a while.

I don't remember when I stopped playing. The compulsions became too much. There was a game within a game that I didn't want to participate in anymore. I just wanted to dribble, jump and release. Nothing more. A simple thing twisted, now crumpled and discarded. The urgency crawls up my spine as I write this. Habit is too cozy, too friendly a word. Maybe a picture. Standing alone on an empty court. A trickle of breeze, sun sinking behind a patch of trees. Peach colored light. The ball in mid arc. Not caring what happens next. I would love for this to happen someday. Not now, not yet. Someday.

CHAPTER 24

HELL IS FREE

Hell is free. The gym is not. Everything else is about the same. I loathe the idea of paying to torture myself. And yet I do it anyway. Why? I want to be healthy - mentally. I need to sweat. Let the anxiety bead on my forehead and streak down my neck. I need to see all that stress on a gray t-shirt. I need to smell it, feel the thin layer of grim on my skin. Only then do I know that I have made room. I will not overflow. Some of my fear has left.

For all its benefits, I think the gym is a stupid thing. I would much rather run outside than grind away on a treadmill with stationary scenery. I need that movement, a sense of point A and point B. This feels like accomplishment. There is actual joy in the activity. I can interact with the world around me, a vibrant place full of sights, sounds and smells. Sure, the weather plays a factor. Rain and cold are a real pain in the ass. In a perfect - perhaps braver - world I would ignore caution and exercise in the great outdoors. Not happening. Too much hassle. The gym is a convenience store with weights and ellipticals.

I go to the gym 4-5 times a week. I make an effort to skip days because I don't want this to become a compulsion. I feel better and worse. I think pretty much the entire time. For a person with OCD, especially a counter, the gym is taxing. The constant math, keeping tracking of sets and reps is a cruel twist. I'm told I need to monitor these things so any attempt to just forget is lost. How else would I measure progress? Numbers are everything. How much weight? How long? How far? How many?

Contrast today. I went to the gym this morning and played soccer in the evening. I love soccer, love to watch it. I've never played the game in my life. It didn't matter. I ran

around. Just ran and kicked and chased. No thoughts, just instinct. I laughed and winced (got hit in my special area). This wasn't the gym, this wasn't work. The field smelled of grass not cleaning fluid. The sun replaced the fluorescent light. I talked and played with other people instead of mindlessly staring away at nothing while listening to my iPod. I have a blister on my foot and sore shins. I will be in so much pain tomorrow and I couldn't be happier.

CHAPTER 25

I THOUGHT

I thought my father could punch harder. He hit me in the face and chest. The force was laughable. I wanted to tell him. I didn't do anything. The fight lasted less than thirty seconds then I disappeared. I took a walk through the tree farm behind my parent's house. I plotted all the ways I would hurt my father. I would cut off his balls and feed them to him. Maybe I'd get one of his guns and shoot him. I'd settle for beating the hell out of him. I wanted him to feel pain, or better, fear. The man scared me.

He lifted me and pushed me with a thud against the wall. He licks his lower lip; he always did this when he was angry. I was six and mouthy. He brought his face close to mine. I needed to be respectful and not back talk to my mother. I didn't say anything. I wasn't supposed to.

I bounced off the sliding glass door. My dad and I were playing video games. He had taken the control from me because he thought he could do better? I gave him a dirty look. He didn't like the words I formed in my mind. He grabbed me and flung. My bones make a dull bonging sound against the glass.

Watching television. Me in one room, my father in another. I sat on the couch zoning out to a baseball game. My dad yelled from the other room. He told me to change the channel. I responded with "no way Jose." A slam of the recliner and a panicked rush to change the channel. Too late. My dad ripped the remote from my hands and smacked me on the head.

Hand me a wrench, he said. I didn't know which one. I hurried along the shelf of tools hoping the right one would be kind enough to volunteer. Dad holding onto some part. A

realization sets in that his kid is useless. He tells me to hurry the fuck up. I take a wild and incorrect guess. Dad - sweat dripping from his bushy mustache - drops the part. He starts kicking shit at random.

A handsaw flies through the air. It crashes in the bushes, never to be seen again. He skips a hammer like a stone. Saw horses are flipped over. Sunlight catches the dust as it drifts to the ground. I am always taking a step back.

"Dumb ass. Dip shit. Dumb shit. Asshole. Idiot. Moron."

Age thirteen. My dad has a heart attack. He is forty, a smoker, overweight and angry. He eats candy bars and ice cream for breakfast. My mom leaves. Dad is in San Diego (Navy). Mom and I are in living with my grandparents in Washington.

They come back six months later. Dad is pale and thin like someone stuck a straw inside and sucked the life out. His feet hang over the bed. He looks powerless. I am perversely happy.

He cocks his arm back and releases. The football spirals. I dive and make the catch. I land in the soft grass. I always dive. The three of us are taking walks every day. Dad has a zipper scar in the middle of his chest. Doesn't matter. He is a good quarterback. After school we play basketball on my plastic Jordan Jammer. I post up against him. I spin and dunk. There are peacocks on the roof.

He starts drinking bottles of wine. Little ones then big ones. When he runs out and it's late he drinks Nyquil. The anger he lost returns. He gets in fights with my mom. He yells at her. Sometimes he leaves.

My mother tells him she wants a divorce.

I stand at the window of my grandparent's house. I can see my mom and dad in the car parked outside. They are crying. We go to visit him at his apartment. We have hamburgers the size of dinner plates from a place called Harold's. There are boxes and mess everywhere. My dad has bought a vacuum. I don't think he knows how it works. Part of me believes he has it on display to show my mother he is a changed man.

A pounding on the door. I have been asleep for a few minutes. It is New Year's Day. I spent a sleepless night with friends then worked an eight hour shift. My father stands in the doorway screaming. I need to get my fucking lazy ass out of bed. I am a worthless piece of shit.

I stumble, dazed and bleary eyed to the yard. My parents are trying to get the pigs back into their pen. They have what amounts to a small farm. I find my mother. She tells me everything is fine, maybe I could stand over by the shed. I do. My father yells some more. I am equal parts tired and terrified. I tell him to shut the fuck up. I've never been so bold. He charges.

