

STRANGER

~creative non-fiction~

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In front of me an old woman with cherry lipstick and a clipboard asks questions about sexual abuse, but my mind is through the square window on the door behind her. In that room I see a steel bed surrounded by emptiness. On top of it lay leather straps uneven in width where they're wearing thin. Each strap has a set of holes to fasten the buckles tight, and I can see quite clearly that the ones nearest the end are circles while the ones furthest away have stretched into ovals.

"Do you need more time to think about it?" she asks, gently.

"No."

"No, you don't need more time, or no, you weren't sexually abused?"

For a moment I am in that steel bed. Then I come back to her.

"No. I wasn't abused."

Tonight will be a Haldol night. The newly minted nurse will say, This is going to make you feel better, and I will duly reply, Ok, anything. She will tell me to lean forward over the table and pull up my gown. I will feel cold air crawl like fingers around my torso. She will tell me it's going to feel like a prick, but only for a moment. I will feel the skin on my ass cinch around the needle. The tranquilizer will swim out the chute in a billowing yellow cloud. She will announce, Good job, jerking back.

I awake twenty-two hours later.

No one visited my dreams last night because there was no space in that blackness. All that was was an outside, an outline of a creature whose inside was less than asleep, less than comatose, less than dead: it was missing. Except in cursive notes on the other side of a clipboard, from which this simulacrum gets made.

What I notice first upon flicking back on is disembodiment. I see limbs hanging but they are not me. My sense of self is a headache banging against the walls of my skull, and that's all. At some point I capture intention again, and with it the structure of thinking—though no thoughts—and from that, attention. Now I place this attention on my left shoulder. It tingles, brought back to life. Then my elbow, down to my wrist, and finally into my hand to unclench, but there is a delay between the command and action. I sense I am living a half-second behind time.

Next comes sound. I hear the space around my body, then the space of the room, and with that I know there is separation between us two. There is a ping—a steady

reverberation that clarifies into water dripping from the bathroom sink, and a nervous hum that rattles from some appliance I cannot place. The light overhead perhaps? Maybe it's the bugs frying in its case.

The other side of the window is blue, either dusk or dawn, so I wait to see if it lightens or darkens. Fade in, fade out, fade in, see black, and out, and in, still black, it's out, wake up, come in, wake up, I'm out, I'm waking up at night, at night, at night I'm waking up at night and my ass is bruised, the world was blue, my ass is bruised and the world was blue and now is black and I'm waking up at night because the world was blue and now is black and my ass is bruised, *I was injected*.

A wave of panic flutters my chest. Thousands of ants crawl up my calves, trace my lips; they circle my ankles and burn my ears, climb my spine, sting my dick; they chew each root of each hair. I have to stand up and shake them off, but I can't put together enough instructions to coordinate my whole body moving. So I lay instead in akathisia.

The door creaks as the psych tech peeks in, but once he notices I'm awake it swings hard and he struts to my bedside.

"Looks like you wet the bed. We're gonna need to change those sheets."

He has a beard not unlike mine though cut closer. He never looks me in the eye. He pays his attention to objects in the room. He has to make sure everything is in order. In the bathroom he notices the dripping water, so he turns the hot knob on then off, cold knob on then off, then repeats twice, each time looking a little angrier that the contraption won't stop leaking. He sighs aloud in bewilderment, Huh, but I also hear him secretly whisper, Fucking pipes. He peels back the shower curtain hastily, as if to get it over with in case there really is a decomposing body draining down the center hole and clogging those pipes.

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Across the dinner table a hungry man stares at me. Gray curls tumble down his forehead and eclipse the top halves of his lazy, bloodhound eyes. He is purring.

"Are you gonna eat that or just drool all over it cause I'll eat it if you ain't gonna?"

Even sitting, I can tell he is mighty. Perhaps seven feet tall, big enough that anything he says sounds hostile. Now I don't know where I've been, but I must have been there awhile because the fish is skeletal on his plate and pristine on mine. Except for a swirl of drool that has fallen onto my lemon dressing, yet to blend. People say you should live in the present, but I wonder sometimes if they understand what it's really like to live moment-to-

moment. To find yourself arriving suddenly to the experience of a place without any imprint from the minutes before.

