

Magical Shrinking
Stumbling Through Bipolar Disorder

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For Jason, Jack, and my

Mom.

And all the people who helped me stay alive.

“You need to claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality.”

Florida Scott-Maxwell

Preface

I thought about writing this book for over a decade before it was written. Even five years ago it was premature to think I was anywhere near ready to tell my story. I had no idea who I was, no clue about what really went on in my head.

There are two parts of me, and both are real. There is my Real Life self (RL), visible to others around me in this “real world.” Then there is an Alternate Universe (AU) self, and throughout the book this version of myself can be found in italics. The AU is my second life, with a family I created and a reality I’ve lived for nearly 28 years. I mention it again in the first part of the book, since many people skip introductions and prefaces.

How do I explain two parts of myself, one in “public” and one “in my head?” They are equally real to me, just in different places at the same time. It can’t be neatly labeled and pathologized as a mental illness. It’s a coping mechanism my young brain came up with to deal with reality.

Children are tough and delicate all at once. As a child I was sensitive and precocious. I was charming and well-behaved, but as an only child often had to figure things out for myself. Confusing things, like what drugs were, and why they were such a secret. It was beyond my comprehension, and yet part of my world.

The AU was caused by trauma, but I cannot point to one part of my childhood, or my life in general, and say, “There it is! The trauma that changed me!” It’s not that simple. It hurts me to think of my mom reading this book because I fear I know what she’ll think.

No parent can read a book where their child has formed an AU, due to trauma, and not feel it was their fault. But it wasn’t my mom’s fault. It was a smattering of incidents and knowledge. On a regular basis. And it wasn’t just suffering for me, but for my mom as well.

Watching her being traumatized by my father caused me pain. It was a chain reaction of hurt and anger.

My brain took the available information and found a way to protect me from being hurt, as best it could. The word hurt is misleading unless one views it as a catchall for all types of pain. Not necessarily physical abuse, or sexual abuse, because there are many ways to hurt a child. Children are vulnerable, and easily hurt, whether there's intent to damage them or not. In the case of my RL parents, there was no intent to harm me. It was a natural consequence of the environment.

The AU began for me around the age of 8. I was hurting, and had no idea why. I was confused. I didn't understand why things happened the way they did in my home. My father didn't like me. He didn't speak to me, or notice I existed at all. He was cruel to my mom, right in front of me. He treated her terribly, and they fought. I was often terrified by their fights, and didn't like him. It's hard to like a father who treats your mom so maliciously.

Nearly every weekend I slept at my grandparents' home, and we watched the same television shows each week. I picked a man from one of those shows and made him a relative. From that point on, he was my Uncle Richard, and he would take over as my primary caregiver in the AU.

I was a fairly mature child, but no young child is mature enough to handle drugs and domestic violence. An only child bears witness to cruelty and pain without being able to help, or process it with a sibling. It was a secret, to be kept between the three of us. I loved my mom more than anyone; I wrote her notes telling her she was my favorite person. To watch her fight with my father, both verbally and physically, scared me to death. What if he hurt her? What if he killed her?

My brain took this information and created a new life for me. One I could turn to for refuge, and yet was much more brutal than my real life. I had no idea what was going on. Every week I saw this man on television, my "Uncle Richard," and each week he became more real to me. Life split off into two directions – RL and the AU. I was very different in both places and yet the same. I had the same essence of self in both worlds, as different as they were.

Life was much more physically painful in the AU. My father in the AU was extremely violent, and beat me and my

mother. He injured me badly both physically and mentally. My father in RL never laid a hand on me, or paid me any mind at all. I wondered at the time which would be worse, to be beaten or ignored? In my head, if my father hit me, at least he was acknowledging my existence.

My story is way too complicated to endeavor to explain in this preface. It's not necessary to take the space to attempt an explanation. There's no easy way to describe what happened to me. Or didn't happen to me.

I was a creative child who crafted a world in my head to escape my real life. When I first considered suicide at age 8, my brain switched gears and found a way to keep going. I had a way to escape RL which was too painful at the moment. In the AU, I found a way to get what I needed. A "perfect" parent. One who would never harm me, by words or actions, and who would always be there for me no matter what. An ideal which couldn't be realized in my own home. Uncle Richard would prove a pivotal member of my life from the age of 8 until the present.

Always remember the stories in italics did *not* happen in my reality. They existed in my head. And yet were sometimes much more poignant and real than what was happening in the real world.

The best way to understand is to read and see what happens when the brain takes over and creates a world in which a person can figure out a way to stay alive.

Potential

*“Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things
that escape those who dream only by night.”*

Edgar Allan Poe

I love watching my mom roll joints. She deftly turns paper and leaves together and it's a thing of beauty. I'm thinking about rolling joints when my parents start to argue. I'm not paying attention to what they're yelling about. I think it's a lady my father works with at the truck stop. She works in the store and always wants to tickle me. My mom doesn't like her, so I don't, either.

They're really fighting. We have a blue lamp in the living room that my Grammie on my mom's side made. My mom loves it. It's a cherished possession. I look over and watch my father smash it on the floor. He knocks it off the table with a broad swipe of his arm.

A million white beads spread across the hardwood floor like water. I hold my breath. I bet my mom is going to punch him. Instead she screams at him that he's a fucking asshole. She's so upset. I would be, too. Why would he purposely break something that means so much to her?

Days later I'm outside with my mom. She's yelling at my father again. His stuff is packed into the back of our car and he's going somewhere. I don't know where he's going, but my mom is really distressed. When we go back in the house she cries and cries.

He only stays gone for a few days and he's back. He's kind of a jerk, so I didn't miss him. It didn't make me cry that he was gone. I didn't even notice he was missing, to tell you the truth.

*

¹My family is having a big party at my Aunt Margie's house. The adults are outside on the patio eating and the kids are running around in the backyard. I like the punching bag in the garage. I'm punching it and punching it, and my right hand starts to hurt. I keep punching until my Uncle Richard comes around the corner of the garage and sees me.

"You're really hitting that bag," he says.

"Yeah," I say, smiling. "I wish I had one at home."

"How's it going?" He asks. We sit down on my cousin's weight bench.

"Good," I lie. I stare at the floor. There's really not anything good going on, but that's what you're supposed to say when someone asks how you are. It's polite. "I saw your show with Grammie and Grampie on Friday."

He smiles. "Did you? Was I any good?"

"You were great," I tell him. He's not anything like the mean character he plays on TV.

He looks at my arm and frowns. There's a big bruise on it. Finger marks. From when my father grabbed my arm and wouldn't let go.

"What happened to your arm?"

"Nothing," I say.

"It's not nothing," he holds my arm and examines it. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I'm still looking down. I'm a big liar. "Everything is fine."

"Would you tell me if someone was hurting you?" He asks. "Is it your father?"

"No one is hurting me," I say. "Don't worry."

¹ Stories in italics did not happen in real life, but are part of the "Alternate Universe," or AU. Please refer to the preface for specifics on this phenomenon.

"Okay," he has a funny look on his face. I get up before he asks me any more questions. I head out of the garage.

"See you later!" I say over my shoulder.

"Bye, Chris." I wish I'd worn a long sleeve shirt. Even if it is summer. I know better.

*

I spend almost every weekend with Grammie and Grampie, my father's parents. My Uncle Bobby lives there, too. He's fun and has a guitar. He loves music and movies. Sometimes he plays Stratego with me. When you're an only child it can be hard to get people to play board games with you. I don't have friends visit my house, and I'm pretty sure it's because of the pot.

I love being at my grandparents' house. It's fun. They live near all of my cousins and family in Milford. We play sports or go swimming. Plus there are a lot of kids my age in the neighborhood. I always have a good time.

I have friends at home, too. My parents and I live in neighboring West Haven, where we moved when I was 7. My best friend is David. We like to go to the beach. It's just across the street and we spend all summer there. Making sand castles and burying each other. Spitting off the pier, pissing off the fishermen.

*

My back is in various stages of healing. There are scars, scabbed over areas, open sores and open sores that might be infected. Pus comes out of those areas. It hurts to take a shower.

No one sees my naked back but me. Sometimes I worry and think about showing my mom to see if it's infected, but I don't want to make her feel bad. Plus, it isn't like she's going to take me to the doctor.

If my father saw my back he'd target those areas the next time he beats me. That's the kind of man he is. Mean.

Would it be better if I could predict when he was going to hurt me? It's best to try to be prepared mentally for it and take it when it comes. You can never really be prepared because no matter how much you try, your mind can't stop it from hurting like hell.

It could happen the minute he walks in the door, or an hour later, or it might not happen at all.

One time there was a commercial on TV about child abuse and I called the number on the screen. I thought maybe it would be nice to talk to someone. But I asked them if they could trace calls and they said yes, so I hung up.

He comes home.

I hear him yelling for me to come downstairs. I've done nothing wrong, I shouldn't have to worry. But it doesn't matter if I've actually done something wrong. My existence alone is enough to provoke rage in him.

I go downstairs quickly. If I take my time, it'll be worse. They're in the living room. My mom gets up and leaves, and before I know it he's grabbed me by the collar and thrown me across the room.

I stagger, and then stand to face him. This shouldn't be happening to me.

His belt is off and he swings at me viciously. If only there was a place on my back that could withstand these blows with unmarked skin. I drop down and curl myself up into a tight ball. I hope to avoid blows to the head, as a belt buckle to the noggin is most unpleasant. He targets my back.

It's hard not to yell out, but I won't. I won't cry and I won't give a reaction. It takes all of my concentration. There's a mantra in my head, "This will end soon. This will end soon. This will end soon." It feels like forever.

It's hard to describe the pain from each blow. When he hits an open wound I feel like I'm going to black out. That would be welcome. But I don't.

It takes my breath away. I don't know why I'm being tortured, but when it's happening I have no energy to wonder about it. Just to make it through. To endure the unendurable.

Sometimes I gasp because I can't help it. The pain is too much. And often my eyes betray me and tears leak from them. As much as I'm telling my brain not to show signs of pain, it does.

It's over. I stay tight in my ball. Sometimes it seems like it's over and then there's a shocking blow. I won't leave this position until he walks away. He likes to stand there for a moment and enjoy his handiwork. It makes me want to vomit. The hate and pain are a poisonous brew in my stomach.

Once he's gone, I move gingerly. My hands on the floor. When I think I can push myself up without screaming I do so.

I go into my room as quickly as I can get there. I look straight ahead. I don't hear anything because sounds are far away.

In my room, I lie on my bed face down. Sometimes I cry until I choke and sometimes I have no emotion. Today I start to shake. I wait until the shaking stops and my body feels calm. I go into the bathroom, remove my clothes and see what new damage has been done.

He always avoids my face. And usually my arms. He leaves bruises when he grabs me sometimes. It would be stupid to attack me in places people would notice.

When I've seen enough, I dress. I must go about my day as usual. I can't let him destroy me. But there's no end in sight. There's no hope for me.

This is my lot in life and I will withstand it until I'm old enough to run from this place and never look back.

*

There's something wrong with me. I don't feel right. I'm eight, and it's New Year's Eve. I'm at my aunt and uncle's house. My cousins are here and lots of other family. I'm sitting on the floor in front of my grandparents and thinking about killing myself.

There are people all around me but I feel like I'm in the room alone. I don't hear anyone. I'd like to shoot myself in the head. I'd put the gun up against my temple and pull the trigger. What would happen? Would people be sad? Would they miss me? Probably.

My mom and grandparents would miss me. My father wouldn't. He doesn't really care about me. I can tell. If he did, he would talk to me.

*

I daydream all the time. I spend hours in my room, dreaming. I've got a whole other life in my head, a different family. The parents in my head are way meaner to each other than my real parents are. My father there beats the shit out of me. Not like in real life where my father and I don't talk. It sucks in both places.

*

I'm trying to play in my room and ignore the screaming. I hear my father hitting my mother. He's screaming he's going to kill her. He says it all the time.

I leave my room and step quietly down the stairs toward the kitchen. I get down on the floor and peer around the corner. I can't let him see me.

He's hitting her in the face, over and over. Then suddenly her head slams against the wall. She crumples to the floor. My father doesn't leave her alone, even though she's on the floor. She's crying, but that won't make a difference. He likes it when you cry.

Her face is going to be so bruised. He doesn't usually do that. He has a scary look on his face. He takes her head and starts banging it on the floor again and again. I have to do something.

I get on my feet and shout. "Stop! You're killing her!"

"You're next," he says without turning to face me.

I run upstairs. I have a singular thought in my head. I'm going to kill him. He's not going to kill me. I go into his drawer and fish around until I feel cold metal against my hand.

I take the gun and the clip. The clip is full and I slide it in. I make sure the safety is off. I've been taught about guns.

Racing downstairs, my heart is beating so hard it might jump right out of my chest. When I get to the doorway, I see a pool of blood on the floor under my mom's head. And something nauseating. Are those chunks of her brain?

My father is standing over her panting. I hold the gun up and tell him to leave her alone. But it might be too late.

"She's dead," he says, not looking at me.

I don't know what I'm waiting for, I need to shoot him. Now. He knows I have a gun aimed at him and doesn't think I'll use it.

I aim at his head and fire. He falls back and I move toward him. I shoot over and over, until his head is full of holes and there's blood everywhere.

The kitchen looks like a scene from a horror film. I move in closer and shoot him twice more, just to be sure. There's blood all over me. I drop the gun and it clatters against the floor.

I kneel down next to my mom. I touch her hair. She's not moving or breathing. She's dead. I start to shake. I'm shaking and tears are pouring down my face.

Standing up, I look at my father. I've pumped him full of holes. He deserves it.

I'm overcome with fear. I've got to get out of the house before the police come. I run upstairs, slipping on the hardwood floor from the blood on my sneakers.

I take my shoes and pants off. I put on fresh jeans and pull my shirt off. I put on a t-shirt and step back into my bloody shoes.

I go into the bathroom and wash the blood off of my face, arms, and hands. I grab a jacket on my way out the front door and put it on as I run.

My feet carry me away from the house as fast as they can. It's bitterly cold outside. I run until my lungs are on fire. I stop and put my hands on my knees. I'm still crying and snot is flowing from my nose. I wipe it with my jacket sleeve.

At least I'm not shaking anymore. I start running again. I have to get all the way across town. An internal compass has pointed me in this direction. I can't think of anywhere else to go.

I round the street corner and run up to my Uncle Richard's door. I pound on the door and ring the doorbell. I keep pounding on the door until he opens it.

He answers the door and looks puzzled.

"Chris?"

I can't breathe. I'm trying to catch my breath. The running and crying were too much. Tears start rolling down my cheeks again.

"They're dead," I pant. It's hard to talk when you can't breathe.

"Who?" he asks. He pulls me inside the house.

"My parents," I say. I take another breath. "He killed her and I killed him."

I look up when I see someone peek down the stairs. It's a woman I don't know.

He's looking me over and checking me out because there's blood on me. I push his hands away and shake my head.

"I'm okay," I say. "It's not my blood."

"Your parents are dead?" He asks.

"Yes!" I yell.

Richard hugs me. My heart is beating so fast I can feel it pounding in my ears. My parents are dead and my life is over. I'm going to go to prison. I should have killed myself with one of those bullets.

The woman is dressed and downstairs. She's freaking out. She wants to know why there's a kid here covered with blood. Asking if I really killed someone. Didn't I just say I did? Richard waves her off.

"Did you call 911?" He asks me.

"No! I just came here!" I'm still yelling.

He turns and tells the woman I'm his niece. She should go home because he needs to call the police. He's sorry about tonight. She leaves quickly, staring at me the whole way out.

*

By the time I'm ten, I've solidified an Alternate Universe (AU) in my brain. It's a universe because it runs parallel to my reality. A different dimension only I can access. It has grown from my daydreaming, but it's much more complex than a daydream. It happens as my life happens. Throughout the day I check out of Real Life (RL) and go into the AU.

In RL, I know my family is all wrong. From where I stand, there's no family as fucked up as mine. At least I haven't seen one. It's lonely. In the AU, I've created what I need to survive. My parents are gone and I live with my Uncle Richard.

*

The days after my parents' death are a blur. The night they died, Richard and I spent hours at my house. I answered a million questions. Then I took off my clothes while the police took pictures of the marks, bruises, and scars on me.

Richard cried while they did it. He had to leave the room. When he came back, he kept saying he was sorry. I don't know why. He didn't do it.

