

**NOTICE:**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of reproductions of copyrighted material. One specified condition is that the reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses a reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

**RESTRICTIONS:**

This student work may be read, quoted from, cited, for purposes of research. It may not be published in full except by permission of the author.

Burning the Mask: A Story of OCD and Body Dysmorphic Disorder

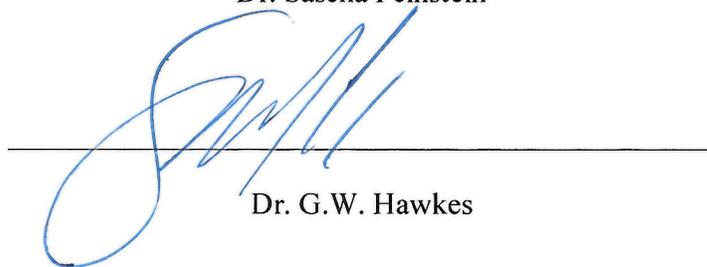
Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Allison Lax  
Lycoming College  
2020

Approved by:



Dr. Sascha Feinstein



Dr. G.W. Hawkes



Dr. Maria Hebert-Leiter



Dr. Kurt Olsen

# Burning the Mask

A Story of OCD and Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Allison Lax

## Contents

Prologue: Lady and the Moon	4
Chapter 1: Echoes in the Tunnel	10
Chapter 2: Criminals, Inverted	18
Chapter 3: Just Look	30
Chapter 4: Ojai	44
Chapter 5: Reborn	58
Chapter 6: Dangerous, Beautiful Boy	70
Chapter 7: My Only Sunshine	86
Chapter 8: Burning the Mask	97
Afterword: Lady and the Sun	107

*to Mom—first five drinks are on me*

## Lady and the Moon

*The moon is a friend for the lonesome to talk to.*

—Carl Sandburg

I could barely see her in the dark, and when I did, Nick and I didn't stop. We kept trudging through November slush toward the Moon and Raven, shooting the shit, back-door-bragging to one another about how swamped we were with end-of-the-semester demands. Whoever lay in the street sat up dazed as though waking in bed, looking more like a mass of puffy black coat than a person. A small group of people poked around like pigeons as she remained seated, munching or sipping on something—it looked like a Capri Sun—near the intersection of West Fourth and William. Diverting cars to an adjacent street was a man in an orange vest.

“Do you think we should go over and help?” I wasn't sure there was even anything to help with.

“Nah, they've got it covered,” Nick said, gesturing to the pigeon-people with one hand and stuffing the other further in his pocket. “Come on, it's cold.”

I wondered what happened. Did she faint? Slip on the ice? *Is she hurt?* But these puzzling thoughts were quickly replaced by the delectable smells and sounds of the Moon on a

Thursday: burger grease and garlic fries, laughter and spices wafting from each table. The crowd looked to be mainly 30-somethings and up, as usual. Most Lycoming College students went to the pub across the street, but Nick, my good friend since kindergarten, is a 23-year-old Fancy Bartender who would never drink \$2 beers. Besides, we weren't out to get drunk; as "busy, driven college students" (as we so often liked to remind each other), we had to be back on campus in an hour for extracurriculars. I forgot about the woman as a waitress led us to our seats, commiserating as we bitched over our respective workloads.

When I first got better—better enough to really live again—I felt intensely grateful for almost every aspect of normalcy. I tried not to be outwardly irritating about it, like those moms on Facebook who always post how blessed they are, but I felt damn lucky to be back in school. Being able to go out with friends again after returning from the months of residential treatment I'd received for my Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) felt like the greatest gift. Life had all but stopped in my late teens and early twenties, just as it blossomed for most, and I finally felt ready to bloom.

Like going to bars, for example. I'd turned 21 at the peak of my illness, and my birthday had not at all been the birthday of a normal 21-year-old. I'd spent the weeks leading up to it mentally prepping with my therapist, who I saw twice a week, two-and-a-half hours away in Allentown. I journaled a lot back then, a mix of illustration and prose, and I remember drawing two comparative pictures to illustrate the issue that sickened me: what I wanted to look like on the big day versus my fear of what I might *actually* look like. The first featured me all dolled up, hair curled and makeup pristine, dressed in my favorite black jumpsuit with the deep "V" to highlight my collarbones (which I'd always liked) and my dangly aqua earrings. The second,

which I feared would be closer to the truth, featured my typical wardrobe at the time: bleach-stained sweats and a long-sleeved shirt. But what hurt most was how ugly I knew my hair and skin would look: messy bun and a forehead pocked in comedone braille. I know it sounds dramatic, but at the time, dressing up felt like putting a bow on a trash bag. I spent that night being legal with my family. Mom made a coconut loaf to sub for cake, using almond butter as glue to stick blueberries and raspberries in the shape of 21. (I forced myself to eat it, so uncomfortable with all that sugar and margarine.) Later, more out of her persuasion than anything else, she, my stepsister, and I went down the street from the Moon to the Bullfrog, where I had exactly one glass of merlot, as I was terrified of the more sugary drinks, the ones I actually wanted.