“Well?” he asks.

I hear fluorescent lights buzzing.

“You can have it,” I say, my words echoing. I am still a half-second behind time and—as if on a bad phone call—it takes me that long to hear what I say. Excited, the hound stretches both arms across the table and picks up my plate. He lifts it above his head, holds that posture for a moment of dramatic tension, then tilts the plate downwards so the fish slides off into his mouth. He smacks loudly as he chews, licking his teeth between bites. When he finishes, he abruptly stands and knocks his chair over backwards. He pants, until suddenly—as if the fish sunk in his stomach leaped up his throat and popped its eyes through his own—he spots coffee, at which point he puppeteers his arms and legs through a stilted walk (that only meds can make) towards the steaming pot of black magic. He leaves behind his plate, and with it even the memory of having eaten, for every moment here is independent of the next, discontinuous, puzzle pieces that promise a big picture but when you go to connect them their edges don’t match.

Haley is swimming in the ocean next to me. I know she is there, but each time I swivel my head she disappears. I can only glimpse her in the periphery. There are eels chasing us. My hand is taken into Haley’s so that our arms swimming together make a water mill, and this propels us faster into the horizon until suddenly the horizon is moving towards us. As it nears, the whole scene—ocean, eels, us—flattens and we lose our dimensionality. Now we are white stick figures on a black canvas, the last drops of squeezed-out ocean sweating down the canvas face.

I am shaken awake by the bearded psych tech. My empty dinner plate is across the table waiting for whatever patient is on clean-up. A crust of drool dries on my chin. The ants are in a flurry, they must be hungry. My thighs twitch, my hands rise without command, my toes cramp backwards and I’ve bitten my cheeks, yes I bit them again. I taste like blood.

“Dinner’s up. Let’s get you to group.”

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There are times when the big thoughts bring me comfort. When I remember that to reach the edge of the universe, you have to travel 187,000 miles every second for 14.5 billion years. That there’s so much out there kicking and screaming and collapsing into spheres that no way a speck of humans pushing shopping carts matters a god damn. You believe seas

part, I believe mirrors watch, our heads spin, the Earth spins, you can't see what spins if you're spinning too, but nothing really spins because nothing ever moves, for to reach one point from another you must first cross a point halfway in-between, but to reach that halfway point, you must also cross a halfway point between it and your starting point, and to reach that you must first reach another halfway point and so on and so on until the only logical conclusion is that nothing ever moves because there is no indivisible space. There are always halways in-between. But now is no time for big thoughts—only baby steps Steven, and that is why I am at Stabilization on Haldol: I am halfway between alive and dead, and no one knows which direction to move me.

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Three days later I am at Treatment. Here the walls are further apart, the air has more space to breathe, the floors squeak a little less and the mattresses are wrapped in cotton instead of plastic. But mostly it smells different. Yes, I smell institution—the detergent on the linens, the pink handsoap, the stale paper in self-help books; but it's nothing like the rotten scent—the chemical humidity—that hangs in Stabilization, one I swear thickens each time a patient sucks it in and coughs it out.

There is also sunlight in this wing, albeit dulled through the frosted windows. And high ceilings with skylights that create the ambience of an airport. One feels less like a sick person in here and more like a customer. Which isn't to say you're treated like one—or at least that if you are, it's as a customer attempting to return an un-returnable item...forever.

I am standing in the grand central room. In the middle is the employee headquarters, a large octagon marked off by waist-high countertops. Inside are open-air stations and filing cabinets that the employees fiddle with endlessly, always bending over and gesturing to one another with the resentment of being watched (“Why is everything always setup in the *patient's* favor?” they groan). There is no glass like at convenience stores, but those countertops are just a hair longer than striking distance.

Medtime. A voice over the intercom drops from the sky, “Medications. Line up for medications.” We heed the call and gather single file. If aliens invaded at this moment and this was the first image they saw—thirty of our fumbled bodies aligned before two clean creatures dressed in white, our cheeks watched closely as we swig back plastic shot glasses—what would they *see*?