There's a wake and a funeral. I wait until no one's watching and spit on my father's coffin.

At Richard's house, I'm getting used to the peace and quiet. He's always so calm when he talks to me. He smiles at me. He never raises his voice.

I feel bad because the first couple days when he moves his hand out to touch me I flinch. I can't help it.

"Chris, I'm not going to hurt you," he says. "I'm never going to hit you. I swear."

"Okay," I don't believe him.

"I'll never do anything to hurt you," he slowly raises his hands and puts them on my shoulders.

I nod at him.

"Do you believe me?" He asks.

"No," I answer.

"That's okay," he looks sad. "Every day I'm going to prove to you I can be trusted. Because I love you. I promise I won't hurt you."

I'll never forget this conversation. So far, he hasn't hurt me in any way. It'll be nice if it lasts. It would really be cool to live with someone who loves me and doesn't hurt me. My mom loved me. But she couldn't keep my father from hurting me.

*

I'm an observer in my home, watching everything and processing it in my room. I want to be a writer. I write about what I'm thinking, but it's not cohesive. I'm not sophisticated enough to get my thoughts down on paper the way I want, and it frustrates me.

I know a little about what's going on here. I know about pot because there isn't a time in my life when I don't recall it being around. It has always been smoked in front of me, and I don't mind. It smells good.

Cocaine is still a mystery to me. There's a mirror on the wall that comes down when it's time for them to make lines of "coke" and snort it. It affects everyone much differently than the pot. They're more hyped up and talkative.

I don't understand what they're smoking with glass pipes, but it's clearly the most serious thing. It's called "freebasing." Fire is my biggest fear. I've always been terrified of our home burning down. It makes me very nervous to have a blow torch in the dining room.

Towels go up over the windows and I steer clear of them during these times. I hang out in my room, writing and thinking.

*

I'm in fourth grade and my teacher, Mrs. Dougherty, adores me. I bring my passions into the classroom and include my classmates. I write plays and my friends and I act them out. I bring in articles about current events for us to talk about.

I draw diagrams on the chalkboard and teach my friends how elevators work. My father is an elevator constructor and it's the only cool thing about him. He builds elevators and it's bad ass.

Suddenly I'm asked a ton of questions by someone and placed in the gifted program. I get to spend one day a week in a special classroom with four other kids. We do awesome stuff in there.

I play with a computer and teach myself to program. I pick out projects and research them. I'm especially interested in nuclear power and automobile emissions.

Elementary school continues on this path. I'm a chosen child. It's not lost on me that all of the other kids aren't getting this treatment. The adults talk to me like I'm older than I am. I get to explore whatever I'm interested in and I'm fully engaged.

*

My parents fight too much. Usually they just scream at each other. But sometimes it comes to blows and I'm scared. I cower and clutch my stuffed rabbit, Freddie. I cry because I don't want my father to hurt my mother. I needn't worry. Her rage allows her to hold her own and she gives as good as she gets.

Other than the occasional verbal assault when I've fucked something up, no one hurts me physically or sexually. Ostensibly, I'm safe.

At school, no one would ever guess what my home is like. I'm well-behaved and cooperative. I don't act out. I have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and adults around me help fulfill it to the best of their ability. Teachers fawn over me. They tell me I'm brilliant, and it's a pleasure to teach me. It makes me uncomfortable.

My mom tries so hard to make things good for me at home. She gets me chemistry sets and electronics kits. She buys me art supplies. We talk about science and books. She takes me to museums. We go to New York City and Boston as much as we can.

*

Drugs intrigue me. When I'm home alone I try to roll joints, but it's way harder than it looks. It feels like it takes a million times before I get one rolled that might be good enough to smoke.

I light it gingerly. I can barely work the lighter. I've never even smoked a cigarette and have no idea what to expect. I cough so hard I choke. I try it again and take a lighter pull. I smoke the whole thing. I don't know if I'm doing a good job with it, but I'm trying.

When I'm done I wait for something to feel different, and it happens. It's subtle. Everything is a little lighter. I feel relaxed. I'm usually very tense, biting my cuticles until they bleed. Right now things are good. It's a little clearer why they like this. Then I get tired and take a nap.

*

For my tenth birthday, I ask Richard for a guitar. My father was a famous musician. He played bass guitar in a well-known punk band. I have a special musical ability only I know about. I can hear a song and play it perfectly.

There's never been an instrument I haven't been able to play on the first try. I love the guitar. I've played Bobby's guitar when no one is around, and I kick ass.

Richard thinks it's a great idea for me to get a guitar. He's worried I'm isolating and withdrawing from people. I don't mean to.

I don't think I'm withdrawing from him. Every night I sit next to him on the couch and watch TV. It was a big step for me to start off in the same room with him, then move from the chair to the couch, and then actually sit next to him.

He thinks I'm too serious. He's worried about how what happened with my parents has affected me. I don't talk to him about it. I have nightmares. I'll never get the sounds of that night out of my head.

He takes the afternoon off and we go to a music store in New York. I see people here I know and haven't seen since my parents died. They give me hugs and pat me on the back.

I wonder if some of them hate me for killing my father. He was very popular. He had a whole different personality when he wasn't at home. People liked him.

I want the same guitar Joe played in my father's band. A Fender Stratocaster. I look them over and my eyes are drawn to a dark blue one. I love it. Richard asks if I'm sure. He says not to worry about money; I can get any guitar I want. This is the one I want. I give it a couple strums. An employee comes over and plugs me into an amp.

Richard is milling around and no one is paying much attention to me, but I'm still self-conscious. I decide to play Van Halen's "Ain't Talkin' Bout Love."

Lately I've listened to the song a million times in my room. I'm halfway through when I notice a crowd of people watching. Richard is stunned.

I can play any song I've ever heard. It's a freak gift. I play until my fingers hurt. Richard pays for the guitar, an amp, some strings and picks. That'll do for now.

A couple guys walk up to me and ask if I want to play with them sometime. I'm just a kid. I know them both from my father, and I give them my number. I can't actually imagine grown men would want to play in a band with a ten-year-old.

*

I play hockey on both a girls and a boys team. It's the thing I'm proudest of in my life. I'm good. I like my girls team better because I'm the goalie. It's awesome being the goalie. I have my own coach and my own drills. During practice the whole team lines up and takes shots at me, and most times I shut them all out.

On the boys team I'm a defenseman, and it's a whole different type of play. I don't like it as much as goaltending, but I do love the skating. I feel so alive. And I love to nail the other kids against the boards. I check them hard.

Hockey is a huge part of my life. I'm obsessed with it. The neighborhood kids take shots at me to practice my goaltending. I shoot slap shots for hours at my homemade net. I want to play hockey through high school, and maybe even college.

*

At school, the five of us in gifted stick out. Everyone knows about it. We're in sixth grade, and kids are a little meaner than they were even last year. But I'll kick anyone's ass if they think about making fun of me.

In seventh grade there's no more girls hockey team. It's been a tough year already and this is a huge blow. I've been depressed.

Sometimes at night before I go to sleep I wish with all my might I won't wake up in the morning, but it never works. I stop playing on the boys team. I'd rather just sleep in than play now.

*

We have a meeting to get to know each other better. There's beer, and I help myself. We all smoke a joint. Dave is lead singer and plays bass. Rich is the drummer. They play some tapes of their old songs, with the last guitarist. I hear them and I'm ready to play.

Since getting the guitar I play it all the time. My fingers have calluses on them. I'm ready to play with a band. I've been begging Richard and he finally says it's okay.

The guys aren't condescending and don't make me feel like a child. I'm a real member of the band. Richard thinks eleven is way too young to be doing this, and he's right on the verge of saying no. But I think he feels bad for me.

What happened to my parents is never far from his mind. He'll never forgive himself for not acting on the knowledge of the abuse in my home. I forgive him. Lately I've been sad. This puts a smile on my face.

Dave and Rich are heavily into drugs and Richard is rightfully concerned about their influence on me. They smoke weed constantly and also use cocaine and heroin. The drug scene is very familiar to me from my parents. One of Richard's biggest concerns is the possibility of me experimenting with drugs. Smoking weed makes everything hilarious and takes away my worry and guilt.

My biggest worry is that Richard will abandon me when he finds out about the drugs. He'll find out eventually. Two main things are causing my guilt, the death of my parents and now, drugs.

Richard doesn't know, but nightmares are still constant. I wake up in a cold sweat almost nightly. In the dreams, I relive shooting my father over and over, and it's too much stress for me to handle. Smoking weed helps and reduces my thoughts of suicide.

*

Richard's affection is like a drug to me. It took a while to accept his kind touch, but now I can't get enough of it. It embarrasses me to need him so badly.

I never knew what it was like to have someone hug me multiple times in a day. I feel shame over it. I go up to him before school, after school, before bed. I want hugs. And when we sit on the couch together I'm next to him, and I want his arm around my shoulders. I need him.

It makes me cry sometimes. I've been deprived of affection. No one touched me in a nice way. Sometimes my mom hugged me, but it wasn't enough to mitigate our violent situation.

Something has changed inside of me. I trust Richard. I'm safe. I don't feel like I'm on guard all the time. I've relaxed my defenses with him.

*

Middle school doesn't start off well. I have friends at school, but feel very alone. My attitude has changed drastically. I don't care about school anymore.

But when I'm kicked out of the honors program after receiving a C, I'm devastated. I can't believe they'd do that to me. I stay in gifted because it's based on IQ.

I clash with my gifted teacher from the start. I dress in all black and don't give a fuck. I work on my own stuff while she talks. I still love to write.

She calls me out all the time for not paying attention, and being disrespectful. I've never been disrespectful to teachers the way I am now. She doesn't want me in her class and it's obvious. I'm not a typical gifted kid, I'm difficult, and she doesn't like it.

*

My mom is in college, studying computer science. I love going to school with her. I'd go with her every day if I could. She buys me a conceptual physics textbook to read while sitting in her classes. I mark the areas I want to discuss with her later.

Sometimes I hang out in the computer lab and play Karateka, my favorite video game. I love the library at her school; it's huge compared to the public library, or the lame ass library at school. My mom checks out books for me with her ID.

She's trying so hard to keep me from plummeting. She can see what's happening to me. I'm withdrawing from the world. I hide in my room and blast music with the door locked.

I carry a knife in my pocket every day. I'm always touching my pocket to make sure it's still there. I'm waiting for the day someone fucks with me so I can stab them.

I smoke pot nearly every time I'm home alone during the day. It makes me feel so much better. When I'm sober I think about death. I obsess about it. I write stories and poems about killing myself. I keep them under my bed in a notebook.

My father never says a word to me. We're strangers living in the same house. No matter what I do, he doesn't have anything to say. Good or bad. I hear him complaining to my mother about me and the things I do.

He should grow some balls and confront me directly. When he does, I plan to tell him to fuck off. It never happens. He's not a real father. He's just a man who treats my mom like shit.

*

I'm so tired of kids and adults alike asking why I live with Richard. What happened to my parents? Why do I have a legal guardian? I don't know why they ask. It's pretty common knowledge that my parents were murdered.

Over dinner one evening, I tell Richard it happened again, and ask why people don't understand. He says he'd like to adopt me. Become my father, legally. He already feels like my father. It would just be a formality.

This is an amazing thing to consider. He says I don't need to make a decision right away. There's no question for me.

I follow him into the living room after dinner and sit next to him. "I want you to adopt me."

He smiles. This is a huge deal. I feel loved.

Going before the judge on adoption day, I feel shy and nervous. Richard can still back out. There's no reason for me to think he'd do such a thing. Rejection is my biggest fear. Even

bigger than my fear of the house burning down. His rejection would kill me, because there's no one in the world I love as much as Richard.

When the hearing is over, he's gone from my legal guardian to my father, and he not only acknowledges it, but delights in the fact I'm now his daughter.

After the hearing, my grandparents take us out to dinner. I've felt so uncomfortable with them over the past few years. I killed their son. Yet they've never treated me with anything but love. They're so pleased Richard has taken the step to adopt me. It's an excellent day.

*

I'm a completely different kid in eighth grade. I'm confident, and even a little cocky. There are 14 other kids in my class. It's nice and small. You can feel comfortable in a class this size.

Plus, we have the incredible luck of getting Mr. Baxter as our homeroom teacher. He's by far the most popular teacher in the school. We also have him for social studies at the end of the day.

Mr. Baxter seems very approachable. He's a genuinely nice guy. Early in the school year I feel he might be someone I can talk to. I have an instinctive feeling I need an adult in my life to help me feel a little less lost. I'm flailing out here, unable to get a handle on life. I need guidance.

The drugs in my house are old news at this point. I don't mind, because I like to smoke pot. What's really blowing my mind lately is my mom's affair. She's met a consultant in town from Illinois and he's been here for at least a month. I've known about the affair pretty much from the beginning because I hang out with them. We've done quite a few things together.

I'm at a family gathering when my mom and Evan pick me up. We drive into Manhattan for the evening. We end up at the World Trade Center and take the elevator to the observation deck.

Evan's never been here. My parents and I have been up here a million times, but I've never been able to go onto the roof. The weather has to be *perfect* for them to open the deck on the roof. Tonight it's perfect. It's unbelievable up here.

I'm outside, underneath the sky a hundred and ten stories up. This is incredibly romantic for my mom and Evan. For me, it's also magical. I feel like I'm on top of the world. We stay out here for a long time and I never want to leave.

The night is so clear you can see everything, in every direction. It's beautiful. I'm so glad my mom trusts me enough to know I can be a part of this secret. I'm hopeful this will be the catalyst to get my mom to leave my father. I wish for it so hard.

One day we go to Milford Recreation Center to play video games and pool. When I'm done playing video games, I notice my mom and Evan are nowhere to be found. I go out to the parking lot and spot the car.

I open the door and two people are making out. I shut the door and look around the parking lot for another white Firebird with out-of-state plates. I don't find one. It was my mom and Evan making out. My mind wasn't able to process it.

I'm stunned by the way my eyes saw my mom and I didn't recognize her. I don't care at all they were making out. I'm just amazed at what the brain can do.

As much as I like Evan, it weighs pretty heavily on my mind that my mom is having an affair. It's a huge secret to keep. Since I do so much stuff with them, sometimes I almost slip and say something about one of our good times to my mom when my father's around. I have to be super careful not to blow it for her.

*

At school one afternoon, Mr. Baxter puts on a filmstrip for my class and heads out into the hallway. He always hangs out in the hallway when there's a filmstrip going.

I walk out of class and stand next to him. I feel the need to talk to him. I'm a big troublemaker, and he must wonder what the hell I want.

"Hey," I really don't know what to say. This is weird.

"Hi," he smiles. "What's going on?"

"I just wanted to come out and talk to you." I say.

"Okay," he replies. "Anything specific you want to talk about?"

"I guess," I answer. "It's kind of hard to figure out what to say."

We stand there for a few moments.

"I have a lot of problems," I finally tell him.

"I sort of figured that out," he nods.

"Really?" I'm shocked.

"Yeah," he says. "I've been teaching for a long time. I can tell when a kid is having a hard time."

"Wow," I can't believe it. "I thought I was pretty good at hiding it."

"You are," he agrees. "But I don't think you act out the way you do in my classes with other teachers."

He's right. I act differently in his classes because I feel strangely comfortable with him. I talk back and joke a lot. I'm disruptive. Often I feel myself doing it, and want to stop, but I can't.

"So what's going on?" He asks.

"I'm not sure if I can say it," I'm afraid I'll say too much.

"That's okay, Chris, I'll be here when you're ready," what a nice guy.

"Thanks," I walk back into class.

*

Before I know it, Mr. Baxter is a huge part of my life. I manage to stumble through talking about parts of my life. For someone who's relatively articulate, I can barely spit out what I need to say. I can't put into words what has never been spoken out loud.

Only certain things are safe to tell. Like how depressed I am, how sad I am my father doesn't care about me. The struggles with my mom. I smoke pot pretty regularly. Like, every day.

I hate the way I act around Mr. Baxter. In class, I'm outright disrespectful. When we have a chance to talk alone, in the hallway or the classroom, I'm able to have great conversations with him. If other people are around, I act like a child.

I have such poor impulse control I say things I don't even want to say. I can't help myself. Words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I taunt him and try to provoke him. I egg him on, testing the limits of his patience to see how far I can go. He lets me go pretty fucking far.