I think I am gone for thirty minutes. In reality I have been walking for two hours. My mother has called my uncle to find out if he knows anything. Someone calls the police. I come steaming up the driveway. My mom runs out to meet me. She is crying. Where have I been? She was so worried. I tell her I'm going to kill him. I tell her he needs to leave.

A flicker of red and blue on the vinyl siding. The police take my dad out in zip tie handcuffs. He doesn't look at me. The officer takes my statement and gives me a pamphlet on

domestic violence. My dad spends the night in jail. He's ordered to take anger management classes. There is no law which tells him he has to apologize.

CHAPTER 26

MY FATHER

My father and I have never spoken of what happened fifteen years ago. I think this is why it lingers. In that time I have come to see the man in a different light. He is not a monster nor is he evil. He is complicated.

Dad and I were once two peas in a pod. He potty trained me. I remember crying in the backseat of our car when we dropped him off at the airport. His job kept him away half the year. I vividly recall being summoned to the principal's office in elementary school. I was something of a brown noser and didn't understand what I could have done. Worry turned quickly to elation. Dad stood in the office. We got in his truck and he gave me something. It was a simple beige envelope with one exception. There was a picture of two menacing looking rattlesnakes on the outside. The words read "Rattlesnake Eggs: Handle with Care." Dad told me to open it, the eggs were harmless. I peeled back the seal very slowly. I didn't dare breathe or make a sound. Then, a deathly rattle from inside the package. I tossed it and jumped out the truck. I started to run and in between heavy flops I heard my dad laughing. There were no eggs, just a washer attached via rubber band to a piece of metal. I think I called him a jerk but later I laughed and pulled the joke on my friends.

What happened? I'm not sure. I know Dad started to change when we lived in Phoenix. He had been assigned to recruiting duty. He loathed the work. I think he felt guilty, like he was somehow duping people into joining the military. I know he didn't like making the rounds to schools. Dad liked to fix things; he was a welder not a missionary. Arizona is a hot place and for a long time we didn't have a car with air conditioning. I can see my dad in full

dress driving the steaming Phoenix roads. I can feel the sweat and irritation. It didn't help that he started to gain weight. He worked a desk job and liked to eat junk food. He came home once and I gave him a package of "Fat Boy" ice cream bars. I told him they were made just for him.

I think my father didn't know how to be a father. He was the youngest of several (not sure how many) children. His father died early on. My father grew up on a farm in the 50's and 60's. Life was different, men were different. Dad grew up in a traditional way and then the traditions changed. Who did he have to turn to for advice? Probably lots of people, but men of his generation didn't talk. They forged ahead. They provided. I know he worried. I know he stressed. He's human. Is it any surprise that he turned to drinking? I would. I think I would blow my brains out if I couldn't say how I felt. All that inner dynamite. There is only so much storage.

My father died. He was legally dead for a couple of minutes. No one is better off dead. However, it is a cruel thing to be brought back to life and then realize how much it changed in those minutes you were gone. We all know we're mortal. We will all die. We try not to think about it. Dad was forty when he had his heart attack. Young. He's sixty now. He's had two decades to wonder when death will visit again. In that time his health has deteriorated. The Hepatitis C he contracted in the Navy is wrecking his liver. He had a stroke a couple of years ago and a severe case of the flu. He was in a coma. The doctors all thought he wouldn't make it. I lived in Iowa at the time. I didn't want him to die.

I learned something about that day dad and I got into the fight. The doctors were giving him all kinds of medication to help with his ailments - depression being one of them. His aggressive and irrational behavior makes sense. It is the same behavior I exhibited in the first

year or so of my anxiety. My moods were all over the charts. I was freaked out and terrified. I imagine my dad felt the same way.

Now what? I want to have a relationship with my dad. He's the only one I have. We have our moments. We can easily talk about football or politics. He loves my fiancée and she loves him. I want my father to be a part of our future. He loves kids. The daycare kids think he's awesome. I want my child to know his/her grandfather. I'm just not sure how to bridge the gap. We need to talk about that day and about my childhood. I know I'm missing something. I've known the man my entire life and yet he is a stranger. To know him is to know myself a little better. What to do?

CHAPTER 27

I DON'T KNOW

I don't know half of myself. This isn't some existential crisis. Who am I? What's the meaning of life? How much wood could a woodchuck chuck? Who knows? I'm referring to genetics. I have a biological father. I haven't seen him since I was ten. I know his name and what he looks like. The rest is a hodgepodge of loose information. He's a stick figure, an empty thought bubble on a cartoon.

I know he has a temper. This could explain my childhood tendency to throw video game controllers whenever I lost. Maybe this is why I cuss whenever I try to assemble anything that comes with instructions. Or maybe there is another reason. I have no idea. He was a hard worker. I think I am a hard worker. He was smart. I hope I am. He was an adulterer. He celebrated my birth by having a party with his mistress.

I refer to him in the past tense. He's still alive. He's around 65. I know he just won a battle with lung cancer. I know this because of my half-sister. I met her for the first time a few years ago. I knew of her existence but didn't know. Should I interfere with my father's new life? I didn't want to upset the familial balance. She was young and deserved to stay that way. So I left it alone.

Then one night I had a few too many (one beer total) and decided to say hi. I found her on Facebook. She was older and so I felt less guilt. I sent her a message asking if she was so-and-so's daughter. She replied yes. Thankfully she took the news well. My years of careful avoidance ended with a moment of arrogance. I could have wrecked everything. Instead, she agreed to meet me.

It's early still but I hope one day to play a role in her life. I have always wanted to be the cool other brother - I have a cool older brother. The thought of my sister coming to me for advice is remarkable. What will I say? Make sure to eat your vegetables? Boys are gross? I want to be there for her. I need it more for me than for her. I will never know my biological father. She is a link to that half of me. I need to know that I can be better.