Despite all the material I can't remember from elementary school science, I vividly recall my disappointment when I found out that the moon, in fact, did not change shape; each night, it merely showed a different side of itself to Earth. Along with the added trouble of having to memorize each phase for our test, I considered this a dirty trick. If God had made the moon *look* like a shape shifter, then that's what it should do; I had no patience for things that appeared to be what they were not. However, as we learned more about this celestial body, how it did not produce its own light but served as a sort of mirror for the sun, I began to feel differently. In reality, *we* were the ones changing the moon's shape, our shifting perspectives creating this illusion—a beautiful lie. As it orbited our planet, only its body moved; the essence never changed. Years later, when mental illness would make a mission of distorting my reality, I longed for this reliability, that steadfast constant. Though the moon may wax and wane, dancing cleverly between darkness and light, at the end of the day, it remains entirely true to itself.

As a 22-year-old out of full-time psychiatric treatment almost a year, I still felt grateful to hang in a bar with a friend, able to talk about normal 20-something stuff and actually enjoy it. But somewhere I couldn't remember, that gratitude had been reduced to background noise. I could appreciate how lucky I was to survive such a dark place, but I'd also forgotten the stresses and pressures of the real world, especially the challenging classes and relationships (or lack thereof). When I'd emerged from the depths of BDD, I had naively assumed all my problems would be over. Even though I was finding that not to be true, I didn't want to stop moving forward. I still cared and thought often of my friends back in Wisconsin, the ones still going through battles I'd fought only months before. But I had started to forget something I'd sworn to always remember—that just because I escaped with my life from the burning building didn't mean everyone else had.

So when a cop-car/ambulance parade of shrieking reds and blues showed up through the Moon and Raven's wide windows, the kind they crank open in the summer because they're big enough to swallow the wall whole, I embarrassingly found myself a little annoyed. What was this commotion interrupting my scheduled fun time?

One of the older men at the bar, a sharp-looking businessman whose cheeks had flushed from his beer, turned to Nick. "Think she's suicidal?" he asked. His voice was dry as a cactus, as though he were pondering if tomorrow's weather would be rain or shine. I stiffened.

"I don't know," Nick said casually.

The ruddy-faced man must have seen that I looked uncomfortable, because he quickly added, "Sure hope she's okay. Good thing someone's helping."

I nodded out of politeness more than anything.

With a sheepish smile, he went back to his own conversation. Even through all this, with the red lights still strobing, things went on as normal. People were mildly curious, and it was a brief topic of barroom conversation—“I wonder what happened? What are they doing?”—but in ten or 15 minutes, questions died as quickly as they had bubbled up. Half-concerned comments segued into the norm. And what amazed me in one corner of my brain, even as I resumed speaking, was that I did, too.

Even now, almost a year later, I’m not sure what to make of this—that the world, *my* world, just kept turning, even when that woman could have been crumbling into pieces. It’s not as though I can blame the other diners, or myself, for that matter. After all, the woman was being attended to; it’s not like anything else could be done. But that was the first time since I’d gotten better that I witnessed firsthand how things just “go on,” the way W.H. Auden describes the reaction to Icarus at the end of “Musée des Beaux Arts”:

[T]he ploughman may  
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

My capacity for emotional distance startled me. People in the lands of sickness and wellness lived bizarrely apart from one another.

What was she thinking when they found her? Maybe her mind was on a different plane than what we would deem normal. Or maybe, and I hope this wasn’t the case, she *was* aware, like patients in surgery who are technically under anesthesia but remain semi-conscious, feeling

every cut while not being able to communicate or stop the incisions. More often than not, that's what BDD felt like.

Maybe this woman was aware, at least on some level, that sitting down in a busy intersection was a bad idea. Perhaps she knew, remotely, that she didn't actually want to die; she just wanted the pain to stop. I'd been there. But when I was in that bar, laughing with my friend over Anchor Steams, I couldn't get on that level with her. And it made me remember, or even realize, how alone people suffering from ailments you can't see—a ravished, broken brain—really are. The worst part isn't that you can't communicate. It's that even when you do, no one, except people in the same headspace, can truly understand.