I don't know why this is happening, but I think it's because he's shown he cares about me. He jokes with me, and when I give him a hard time, he gives me shit back.

He also puts his arm around me and takes the time to talk to me whenever I need him. He's my staunchest ally. He does everything he can to help me reach my academic potential. Including meeting with Ms. Thomas, the gifted teacher, and I. He helps negotiate a truce between us. He helps her understand more about me and why I act the way I do. Suddenly she's on my side as well.

He works hard to boost my self-esteem. Nothing is more important to me than his attention.

In class, when I wear a Yale t-shirt he gives me a hard time.

"Ha! Yale in your dreams."

I laugh. "I could go to Yale."

After class he comes up to me and affirms my statement. "You *will* go to Yale. You belong there."

I've gone from no support to a ton of support. It's not even just Mr. Baxter and Ms. Thomas now. The guidance counselors love me, my band teacher takes time to talk to me, and it feels good to have so many people on my side.

I'm in the Industrial Arts Club, because they do such interesting things, small engine repair, bridge design, and the newest event at the convention this year, computer-aided design (CAD). I run for president of the club and win.

Mr. McLaglen, the adviser, doesn't like me much. I've always had a bad attitude in his class. Suddenly I've become president of his club. He doesn't know what to think. I tell him I plan to enter the CAD contest at the upcoming convention. He tells me to go for it.

I sit in the computer lab and design a flat-tip screwdriver in drafting format according to the specifications provided. It takes me no time at all. I put it on a disk and submit it.

My mom is no longer in school and is working as an elevator constructor, like my father. They make good money and things are going well for us financially. However, they're constantly at each other's throats and I hate it. It drives me crazy. I sit in my room and think about leaving. I really want to run away. Or die.

*

Richard has been an actor since before I was born. He became well-known for his work on an hour-long drama. Once I moved in with him, his character's role was reduced so he could have more time to spend at home.

Being at work with him is fun, and the set of a television show is an interesting place to hang out. Nearly everyone he works with makes me feel comfortable and welcome.

Susan doesn't make me feel welcome. Ironically, her character is in a relationship with Richard's character. They spend a lot of time together working on scenes, talking, and joking around. Her proximity to Richard leads to her knowing too much about me.

She eavesdrops about what I am and am not allowed to do on the set. Whenever she catches me doing anything wrong, she goes right to Richard to let him know. No one else would ever dime me out. It pisses me off.

*

I'm obsessed with talking to Mr. Baxter. He seems to know exactly what I need and provides it. There isn't much touching or affection in my home, my parents aren't affectionate people. Mr. Baxter makes me feel like he cares.

I'm ashamed to be so transparent with him. It's a weakness I shouldn't be showing. Counting on someone is dangerous, but I've got to take the chance. I crave his attention. Positive or negative.

My mom buys me a guitar for my 14th birthday. It's the most exciting gift ever. Now I can be like AU Chris. Except I can't play the guitar and don't put in the effort to learn. Still, I can hold it and pretend.

I make several attempts at running away. After my fourteenth birthday, I run to Amy's house and take a cab to the Greyhound Bus station in New Haven. Amy's my best friend. She's the only person in the world who knows everything about my life. I trust her implicitly.

The next bus is going to Boston and I buy a ticket. I board the bus and stand at the front looking back at the passengers. I'm struck by how bad it smells. Like sweat and body odor. I begin to have doubts about making this move to Boston. I should have gone to the train station instead.

Boston seems like the best choice of cities. The other option is Manhattan, and I'm not sure that'll be very safe. I'm a little worried since after buying the ticket I only have \$85 left. It won't last long once I'm there.

I return to the bus terminal and refund the ticket. I take a cab back to Amy's. Apparently my mom has already been to Amy's and demanded to know where to find me. Amy told her where I'd gone and my mom is at the bus station. She's fucking livid when she finally catches up with me.

There's talk of being grounded, losing privileges like talking on the phone and going over Amy's house. The next day all is forgotten. I don't have real consequences at home. I get away with everything.

There are no consequences for my actions in RL, only in the AU. Unlike my friends, I've never been grounded and I've never had a detention. Yet my behavior is worse than anyone I know. It doesn't make sense.

Then there is a punishment after all. A big one. Since I ran away, or tried to run away, I'm not allowed to go to the Industrial Arts convention in Hartford. My mom is afraid I won't come back. My work on the CAD competition was for naught.

*

I received an X-Acto knife kit for my birthday. They were purchased so I can work on wooden models of bridges. When I examine the knives in my room, I forget all about bridges.

They're beautiful knives. So sharp. I run one of them along my arm. Then I do it a little harder. And harder. Finally droplets of blood appear. It doesn't even hurt. I make cut after cut, each time digging a little deeper.

I decide to go for it and really hurt myself. I make a cut a few inches below my palm. I dig the blade into my arm until blood spills out. It's exhilarating. I put a piece of paper under my arm to catch the blood.

It stops bleeding before long. Now I'm all cut up for nothing. I should've known better. From what I understand, this is not a very successful method of suicide.

It's winter, so in the morning I put on a long-sleeve shirt. I go to school and think nothing of my cuts. It isn't until gym class

that it's a problem. I change into my gym shirt, and it has short-sleeves.

If I'm in action, no one should notice. I go out and start shooting hoops. I forget about everything until I hear Mr. Baxter call for me and I turn around. He shouldn't be in the gym. I jog over to see what's up. He takes my hands and looks at my arms. The gym teacher had him called down. Seriously, does everyone in the school know he's my buddy?

"Were you trying to kill yourself?" He asks me.

"No," I pull my arms away. "I was just messing around."

"Messing around?" He's incredulous. "Why would you cut yourself like this, Chris?"

"I don't know." I turn away.

He tells me I have to go to the nurse.

"No!" I yell. "You're an asshole!" I fight tears, but they come anyway. Rolling down my cheek.

"I care about you. We can't let this go," he looks sad. "You need to talk to a professional."

"Fuck off!" I yell. I'm making quite the scene in gym class. No one's playing basketball now.

I want to continue lashing out at him, but I don't. My mother is going to kill me if she finds out about this.

I have to change. The gym teacher comes in the locker room with me and I throw my regular clothes on.

Mr. Baxter walks me down to the nurse's office and I'm pissed. I keep telling him it's no big deal and he keeps arguing that it is.

The nurse's questions piss me off. I tell her to fuck off. She wraps my wrist in a bandage and I roll my eyes. I guess she felt like she had to do something.

We're walking to the guidance office when two members of the Industrial Arts club sprint up to us.

"You won!" James yells.

"I won?" I ask. "The CAD competition?"

"Yeah! Mr. McLaglen has your trophy," he says.

"You're going to regionals now!" Erica tells me. "And Mr. McLaglen is really pissed at you for not going to the convention, by the way."

I yell and jump and down. "I won!!! I fucking won!"

In the guidance office, faces are grim. My mom has been called and told she has to pick me up from school. She refused and told them no. She isn't coming.

I look at them and nod my head. Nice. I can't believe they called my mom, and I especially can't believe they thought she'd leave work and pick me up because of some little cuts.

They seem unsure of where to go from here. I get the feeling this has never happened before. Of course it hasn't. This would only happen to me with my parents.

"You can't stay here, Chris," Mr. Washington says. He's my guidance counselor. A very kind man.

"Can I go to a friend's house?" I ask.

He looks at the other counselor. "I guess so," he says. "As long as a parent is there."

We stand in silence, looking at each other. I shrug my shoulders.

"Well, maybe I could go to Amy's house," it's worth a shot. "One of her parents would probably get me. But she has to come, too."

I'm filled with panic. Mr. Washington is worried about how nervous I am. I tell him he doesn't understand. My mother is going to be so upset. I don't say anything, but I'm going to hear some awful things because of this. They aren't helping me at all.

Amy is called down to guidance and I fill her in. She punches me on the arm and tells me I'm an idiot. We laugh. I tell her the gym teacher and Mr. Baxter are dead. She rolls her eyes and tells me it's not their fault I do stupid shit.

Her dad says he'll come and get us. Problem solved.

In Amy's dad's car, I feel like a burden. He had to leave work to help me. Luckily, he owns his business. He asks me what's going on. I tell him nothing and he says bullshit. There's clearly something going on with me. I can't talk about it, though. I say things are kind of messed up at my house. He nods because he isn't stupid. He knows. He tells me not to worry about having to pick me up, they're here for me. I know they are, and I appreciate it.

I love Amy's family. Their house is normal, and I like to spend time there. I push their buttons, too. Push their limits, and they never reject me. They're good people.

At their home, I try to relax and forget the fact that eventually my mom will show up to get me. When she does, I go out to the car like I'm on a death march. Surprisingly, my father is in the car, too. That's odd. I sit in the back seat.

As my mom is backing out of the driveway she says, "We're very disappointed in you." That's it. My father doesn't say a fucking word. I look out the window.

I'm disappointed, too. Sad to have parents who don't give a shit about me. It's hard not to get out of the car and run. Run as far away as I can get.

*

The next morning I head for homeroom and Mr. Baxter tells me I need to go to the guidance office. I turn around and shuffle my feet as I walk out of the room, taking my time. I get his attention once I'm in the hall and flip him off.

In the guidance office, everyone is all smiles. Ron Weiss, the school district psychologist, is here to meet with me. That's nice. I refuse to see him unless Amy can come in, too. I won't even enter an office with him. Amy's called down and goes in with me to see Ron.

I ask Amy to tell him what's going on and start laughing. She hits some of the important things. Things are hard at home lately. Sometimes I feel like killing myself. He asks if I use drugs and we both shake our heads.

I'm unable to keep a straight face. I keep laughing hysterically. It goes on and on, and I can't get it under control. There's nothing funny about this. I just can't help it.

He plans to let my parents know I need to see a therapist. He can work with me here at school with parental consent. He's going to call my mom and get back to me.

I'm called down an hour later. My mom told him to fuck off. She told him they're crazy and there's nothing wrong with me. I don't need a therapist. They need to leave me alone.

I'm a little surprised. I didn't think my mom would resist so strongly.

Ron says he's going to see me at least once a week without parental consent. And if I need him during other times, I can let guidance know and they'll call him. I can't believe he's

going to do this for me. Why are all these people being so nice to me?

*

I win the regional CAD competition and receive a letter in the mail inviting me to the national competition in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I can't believe it. Everyone is excited. This is huge deal for both me and the school.

Mr. Baxter comes down to the industrial arts room to congratulate me, and I'm talking to Mr. McLaglen. Mr. Baxter puts his arm around me and smiles. Mr. McLaglen still doesn't like me much. He asks Mr. Baxter if he's the president of my fan club. It's kind of a dick thing to say. Mr. Baxter rolls with it and says he is.

My mom books our trip to Baton Rouge, and my father isn't coming! It's just going to be the two of us. I can't believe this is happening to me. It's incredible. A win will mean the school gets \$20,000 worth of computer equipment. I get a computer, too.

An architectural firm in Greenwich invites me to their office to train me on using the AutoCAD software. This is unreal. One day I'm wishing for death and cutting on myself, and the next I'm practically a celebrity.

My mom and I get to Baton Rouge and end up in a hotel room filled with cockroaches. Within minutes we're both standing on a bed, horrified. I look to her for help. I can't stay here. She says she can't, either.

She calls another hotel, asks if they have roaches and when they say no, gets a room on the top floor. They send a shuttle to pick us up. Not an auspicious beginning.

When it's time for my event, I'm confident. Mr. McLaglen is allowed to go into the room with me. He isn't allowed to answer any questions, but is there for support. Suddenly I have a million questions.

I was taught how to use the software, but I don't know drafting. I suck. I have no idea what I'm doing. Mr. McLaglen looks like he's going to explode. He's dying to tell me what to do. It's brutal.

I come in fourth in the nation in the CAD competition. During the awards ceremony, I'm proud of myself. Just getting

here was an accomplishment. I did the best I could, and this is awesome.

My mom is furious when we're driving back to the hotel. She's raging against everyone who set me up for this failure.

“This is their fault! They made you believe you could win this!” She yells.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I reply quietly. “I came in fourth.” In my head, fourth isn't bad.

“It’s a big deal!” She screams. “They fucked you over! They made you think you were so great, so perfect. And now you lost. They did this to you!”

Tears roll down my face. Fourth place had seemed cool until getting into the car.

“It’s okay,” I start to explain how I feel and she cuts me off.

“No! It’s not okay! Fucking Mr. Baxter, Mr. McLaglen, the principal, they all did this. They all set you up to fail and I’m pissed!” She's livid and her anger is frightening me.

When we get back to the hotel, I go downstairs to a pay phone and call Mr. Baxter to tell him what happened. He's proud of me. He doesn't think fourth place is a failure at all.

*

It's time for high school. I have to let go of Mr. Baxter and it's hard. I don't know how I'll make it without him.

I decide to go to a private school. My CAD accomplishment is a big deal, and I don't want to go to public school anymore. After much deliberation, I decide to apply to Lauralton Hall, an all-girls Catholic school. I never in my life thought I'd consider it, but here I am.

When I call they tell me their freshman class is full. School starts in two months. But they're willing to give me an interview, even though I haven't taken their entrance exam.

My grandfather drives me to the school and I meet with Sister Janice. She's blown away by me. She is so impressed by the CAD thing alone she can hardly contain herself. My performance in gifted and my grades from last year are pretty good, too.

I go to my grandparents' house for dinner. My mom calls and says Lauralton called to say I'm in.

*

Lauralton is a beautiful school compared to the public schools I've attended. It's rich with history. The main building was once someone's mansion, and has a wooden spiral staircase, hardwood floors that creak with age under my penny loafers, and actual "tower" rooms that are round and have pointed roofs.

The year starts off well and I make plenty of friends. But I want to belong to a club. No school clubs interest me. One day I notice a flier for a group called Sea Explorers. I love boats and sailing. It sounds perfect.

I'm nervous going to the first meeting alone, but I do it. Once I'm there I meet Hayden, and he's a really nice guy. He's a year older than me. We talk while the other kids show up. Everyone's very welcoming.

We head upstairs for the meeting when the skipper and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Holm, arrive. The officers sit around a table and the rest of us sit on benches and chairs around them. There are about ten kids in all. I sit with Seth and his brother Aaron. I fall for Seth right away. I know I'm going to get to know him better. He's cute and I like his smile.

Everything about the Sea Explorer meeting is comfortable and fun. They talk about an upcoming winter camping trip to Camp Sequassen in upstate Connecticut. It sounds great. When my mom picks me up I'm very excited. I'm proud of myself for going to the meeting even though I didn't know anyone there.

*

Freshman year I try out for basketball and am the point guard for the junior varsity team. Practicing and playing in games feels good. When I'm out there playing, my thoughts are on the game – passing well, running plays, and making shots. Playing basketball is the healthiest part of my life.

At home, Richard is getting very serious with Susan. Susan can't stand me; she thinks I have a bad attitude. I keep hoping they'll break up, but instead she's spending more and more time at our place.

My escape is being on the team, going to Sea Explorer meetings, band practice and shows. She takes too much of

Richard's time. After becoming accustomed to a certain way of life with him, everything is changing.

Richard drops a bombshell. He asks if it's okay for Susan to move in with us. I don't know what to say and I don't want to hurt his feelings. He's done everything for me over the past several years. How can I deprive him of happiness?

I tell him it's his house and he can do whatever he wants. He shakes his head and says that isn't what he asked. I lie and tell him I don't care. My hope is he'll see through me and understand I can't tell him the truth.

She moves in and I get to use plenty of drugs. Richard is distracted by Susan and doesn't notice me getting high. I do lines of cocaine after school and then go out with friends. I smoke joints on the way home after basketball practice.

It hurts that Richard has brought Susan into our lives. I don't want to share him. I'm distressed by my inability to express these feelings. Richard knows I love him, but I'm unable to convey how badly I need him. I should be telling him I'm not doing very well. It's too late.

*

Amy and I spend the summer hanging out with Mike. He's 19 and we're 15. He drives a motorcycle, he's hot, and he provides alcohol. He buys any bottles of booze I request, Southern Comfort, Jack Daniels, and vodka.

We hang out at my house during the day, drinking and smoking weed. I'm looking to get as fucked up as possible. And I succeed.