Mine are vanilla hexagon, lip-stick red tube, two faded bluejean circles, and an unabashedly golden egg. Call them Lithium, Abilify, Effexor, and Ativan. In one fell swoop

they are me. It's in the moment that I swallow that I feel hope. Though I can't get out now, I did in fact check in to this place, and this is why right here: I talked to my doctor, I read the pamphlets, I aced the quizzes on pfeifer.com, and I'm here to collect on their wager that flowing white robes in lime green fields are a balanced chemical away. That's what a particular kind of desperation will do.

Now it's time to smoke. The pack I checked in has been traded for coffee and excuses to loiter in the smoking cage. Everyone knows the employees keep a stash behind the counter, but you have to sway them into giving up such leverage. Fortunately, at this time of day, coffee has kicked me into a formidable charmer (the brochures call this Rapid Cycling). I look for a vulnerable employee who must have kids my age and therefore cannot possibly say No (they call this Manipulation). Back and forth yackity yack, a flash of devilish smile, she hands me two cigarettes—reluctantly, telling me these will be my last, then launches into sermons about tobacco and mental health that are also posted in bold fonts on the bulletin board (and in those brochures).

The doorway between the hospital and the smoking cage marks two worlds. On the inside I am notes in cursive. On the outside I am a friend. We congregate, six of us men—the women have to smoke in a separate cage—something about tobacco calling back a rite of camaraderie. Here we laugh.

There is Brian, who looks just like a cat, a groomed cat. He talks like one would too, in aesthetically pleasing tones and circuitous phrases, as if everything he discussed was a piece of art. He is here because he drinks way too much and wants to die during binges. Just like Alan, who is eyeing the copy of *Cat's Cradle* in my hand, is here because he smoked crack and lost everything. For my part, I am here because I think too much.

“That's a very good book,” Alan says, pointing. I think he's one part impressed because I'm too young to read good books and one part eager to find in that young-ness hope.

Brian gossips about the hound who ate my fish. “He was my roommate on Stabe for Christ's sake. So here I am detoxing and nearly dying, and next to me snoring all night is this *ghoulish* creature who *not infrequently* talks in his sleep. God!”

“What did he say?” I ask.

“He said,” and now Brian puts on a Frankenstein face and comes towards me, “I'm going to eat your lobotomized brains you schizoid fool!” We all laugh. Even in here we think others are crazier.

The cage is made of coated steel fencing like you find around a baseball field. It is shaped into a dome so there are no edges to climb over. What you see through the

diamonds are more brick buildings, a vast lawn that is half-dead half-alive, and in the distance a few pine trees. But there's sunlight everywhere, which makes me sweat.

Alan asks, "Hey kid, what are you gonna do when you get outta here?" I have these kinds of answers rehearsed: "Gonna stay clean, take my meds, try and get a job, find a routine."

"Stay away from women," he reminds me. Maybe he saw me last night in the phone booth dialing over and over. Maybe he heard me leaving messages, saying Haley's name sternly at first, then desperately, then chaotically.

"You know what the problem with this place is?" asks Brian. "The problem is—and here I want to qualify that I am in fact sober and *therefore*," he holds up one finger and pauses to accentuate what's coming, "entitled to my opinion." And now he takes a deep breath. "We all just need to get laid."

"Ain't that the truth," says an otherwise silent guy leaning against the cage.

"We just need to fuck it out!" Brian smiles big at his own discovery. Then he starts thrusting his hips, "Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it out!" He hops around, thrusting wildly, the whole lot of us entranced and laughing riotously. "What do you gents think about that?" he asks, then sucks a long drag.

My meds have kicked in. I'm frustrated that in their haze I cannot find a response sly enough to meet his energy. But at least there are no more ants running up and down my ribs. Just the tingle of hilarity.

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I am having trouble leaving the mirror. I hear laughter behind it. There are men sitting behind the mirror laughing at me as I piss. I want to see them. I feel around the mirror's edge for a space where I can peek behind but find nothing. Near the end of my trace I hit a burr and cut my fingertip. Now I'm sucking my index finger and the men are laughing at me and calling me faggot. They record me on videotape so they can broadcast it to the whole world of people who have it together and think small-ly of these behaviors.

There's a firm knock on the door.

"Are you okay?" enters a muffled woman's voice.