I don't want to abandon my family. I don't want to cheat on my fiancée. I don't want lung cancer. I don't know what else I don't want. What diseases am I prone to? What is my ancestry? I don't care why he left. I know it has to do with him and not me. Still, I'd like to know about his life. Again, this is for purely selfish reasons. I'm looking for answers to myself. I want to be able to explain to my child what it means to be half of me.

CHAPTER 28

OLYMPIA

Olympia. Elma. Montesano. Shelton. San Diego. Phoenix. San Diego. Olympia. Shelton. Pullman. Shelton. Olympia. Portland. Ames. Shelton. Olympia.

I have moved at least 16 times - not counting small moves. My average length of stay is three years. I'm without gravity. Place means nothing to me. There are always more dots on a map. More friends to make and lose. Faces only last so long in the rear view. I've learned to let go. It's easier that way. I don't want to think about how much I miss some people.

I could have had an alternative history. Maybe I stayed in one place my entire childhood. School would have been easier. Fewer awkward first day introductions. "Class this is Eric. He's new. Let's all stare at him for an obscenely long time." I might have grown up with the same core group of kids. I would have belonged. I wouldn't have gone to three schools in one year. Instead, my chums and I would do nostalgic things like climb trees and eat ice cream cones on the sidewalk, vanilla drooping off the sides onto our sticky hands. We'd laugh. These shared experiences would carry me through high school. Some of those buds would become cooler or lamer than me and would hang with other clicks. Still, we'd have an understanding. An unspoken bond. We would have dirt on each other.

My urge to flee has lessened in recent years. Anxiety is a pair of lead shoes. I want to explore but I don't want to move. Moving is boxes and tape and goodbye. I want roots. I'll cover them with cement and put elephants on top just to make sure. Exploration is a suitcase. Coming back. Telling good stories to the friends back home. Boring them with obnoxious photos. This sounds so normal and lovely. Home. No longer a four letter word. Not

just wood and drywall and windows. The shortcuts. Hole in the wall restaurants. The best place for coffee. The surprise of driving past the same place hundreds of times and seeing something new.

I need the routine. Anxiety doesn't like different. I hated this idea because I didn't want to be stuck. Staying was a slow rot. Comb overs, minivans and pulling weeds. A forced settling down. It's what had to happen - minus the stereotypes. It took time to embrace the idea. I spent a lifetime waiting to leave, never really connecting. Anxiety is a goofy thing. It makes you afraid of just about everything, except people. I'm cobbling together a life when I thought life was being taken from me.

CHAPTER 29

THE WINGS

The wings are going to fall off. I know they will. No. A terrorist with a bomb in his underwear. Blow us all to hell. Someone will accidentally open the emergency door and we'll be sucked into the void. A thunderbolt smashes the rudder. We hit a pocket of turbulence and the plane crumbles to bits. The beverage cart gets loose just as the pilot opens the cockpit door. The pilot falls down on the controls and we plunge into a forever nosedive. I flush the toilet and am pulled through the opening. No parachute. Just me and my poop floating through empty sky.

I hate flying. Correction. I am terrified of flying. Correction. I love being in the air. Correction. I love being on the ground even more. I loved to fly when I was a kid. I did it all the time. The flight attendants gave me shiny pilot's wings and extra nuts whenever I flew alone. I had no sense of the fragility of the thing. I was an idiot. Ooh, look at the big hunk of metal. It makes cool sounds. Check out the fancy doodads and gizmos. My tummy makes a hop whenever we take off. People look like ants from up here. Moron.

I woke one night with a sense of dread. I opened my laptop. The pale blue glow shone on my worried face. I pulled up my itinerary. Yep. Not gonna happen. I cancelled my flight. Something told me not to go. I called my friend the next day and told him I couldn't make it to his wedding. I was the best man. I lied and said work had messed up my schedule.

The plane didn't crash.

I have a ritual. It's the OCD. I need to feel some control. I say little prayers as I walk down the jet way. I make sure to touch the outside of the aircraft. I'll stand there as long as I can with my hand on the metal mumbling little desperations. I make the same pleas as the plane taxis and when it barrels down the runway trying its best to fracture some invisible wall. My hands are wet hyper color. I keeping repeating myself in my head hoping words will provide thrust. Takeoff. Those initial seconds are nothing but flashes. My burning death, the mechanic who forgot, the drunk pilot. There is ground underneath my feet but nothing under the ground. I'm sitting in air. I have zero input. What will happen will happen - and that sucks.

I haven't been on a plane in three years, not since the anxiety started. I know I will have to fly. Will I have the courage? I know I will get on the plane. Will I have the courage to fly without my baggage? I don't want or need the compulsions anymore. They will only make the experience worse. I do worry that I will be like that guy who got shot a few years ago. He didn't take his meds and got on a plane. There is nowhere to go if I have a freak out. I will have my pills and my wife. I think this will be enough. It has to be because I don't want anything else.

CHAPTER 30

TWO VERSIONS

Two versions of the same story.

I am jealous. Jealous of gas fireplaces with fake logs. The ones you can start with a switch. I want the ease. I am so tired of having to choose between "A" and "B". I want both. My wants are small, minor and so I don't feel guilty. I'd like a hammock - the \$65 Costco variety. I need gas. I cannot have both. I have no hammock. My bank account runs dangerously close to empty at the end of each month. Hell, it's pretty much empty halfway through the month. Sometimes I borrow money from my mother. I claim to be good with money but spend it on plants or decaf coffee. These things bring me joy. I get something from these purchases. I cannot get rid of them. If I do then money is pointless. It's only purpose would be to pay for debts. There is no joy in spending hundreds to get your car fixed especially when it leaves you strapped. Oh, sure, you get the car back. More gas.

I used to be King Shit of Turd Mountain. I had a good job. I had thousands in the bank. I was saving - for what I'm not sure. I had no worries of a financial nature. I bought lunch for my friends. Now? I never pay. The only way I can and not worry is if we go to Taco Bell. My friends are all doing well. They have houses, retirement accounts and families. I'm glad. They're good people. I'm also envious of their discretionary wealth. It's not that they can afford the latest and greatest. It's not that I want the latest and greatest. It's that I don't have a choice to want or not want the latest and greatest.