One afternoon, after way too many drinks, I set the backyard on fire so I can put it out with the hose. It almost gets out of hand and I panic for a moment before the fire is out. Mike can't believe me and thinks I'm insane. He also thinks my mom is gonna be pissed. There's no doubt about that.

Sea Explorers is even better than I'd dreamed. Going sailing all summer is incredible. It's a beautiful life. I can't believe the luck of seeing that notice posted at school and actually having the guts to go to the meeting. It was one of the best moves ever.

*

Susan has been living with us for a few months. It feels like she's always trying to put me in my place and make me feel like a child.

Richard loves her, though, there's no denying it. We've had so many tough times; it's good for him to be happy. However, it's terribly hard to share Richard with her.

I'm used to having his undivided attention. This new life sucks. Instead of talking to him about it, I've decided to take advantage of the lack of attention and increase my drug use.

Getting high and anger are my main coping mechanisms. When I'm sober I struggle with thoughts of suicide. Richard doesn't see what's happening. He's in the honeymoon stage of his relationship.

There are times when he busts me getting high or drinking, and I get grounded. In the past he'd be around, and it was fine that privileges were lost. We would do things together and hang out. Now I'm alone, home with no phone or TV, or worse, Susan's here. I still get high. Fuck it.

*

Sophomore year at Luralton starts well. My friend Jill and I create a club, Students Against Drugs (SAD). We feel there's a need for a club dealing with the dangers of drugs. It feels a little hypocritical, since I smoke weed on occasion, but I don't think of it as a big deal.

Jill and I are great friends and care about people fucking up their lives. Personally, I'm not worried about my own life, but I don't want any other kids to get hurt.

I'm struggling with depression. Even though school is great, things are never great at home. I spend a lot of time in my room, brooding.

One night I bring Amy to a Sea Explorer meeting. After the meeting we go out with Seth and Aaron. Seth has his license now, and he's becoming my close friend. We're a little bit late getting to the restaurant where we're going to meet my mom.

She isn't there, so we go inside. Minutes later she comes in with a furious expression on her face and we go out to the car.

My mom's in a rage, screaming at me. She tells me I'm an asshole. Everyone thinks I'm such a fucking gem, but they don't know the real me. If they did, they'd know I was an

asshole. I try to tune her out. I can't hear this shit. I can't believe Amy is in the backseat listening to this.

It doesn't seem like the punishment fits the crime. Being late to get picked up shouldn't have anything to do with me being an asshole. I cry, but keep as quiet as I can. When we get to Amy's house, I let her out of the backseat. My face is streaked with tears. She puts her hand on my arm and whispers, "I'm sorry."

We move to Milford from West Haven. It's going to make my life much easier, because now I live right down the street from Lauralton, instead of a 45 minute city bus ride away. My cousin Jenn, and her mom, Bonni, move in with us after Bonni leaves her husband.

Jenn is 11 and I'm 15. She drives me crazy, like a little sister. But it's also nice to have them around. Something about their being in the house makes it a little better. Just a little, though. It's still pretty insane around here.

I need to see a therapist. I've thought so since 8th grade, but it's never happened. Last year I became obsessed with writing poems about killing myself and other people. I'm very dark. I don't see why I have to keep on living. It's too hard.

My brain is overloaded. In the AU things aren't going well, either. I'm dealing with stress in both worlds, and it's overwhelming.

I can't easily make the transition between the AU and RL. I'm either in one place or the other. I know I have two places, but I don't know why or how it works. I can never speak of the AU to anyone, because I'm clearly crazy. No one but a crazy person would have two lives going on at the same time, and believe they're both real.

But they are both real. I'm like two different people, and yet the same. It's confusing. Sometimes I feel like the Chris in the AU, and I have tons of confidence. I can do anything, nothing is impossible. I walk around as that girl. I'm a rock star. Then I'm RL me, who has very little confidence and is depressed. I don't know what the AU is. I don't know who I am.

*

Amy hasn't heard from Mike in a couple weeks. We call the tattoo shop where he always hangs out. I ask for him, and the

guy that answers the phone tells me they buried Mike last week. He killed himself.

Amy and I talk for a long time. We're stunned. I hang up and am in shock. I sit on the side of my bed, my head in my hands, and cry. I've never had a friend die.

My parents are partying tonight, doing some coke with their friend, Jim. My bedroom door is open, and when my mom and Jim walk by, he asks if I'm okay. I tell them Mike died and my mom waves it off. She says a lot of my friends are going to die. Get used to it.

Mike bought a huge amount of cocaine, got a motel room in Branford, and killed himself with coke. Had a massive heart attack and then fell against the heater. Which burned him badly.

Amy and I want to know the details. We know the name of the motel where he died. I find out where he's buried and get the exact plot location. My mom refuses to take me to the cemetery. She doesn't think we should be dwelling on Mike because he was a loser.

I'm obsessed with suicide. If Mike can do it, I can do it. I just wish I could do it in a way as cool as him. I don't even know where to get cocaine. I don't think I have the guts to use a gun. There aren't enough pills in the house. I'm going to have to try to slit my wrists and get it right.

I research the method and learn vertical cuts are necessary. I'll use a bowl of ice to numb the arm so it doesn't hurt badly when I make the deep cut. Then I'll submerge the arm in warm water, in order to help the blood flow freely from the wound. Sounds simple enough. The problem will be getting enough time home alone to pull it off.

It doesn't take long before an opportunity presents itself. I stay home while my parents take Bonni and Jenn out to dinner at a restaurant notorious for slow service. Plus, there's a bad snowstorm, so they're going to have to drive carefully.

As soon as they're out the door I race to my room and grab the hunting knife I stole from my father. I've been sharpening it every night with my whetstone in preparation.

I grab a bowl and fill it with ice. I fill a stock pot with hot water. It'll be warm by the time my arm's in it.

My arm is numbing and my heart is racing with anticipation. The phone rings. I roll my eyes. Should I interrupt my suicide attempt to answer the phone?

As a teenage girl, I'm unable to resist the phone. It's definitely going to be for me. I need to keep it quick.

It's my friend Laura from Sea Explorers. We've become close this year, as she goes to Lauralton, too. She asks what I'm doing and I say nothing. We talk and I find myself tearful. She keeps asking me what's wrong.

I tell her I'm in the middle of a suicide attempt. She's shocked. She asks if she can come over to my house. I guess so. My chance is blown now. She asks her dad if she can come over and he doesn't want her to drive. When she tells him it's serious, he says he'll drive her. I promise I'll be alive when she gets here.

When we get off the phone I'm crying. My attempt is foiled because I was stupid enough to answer the phone and lose my nerve.

I empty the pot of water and the bowl of ice. I'm so angry. I want to punch the wall until my hand bleeds, but that's not the answer. I'll have another chance to die. I sit down on the floor and put my head in my hands. I can't believe this happened.

By the time Laura arrives my parents are home. We go for a walk around my neighborhood, trudging through the snow. I feel despair. We talk about my depression and hopelessness.

She wants to help. She asks what I think will help, and I have no idea. Things will never get better. She says surely there must be something we can do. Such an optimist.

I'm at a loss. My mom has already shot down the idea of therapy. People have tried to help me in the past and it doesn't work. You can't get past my parents and their unwillingness to allow me to seek help.

We walk quietly and Laura has an idea. She thinks we should go to Mr. and Mrs. Holm. I let it roll around in my head. I'm very fond of the Holms. But what if they don't care? I can't handle rejection right now.

They have their own family. They're busy people. Why the fuck would they care about my problems? What will I tell them?

Laura calls them from my house. They say we can come over tomorrow night to talk.

When she's gone and I'm in my room, I'm concerned. I've been taught my whole life not to talk to people outside of the family about problems. It's not safe. I took the chance with Mr. Baxter, but not a soul after him. Only Amy knows my whole story. And she keeps it to herself. She never betrays me.

*

I'm nervous at Mr. and Mrs. Holm's house. I've never been here before, and now I'm going to be asking them to help me. I'm so lost. I have plenty of friends in high school, but none of them can tackle my problems. Jill and Amy give it their best shot, but we're all just kids.

We sit in the living room. I don't know what to say. I hate how when I really need to say something, I'm at a loss.

I manage to stumble through why I'm here while I stare at the floor. My friend died, he killed himself. I tell them what my mom said to me about it. I want to kill myself and was all set to give it a go last night when Laura called. I'm depressed. I feel hopeless. I really need someone to help me.

They offer to help. I'm obviously in pain. We're going to find a professional I can talk to. In the meantime, they generously offer to let me come to their house or call if I need them. I'm immediately drawn to them and their kids.

It'll be hard to let my defenses down. It isn't easy to trust people. The way to see if people truly care is to give them a hard time and see if they reject me.

They both give me hugs on the way out. When has someone hugged me like Mrs. Holm just did? With such tenderness and caring? It makes me want to cry because I don't get this in my house. I'm encouraged. They seem to really care about me, and I'm touched. My heart is filled with warmth.

Laura and I go their home again over the weekend. They're preparing Christmas cookies. I feel a little shy. Their two youngest daughters are home, Sara and Susan. I feel damaged, and I'm not sure they should be exposed to me.

I'm welcomed into their home and even steered toward the baking sheet to form cookie dough into balls with Mrs.

Holm's help. Laura snaps a photo of us. This experience is unreal to me. Is this really how they live? I could get used to this.

I get a copy of the photo Laura snapped of me making cookies with Mrs. Holm. Mr. Holm is in it, too. It's perfect. It makes me cry. I look at it every day. Sometimes more than once a day. It gets me through the hardest times. When I don't think I'll last another minute.

I look happy in the photo. Like I'm part of something special. I'll keep it always. I put it in a special place in my room. With my pictures of Richard.

I'm taken aback by how much I need the Holms. It's hard to accept how much I need them, and how quickly I'm becoming dependent on them. I'm embarrassed and feel pathetic.

I don't want to be transparent in my neediness, so I act out. I make jokes and screw around. It's hard to make myself vulnerable. But when I hug Mrs. Holm, I'm vulnerable. I can barely stand my raw emotions.

It's got to be obvious I'm starved for affection. I don't want to crave attention so badly, and yet I do. I carefully keep my mom from knowing about them. She won't be okay with it. She'll be afraid of what I might say to them. And threatened I've found another family I care about so much.

Mr. and Mrs. Holm take me to the cemetery to see Mike's grave. I slip out and lie to my mom about where I'm going. I can't believe they're doing this for me. I need the closure of saying goodbye.

We find his plot. A fresh grave since it's been less than a month. They leave me alone to say goodbye. I crouch down and start to cry. I tell Mike I loved knowing him. I'm so sorry he had no other way out. I feel like maybe I don't have any other way out, too.

Mike wasn't a loser; he was lost, like me. Maybe when you get older and you're lost it's easier to end it. You have more resources available for suicide.

I'm incredibly grateful for Mr. and Mrs. Holm. I don't feel worthy of their kindness. If my own family doesn't think I'm worth it, why do they?

I get the courage to tell my mom I need to see a therapist. We're in the car on our way to Lauralton in the morning and I

need to be quick. I tell her I need help. I can't stop thinking about killing myself. She laughs in my face.

"You?" She yells at me. "You have problems? I'm the one who has fucking problems. I'm the one who wants to kill myself!" She makes me feel like it was ridiculous to even make such a request.

It hurts. I get out of the car into the bitter cold. I can't cry. I walk into school and keep my head up. I really thought she might go for it this time. I guess my problems aren't as serious as hers, and therefore require no professional intervention.

Little does she know I've seen a pastor who has told the Holms I do need help, and we'll keep trying. I call Mrs. Holm from school, and she comforts me. Lets me know they're here for me. I'm so thankful.

*

Richard and I maintain an open dialogue about how I'm doing and he thinks once a stable therapist is involved, I'll get better. Drugs are complicating things. It's no secret I smoke weed, and Richard has caught me red handed with cocaine.

What he and Susan don't know is the frequency with which I get high. I smoke weed daily, and I do cocaine nearly every weekend.

Susan reads all the books she can get her hands on about kids using drugs. She relaxes after work in the evenings with a glass of wine and books about dealing with troubled adolescents. She shares the information she learns with Richard, and tells him how they should be dealing with my "problem."

He thinks my problem is depression. I agree. I'm getting high to escape crushing feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. The drugs help me run away from the gamut of feelings I experience, from anger and extreme irritability to depression with suicidal ideation.

Richard knows I obsess about suicide and he's confiscated excessive caches of pills and knives from my bedroom. We have an agreement where he randomly checks my room to see what's in there. No problem, I keep it empty of anything incriminating.

When I was younger I made a promise to go to him if I was ever so depressed or hopeless I might hurt myself. If I had a

decent plan for suicide it would be stupid to tell Richard. He'd stop me.

*

The Holms and I have been waiting for a good day to go to Milford Mental Health, our community mental health clinic. It has to be done without my mom knowing, because she would never say okay. Or bring me herself. She's been crystal clear on that.

Finally we have a snow day from school, and it's time. They pick me up from the house and take me to Milford Mental Health. They tell the receptionist what's going on, and we wait. I'm so nervous I could throw up. Who knows what's going to happen here?

We're taken back to speak with a social worker, Mary. She hears my story, and I'm honest about my frequent suicidal ideation. She asks the Holms to leave so she can speak with me alone.

I tell her about 8th grade, how my mom was supposed to take me to a therapist and refused. Things have never gotten better. I have periods where I'm not depressed, but overall I want to die. I yearn for it.

She goes out and speaks to a psychiatrist, and they return together.

"Because your parents are treatment resistant, and you're depressed and suicidal, we think you should be in the hospital," the doctor says.

I draw back physically. What he just said about the hospital has floored me. It can't possibly be true.

"No way," I tell them. "No way."

"You're a danger to yourself. We can't just let you go home," he says. "The fact you had to come here with people who care and are not your family speaks volumes. If you're so afraid of your parents' reaction to you coming here, it's not a safe environment."

I shake my head. My brain can barely process this. The hospital? The mental hospital? No. They can't be right.

"No," I keep shaking my head. "That can't be true."

"We're worried about your safety," Mary says in a calm voice.

I'm getting agitated and angry. "You don't understand," I tell them, "my mother will kill me."

"Right," the doctor says. "We can't let you go home from here."

This is so far from what I thought might happen I can barely believe it. It's mind-boggling. These people want me to go to a mental hospital. They won't let me go home from here. How can this possibly be happening?

Inside, I know they're right. I shouldn't be at home. It's true. I push that thought away.

"Look," I say. "You don't understand. In just over a week I'm going to Washington, DC for a Washington Workshops Congressional Seminar. My parents have paid a lot of money for it. And I'm going. It's a huge deal. I can't go to a hospital."

"You're going to Washington alone?" Mary asks.

"Yeah," I say. What's her point? I'm old enough to do this. I can handle it.

"Wow," the doctor says. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

I'm at high-level anger now. "You can't take this from me."

"Let's try to figure out another solution," Mary tells me. Trying to calm me down.

The solution we all come up with is fucking awesome. I've gone from the horror of hearing I need to go to the hospital, to a plan where I spend the weekend with the Holm family. This is the greatest thing I've ever heard. All we have to do is go to my house and get some clothes.

This is so perfect. Until we pull into my driveway and see my parents' cars. My heart almost explodes. How can I possibly go in there and tell my mother what has just happened? Mr. Holm should back the car out and leave. Or maybe my mom will see this is really serious? She's so unpredictable I have no idea what'll happen.

The doctor and social worker only let me leave Milford Mental Health because they made this plan. My mother can't say no, right?

By the time I'm through the back door I'm so scared, I'm shaking. My breath is ragged and I'm crying already.

I run into my mom coming down the stairs. I tell her what happened. I'm here to get clothes to stay at the Holms' house this weekend. I have to go back to Milford Mental Health on Monday so they can reassess the situation.

My mother blows up. She's furious.

"Over my dead body!" She screams at me. "You're not going anywhere!"

She goes outside to speak to the Holms. I can only imagine what she's saying to them. She's scary right now. I want to go out there, too. But I'm glued to the floor.

She comes back in and tells me they're gone. I can't believe this is happening to me. What have I possibly done to deserve this? What will it hurt to let me be away from this shit for the weekend? Just let me spend the weekend with a normal family. Is that so much to ask?

"You're not going to Washington!" She's still screaming. "That's for fucking sure!"

My mom is still screaming at me. I catch pieces of it. I'm removing myself from this situation mentally. I can't handle it. I hear her ask me how I dared go to those people and tell them our family's business.