"Just a minute."

Pause.

"Group can't start without you."

Even though I can't see her, I can feel her waiting on the other side. So I wrap my bleeding finger in toilet paper and stick it in my pocket.

*

We face forward in rows of six, a parade of humpty dumpties without shoelaces (you could hang yourself). Up front in her lone chair, Angela observes, one leg tight over the other. Her pointy glasses look like teardrops turned sideways and her red hair slits back into a knot. I keep thinking she and I must have something in common because we're both so young, but I can't get around her nametag. This is Angela: Psychiatric Technician, and there ends the story.

On one side of her a table displays a basket of plastic fruit. Pineapple, Lemon, Pear. On the other a good patient holds a poster of cartoon faces showing different expressions, each one with the name of an emotion written below. Happy, Sad, Mad. It's called *My Feelings*.

At the strike of the hour she begins. "Say your name, how you feel, and whether you accomplished your goal for the day."

We start with Henry, whose is still as dead. She calls his name four times before his feet shuffle, and when they do, their friction against the floor polish fills the room with squeaks. He looks down at the commotion, a tub of drool from behind his bottom lip spilling over. Moments later it touches the floor in an uninterrupted line, and I wonder then whether all the polish is made of our drool.

Angela's eyelids catch a rhythm, snapping at half-second intervals and in sets of six. Her lips purse. Now she repeats the instructions, this time with such slowness it's as if the words taste bad. "*Henry*, say your name, how you feel, and if you met your goal."

His head never rises. "I'm Henry. I—I feel good. My—my—my goal today was to get—um—a—better, ma'am. That's right."

We all wait in tense silence, a few coughs, a few wisps. A faint voice from over the intercom communicates in nurse code.

Angela's tick-tock blinks continue, until finally she comments, "*Good* is not a feeling. *Good* is a judgement. Henry, which of these faces best describes how you *feel* this evening?" Any joy I had from that cigarette break is crushed.

Henry looks up. His eyes widen. He's seen this poster for months but still it's foreign. He mutters to himself a few times, then answers, Joyous. Not a moment's

reflection, Angela scratches on the other side of the clipboard, then darts her eyes to the next-in-line, at Marge, who is eagerly smacking gum and ready for showtime.

“Name’s Marge. Feeling hopeful *and* proud this evening. What does that one say? Oh yeah, *and* enthusiastic, yes ma’am! My goal today was to be one more day away from drugs (she says “drugs” with a prolonged emphasis on the “ug”) so I can get back my kids and treat my mental illness that’s been holding me back all my life making me do stupid things...” She goes on like this forever.

At my turn I hesitate. Angela asks the good patient to bring the poster closer to me. “This is the list of feelings. If you can’t read them, point to a face.” I don’t see homicidal on the list.

Here is my chance to stand my ground. Perhaps earn another diagnosis in my defense of what I will later come to understand as the opposite of this place: ambivalence. Instead I point to the face called Guilty.

*

The next morning I awake elated. No, electrified. The new drugs have pumped me full of hope. If it feels this good to be normal, then I’m committed.

As I walk down the hall for coffee, I smile big at the employees. One says, “Good morning, Mr. Morgan. Everything alright?” It doesn’t matter if you’re up or down, either one elicits the same investigation.

“I’m wonderful.”

Just before the breakfast room, I spot Brian, the cat man, in a chair. His head is collapsed into his hands. He is still. I ask him, “Hey man, wanna smoke?” He doesn’t move, so I wonder if I have the right guy. “Brian?”

Now he sighs and looks up. His eyes are torn, though it doesn’t look like he’s been crying.

“Will you sit down?” he asks, desperately.

I take the empty chair next to him.

“What’s going on, man. Are you depressed?”

“No, no, it’s not that.”

“Ok.”

“Listen, I’m gonna tell you something. You’re young enough that you might not care.”

He puts his hand on my knee for comfort, and I can feel his hand trembling. Then he backs it off a few inches and holds it there, contemplating whether to keep touching my knee or not. He decides not.

“I had sex with my daughter.”

He looks right into me with those distraught blue eyes. His mouth hangs open, panicked.