I once dumped a scalding cup of water on my hand. Why? Because I thought the girl I had a crush on was dating a coworker. I knew she was (still is) a lesbian. And yet I also knew she thought our male coworker was hot. Another time. I drove past my friend's apartment on several occasions because I was so sure he was "doing it" with my girlfriend. Nope. My girlfriend thought he was creepy and smelled of eggs. She laughed when I finally confessed to my behavior.

The insane, irrational jealousy I had over women is gone. At some point I just decided to trust. Age helped. I forgot about past relationships. The former hurts and deceptions offered nothing new. It's like reading an encyclopedia from 1959 and trying to pass it off as current. I'm not sure about this John F. Kennedy fellow. A Catholic President? Never happen.

The other jealousy? Alive and well. I think it's because I know my capabilities. I can be successful because I have been in the past. There's a pressure on me that I put there myself. I don't know why I do this. Perhaps it's because money is translated to mean security. I don't feel secure or stable. I'm not poor. Poor is a kid living in a pay by the week motel room eating chips for breakfast. I know. I met him recently. I have a support system. I hate not being able to give back. I see despair and know I can't buy him some groceries. I'm too concerned with keeping myself afloat.

PS - Age did help. It's one of the things that led me to my fiancée. I don't even think about jealousy because I'm too busy enjoying our time together.

CHAPTER 31

DEATH

Death. I'm not afraid. Really. What terrifies me is that last moment. The final breath. I don't want to feel it. I want to be asleep. No beeping sounds or tubes. No gruesome accidents. No prolonged deterioration. The last part of my life should be worry free. I was and then I wasn't. Beyond that I don't know.

I think about death. The brain is technically still working for a few minutes after a person dies. Horrible. The business of death gives me shivers. All the blood drained and replaced with a preservative. Someone grooming you to make you look alive. Being stuffed into some kind of container and either covered with dirt or burned. Headstones, old and forgotten because all who knew are now dead. Tossed into the ocean.

What kind of pillow would I like to rest my head for all eternity? Umm. I'm dead. With any luck I will be in another place or I simply won't *be*. I doubt I will have neck pains - but what if I do? Underground with my thoughts. Confined to a dark place with a cramp I can do nothing about. I don't know about Heaven or God. I know the history of The Bible. Any other document with that much after the fact editing would not be believed. Maybe it came from God, but it was transcribed by man. I want to believe and, as I grow older, I find myself believing more. I'm not sure if that's because the spirit found me or because I don't want to die. The afterlife is just as it sounds. Life continues.

My OCD was an attempt to prolong life. I thought I could exhibit some kind of control - keep friends and family from dying. My compulsions came with an inner dialogue. It played on my fears. If I only did such and such then nothing bad would happen. Hearing voices. Except I

wasn't. The words were always in my voice. I don't know why I latched onto death so early in life. I was fortunate enough to escape childhood with my loved ones intact. Maybe I was waiting for the other shoe to drop; maybe the Reaper had a list. Death would come and the fact that everyone was still alive provided proof that my behaviors worked.

I no longer have a desire to turn on light switches or tie and untie my shoes repeatedly. The stress of an endless worry, of thinking that I could save another person was driving me to an early grave. The guilt I felt when I was too tired or too angry. What if something happened when I refused to prop up the world? Is it any wonder I broke?

The wonder is that I found all the pieces. They're in a different order. Some are clearer. I fit together better. In a weird way I have my OCD and anxiety to thank. My fears made me act and doing so brought about change. I still think about death, about the final moment. Only now, it's my moment and I have no control and I like that.

CHAPTER 32

I AM

I am 34, not 33 or 35. I am $20+14$ and 17×2 . Something happened when I turned 30. I couldn't be in the same room when the microwave counted down from 32 to 31 to 30. I couldn't see my age on the digital timer. Doing so had implications of death or disfigurement.

Clocks worked the same way. 12:30 didn't exist, 12:31 did. Anything that added up to 30 triggered an elaborate process of self-preservation. I had to find another number higher than 30 – and quickly. Sometimes this was as simple as waiting for 12:31.

And then there were the other times.

I found elasticity. In desperate times, I could simply think of a number – a large one. 84 is good because it connotes longevity. You see, I was trying to keep myself alive. 101 sounded like a fever and I didn't want to get sick. I have no idea why I never chose 98.6.

I have been holding back. It might not seem so but there's more to tell that's I've been reticent to share. I used to think I was talking to God. I'm not sure how much I really believed I had the almighty on the line. I like to think of myself as smart enough to know it was always me.

This "God" figure used to threaten me if I didn't do as told. The Man in the Sky would kill my mom if I didn't lean out of the bed, put one foot on the ground and tap while reciting, "there is only one God and I am not him." I'd go for hours, long past my bedtime.

I'm not a kid anymore and I know I was having conversations with myself. A scared eight year-old doesn't argue with unseen forces. Who really knows what kind of glue is used to

keep the world together? Sure, the rituals were frustrating but my mom was still here. Isn't that proof?

I've put dirt in "God's" mouth. The voice is me and I have changed and I haven't. The microwave is just that and clocks are ever-present but otherwise just a normal irritant. I don't know if I'll ever be rid of my fixation with numbers. They're the base. 9 months until birth, 10 fingers, 10 toes, 1st word, 1st step. $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. $E=MC^2$. 15 items or less. 200 channels. 25% off. \$3.34 a gallon. 72 years and 79 years respectively.

16. The number of wins my favorite team, the Seattle Seahawks, needed to win the Super Bowl. I'm a lifer, committed to the cause despite years of disappointment. We (they, I'm not on the team) won 13 regular season games. That meant three more wins to victory. 16 became my new number. Old habits returned. If I walked across the grass my last step needed to be with my right foot and I had to be thinking "16." Why? Grass is a living thing and the right foot is "right," whereas the left foot was wrong? More than superstition, this was tortured belief that I could influence an outcome.