"I didn't tell them about you," I say quietly. I protect their secret. There are so many secrets and I keep them all. I didn't tell Milford Mental Health my parents are nearly as fucked up as they are. All I said was my mom won't let me get help. And she won't.

My father comes downstairs to see what's going on. My mother tells him, and he goes back upstairs after shaking his head in disgust. He has nothing to say to me.

My mother hasn't calmed down at all. She continues to scream at me. Asking what the fuck I was possibly thinking. And then the phone rings. It's Mary, the social worker.

My mother goes off on her. I mean, she tears into the woman. Telling her *she* is my parent, not the Holms. How dare they talk to her daughter without consent? There's not a chance in hell I'm going to their house.

She's obviously told I can't stay here. She screams I'll go to my grandparents' house. And hangs up.

"Oh, you can't stay here?" She asks derisively. "It's not safe?"

I'm crying so hard. I could fall on the floor right now I'm so blown away. I want nothing more than to die. This is such a terrible situation I don't know how I'm even getting through it. Part of me wants to walk out the door. But if I do, I'm certain my mom will follow and beat the shit out of me. I wouldn't have a chance against her fury.

Why does she hate me so much? I don't understand it. I think I'm a pretty good kid overall. I don't know what I've done to deserve this.

My grandmother is on the phone. I'm packing some clothes and she asks me if I'm trying to ruin their family name. I'm stunned by her question. I tell her I don't give a fuck about their family name.

Is that what's important here? Family reputation? Not my mental health? This isn't about me and my well-being. It's about everyone else and how much they want to ignore there's something wrong with me.

I can't stop crying. My grandparents are coming to the house to pick me up. My mom keeps screaming at me. She says she's done with me; she's washing her hands of me, and yet won't stop screaming. I want to yell, if you're done with me, shut the fuck up!

My grandparents have never been mean to me. I'm an only grandchild and they've never treated me with anything but love and kindness.

Today they speak to me with such anger and disgust it breaks my heart. It cuts me deep. I'm used to my mother's cruel words, and my father's indifference, but this is shocking. There's been too much shock today. I'm worn out.

I go upstairs and cry. I sob and sob. I want to go to the Holms' house, but when I ask, my grandmother seems flabbergasted I'd suggest such a thing. I'm not going anywhere. I call Laura, but my grandmother is listening to the conversation.

Mary calls and asks to speak to me. I'm filled with anger. She asks how I'm doing and I ask her how the fuck she thinks I'm doing. But this is my fault. I should have let them put me in the hospital. I shouldn't have gone home to get clothes.

Mary happens to be an easy target for my rage. She didn't protect me. I don't believe anyone can protect me. My

grandmother is listening to the call. Mary makes me promise to come in on Monday and I do. Apparently my mother has agreed to take me there.

I'm emotionally exhausted. I almost got to spend the weekend with the Holm family. They were going to let me go to their house. What's wrong with my family? It's inexplicable. What other family would do this?

My grandparents have damaged our relationship. They've hurt me badly.

At home the next day, my mom is fine. Everything is fine. It's like yesterday never happened. But she isn't kind when she says I can go to Milford Mental Health on Monday if I really want to. She's not bringing me.

I'm just a fifteen-year-old kid. I don't know about emotional abuse or trauma. But I know this is wrong.

*

My mom didn't mean it when she said I wouldn't be going to Washington, D.C. You don't spend that kind of money and change your mind. I get on a commuter plane from New Haven to Washington. I can't believe I'm taking this trip alone.

I take a cab to the dorm at Georgetown where I'll be staying. I check in and go up to my room. It's more a hotel than a dorm. My roommate is 19 years old. It turns out I'm the youngest kid here. I had no idea it would be mostly college students.

I brought a roll of quarters here to make phone calls to Mrs. Holm. I don't want to use my parents' calling card to call them.

By the second day I don't know if I can do this. It's too hard to be with these older kids, dressed up. I want to go home. I tell my mom I need to come home and she gets it all set. I have a flight ready and I leave. One great thing about my mom, when she wants to help me, she does it right.

*

When I'm not at school, I'm either locked in my room or trying to go visit the Holms. I talk to Mrs. Holm nearly every day on the phone, and if I don't get to talk to her, I speak with Mr. Holm or one of the kids.

My attachment to the Holm family really shames me. Yet if I try to take a break and not visit them or call, I become upset

and compelled to see them. Mrs. Holm even has to deal with my visits to her workplace.

I worry about caring so much. An overwhelming fear of rejection is present, but at the same time, I behave in a way that invites rejection. I'm not sure they realize despite my joking and foolish persona, I'm terrified of being hurt.

*

My mom becomes concerned about my mental state after the Milford Mental Health debacle and my failure to stay in Washington. One of our relatives, a therapist, recommends a colleague to my mom.

When the therapist asks why I'm there, I cut right to the chase.

"I want to die," I state matter-of-factly.

She's clearly surprised by my opening sentence. She spends the majority of our session talking about the possibility I might have a chemical imbalance. I think it went well.

Less than an hour later, she calls my mom and tells her my issues are too much for her to take on as a family therapist. I need to be taken to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation immediately. My mom is going to take me to get evaluated. Maybe tomorrow night after school.

*

I tell Jill what happened. I tell her that's it, I'm going to die. I can't live like this. I'm sure she can be trusted with my secret.

She tells Fr. McGee, our club adviser and beloved teacher. He pulls me aside and asks me what's going on. I tell him nothing. Suddenly I'm called down to the nurse's office. My guidance counselor is there. I can't believe Jill told on me! And Fr. McGee? Fucking traitor.

They question me about my suicide plan and I tell them to fuck off. They page my mom at work and tell her she needs to come and take me for an evaluation before I can return to school.

When my mom shows up I'm excited. She's going to tell them off good! And she does. Her voice is thick with sarcasm as she tells them it was important for her to leave work right away. I was surely going to kill myself at school. We were planning to go to the hospital anyway. I'm smiling as she tells them to go to hell.

We leave, and my mom is super cool about it all. At the house, she and Bonni smoke a joint and I prepare myself for a psychiatric evaluation. I have no idea what to expect.

She and I head to a hospital in New Haven and I'm sure I won't be coming home tonight. There's no way I won't be admitted. I don't know whether to dread it or welcome it. This is too crazy to even wrap my head around.

We get to the hospital and tell them the story. They call in a psychiatric social worker from the nearby Clifford Beers Clinic. The evaluation is an all day ordeal.

I get interviewed alone, and then with my mom. Then my mom is interviewed alone while I chill on a bed in the ER. I pick my cuticles the whole time.

It occurs to me whether or not I end up in the hospital is ultimately up to me, and what I tell this social worker.

They won't consider the interview finished until they get to interview my father, which makes me laugh. He, too, has to leave work and drive to New Haven. It takes forever and I know he must be pissed off. I think it's funny. What will he possibly have to say? He doesn't even know me.

I get interviewed again. This is it. I can't get admitted to the hospital. I'm afraid. I minimize my depression and bring drugs into the picture. In the AU, I'm a hardcore drug user. I do cocaine, smoke pot and drink. I've done LSD. I tell her these things even though they're only true about the Chris in my head.

The social worker decides I don't need to be hospitalized. I'm shocked. What is wrong with these adults that they can't see through me?

She tells my mom I suffer from depression and depersonalization disorder, and need to see a psychiatrist.

I'm a little disappointed I get to walk out of the hospital. As my mom and I walk to the car, she's upbeat and hopeful. She's going to make me an appointment with one of the recommended doctors.

*

The psychiatrist I end up seeing sucks. I see him twice a week and it feels like a huge waste of time and money. He tells me he's an analyst, which I don't really get, but he barely says a word. I cock my head and stare right back at him.

If he's not going to ask me questions, I'm not going to offer anything up. We're silent most of the time.

My parents are driving me to New Haven twice a week without complaint, and it's all for nothing. He's a fucking medical doctor. Why isn't he giving me Prozac or something?

I realize there's something on my mind and bring it up.

"Sometimes people talk to me and I don't hear them. It's like I'm spaced out and it takes me a while to come back from it."

"Tell me more," he says.

"Well, I'll be in class and someone talks to me, but I'm not really there. It takes them saying my name a couple times before I can answer," I tell him. "I think I'm just daydreaming."

It's the AU, but let him figure it out on his own.

"That's very interesting," he's nodding. He's excited I've brought something up.

"Is it?" I ask.

"Yes," he tells me. "I think you might be having seizures."

"Seizures?" This guy is such an idiot.

"They could be partial seizures," he's animated for the first time ever. "I'm going to refer you to a neurologist. He'll check you out."

"Okay," Whatever.

"If you're having seizures, I'll have to inform the DMV," he drops on me. "You can't drive if you're having seizures."

I'll never see Dr. Santino again. My parents won't care. I take his referral and leave. I'm getting my license within two months and no one will take away my precious chance to drive.

*

I'm referred to Dr. Martin from the Yale School of Medicine. He orders multiple tests – EEG, 24 hour EEG, CT scan – and they all come back negative.

When I tell him I have terrible headaches, he prescribes the antidepressant Elavil, and says he knows someone who might be able to help. A neuropsychologist named Ben Norris.

At the first session with my new therapist, Ben, I don't have my driver's license yet and my mom brings me to the appointment. The first time we met with Ben we spent quite a bit of time in the office because he wanted to speak to each of us separately. Today it'll just be me.

When Ben calls me into his office I smile and look down. I shake his hand and sit in a chair set off at an angle to the right of where he sits. Last week we sat at his desk.

I think about how tall he is compared to me. I look around the office and take it all in. It's pretty bare in here. He has a desk, and there's a reel to reel machine on a table against the wall. The only other furniture are the chairs we're on and a little table with a lamp, tissues and a clock between us.

"Do people cry in here?" I ask. "Do they really need tissues?"

"Sometimes they cry," he answers.

I laugh. "Well, I won't be doing any fucking crying, I can tell you that."

He smiles. I'm uncomfortable with his calm presence. It occurs to me my mom is sitting in the waiting room and might be able to hear what I say through the door. The thought of it unnerves me. Soon I'll have my license and will be able to drive myself to appointments.

I try to articulate the events of the past few years. How I got here. I fail miserably. I'm swearing a lot. Talking, but not saying anything.

I'm still worried my mom might hear what I say so I completely avoid the topic of my parents. I stick to the main issue, depression. The hour and a half session seems to fly by. I'm drained from it, and relieved to go home. I need a nap.

*

Mr. and Mrs. Holm are glad I'm finally seeing a therapist. Me too. I'm certain everything is going to be great once he figures out what's wrong with me and fixes it.

*

The next time I see Ben I enter his office the same way, smiling with my head down. I have a strange feeling in my stomach, like butterflies. I feel like a little kid. I like this man.

You'd never know I like him. My body is overflowing with anger. My posture, language, and voice all scream anger.

From now on, the first thirty minutes of our sessions will be spent in a ritual where I swear at Ben, sometimes jumping out of my seat in order to get control of myself. I call him names.

But every minute is precious, and I always feel great remorse at wasting those thirty minutes. It doesn't seem to matter to Ben. He takes it all with a smile.

*

My sixteenth birthday is a huge deal. Soon I'll be getting my license. And I'm doing a little better mentally.

I want golf clubs for my birthday. I've always played golf with Grampie, and it's time for me to have a set of quality clubs. I pick them out after extensive decision making at the golf store.

When I visit the Holms, they give me a birthday card. In it, they've signed, "We love you." It's precious to me. No material gift can match their love.

I keep the card hidden in my bedside table under other cards and papers. Every day I take it out and look at it. It makes my heart feel light, no matter how heavy it had been. It brings me strength. That and the photo Laura took of us at Christmas.

There's something so beautiful in knowing people care. They don't need to buy me anything. It's their love, caring, and affection I cherish. I appreciate my mom, and the golf clubs. But what I'd love is for her to be predictable. I know she loves me. But I want her to tell me. To show me.

*

I like Ben more all the time, but each week the ritual continues and I lash out at him. I keep up my defenses with intense anger. Why can't I just come into his office and talk with him calmly?

He never gets angry, never seems annoyed, and never acts like he's anything but pleased to see me. He just smiles. We can talk once I've called him an asshole fifty times.

So much of what happens with Ben isn't even what we talk about. It's how I feel in his presence. His office has become a safe place for me. I can talk to him.

I try to be tough. I fear his rejection. It wouldn't surprise me if he suddenly turned on me and was mean.

I look forward to his paternal affection. A touch on the shoulder as I leave, or a hug. It's too powerful. After each session I walk down the flight of stairs leading to the street and lament that I have to leave. I could spend all day with Ben.

My emotions are all over the place, but one thing is for sure. I always feel better after I see Ben. Or the Holms. I feel more in control of myself, less angry, and more empowered. It doesn't last, though.

I keep telling Ben I'm a loser. Pathetic. He scoffs at the idea of me being a loser and actually laughs. He thinks I'm destined for greatness. I want to be a doctor and he says I will be a doctor. He has no doubt about it.

Ben says there's nothing wrong with me other than hurt, pain, and anger. He feels my depression stems from anger. It's anger turned inward. Surely there's more to the problem than anger.

He wants to talk about my parents, especially my father, and I won't. When he brings up my father I become agitated. No matter how much I care about Ben, and want to please him, I can't allow myself to cry. If I talk to him about my father, and how little he cares about me, I might cry.

My favorite book is Ordinary People, and like Conrad Jarrett, I enjoy joking around and avoiding issues. I turn his clock around on the table so only I can see it. Ben keeps pushing me to talk.

Every time I go into his office I feel like I'm about ten years old. It's humiliating. I don't realize I get to be a kid in his office because it's safe in here. He's safe.

*

Calling the Holms all the time and showing up at their house is an imposition. They hang in there with me and are supportive. Ben is here for support now, too, and in our sessions I'm getting more comfortable and less defensive with him.

One day at home, when feeling particularly depressed, I call him at work and talk to him. It hadn't occurred to me I could call him during the week. It's easier to talk to him over the phone, because in person I feel too vulnerable.

*

Junior year at Lauralton starts out great. I love school and life is good. I walk around school with so much self-confidence it's exhilarating. I know everyone and when I walk the halls I smile and say hi to all who pass me. People like me because I make them laugh.

On Halloween, I decide to bring a gun to school. I borrow a holster and gun (trigger removed) from my friend, Ken. He doesn't think it's a great idea to do this, but I brush him off. It'll be perfect. I'm invincible. There's no such thing as a consequence for me.

I walk around the school wearing a gun around my waist for half the day before someone finally notices. I'm called into Mrs. Finch's office, the principal. She confiscates the gun and asks what I'm thinking.

I shrug. "There's no trigger, the only possible way I could hurt someone is if I pistol-whipped them."

She's completely stunned. She tells me there's nothing funny about bringing a gun to school. I say I wasn't trying to be funny; I was trying to be scary.

I can get the gun back at the end of the day. I'm annoyed. Now I have no costume.

*

Jill gets a detention for skipping driver's ed. This is the craziest thing we've ever heard! It's not even during school hours! Mrs. Gates, dean of students, is responsible for the detention. We plan to retaliate.

There's a senior dance at the school on Friday night. Jill and I are hanging out, eating frozen yogurt, when we decide to slash Mrs. Gates's tires. She'll be at the dance, right here in Milford.

I recently purchased a knife that'll be perfect for the job. We ride up the circular drive in front of the school. Jill jumps out to slash the tires. I'm nervous, but excited. No one will ever know it's us, or be able to prove it.

Jill jumps back in the car, "Go!"

"Did you do it, did you do it?" I ask.

"Can't you hear it?" She yells at me.

"No, I couldn't hear it," I say.

"Dude! It was so fucking loud!" She's still yelling at me.

Jill calls her sister, Denise, from a pay phone and tells her what we just did. Denise is at a senior party, drunk. She yells out, "Jill slashed Gates's tires!" Great.

When I see Ben in the morning I tell him someone slashed Mrs. Gates's tire. He's heard about her before; she and I

are often at odds with one another. Mrs. Gates recently called me immature and irresponsible, which led to me blowing my fucking lid in a hallway filled with students and faculty. Screaming, she's wrong! I'm not immature and irresponsible!

I don't say it was me and Jill. I just want to try out talking about it without it looking like it was me. He doesn't ask if it was me.