For the first time, I realize what this place is. A place for people with too many secrets. We are punished or punishers or both at the same time, all driven mad by secrecy. This is our real commonality, not some vague notion of an ill mind. The polysyllabic words tattooed onto us by psychiatrists are just curtains over raw skin.

I stand up, wordless, and walk off. Pass through a room where a young man is to play piano. He has frazzled hair like he was recently electrocuted and crooked glasses like he forgot to straighten them thereafter. I am dazed and stop. He strikes the lowest note so hard that its tone shifts in the air. Everything in the room shakes. Then he begins, his range locked into dark, throaty notes. With one finger he bangs hard and direct, punching at single keys for minutes on end. He shifts chromatically—one step up, and it’s too tense. His right hand grasps for five-fingered landscapes that make no sense. I have no idea if he knows what he’s doing or if he’s just choking this ivory like it’s a stranger he wants to hear squeal.

From the corner, an old man kicks off his stool and firms up his stature, ready to dance. He extends his left arm around a partner no one can see, his right hand on her hip, then starts waltzing a two-step out-of-sync with all but his memory. The bass tones crescendo from wild to rabid. All direction lost, but still our old man dances with a farmer’s smile—*work is done, now we make love*—while I moan for the sensibility of structure. Now I want to be normal, I want to be normal, I will eat shapes because they have beginnings and ends and edges and insides and there’s formulas to know their every move like written music, like normal music, mapped out, always on a staff—because on a staff, there’s only so many places you can go.

The last sound pings. The highest note has been struck. Neither complements nor contradicts all that preceded. Instead it bleeds through the rubbery side of my elbow. I have torn my skin. I try to slip out for a cigarette but someone shouts, “You’re bleeding all over the place!” And this attracts the employees with vampiric speed.

*

One spins a cocoon around my forearm while another clips my nails. It feels good to be touched, even as an object.

“One more time and we’re putting on the glove.”

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At some point, if you’re lucky, you realize that the only way out is to lie. The person most important to lie to is the psychiatrist. But since you only see him for ten minutes once a week, it’s imperative that you also lie to your fellow inmates, and the employees. Lying comes in two forms: one, you must say things like “I am hopeful” and “I want to stay on my meds” and “This place has made me much better.” Two, you must deny your feelings any expression. They must be stored away with all the other secrets. In other words, you must behave. I have been a good patient (*No more smiling inappropriately* my notes will say), and now it’s time to see the psychiatrist.

We meet in tiny box room. He is Indian, and his accent along with the gentle way he speaks lends him a certain kind of authority.

“Steven, Bipolar Disorder is a serious brain disease. You’re going to be managing this for the rest of your life. The medications are most important, but there are other lifestyle changes that only you can make.” He counts off his fingers as he makes a list: “Diet. Eat enough vegetables and whole grains. Exercise. At least thirty minutes a day. Routine. You have to make a schedule for yourself everyday and keep to it. Sobriety. If you don’t do these things, I’m afraid for you.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“That you will get lost in mental illness forever.”

I am worse off than before I came here. The only marked change is that whereas before I knew I was going to kill myself, now I’m so fucked up I won’t even be able to muster the energy for that.

“I’m committed to getting well. I’m feeling hopeful, too. I’m not gonna go off my meds anymore and I’m gonna stay sober and get a job.”

The doctor is frozen, chin resting in the palm of his hand. He assesses the situation. He is doubtful, but the monologue in his head must be convincing him otherwise. Because he responds, “Good. And good luck to you out there.”

And just like that I am free.

*

On a gravel road between tall pines. A thunderstorm has just passed and the forest is drooped in wet yellow light. With the windows down the perfume of moss whiffs in and out my throat and reminds me of vanilla ice cream. Not the kind served to patients, but something richer, something known between lovers.

Ten miles, ten years, behind me is the mental hospital. Just ahead is the river, the same running water where I played as a child.

When I step out the car I find my bare foot in an ant hill. They sting, but I can move away. So I do.

It is a perfect, moody, June day. I am nude. On the river reflects my figure, the treetops, a swirling blackbird. If you were looking from above, you would see a mammal shape his hands towards you, then you would see him leap. There would be ripples of chains left on the surface, a man disappearing underneath.