The month leading up to the Super Bowl I had a little boy living in my head. He did what he was told because the unknown is a toss of the coin. We won. I had absolutely nothing to do with the victory. I know this and yet I couldn't stop myself. There's a root deep in me.

Next year, they're on their own. I'll give up watching if I have to. As for the rest of you. One day I hope I can tell myself "good luck" and "you're on your own."

CHAPTER 33

DIS/EM/FING/ER/TATED

Dis/em/fing/er/ta/ted

Verb

1. To have one's finger removed.
2. A psychological conflict stemming from a fear of losing one's head.

Origin:

A child's bedroom circa 1990. This boy has horrifying thoughts of being decapitated. He gets the idea from a scary movie. Some psycho with a machete lops of a guy's noggin with one quick slice. There is a cringe inducing slurping sound as blood fountains from the wound. The boy can feel the blade against his skin. He lays in bed most nights afraid the killer will come in through the window. He needs protection. The boy knows a little karate. He is realistic. A high kick to the groin won't do much. Besides, he is only a yellow belt.

The boy somehow finds the word disemboweled. He's a reader so it's possible he came across the word in a story or the encyclopedia. Guts. Slimy parts spilling out an open stomach. The victim holding his insides. The terror in his eyes. He wants his mommy. The boy holds his tummy and wishes his hands were made of metal.

The OCD finds a way. It's always working to ensure safety and prosperity. Disemfingertated is born, a hybrid of decapitated and disemboweled. This is a third

option, the preferred one. The boy can now choose to simply have a finger cut off. He can keep his head and his vital organs if he simply thinks this new word to himself. This magic vernacular will ward off all evil. The trick is, he needs to think it a lot and may even have to say it aloud when no one is around. Otherwise. Well. Death.

CHAPTER 34

I'M TRYING

I'm trying to think of a name for the last month. I keep coming back to sports terminology. The Super Bowl of panic implies a one day, stress packed bonanza. The World Series of panic is longer and not long enough. The Olympics? Comes every once and awhile. Lots of events. Frenetic but ultimately boring. I need something splashy, something with corporate sponsorship. The Kodiak Muscle Milk Thirty-One Days of Batshit brought to you by Pacific Rim the musical. Go big or go extinct!

I suppose a name doesn't matter. It's over. I had millions of imagined panic attacks and no actual ones. The wedding, for all its frilly brutality, didn't even require an extra layer of deodorant. The weeks leading up to the day were exercises in the limits of passive aggressiveness. The planning of the event produced more knotted chests than the actual thing. I simply didn't care what happened. Call it faith or trust or Emily. I don't know why it was so easy, I was so easy. I didn't puke or blackout or puke then blackout. I laughed, we laughed and for a day I was normal.

And then...

We had to get on an airplane. The small kind. The ones where every bump is a five hundred foot drop. These are the planes that need to be weight balanced. Huh? Is this the pinnacle of technology? The plane will veer to the left unless everyone is in the right

position. Fun. An entire day making circles over Portland. Is this a puzzle or a highly sophisticated piece of engineering?

I had to go. Emily's grandfather passed away just before the wedding. I met the man, talked with him a few times. I wish he were my grandfather. He had good stories. I think he was the type of person who wrote letters. In my mind he liked to give high fives. I loved his glasses (thick) and when he fell asleep in his chair mid conversation.

I needed to go. I went and hated every mother f**king minute of the flight. I had this overwhelming urge to jump, just pry open the door and be one with the clouds. Flying is stupid, just dumb as s**t. I'm not Nellie Furtado. Does it look like my ass is on the back of a quarter? Okay. Enough channeling of the Samuel L. Jackson. The plane did not explode or nosedive. I didn't close the bathroom door and knock the wings off. I did squeeze Emily's hands during takeoff. She never winced - she might of, I had my eyes closed. She talked to me, told me to breath, kept her hand on my stomach.

We made it (both times). Now what? I've had about ten minutes of terror in the past month. During that time I've gotten married, given speeches and flown. I've been me more than not me. Maybe I do have a name for this. Maybe this is the end.

CHAPTER 35
EXPECTATIONS

Expectations. I think they're worthless. In my experience the imagined and the real seldom mesh. I say this because I'm tapering off one of my medications. My last attempt at this didn't go well. I had a good doctor who gave bad advice. I wanted off the drugs and he provided the quickest route to my goal. The resulting chaos is a memory wallpapered. It's what I see.

I had a therapist once tell me not to judge my panic attacks. She didn't want them labeled as good or bad. They happened. Don't process. I thought she was an idiot. Judging is what we do. It's a necessary part of life. We have to analyze situations to predict outcomes. Without this ability what's stopping me from walking right out into traffic?

Hence, what happened last time I went off my medication is bad. Prediction: it will happen again. That's about as refreshing as a deep breath in a public bathroom. I'm doomed. I've locked myself into a permanent loop of stopping and starting. There's no way around it. The first is an indicator for every.

But there's so much proof to the contrary. I eventually learned to ride a bicycle. I passed the next math test. I got married. It's so easy to believe I know what will happen next. There's comfort in patterns - until there isn't. Bucking tradition is hard. Staying on this medication is easy. I've been doing it for years.

And I've paid a price. My thoughts are a fitted sheet stretched the wrong way. There's no comfort only restlessness and limp anger. That's the joke. The medication dulls the senses because they're what got me in trouble in the first place. I can only be so positive or so negative. I am the middle and yet my middle feels like bottom.

I used to be more optimistic? I don't know if events of the last three years changed me or only reinforced me. I guess it doesn't matter. I'm coming off the Clonazepam. I don't need it. I'd like to say the next few weeks and months will be an adventure. Honestly, I don't know how it will go. So far it's been pretty easy, which leads me to want. I want to make a bold prediction that it will be easy and not hard. I can't. Not this time. Why? Here's a simple and incomplete answer. Expectations are stupid. They are the past and the future and they're dead or yet to be born. I need the present. I need something alive, something with a pulse and no memory.

CHAPTER 36

THIS IS HOW

This is how I cope with anxiety and airplanes. I write whatever I see.