On Monday, the school administration is on a witch hunt. People are whispering about the incident in homeroom. I act as surprised as everyone else.

Mrs. Finch comes on over the PA and says the senior lounge is closed until they find out who did this. Good! They think it's a senior! I'm not worried.

I get called out of class and taken into a small office to find a Milford police officer sitting at a table. My heart pounds a little harder, but they haven't got shit on us. He questions me. Where was I Friday night? What kind of car was I driving? Do I know whoever did this could be charged with malicious mischief? I ain't telling him shit. I answer his questions and leave. If that was it, we're in the clear. Jill and I have already had time to get our stories straight.

I tell my mom someone slashed Mrs. Gates's tires. She's not surprised. She doesn't ask if it was me.

*

The next morning, Miss Preston, another dean, interrupts my first period class and tells my teacher I have to go with her. She tells me to bring my belongings.

She brings me into her office and tells me they know it was me and Jill. I tell her that's wrong. Nope. It wasn't us. She leaves the room and I wait.

I'm certain they have Jill in another one of these offices. Probably Finch's. I'm starting to get a little worried. Stressed out. How could they know? Someone clearly dined us out. It occurs to me we might be caught.

Miss Preston returns and asks if I'm sure I don't want to just admit it? I have nothing to admit to. She leaves.

Miss Grand enters the room. She's my religion teacher, and I've become pretty close to her. She's one of the many people

in my life I talk to on a regular basis about how things are going with me.

She tells me they know. She's worried about me. Don't I realize I'm only making things worse by continuing to lie about it? If Jill and I would just admit it, she's sure it would go a long way.

I'm starting to lose it a little. I'm too emotional. It's such a liability to have emotions as strong as mine. I know Jill is in another room, probably telling them to go to hell. She's way tougher than me mentally.

I start to cry. I know I'm dead. This might as well be a verbal confession. I'm fucking crying. They're way slicker than I thought, bringing Miss Grand in here. She says she'll be back and leaves me in the room. I've blown it. Blown it! I'm so weak.

They're done with me. I'm brought into the main office to wait until my mom gets here. I look out the door and see Jill.

"Jill!" I yell. She turns and walks toward me.

"No!" Mrs. Finch says. "You are not to talk to one another."

Fuck her. I walk toward Jill. "Dude, I'm so sorry. I started crying."

"It's okay," Jill says. "It'll be okay."

I start to cry again.

My mom gets there and we all talk. I'm suspended indefinitely until they decide on an appropriate punishment. I could be expelled. Oh my God. Expelled? No way. There's no way that'll happen.

*

My mom is incredibly cool about this. She says she knew it was me as soon as I'd told her the incident had occurred. I'm so upset. I can't stop crying. We get to the house and she grabs a drink and heads to her room to smoke a joint.

I go in my room and call Jill's house. Denise answers and sounds very grave. Her parents are going off on Jill right now. She'll try to help Jill call me later.

I go into my mom's room. I'm in shock. My mom says she bets Jill's parents aren't smoking a joint. I have to laugh. No, they sure aren't.

*

I go into my room, locking the door behind me.

I walk into my closet, and kneel down before a big pile of clothing in a back corner. As I dig to the bottom I hold up my basketball jersey from sophomore year, after making the varsity team. I run my fingers over my number, 7, and place it back on the pile.

The sudden realization all may be lost hits me hard. I pull a shoe box from the bottom of the pile. I go out to my room and sit on the floor, my back against the wall.

I open the box and remove a 9 mm handgun wrapped in cloth. I bought it for just this sort of occasion. After polishing it with a cloth, I load the clip with a few bullets.

I'm holding the gun as if in a trance. I've never touched this gun since the day I bought it. It was purchased and hidden in the closet.

The last time I fired a gun, I killed my father. Thinking back, the scene replays in my head. There's gonna be a lot of blood. I put the clip in the gun and set it down in my lap. I stare straight ahead. My heart is pounding.

The time to act is now. Holding the gun up and sticking it in my mouth, I think of the phrase "eat a gun." How appropriate. Biting down on the barrel, it tastes like oily metal.

I ignore the knock at my door. Richard couldn't possibly have gotten home so quickly and Susan can go to hell. Putting the gun in my mouth and closing my eyes, I feel so serene.

Until a key unlocks the door and it flies open. When I look up and see Richard, my heart drops. The look of shock on his face shames me.

I take the gun out of my mouth, and he looks stricken. He puts his hand out and indicates I should hand him the gun.

"No! Let me do this!" I yell. "Please!"

His hand is still out and he walks over slowly. I let go and allow him to take the gun.

He sits down next to me on the floor and we don't talk. Crying, I hide my face in my hands and Richard puts his arm around me, pulling my head against his chest. He tells me everything will be okay. He's wrong.

Struggling over the shock of walking in on me with a gun in my mouth, Richard calls Ben and asks him to come to our

house.

When he shows up, Richard, Ben and I go into Richard's office and discuss the hurt I feel about getting kicked out of Lauralton, and how desperately I wish I could take it all back.

The pain is too intense. I can't even think about it without crying. While unable to see how I can go on living, I agree with them it was terribly impulsive to nearly blow my head off.

Ben says I have to avoid letting myself get overwhelmed by dwelling on all I may have lost. I need to get through tonight, and tomorrow we'll meet again to continue working on getting through this.

He's right. I need to let the reality sink in slowly, and then deal with what I'm going to do next.

*

It feels like forever before Lauralton contacts me. I'm on the phone with Jill when the doorbell rings. I run downstairs and it's the mailman with a certified letter. I sprint back up to the phone and read it. Oh no. This is not happening.

The letter says it was a tough decision for them, but I can't return to Lauralton. They're strongly encouraging me to withdraw in order to save myself the process of expulsion. I can't go on living. I hang up with Jill.

I take out the hunting knife I was going to use to kill myself last year. I don't care about pain. I tear open my arm with great force.

It's brutal and makes me gasp with pain. It's a gaping wound and blood starts pouring from it. I run the knife deeply through it a couple more times, despite the excruciating pain. I run it down as far as I can into the wound. It's a grisly scene.

I have to die. I make a couple more cuts as deep as I can manage. Blood is pooling on the hardwood floor in my room. It's on my shirt and my pants.

I'm getting kicked out of school. My beloved Lauralton. How will I go to Foran, the public school? I can't. This has got to kill me. It bleeds for quite a while, and then trickles. I sob with disappointment. I have to die.

My father has a gun. Do I have the guts to use it? I get up to go to my parents' room for the gun. I'm in shock. The doorbell rings again. What now?

I open the door and am astonished to see Mrs. Black, one of my teachers, standing there. She looks sad. I can't believe she came to my house. I don't invite her in. I'm a ball of pain and anger right now. She asks if I want to go for a ride and talk. I tell her no.

I'm covered in blood, which somehow she hasn't noticed. I never opened the screen door. I can feel the blood from my left arm soaking through the long-sleeve shirt I'm wearing. I don't want to go out with her. I want to be left alone.

She's reluctant to leave and asks me if I'm going to be okay. I give a little laugh. I'll be fine.

*

I see Ben on Saturday. I take off my coat, and I'm wearing a red short-sleeve Polo shirt.

"Nice arm," he says.

I look at my arm. It's gruesome. A raw, gaping wound. My parents haven't noticed, or if they have, I've heard nothing about it.

"I really thought I might die," I say.

He takes my hand and pulls my arm closer to examine the damage.

"You did quite a job on this," he shakes his head. "You should've gotten stitches."

"Like I was going to go to the hospital," I scoff at him.

We sit in silence for a moment. Then I tell him about the letter from Lauralton. It's tough, but I fight back the tears. He's sad for me. He knows how much I loved it there.

"You don't think this is a big deal?" I ask, gesturing at my cut.

"It is a big deal," he nods. "But I'll know if you're really dangerous."

"Really?" My voice is dripping with sarcasm. "Did I call you before I ripped my arm open?"

"No," he admits. "But you should have."

"I want nothing more in the world than to die," I yell at him. The tears may come. I might not be able to hold back. I scream, "Nothing!"

"But you won't," he smiles. "You can't die, Chris. You have too much to do in the world."

I can't believe him. Is he really smiling at me? Fuck what I have to do in the world! Fuck everything. I shake my head and point at him.

"I'm a loser!" I yell at him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He laughs. "Oh, you're not a loser. You're going to be great someday."

I start to cry, but I choke it back. I won't cry in front of him. He's wrong. I'll never do anything great. I'm worthless.

A week passes before I get another letter from Lauralton. They've moved to expel me.

*

At Foran, I'm nobody. I've been robbed of the status I worked so hard to build at Lauralton. Halfway through my junior year I'm starting over, at a school where I know five kids. I didn't go to elementary or middle school in Milford. School is filled with strangers.

I hate myself for ruining my life. This is my own fault. Jill lives in Stratford and now goes to the high school she's always wanted to attend. She didn't want to be at Lauralton in the first place.

I go to most of my classes. Sometimes I drive to school and instead of turning onto Foran Drive, I keep going. I can't bring myself to go. I don't care what happens to me. No one notices.

I start smoking weed every day. And I drink. I take my father's bottle of vodka and do shots. Until I'm buzzed and reality is altered.

I love Seth. We get fucked up together after school. I've loved him since the day we met. There's no other boy I've met in high school I'd rather be with. He knows how I feel.

We're the best of friends. We spend all of our time together. As best friends. I must be hideous if he won't date me.

*

Ben is my cheerleader. Without him I'd be completely broken. He refuses to let me give up. It's annoying.

"You need to find something to do with your spare time," he says. "Maybe volunteer?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm already doing the Yale Frontiers of Applied Science thing on Saturdays."

"That'll be over soon," he won't let me dodge this issue. It's come up before.

"I don't care anymore," I tell him. "I want to die."

"You do care. You're going to be a doctor," he smiles.

"Right," I roll my eyes again.

On the way home to Milford, I think about his suggestion. Someone recently came to Foran and spoke about volunteering at Yale-New Haven Hospital. Maybe I could do that. I should call and check it out.

I call the hospital and set up an interview. The volunteer coordinator loves me. She sets me up in the "Student Healthcare Preceptor" program. It's for students interested in medical careers. I'm assigned to the adolescent unit and right away I love it.

The nurses know I want to be a doctor and show me everything. I get to go on rounds. I roam the unit freely, talking to the kids, asking the staff a million questions, reading medical textbooks. Oncology is what fascinates me most. I can't learn enough about cancer.

It changes my whole perspective on life. Kids I know on the unit die from cancer. Suddenly life seems so fragile and precious. I see the toll it takes on their families. It's heartbreaking.

I pull myself together at school. I'm less of a truant. I start talking to kids in my classes and make some friends.

Ironically, although I'm watching cancer kill people my age, I start smoking cigarettes. It's a huge benefit to me socially. At school we smoke outside between classes.

I meet the smoking kids and suddenly know people all over school. I feel more confident. Life is looking up. Foran isn't so bad after all. I ease up on smoking weed and drinking.

*

Slowly I begin to realize how important Ben is to me. He's everything I want in a father and it makes my heart heavy.

One day I want to talk to Ben and when he answers his phone, I hardly know what to say. I really just want to hear his voice, and know he's there. He seems to understand.

It's been a year since I've been seeing him and I trust him. We still can't talk about my father, and I hold back my tears. But he won't betray me. Maybe someday we'll talk about my parents. I talk to him about everything else. My relationship with him has become deep.

I have the Holm family in my life, and I love them, too. But I can tell Ben anything and don't have to fear I might lose him. There are times I do things which disappoint him, but he never gets angry. Sometimes the Holms get really pissed at me. I still fear their rejection.

*

I've been talking to Dave Ullman at school often. I don't eat lunch, so sometimes I go hang out and chat with him during that period. He's a teacher at Foran as well as substance abuse coordinator for the Milford Public Schools. I almost have too many people to talk to. And everyone has a different perspective on my life and how I'm doing. I have different issues to talk about with different people.

With Dave, I talk about my struggle with drugs. I don't admit I'm smoking weed. I make it sound like I want to use drugs, but can't decide. It really is a struggle. Why do I get stoned?

More importantly, why am I *dying* to do cocaine? I want to do some coke badly. But none of my friends use it, and I'm having a tough time acquiring it.

Toward the end of the school year, Dave asks if I want him to intervene. Hell no, I don't want him to intervene. It's too late for that. What we talk about needs to be off the record. Confidential. Anything else is a betrayal.

My time volunteering in the adolescent unit has come to an end. When asked where I'd like to volunteer next, I tell them the Comprehensive Cancer Center at Yale. No one has ever volunteered there, but they find someone willing to take on a volunteer.

Karen is a nurse who does outreach work to help people live with cancer as well as live as survivors. We go to places all over Southern Connecticut, talking about available supports, groups, and quality of life.

I love the cancer center. It's so awesome. To get to Karen's office I go through a hallway filled with researchers. It's very cool. When I have free time, I talk to oncologists and researchers. My research friends mark articles in medical journals they think I should read. I sit in a conference room and read, making notes about things I don't understand. I feel at home.

My life confuses me. When I'm at the hospital, I feel the people there really value me. They're excited about me becoming a doctor someday. Doctors are pitching oncology to me, as if they have to convince me. I'm fascinated with cancer.

At home, I get stoned even though I feel like a complete asshole for getting high. And I'm depressed. I think often of suicide. I don't know what my problem is. I don't get it.

Ben and I talk about these things. He loves that I'm at the cancer center. He wants me to keep my eyes on the prize. College is coming in just a year and I need to stick with the academic shit. Smoking pot isn't the end of the world, but I need to quit it. And he's forbidden me to kill myself, which is hilarious. I can kill myself if I want.

It's a mistake to think I can be as candid with Dave as I am with Ben. I talk to him about my feelings of depression, and thoughts of suicide. Days after I tell Jill I can't believe I haven't been sent home this year for being suicidal, I get sent home. I'm called out of my last period class to go down to guidance. Dave is there and they've called my mom. I can't believe it. I'm so pissed at him.

The school talks to Ben, too, and they tell him I wasn't sent home because I was suicidal. They called in my mom to let her know there are issues that need to be addressed.

My mom never told me what was said in there. They're afraid I'm going to do half-baked work for the rest of my life and not use my intelligence. That it's a terrible waste. My grades suck. I clearly don't care, and yet plan to apply to highly competitive colleges. Foran doesn't think my parents are properly addressing my needs.

Ben and I discuss it. He, too, would love to see me work to my academic potential. But he's not worried. He seems to think wherever I end up at college, I'll be fine. He believes I'll excel in

the college environment in a way I haven't in high school. I don't know why he has so much faith in me. Is he blind?

Once school is out, I finally get to do some cocaine. My friend Tricia and I drive to New Haven with some stranger and he gets us powder from the projects. It's as great as I knew it would be. The high is so intense. It's just the opposite from smoking weed. I can see why my parents love it. If only I could steal coke from them the way I take their weed.

By the time school starts again in the fall, I'm pretty fucked up. I'm going off the rails.

I end my time volunteering at the cancer center and choose the emergency room for my senior year. I pick Friday nights from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., so I can see some good stuff. I wish I could be the person I am at the hospital. Responsible and smart.

*

Dave Ullman is on me from day one of my senior year to join a group at Foran which meets on Fridays. It's run by a counselor from Wakeman Hall, a drug rehab in Hamden. I don't possibly see why I'd need such a group, but what the hell? It'll get me out of class.

I meet Liam, the facilitator, before my first group. He's a recovering addict with a raspy voice. He's for real. I know when I meet him I'm not going to be able to fuck around in his group.

I recognize the kids in here. I smoke cigarettes regularly with many of them. I had no idea they were into alcohol and drugs, too. It turns out I'm the only one who's mainly into drugs. Everyone else drinks as their main thing. I'm not into drinking, but I love to get high.

I start going to parties with the kids in drug group. My popularity is rising. I bring joints. We go outside onto the porch of whichever kid's house it is and get high. It's so much fun.

The same kids I party with on the weekends are now sticking me out in drug group. They've seen me in action and they're concerned. I can't believe it. Apparently, I have a thirst to get fucked up that isn't normal. They think I'm worse than them.

I start getting cocaine on a regular basis. I have a couple people to get it from now. I love the cocaine high.

One day I have an evening appointment with Ben during the week. I do a few lines before heading to New Haven to see him. I know before I reach his office it's a big mistake.