Airplanes are the stupidest smart thing humans ever created. They have wings. I don't trust wings because I don't own any personally. Birds do. I'd feel safer on the back of a large feathered friend. They know what they're doing. Their wings just don't fall off. No mechanics are needed to tighten any loose bolts. The design is straightforward and not subject to human folly. Hunters may shoot at us and the bird may get easily distracted by a pretty bird or might have to poop. I'm okay with that because birds generally don't travel as high as planes. Of course I'd need to fashion some sort of safety device to keep myself attached. I'm thinking a nice saddle with a cup holder – I do get thirsty. This won't be a problem if the bird likes to eat fish. I just have to wait for the dive and get myself a scoop of water. This might not work because the fowl might like ocean dwelling creatures. Salt water is no Bueno. However, I could have myself a nice salmon dinner. No way to cook it and raw would probably make me ill. I'd need to bring some snacks. Whatever food I take with me has to be something the majestic winged beast doesn't want. Do birds like pastries from Starbucks? Best to bring some oatmeal. No one really likes oatmeal. We eat it for the health benefits. Honestly, it's like swallowing chunks of puke that fell in the sand. The only way to make the crap palatable is to add lots of butter and sugar and thus make it unhealthy. Pigeons are probably my favorite bird. They're really quite remarkable. They can fly for days without taking a break. Neat right? There needs to be some kind of union for these guys. I mean truck drivers are not

supposed to drive for extended periods of time. Why should a pigeon have to bust ass? Take a break little fella. Find yourself a nice old lady on a park bench. You work too hard.

An old lady across the aisle from us looks like she's about to face plant in her book. I think she has good eye sight but is tired. The book can't be that interesting. She's clearly not reading *50 Shades of Grey*. My guess is that it's a book on how to can fruits and vegetables. I think this woman would be for team Edward. She likes pale guys and muscles scare her.

The gentlemen in front of her has had his iPad out the entire flight. He didn't bother to turn it off during takeoff. Ass. The flight attendant clearly said to turn off all electronic devices. He must be special, a really big deal. Yes. I know him. He's the famous mother fucker in seat 17C. I just know his wallet is loaded with club memberships to places like Ace Hardware and Panera Bread. Mr. Big Shot got his fancy plastic. Ooh, look at me I get a free cup of soup with my next purchase. Dick. Turn of your iPad before you get us all killed. I don't know what your device is capable of but now is not the time to play Candy Crush.

The lady in front of me has her seat reclined. I'm thinking of sticking my knees in the back of her seat. Maybe I will reach over and stroke her hair. If she wants to get intimate who am I to deny her?

The lady behind me is a grimacer. I've looked back a few times because what else are you going to do on a plane? She did not like my intrusion into her space. Sorry. I'm bored and your face isn't that interesting – it's just there. Don't get all high and mighty. Also, I don't mind if she wants to look at the back of my head.

The old lady is asleep and dreaming of preserved foods.

I have a great view of clouds. I think we're flying in a milk glass.

I have to fart.

A lot of people are watching movies. I won't go on a rant about television being everywhere. I don't really want to talk to these people. I'm sure they're good and decent folks. We could be Facebook friends.

The mother fucker really sucks at Candy Crush.

There are arrows on the wings showing where people can step. This is not an encouraging sign. Are these things so fragile that a two hundred pound dude walking in the wrong spot will break something? I'm pretty sure I can stand on any part of my car and it would be fine. There might be a dent or two but it's still operable.

Whoa man that's one hell of a nose ring! It's just a couple of spikes, like icicles, dangling from his nostrils. That's some dangerous boogie mining.

Watch your elbows please. Tuck in. Here comes the drink trolley. I'd really like another \$7 beer. I'll settle for a piss cup sized glass of water or ginger ale. This is the third trip. I think there's not much for the flight attendants to do. Three trips? Why not give me a can or bottle at the beginning and fill the time with something different? Let's put them in charge of manually raising and lowering the landing gear.

Wings are still attached.

Is the no smoking sign still necessary? It hasn't been 1988 for a while. I have no idea if that's when smoking was banned on aircraft. No internet – at least none I'm willing to pay for.

And here we have the last real human drama. The conundrum that is the passenger stuck behind the beverage cart. He can see his seat but, alas cannot reach it.

I should be glad I'm bored. The alternative is a brand of excitement I would not appreciate.

So many boogers in my nose.

I have to pee but I think we'll be landing soon.

Who's going to be the one? That person in a big damn hurry to catch their next flight. You know the type. Always asking for updates every five minutes. The answer to how close we are is "the time you were last given minus five minutes." Here is the equation: $A \times B = X - 5$

A = Idiot

B = Times asked

X= Time given

Answer: Shut up. Just shut up. If you don't like this solution then get out and push.

The old lady took a short nap. Back to the ancient art of storing and forgetting you stored it food.

The lady behind me has been gone a long time. Maybe she is lost. I look forward to seeing her crumpled face again soon.

I think there is an Amish woman on the flight. I say this because she has a beard, is wearing a bonnet and brought a butter churn.

The back of one's head is a neglected place – kind of like Florida.

The air on planes is recycled? Am I breathing in my own butt stink?

Here's the story of a lovely lady who was living with three very lovely girls. All of them had hair of gold like their mother, the youngest one in curls.

Here's the story of a man named Brady who was living with three boys of his own. They were four men living all together, yet they were all alone. Till the one day when this lady met

this fellow, and they knew that it was much more than a hunch. This group would somehow form a family. That's the way they all became the Brady bunch.

Bone to pick. Alice was never included in the Brady theme song. Need confirmation. Have to wait until we land to Google.

I just peed on Tennessee. Sorry Volunteers.

So, you're not allowed to flush combs down the toilet. The picture on the underside of the lid informed me of this. Curious to know how this came about. Was there extensive testing done to determine what could be dumped down the loo or did some jackass decide he'd had enough of his 99 cent scalp rake and tossed it down the crapper. Little did he know his moment of temptation would cause a major upheaval in airplane bathroom protocol. I will give a name to this faceless being. He will forever be known as Steve Todd.