I'm sniffing like crazy. My jaw is grinding and tight. I feel a cold sweat. He gives me a funny look and asks if I'm high. I deny it, and my heart drops. What have I done? He doesn't believe me. He asks what I've done.

I tell him I did a few lines of coke and he's pissed. He tells me never to come to his office high again. I nod and tell him I won't. And I mean it. This sucks. I feel like the biggest disappointment ever.

He's worried now. He can join the rest of the fucking people in my life. Christ! Why is everyone so worried? I'm fine.

*

When my insurance suddenly stops paying Ben, my mom refuses to pay him out of pocket. I don't know how I'll be able to make it. But Ben keeps taking my phone calls. And sometimes I get to see him. I cherish every bit of contact I get to have with him.

I apply to several colleges. Tulane, USC, UCLA, Arizona State and the University of Arizona are my top choices.

*

One afternoon I call up a guy I met while buying cocaine with my friend over the summer. I ask if he can hook me up. I drive to his house and pick him up with his friend. We head to New Haven to score some coke from the projects.

My parents are away on a cruise, and I'm driving my mom's brand-new car. It never occurs to me not to take it on a drug run.

We pull up to some boys selling coke on Dwight Street. One of them tells me nice car. His friend pulls a gun and sticks it in the car, at my head. He says to get out. The passenger opens his door.

"Stay in the fucking car!" I tell him.

"Did you hear me, girl?" The kid with the gun asks.

"Shoot me," I tell him. "Go ahead. Because if I let you take this car my mom will fucking kill me."

He stands there for a moment and pulls the gun back. The kids start laughing hard.

“This a crazy white girl!” The gun kid yells. “Crazy as hell!”

They sell us the coke and I drive off. The guy in the passenger seat is pissed and asks me if I’m fucking insane. Obviously I am. There was no way I was leaving the car. Plus, I want to die. What did I care if I was killed?

*

When Dave and Liam find out I can't see Ben anymore, they pressure me to go to a therapist at Milford Mental Health. I still feel traumatized from when I dealt with the place as a sophomore. They threaten to tell my parents if I don't do it. I don't know why, but I'm terrified of them telling my mom I do drugs.

Ironically, going to drug group has increased my use of drugs and alcohol tenfold.

I call Milford Mental Health and end up seeing a social worker, Gary Rand. I'm upfront and tell him all about my previous experience there. He pulls my chart from that visit and shows me where it says "Prognosis: Poor." I'm not surprised, and yet I find it disturbing. If it was poor, why didn't they try harder to help me?

I like Gary. He's easy to talk to, and we mainly stick to the topic of my drug use. I'm old enough to see Gary without my parents knowing. I pay \$25 per session on their sliding scale. It seems like it should be free. I work at a drug store for \$4.25 an hour, twenty hours per week. But I always have money. My mom gives me plenty; I'm never hurting for it.

Dave, Liam, and Gary all want me to go to drug rehab. Like that’s going to happen.

I'm depressed again. Why do I go through these terrible cycles of depression? Sometimes I'm on top of the world, and sometimes I want to die. It would be great to have some mental stability. I try to tell them about my depression, but they say it's drugs. How can it be? This started way before the drugs.

I don't know what to think about my life. I'm confused by it. Part of the problem is I don't know who I really am. The other life in my head feels as real as the one I know to be my reality. Some of my memories are mixed up.

At times, I think I live with people who aren't my parents. And when I see my parents they're strangers. I know them, but I don't.

During the past several months it's been much harder to differentiate between the AU and RL. In the AU, I've been a drug addict for years. In RL, I haven't. In RL, when I get high it feels completely natural, because I've been doing it for years. But I haven't. I feel crazy.

So crazy it's unspeakable. True, I do use drugs. But it's not my main problem. There's something else going on, but only I know. They know I'm depressed, but they don't seem to care. It's all about the drugs.

I begin thinking of myself as an addict. I make the decision to tell Mr. and Mrs. Holm about it, and they're pissed. Really pissed. They tell me I'm a hypocrite, and this is like a slap in the face. It hurts.

I talk too much about drugs at Sea Explorer meetings. Even though I'm boatswain this year – the equivalent of president – they tell me I'm out. I've lost Sea Explorers. And gained what? A drug addiction that's only half true?

I miss my father in the AU. I used to get to see him on TV. But his show's series finale was last season. For years I've been able to watch this man on TV, and it has brought me comfort. And the woman he's married to in my head was also on the show. Now they're gone. And it's hard. It all has to be in my head and from pictures carefully hidden in a box in my room.

*

My parents are completely unaware of what's going on with me at school. And that's just how I plan to keep it. They have no idea I go to NA meetings, or see Gary, or am being pressured by three adults to go to rehab.

My mom knows I smoke pot. It's no big deal. I've smoked with her before, including when we went to Los Angeles and Arizona to look at colleges a couple months ago. We had such a great time together. I'd waited my whole life to get stoned with my mom.

I don't get into Tulane or UCLA. I get wait-listed at USC. I'm accepted at Arizona State University and the University of Arizona. I decide almost immediately on ASU. I accept their

offer of admission. Now it's all set. I just need to wait until August and I'm gone.

*

One weekend in January, I have some friends over, including Seth and Jill. I'm drinking and smoking weed, and I go up to my parents' room to roll another joint. Jill and Seth are in there and it looks like they're close to hooking up. I can't even deal with the idea. I get a handgun out of my father's drawer. I bring it out into the hall.

I've loved Seth for so long. And Jill is my other best friend. I put the gun against my temple and they freak out. I stick the loaded gun in my mouth. All I have to do is pull the trigger and everything will be over. No more confusion about who I am, whether or not I need rehab, or anything.

They're so freaked out. I take the gun out of my mouth. I don't even know why I've done this. I'm excited about going to ASU. What if I'd pulled the trigger?

On Thursday, I'm talking to Dave during lunch and getting pissed off. He tells me for the fiftieth time I need a 30-45 day inpatient program and I laugh. I tell him I had a gun in my mouth over the weekend, and if they don't stop fucking with me I'll pull the trigger next time.

At the end of the day Dave is waiting for me in front of the guidance office. Mrs. Branson is there, too. I see her a lot because my friend Kelly goes to her class second period and I like to come in and hang out. We always go into the bathroom next door for a quick smoke.

I raise my arms up and say, "What the fuck is this?"

Dave starts to walk over, "We had to call your mom, Chris."

"What?" I yell. "You fucking asshole! I can't believe you!"

I back him into the guidance office and point at everyone involved. "You're all assholes!"

"Come on, Chris," I think Dave believes I might let him hug me. I'll punch him in the face if he touches me.

"No, fuck you!" I'm yelling. I yell even louder, "Fuck off!" The few other students in here are stunned.

"Your mom is coming in for a meeting with us tomorrow morning at 8," Dave says. His hands are in front of him, they want me to calm down. Screw that.

I scream at them, "If I was going to kill myself I would've done it already! Leave me alone!"

Then Mrs. Branson speaks up. "We're only doing this because we love you, Chris."

I'm astounded. "No, you don't," I say, shaking my head. I back out of the office, ready to head out to my car. "That's bullshit."

In the car, I smoke a joint and am furious. My mom will surely be pissed at me tonight.

But my mom isn't pissed. We're all getting used to this, I guess. She asks me if there'll be any surprises. I shrug. They'll probably tell her I've been getting high. I tell her about the gun, which annoys her, but she agrees at least I didn't pull the trigger. I tell her I won't mess with my father's guns anymore.

School starts before my mom's meeting at 8 a.m. I'm there, but I haven't gone to homeroom or my first class. Liam is going to be leaving soon, and another counselor from Wakeman will be taking his place here at Foran. Kelly tells me when I run into her they'll both be here for group today – Liam and the new guy, Ed. Great.

Instead of homeroom, I track Dave down and tell him to fuck himself a couple more times. Then I smoke cigarettes outside and talk to my friends.

I go to the group room early. I find out my mom is already here, meeting with Dave and whomever else is in on this. Liam and Ed haven't arrived, so I tell my friends what's happening.

Liam comes in and is pissed because he missed meeting with my mom. I laugh out loud. Good. We talk about the issue for a few minutes. The new guy, Ed, just sits and watches.

Then he speaks to me. "I know I just met you, but I've known a lot of kids like you. And they're all dead now."

I don't know what to say to that. I shrug.

We all do introductions. Then everyone wants to talk about me going to rehab. I'm really tired of it. If they only knew what went on in my head.

My mom met with Dave, Mrs. Branson, Mr. Richards, and other members of the student assistance team for 45 minutes. Dave tells me he thinks it went really well. He told my mom I need treatment and she said she'd consider it. I laugh for probably the tenth time already today. Sure she will.

I have to work after school and don't get home until 9 p.m. My mom has no intention of sending me to rehab, which is no surprise. But I'm disturbed by the rest of what she has to say. They told her she shouldn't be letting me go away to school in Arizona. I'm unstable. The nerve! As if I'll let anyone screw that up for me!

*

Lately I've been having this strange, dizzy feeling. Almost every morning it happens on the way to school when I'm driving. Everything turns white, so I can't see, and sounds are far away. My heart beats hard and fast. I don't know what it is, but when it's happening I feel like I'm going to die. Maybe have a heart attack.

During third period I have the dizzy feeling and make my way to the nurse's office. It's hard, because I can't see. It hasn't stopped by the time I get there. She has me lie down on a bed. She's on the damn student assistance team, too. And therefore knows all about me. She calls Dave out of class to talk to me. He leaves his 3rd period class and shows up within minutes.

No one addresses why I feel dizzy. Instead there's more talk about rehab. I tell Dave things are very complex. Everything isn't as clear as it seems. He dismisses my talk as denial and avoidance.

No one in the world can know what's going on in my head. I wish I could talk about it, but I can't. I call Ben, ready to talk to him about the AU, and then stop.

I tell him how much I miss him and I realize how lucky I've been to have him in my life. He tells me I can trust him, and I can talk to him about anything. But I can't. The words don't come out of my mouth, because this thing with the family in my head is too crazy.

*

The next Friday, Liam says goodbye, and our group cries because we'll miss him. Ed Blake takes over and I find I have a

familiar issue with him. I can't be serious. I lash out at him like I used to do with Ben. This is going to be interesting.

Gary makes an appointment with my mom for tomorrow night. He warns me he'll tell her I need to go to rehab if I don't talk to her about it myself. He says I have a drug problem and only inpatient treatment will save me. I don't get angry with him. I've become too accustomed to this shit.

Maybe rehab will help. It might be better than the mental hospital, which is where I should be going. Chuck said rehab is like camp, and Kelly also said it's no big deal. Should I just let this happen? Stop fighting it?

Gary says not to worry, no matter what my parents say or do, I won't be alone. I have plenty of friends and people who care about me. He's right.

This all rests on what I say when I get home from work and see my mom. I'll either tell her I need to go to rehab, or not. It's on me.

*

When I get home from work, my mom is in the kitchen. No time like the present.

"I have something to tell you," I say quickly. "I'm addicted to cocaine and need to go to rehab."

She seems surprised. "Okay."

"Well, you meet with Gary tomorrow, so you guys can talk about it," I hardly know what to say. "I want to go to Wakeman Hall, in Hamden."

She nods her head. I go up to my room. I'm not addicted to cocaine in real life. What's wrong with me? I don't know what's going on in my head. It's done, now. Tomorrow we have group, and no doubt everyone at Foran will be relieved I'm finally going to rehab.

Drugs are not my problem. I'm crazy. My friends all know it, my teachers know it. Why isn't anyone addressing the real issue? Why pretend it isn't there? If they only knew what was in my head. I'm not going to argue, though. It's better to be an addict than crazy.

I go to group. I tell them I'm going to rehab and they actually clap for me. I have to smile. My friends do care about me; I have to give them that. Ed Blake talks to me afterward and

tells me he'll get me set up at Wakeman. I nod. It'll be good to get this over with.

After school I smoke weed in my car with a couple of friends. This is it.

When I go home my mom has me set to go to some place called Arms Acres tomorrow. What the fuck? It's in Carmel, New York and is supposed to be a great place. I don't want to go there, but I give up.

*

When we get to Arms Acres, I'm pleasant and compliant with the admissions staff. I don't know what to expect from this place. We were told I could bring cigarettes, underwear, socks, a notebook, an AA and/or NA text, and a Bible. That's it. I skipped the Bible and brought everything else.

Before my mom leaves, they make me change into scrubs and give my mom my clothes and shoes. I don't get to keep my shoes?

It's finally time for my mom to leave. I want to grab her and tell her this isn't where I need to be. I need to go to a hospital. It's not drugs. But I don't. I know how this works. If I tell her that, they'll say I'm in denial. I give her a hug and start to cry. She starts to cry, too.

They show me to a chair and tell me to sit and wait for a counselor from the adolescent unit to get me.

I sit there and panic. I don't know who I am. That's not entirely true – I know I'm Chris. But RL Chris doesn't need to be in rehab. AU Chris does, she's a real drug addict. The RL me is here at Arms Acres.

I start to break down in my head. This is all wrong. What do I do? Tell the truth about what's going on with me? Or stay here and continue to be an addict? My head is in my hands. Where is Richard? Jesus Christ. I'm losing it.

A nurse comes over. "What's wrong, little girl?"

Really? Did she just call me that? "What the fuck do you think is wrong?" Now I'm angry. The indignity of being called "little girl" sends me right over the edge.

She bristles and turns around. I burst into tears. "I don't belong here!"

She turns around and the other nurse looks over, too.
"Where do you belong?"

"It isn't drugs," I don't know how to say what I need to say. "I'm depressed. I want to kill myself." I cry harder. I want to die so badly. No one understands how I feel.

They look concerned. I need to be honest with these strangers. Any minute now someone will come take me to the unit and my chance will be gone.

They're trying to decide what to do. I have bursts of intense crying. I'm pouring out my soul, here. What will happen? I've been at this point before with adults, and I never get what I really need. Who am I? Who do I need to be right now?

The nurse pages the psychiatrist. We wait and he calls back. The nurse lowers her voice but I hear everything. She tells him it looks like mental illness. In her opinion, I need to be hospitalized in a psychiatric unit.

Then she tells him about the substance abuse history I reported upon admission. It's not true. It's AU Chris's drug history. The doctor tells her to keep me here. I guess I'm staying. It doesn't occur to me that I'm foiling myself every time I lose sight of who I am. Why can't I keep it together?

The adolescent counselor comes down the hall. I stand and we stare each other down.

I could leave right now. Walk out the front door. Unless he can physically stop me. I'm not clear on what they're allowed to do. It's bitterly cold outside, but I don't care. Maybe I'll freeze to death.

I give up and follow him to the adolescent unit. The kids are smoking and I sit down, dying to smoke a cigarette. It's been hours. What a relief. I introduce myself to them, but my mind is in a fog. I can't reconcile reality with what's going on in my head.

The staff is playing hard from the start. They don't scare me. I'm not stupid. It's time for me to be tough. They want a drug addict? I'll give them a drug addict.

Right away they ask me to fill out a chemical history. It's a sheet where you list all the drugs you've used, how much, when you started, etc. I give them AU Chris's chemical history. It's atrocious. They tell me it's perhaps the worst chemical history they've ever seen. I laugh out loud.

I've been following their rules and participating for days. But I don't belong here. It's time to go. My roommate tells me I can leave if I write a 72-hour notice. They have to call my parents immediately and tell them I want to leave. I smile. My parents will let me come home in a second. I write the letter, stating I want to go and don't need to be there.

My cooperative attitude is gone. I'm leaving. They're smug as they scramble around to get my parents on the phone. Apparently, parents never let their kids leave. They think I'm going to be shot down.

My primary counselor, Jane, makes the call and tells my mom I want to leave. She tells her to stay strong, they can't say yes. I have a terrible chemical history. She gives me the phone.

I tell my mom I don't need to be here. I'm not a drug addict. I'm shocked when my father takes the phone from her. He tells me no problem, if I want to come home, I'm coming home. Whoa! Was that my indifferent father talking? My mom gets back on. Jane rips the phone away from me and tells my mom not to let me manipulate them. I fly into a rage.

"Give me the phone, bitch!" I yell.

She won't give it up. I kick a chair across the room and forget I'm not wearing shoes. Ouch.