I am sad because my milkshake brings no boys to the yard.

I just ate half a bagel. I shared the other half with my wife. We are a good match. It was a cheese bagel.

Here's a fascinating fact. Airplanes are not boats.

Changed planes in Atlanta. There are no snakes on this plane nor is there Samuel L. Jackson. I am disappointed. There is also no room. This is clearly the Junior Varsity squad.

The lone flight attendant did the pre-flight walkthrough. The woman across the aisle was told she could not stow her laptop in the seatback compartment. The woman responded with an informative clarification. You see her device was a *tablet* and not a laptop. I felt compelled to place my desktop in with the Sky Mall catalog. This woman is a revolutionary.

Entry from the Sky Mall catalog:

NEW! "Abominable Snowman Yeti Statue"

Capture your own wild man! You'll show the world that a reclusive, mythical, hairy creature DOES inhabit the planet when you position our ape-like Bigfoot as innovative garden décor, unique holiday decoration or as an office mascot and Facebook-pose favorite! Design Toscano let the expedition to this exclusive, snowy yeti in a quality designer resin statue, then hand painted him for abominable realism. Do what legions of sherpas have longed to do and "say cheese" with your very own legendary Glacier Being from the snowcapped mountains!

Life-Size: 72"H x 45"W x 38"D (147 lbs.)

\$2,350.00

Reached a new low. The tablet lady just asked for sparkling water. I think this means she wants ice. She has an accent so maybe in her home country they put diamonds in the water. I doubt they're conflict free.

I think the flight attendant is speaking through a speaker from the nearest fast food joint. The sound is tinny and barely audible. This is probably the only time in history the flight attendant will say something new and useful.

There are three pretzels in my bag of mini pretzels.

The flight attendant already came back for my cup of water!

Robes are gross. I will never own one. If my child ever gives me a robe I will disown him or her. They're basically just sponges with a belt. And, let's face it, the barn door is almost always open. I do not need to see some middle aged man's veiny nut sack.

The window on this plane is at stomach level. My belly button is really happy with the view.

It's dark outside. We could be in space except for that fact that we're not floating. Bummer. I kind of wanted to be in space.

LIFE VEST UNDER SEAT.

I think the flight attendant just asked me if I wanted fries with that? Might be easier to hand out soup cans and some string.

CHAPTER 37

DID YOU KNOW

Did you know that you can type with your finger? This is seriously the craziest thing ever. I could do this all day. Because I clearly don't have anything else to do in my life other than writing with my finger.

The guy behind me is listening to Whitney Houston. I know this because he has the volume turned all the way up thus negating the whole point of headphones. He is a large, imposing man with his cap on backwards. He is also black. I might be racist for mentioning that last part. I do not fear him because he is currently blasting "The Greatest Love." I think we all know what that is.

Man at the boarding gate got into a heated phone discussion with someone on the other line. He abruptly ended his call with a curt "I have to take this trip." I think the other party hung up on him because he looked at his phone as if the device betrayed him. Not sure why he is surprised. He all but signaled he had to go. I think the person at the other end was just being polite.

Lady next to me is a frequent flier. Comforting. I will rub her head for good luck.

Bald man in front is playing video poker on his computer. It's the free version. He is not a high stakes gambler.

At precisely five o'clock pm we were flying over Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The in-flight movie is the live action version of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” I hope it’s the Director’s Cut. 15 extra minutes of Jim Carrey in a creepy green suit!

I love my wife. I would not be able to do this without her. She holds my hand during takeoff and when the flight gets too bumpy. She currently has her elbow in my ear.

A lot of people wearing striped shirts on this flight.

The head rest doesn’t have those adjustable side thingys. WiFi yes. Adjustable side thingys no.

Crying baby behind me.

I think I will steal the inflatable life vest which is stowed directly under my seat.

The flight attendant just informed us Delta is now charging for air. They will be offering a complimentary five minutes of air. They accept debit or credit.

The map is more riveting than the movie. Not the Director’s Cut.

There’s a town or city down below. Don’t know the name. Thanks a lot Ron Howard!

I am chewing gum.

I am now experimenting with fonts

“But I was wrong again.” Excerpt from the book the frequent flier is reading on her Kindle.

I shit you not. The guy in front of me just looked up “revenge porn” on his phone. My wife swears she saw vagina – several times. He just deleted his history.

ABC’s *The Middle* is now on the television. An offbeat take on the modern sitcom, *The Middle* tells the story of one family’s struggles and triumphs in suburban America.

Dark outside. Been that way for a few hours. Will be that way for a few hours more.

So Whack-A-Mole paid between \$7.50 to \$39.95 to access “revenge porn.” Unfortunately, he did not read the fine print. The onboard wireless network does not support streaming video. Sad face.

When all the ice melts we should just build the polar bears islands make of Coke bottles because they seem to enjoy the stuff so much.

Texas Hold ‘em is now reading about Jennifer Anniston. Like Sears, he too has a softer side.

VAGINA. VAGINA. VAGINA. VAGINA. VAGINA. VAGINA. VAGINA.

Are you sure you want to delete your browsing history?

Click.

Revenge porn. Titties. Hot buttermilk titties! Lusty latin ladies. Juicy balls.

I have a problem.

Oh that Zoey Deschanel. She's just so quirky and indecisive.

I have to pee again but fear I have violated an unwritten rule. I have the window seat (the good one). One limitation to this premium position is that I cannot afford to anger my fellow row mates. I peed about an hour ago. This required a lot of jostling and fumbling of electronics. We're about an hour and a half away.

Farted.

My armpits are moist.

I hate people who can sleep on planes.

The lady next to me is the one who is ripe.

The man across the aisle from me has huge hands a beard and a Bible.

The baby behind me has been rather pleasant this entire flight.

The dirty perv has kitties as his background on his phone.

These seats would be great for leg amputees. Airlines might have to charge them business class at the very least.

I still have to urinate and yet the beverage cart is making a return trip.

Beyonce did have the best video of all time!

Kanye 2016!

Stephen bucks trends. He does not use his tray table to hold his cup of water. Way to go Stephen. Here's a napkin.

Planes have wings!

Cars do not.

I lost feeling in my butt somewhere over Denver.

There are polar bears all over this plane! I'm tired of all these mother fuckin' polar bears on this mother fuckin' plane!

I do not wish to be an Oscar Meyer Weiner. That's a stupid wish.

Our love is like the seat belt light so close but never together.

Urine all over the seat. I didn't do it. I swear. Peeing is hard.

Tapped lady on shoulder so I could get back to my seat. No response. Tapped again. Stood in the aisle looking like an idiot. Wife laughed. Tapped a third time. Wife laughed harder.

CHAPTER 38

A BROKEN YELLOW

A broken yellow line stretched over asphalt. An arbitrary set of rules which, when diluted to their purest form say nothing more than "don't hit me and I won't hit you." This is a thin thing. Engineers figured out the system doesn't work. Hence seat belts and air bags. We're protected from each other. Driving is an act of faith.

Commonplace. Taken for granted. Barreling down a highway at 70 miles an hour. The never ending scan from the cars in front to those in back. Jockeying the playlist or station. Adjusting volume. Making calls. Playing the guitar or putting on makeup. Recklessness disguised as control. No real thought of what could happen. The missiles in the other lane coming straight toward at an equal speed. That person could be drunk or asleep. Maybe they haven't checked the tire pressure in three months. The rubber could explode and smash faith into countless chunks and bits of metal.

I'm a goddamned expert. Don't lecture me. I only text at stop lights. You know how many miles I've driven? I've been to the moon and back more times than NASA. I see everything. The guy on a bicycle a mile down the road has a nipple ring. Ole' eagle eyes they call me. I am the fucking crystal ball. The master of hundreds of sensory inputs all at once.

Cowed in the front seat. Inching through the parking lot. Too fast. I have to go. I have to pick her up from school. I am pathetic. A right turn leads to a left and the outside world. I want a hummer, armored plated and loaded with weapons. Twelve feet off the ground with thick tread. I have a Volkswagen with heated seats. I should have let her take the car. Where was I going?

Traffic sucks toward me in a tunnel. My eyes shudder like the sun is on the hood. I pull over and hold down the bile trying to pry open my esophagus. I've gone a quarter mile with two more to go. It's cold, near zero. She will be waiting for me. I can see her breath, know the temperature of her anger. I can't explain and because I can't she won't understand. The practical and the predictable are what she needs. Right now I am the guy leaving her standing outside in the freezing weather.

Red lights are a signal that this will go on longer than I want. Waiting, waiting, waiting. I let the car roll a little to give the sense of progress. This could go on forever. Grey exhaust drifts to the iron sky. Dirty snow chokes the sides. The road ahead is a peeled orange. The gaunt, leafless trees. In this strange season there is little difference between day and night. The world is only barely visible and locked in rust.

CHAPTER 39

EMBARRASSMENT

Embarrassment. The red cheeked revelation hinting at something deeper. I don't understand. I wonder if this feeling of shame is a byproduct of evolution because really, why should I be embarrassed? I haven't failed to bring home food for my fellow cavemen and women. No one will die. I haven't farted loudly in a crowded, yet quiet restaurant. Still, I carry my head low. I know everyone knows and for some reason that is important.

And delusional. Most don't have a clue. I look no different. I'm tall, gangly with dirty blonde hair. I wear clothes. I'm not running around with my parts exposed. There is no foam bubbling out my mouth. I don't talk to myself any more than usual. The average person would see an average person.

I guess I fear the tattered clothed, wild haired, toothless people I see roaming around town. They could have been me twenty years ago. They scare me. I don't want to be them. I also loathe myself for turning the other way. They are easy to ignore and hard to forget. What happened? Are they the product of drugs? Trauma? Disease? I want to know and will not ask. Assuming means I can paint my own picture. They are heroin addicts - absolutely every single last one. No back story. They came into the world as losers. They know no embarrassment. Shame is not in their blood. If they had any wouldn't they clean themselves up? Snap out of it. Get some help, just not from me. Fix yourself.

I feel I am drifting toward them. This inability to leave the house has to be a first step. Knowing the world beyond my door is all knives. Paranoia. Is this how it starts? Can't be. Those people are "crazy" because of their own choosing. I'm better because I have a job and

an education. None of them have been to school. They steal to support their habit. It's not me, it's you.

PTSD? Come on soldier. Drink some tea and relax. People have been killing people since the beginning. It's normal. So what if you got a piece of intestine in your mouth? Happens all the time. Oh teenager. Feeling a little sad. Buck up sport. It's just a phase. I know your parents died. Hey, they were going to anyway at some point. Abused person. Hit back. Get out. I would have kicked some ass. I just don't understand why you would do nothing. Oh, get real. You work fifty hours a week, come home to your spouse and children. Sounds real hard. Give the kids some food, put them to bed, bang your wife/husband and go to bed. Easy. Life is easy. There are zero complications except those you choose to invent.

Embarrassment? Never heard of it. You're making shit up, you crazy bastard.

CHAPTER 40

RETURN

Return. I have thought of this moment many times. It's been a vague notion, a mirage on the horizon, something necessary and unattainable. Now I'm here. Four years later I'm back sitting in the same spot where the seams ripped.

I am not triumphant nor am I defeated. I can't allow myself to feel such extreme emotions. I have no idea about tomorrow. You see, the struggle continues. I think I'm through the worst. I understand myself more than I did when I last sat here.

I'm stubborn and afraid, funny and mean. I don't know how to be one of those people who live in the moment. This isn't a story with a eureka – not yet. Great and lasting change is glacial. I wouldn't believe myself if tomorrow I woke up a calmer, more carefree person. I trust the gradual.

There will be a time when I come together as the person I want to be. Maybe what I need is in this room. I don't return in search of answers. I'm here at this desk to tell you a story and to remove the myth of its beginning.

REFERENCES

None. This is from my own life.