It's Thursday evening. My parents will come up on Saturday for the family program, and if they still think I should go home, that's when it'll happen. I'm pissed. I don't want to stay any longer. It's okay, though. I guess another day and a half won't kill me.

You start in phase one, which is where I am. Then you move to phase two and get your clothes back and more privileges. They start pulling me into meetings with phase two kids.

They really lay it on. I'm doing to die if I leave, this is really serious, and I'm in denial. I tell them all I appreciate their concern, but I'm leaving.

I hear over and over I'm going to die if I leave. Maybe, but it won't be from drugs.

On Saturday, serious pressure is applied to my parents. They force me to read the chemical history to them. My mom is

looking at me like I'm insane. How could I possibly have done so many drugs, so often? She's right. How, indeed?

My parents tell the staff over and over I'm leaving. We want to go. I laugh in Jane's face. "Just give up!"

Reluctantly, they give up. My parents are letting me come home. I get my clothes and shoes back, and say goodbye to the other kids. I tell my parents not to worry. I can handle this drug thing.

*

When I get home I give a lot of thought to the situation. It's possible I'm an addict. I love to get high, and I did smoke a ton of weed and seek out cocaine whenever I could. Just because I'm not as bad as AU Chris doesn't mean my use isn't a problem. I have over a week clean when I return to school.

Everyone is pissed that I left. Dave, Gary, Ed, the kids in group. I can't win. I decide to finish the rehab ordeal by going into Wakeman Hall. Ed Blake was angry that Gary sent me to Arms Acres. He helps me get set up to go to Wakeman. I'm very clear with them I'll only stay for 14 days. They agree with my terms and I plan to check myself in.

Wakeman Hall is warm and welcoming compared to Arms Acres. That place was cold and sterile, like a hospital.

I go upstairs and the counselors are friendly. I have my own room, with a comfy bed – not a hospital bed. I have my own clothes and they let me bring all the books I want. I've packed a whole bag full of them.

My experience at Wakeman is great. I get to see Liam and Ed. Ed has turned out to be an awesome guy. We talk and get to know one another better. I find I can talk to him once I get through a ritual similar to what I went through with Ben. At first I'm defensive and joke about everything. Then I can get serious and really discuss things.

There are three counselors at Wakeman who take a particular interest in me, and speak to me all the time about recovery. Rob, Paul, and Mitch are great people, and they can see I'm working hard to change my life. Not just the drugs, but everything. I need to get myself together if I'm going to succeed in college. It's only 5 months away.

*

I'm going to rehab at Wakeman Hall, in Hamden, where the facilitator for the school drug group works. I'll do my best to get clean and stay that way.

It's hard to adjust to a place where I share a bathroom with five other girls, but thankfully I have my own room. I like being in rehab more than I thought I would. We go to daily NA or AA meetings, have groups, and the other kids are really cool.

Every afternoon we have a recreation period, and I like to go into their beat up old gym and shoot hoops. I feel healthier than I have in ages.

I have individual therapy with a counselor, and we talk about some of my issues. How I'll stay clean around the band, the hatred I feel toward Susan, and my plan for going to meetings.

I feel good about NA and am going to go to a meeting every day. I feel more and more like I can stay clean and handle life. I don't think I need to get high anymore.

When I'm discharged, both Richard and Susan come to pick me up. I'm not ready to like her, but I'll be polite and see what happens. It's the best I can do.

That evening I go to an NA meeting I've been attending for months. I raise my hand and share about how I did in rehab, and about my family situation. Plenty of people who know me give me hugs and tell me to call them if I need to talk.

It feels good to be able to talk with people who understand how hard it is to adjust to life after getting high for so long. I want to do well, and I will go the extra mile with Susan, if only because it means so much to Richard.

*

Back at school, I'm amazed at how many people seem invested in my recovery. Students, teachers, my vice-principal, and the mental health professionals. I go to NA meetings every night. I feel great.

My behavior hasn't improved at all. I'm just as crazy as I've been at any point in high school. When I get to school unprepared for an algebra test, I start a fire in a bathroom. I light up a paper towel and toss it into the trash can. There are underclassmen in there who see me and are stunned. I smile at them and take off.

Other kids know it was me, too. But no one tells. We stand outside for 45 minutes while the fire department does their thing. I'm a little nervous, but pretty confident I won't get caught. And I don't. The test is postponed. Mission accomplished.

I go to class when I want, and skip when I want. I feel untouchable at school. Invincible. I get the feeling people are walking on egg shells around me. Not wanting to upset me and screw up my recovery. It's awesome.

At home I continue to struggle with the question of who I am. It's only when I'm alone in my room that I can wonder what's going on in my head. I look at photos of Richard and Susan. How can they be so real to me? They're with me every day.

My mom says I'm as distant with them as I was before I went to rehab. It might be because they still feel like strangers to me at times. I'm in the house with them, but I don't know why. They aren't my parents. It makes no sense. I try not to think about it too much, because the more I analyze it, the scarier it gets.

While in Wakeman Hall, I started writing stories in a red ASU notebook when I had free time. Stories of things that happened in RL. No AU stories. My plan is to take the stories and write a book. I'll start typing it up when I have a few more stories ready.

As graduation nears, I don't want to leave Foran. It feels safe and comfortable. To think of how much I hated it here a year ago is unbelievable. I could stay for another year. But it's time to move on. Arizona State is going to be fantastic.

The first week in June I start typing up my book. I write feverishly. I don't sleep, writing late into the night and trying to catch an hour or two of sleep before school. The living room is my domain because my parents always hang out in their room. I have the typewriter on the coffee table and I'm typing nonstop.

My mind races so fast it's hard to keep up with it. My mood is off the charts. I've never had so much confidence in my life. This is a special project. I'm an extraordinary person who has something to share with the world. There's not a doubt in my mind the book will be published. Ben is right. I will be great. I'm great right now.

My mind is bursting with brilliant ideas. I can't wait to move on to college and really get working on the mission of my life. To help people. To create peace. To spread the wonder of recovery. It's all within my reach. It never occurs to me there might be anything abnormal about these thoughts, but I don't share them with anyone.

My work on the book continues at an incredibly fast clip. I still have little need for sleep. Every other day I'm at the store buying more ink and correction ribbons for my typewriter. If only I had a computer.

The book is finished by the first week in August. I make tons of copies and give them out to the important people in my life. Everyone who reads it loves it. Of course, they're in the book, so they might be biased.

When I read it and edit, I feel weird. Most of it has happened in my real life and is the absolute truth. But there are many parts that happened in the AU. I don't really get how this came about. It seems fine, though. People like it the way it is, so I don't see an issue. It's not like I really understand how my mind works anyway. It all happened. It's real. My memories are real. They just don't always make sense.

A local author, Glenn Cheney, calls Mr. Richards at Foran to ask if there are any students he knows in recovery that'd be good to interview for a book he's writing. Mr. Richards gives him my name and I set up a time to meet Glenn at Milford Library.

I decide to bring a copy of my manuscript. That way, he'll have the whole story. I don't bring it because I think he'll help me get the book published. I bring it to help him with his own book.

I'm not sure how to get my book published, but with ASU two weeks away, I don't have time to worry about it. Glenn and I talk, and I give him my dorm address so he can contact me. I can't wait to see myself in his book.

I'm very nervous about going to Arizona. I have six months clean. I've got so many friends in Milford, and such a strong support system, I can't believe I'm giving it all up to move to Arizona. But as nervous as I am, I can't wait to get there and start a new chapter in my life.

I try to see as many people I care about as possible before leaving. I visit the Holms for the first time in months, and we have a great talk. It feels so good to make things right with them.

It's time to go. We take a limo to the airport in New York. The minute we get on the highway to leave Milford I start to cry. I hope I can do this.

*

My parents bring me to school and we have a great trip. Even my father and I are getting along and talking. They help me buy everything I need. My dorm is beautiful. It's only a year old and feels like brand new.

The night before my parents go home, my mom brings me back to my room from their hotel. I don't want her to leave. I don't cry while we're saying good bye, but once she's gone I go into my room and cry for quite a while. It's a little scary to be here on my own.

*

Richard and Susan bring me to school. We're all impressed with ASU. My dorm is awesome, the campus is beautiful, and there are plenty of stores and restaurants in my immediate area.

One day we take a road trip to the Grand Canyon. I've never been here. As we pull up to the South Rim, my heart drops. I've never seen anything so magnificent in my life. The three of us walk around on paths and I climb on rocks. We have dinner. We're a family. Susan is being very cool to me. Although to be honest, I think she's just glad I'll be out of the house and on the other side of the country.

It's so hard to say goodbye to Richard. Never did I think I'd feel this way. I thought I'd get to school ready to be on my own. But I don't want him to leave. Suddenly it occurs to me he's returning to Connecticut.

It feels far away. He says he'll come visit me, and I can come home whenever I want. Still, it's a shock to be alone. He's always been right there for me.

*

We have a suite, with a living room, bathroom, and two bedrooms. We have two refrigerators, a TV, VCR, and stereo. We're hooked up. My bedroom roommate is Janie. Stella and

Lorri are in the other bedroom. Stella and Janie are from the same town in Iowa. Lorri is from New York, and she's perhaps the most annoying person I've ever met. I can't stand her.

A couple weeks after getting to ASU, I receive a letter from Glenn Cheney. It stuns the shit out of me. He sent my manuscript to Macmillan, and the readers loved it. He thinks there's a good chance it's going to be published.

I'm absolutely fucking blown away. I had no idea how to go about publishing a book, and here it is. I might be the luckiest person in the world.

When I think about the book being published, an involuntary grin breaks out on my face. It never fails to make me smile. I'm going to be an author.

*

I find myself getting extremely angry with Lorri. I can barely control myself sometimes. One night she's out in the living room with a couple people while I'm trying to study in my room. She's way too loud.

I open the door and ask her to please quiet down a little. She doesn't. I sit in my room and the anger builds in me to the point that I go out into the living room and tell Lorri to shut the fuck up. I move to punch her in the face. My fist bumps into her face, and stops. Then I knock her head back. At least I was able to stop before I actually struck her with force.

She runs out of our room crying. She tells people on our floor I hit her. A million people come by our room to check out the story. It's hilarious.

The resident assistant comes by at some point and I deny hitting Lorri. Nothing comes of it. I want Lorri to know not to fuck with me. Next time I will punch her.

*

I get another letter from Glenn. My book is going to be published. I'll have a contract and advance money by next month. I can't believe it. It's the greatest thing that's ever happened to me.

I have a hard time with the responsibility of living on my own. My parents never really set limits for me, and I lack the self-discipline kids around me have. I avoid class whenever possible. I don't sleep much, except when I'm supposed to be in

class. I don't study unless there's nothing better to do. And that's rare.

I'm spending money like crazy. Without any regard to how my parents are going to pay my thousand dollar American Express bill next month. I do what I want, when I want.

My parents bought me a scooter for transportation. And a bicycle. Every morning I ride my bike to class and have the dizzy feeling I've had for a year now. I don't know what the hell it is, but it's getting worse.

Riding my bike on campus while seeing white is too dangerous. I have to get off and walk. I get to class and it's still happening. I manage to get in a seat, and everything still sounds far away. My heart beats wildly.

One afternoon it happens on the scooter while Jamie and I are driving around at 40 mph. I pull over and we wait until it stops. She demands we go to the emergency room. It's right down the street.

Once we're there and they take my pulse, I'm rushed back and put me on a cardiac monitor. I'm given oxygen and an IV. Jamie and I are shocked. My pulse is going up and down between about 110 beats per minute and 240 beats per minute. It goes up and down like that for what seems like forever.

They refer me to a cardiologist and tell me I'm having paroxysmal atrial tachycardia. Arrhythmia. It never occurred to me this had anything to do with my heart. Other than the fact that when it happens my heart feels like it might burst out of my chest.

Jamie and I go back to the dorm. I light a cigarette and she knocks it out of my mouth. I laugh and pick it up. She's pissed I'm going to keep smoking. I tell her not to worry; everything is going to be fine.

I go to the cardiologist. He orders an echocardiogram and I get an EKG. They take my blood. Everything is negative. He thought maybe it was mitral valve prolapse, but it's not. He's concerned and thinks I should take a medical withdrawal from school until this is under control.

He doesn't see how I can go to school every day with these symptoms. I'm not sure, either. It's become ridiculous. My mom thinks it's a good idea. I can return in the spring. I hate to

leave school. I'm having such a great time, and managing to stay clean and sober. But I'll be back.

*

At home, life is boring. I can't wait to go back to school. The dizziness continues. One day, I walk to the front door to check the mail and collapse onto the floor. This is getting bad. I've been to the cardiologist here in Connecticut and he doesn't know what's causing my symptoms.

Passing out is a big deal. My friend Kathy and I go to Milford Hospital. They accuse me of doing cocaine and are real assholes. I can't believe it. I've never been so indignant in my life. I assure them I'm not high. I've been clean for almost 9 months.

They do a urinalysis and it's negative. They have no explanation for the dizziness and fainting. They thought it was drugs. I get up and leave. They suck.

It happens again. I pass out in my room. This time Kathy and I go to a bigger hospital in Bridgeport. I'm brought back quickly, as usual, due to my incredibly high heart rate. But this time the doctor tells me I'm having a panic attack.

I get Valium intravenously and right away I'm back to normal. He gives me a prescription for Ativan and tells me I need a psychiatrist, not a cardiologist.

He can't be right. Panic attacks? No way. But when I read about panic attacks, my symptoms match the description perfectly. I don't care. There's nothing wrong with me mentally. I'm doing okay.

I keep going to the cardiologist. I don't say anything about the panic attack diagnosis at the emergency room. He puts me on a beta blocker medication that helps a little. I'm only having the episodes a couple times per week instead of every day.

By spring semester I'm dying to get back to school. This time I'm way less sad when I leave Milford, and very excited to get into a routine at ASU.

*

At ASU, all I want to do is work on the book. I don't have much interest in going to my classes. Except acting, which is fun, and I'm good at it. I love my acting class so much; I plan to take a playwriting class in the fall. I might even change my major to theatre. I'll never be a doctor. I possess no self-discipline at all.

I love being spontaneous. Convincing my roommate to drive to Los Angeles for a couple days. Buying whatever I want, when I want. Still not caring my parents and grandparents are getting the bills. Once a month my mom calls to bitch me out for spending so much money and I tell her I'm sorry. I won't do it again. And I do.

I fail two out of four of my classes. I would've gotten a B in philosophy, but I didn't go to the final. I looked at the clock, saw it was time to go take the test, and went back to sleep.

People think I'm crazy. I think it's a mixture of crazy and not giving a fuck. Plus, I'm going to be an author. I've always wanted to be a writer and a doctor. One out of two ain't bad.

My roommates and I get an apartment at the end of the school year. It's so exciting. We buy furniture and make it our place. I have to go home for the summer. I won't be staying in Arizona year round like my roommates. I need time in Connecticut, to see my friends, maybe see Ben. Go to some NA meetings. I'll pay my share of the bills while I'm home.

*

In Connecticut I get depressed. I don't know what happened. I crash hard. I question everything about my life. My mom is pissed when she sees my grades and finds out I failed two of my classes. She wants to know why they're paying so much money for me to screw around. I have no good answer. She's right. I shouldn't be failing classes. I'll do better in the fall.

Or I'll be dead. I take lots of drives around Connecticut, going too fast on narrow, wooded roads. Thinking about plowing right into a tree. I never wear a seatbelt.

Of course, there are guns right in my parents' room. I could blow my head off. I don't have the guts to use a gun. It's too easy and too hard at the same time.

I should start using cocaine, or any drugs. How many times have I heard I'll die if I keep using? Maybe drugs are the answer.

The AU is so intense. I'm clean and sober there, too. I don't want to be. I'm beginning to really acknowledge to myself there's another life going on in my head. I think about it and I'm self-conscious. Will I ever be able to tell anyone?

*

I go back to Arizona in August. I celebrate 18-months clean. It's an amazing milestone. Everyone is so happy for me.

Within a week, I go into my friend's refrigerator while no one's watching and take out a can of beer. Milwaukee's Best.

I pop it open and drink it up. I hold it up for everyone to see and they're stunned. My ASU friends have only known me clean and sober.

What have I done? There's a book coming out this year about my recovery from alcohol and drugs, and here I am, drinking beer.

I don't care. It's on. I've fucked up my sobriety and I'm going to kill myself with drugs and alcohol.

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