I still think about that woman on cold days, when I rustle through my messy closet, searching for my own puffy black coat. Maybe it's impossible, now that I'm well, to entirely comprehend stories like ours. But I can certainly return to her in my memory—and myself, from roughly 2014 to 2018—and try. Tonight, in my mind, I have decided to stop in that intersection, where I will sit down next to that woman, silent, both of us wearing black coats and staring at the black sky. I will smile, bring her into the Moon, and listen.

## Echoes in the Tunnel

“Hel-IOO-oooooooo-O-oo? Heee-loo-OOO-ooooo?!”

The little girl’s voice bounces off the graffitied tunnel walls, ping-ponging through the darkened space and reaching us well before she does. Mom and I slow our pace and look at each other, wide-eyed and quiet, as if raising our voices would shatter the image, instantly revealing it to be an illusion, a fake. I maintain an urgent whisper: “Mom—*look*.” The girl, her white-blond bangs peeking out from underneath her pink Barbie helmet, continues to experiment with different vowels and inflections as she bikes through the tunnel, stopping every so often to look back impatiently, excitedly in her wake. She calls for her parents (“Moo-OOO-mm! Da-AA-dyyy!”) and an attractive young couple walking their bikes brings up the rear. “Looking great, Sweetie!” the mother calls, smiling at me and Mom before laughing at something her husband says. I wave at the girl to get her attention, but she pedals too fast, clearly eager to get to the other side. A moment later, she disappears into the sun, the tunnel still breathing, electric with sound.

Mom and I had made the decision to walk the Indian Park bike path that day, her 57th birthday, in the spur of the moment; neither of us had been there in years. Before Daddy died,

back when he, Mom, and I lived on Quaker State, taking family trips on this path used to be a weekly summer activity. Mom would stuff my Barbie backpack to the brim with granola bars and fruit snacks (Daddy loved to make a big deal of being the one who'd end up carrying it), and together we'd roll our bikes over the little red bridge and be on our way.

When we'd reach the tunnel, about the quarter point of the path, Daddy would go in before me. I'd always been a bit wary of its cool air, the cavernous black. He'd hop off his bike and make sure I was watching, as though we hung on the heels of 40 Persian thieves.

“AALLLYYYYY BAAAHH BAAAHHH,” he'd call, daring me to enter.

Sometimes, when he felt like teasing, he'd add a bit of rasp to his voice for the Boogeyman. Others, he'd square his chest and start pounding like Tarzan, his mouth contorting to an ape-like underbite. “AYEEEEAYEEEEAYYYE!” My father was not a tall man, but in that cave he sounded bigger than God. Mom, already on the other side, would roll her eyes with amused patience. I'd peek. Inside, the reverberations didn't seem so scary. They became ghosts, the friendly kind, and hearing them sing felt like witnessing magic. “Now you,” he'd say, his eyes twinkling in the dark. With a deep breath, I'd yell as loud and long as I could, delighted to hear my voice join his in a sweeping, echoing round.

Losing a parent when you're 11 years old can feel far more weird than sad. It's absolutely both, but the former frequently outweighs the latter—at least that's the way it was for me. You're old enough to know your life will never be the same, but too young to have any idea what this will mean in practice. For as long as I could remember, I'd always *kind of* known something was wrong with Daddy, but no one ever sat me down to deliver the blunt, terrifying reality: “Your father has a Grade III Astrocytoma on his brain.” And what could be said after that? “It's been

pretty well managed through a series of drugs, operations, and chemo for the last 16 years, so try not to worry about it too much . . . Okay, go play now”?

All I knew was that Daddy sometimes took long trips for special doctors’ appointments, and I couldn’t go. I assumed all adults did this and didn’t think much of it. After all, until the last two months of his life, he looked and seemed completely healthy. He worked a normal 9-to-5 as an optometrist, helped me with my math homework, and goofed around like all the other dads I knew. When he took a drastic turn downhill after a particularly bad seizure in May of 2008, I didn’t have a frame of reference to know what to think. Yes, I knew things were serious, but there was still the very pressing matter of Life Right Now. What kid wants to think about something as scary or complicated as a dying parent when there are still summer camps to go to, plays to rehearse for? During those last few weeks, Mom sent me out of the house whenever she could. Daddy lay on a Hospice bed in the living room, unable to speak. When he’d see me, his eyes would shoot wide open, twinkling just like they did in the tunnel. I’d never seen him without his wig before (I hadn’t even known he wore one), and the jagged red scar above his pale expression made me want to bolt. Even though I felt as though I should stay, part of me I didn’t understand felt grateful for the reprieve of leaving.

Every time I type the word *Daddy* to refer to my father, I grit my teeth a little. At best, it makes me sound like Veruca Salt, the spoiled brat in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* who falls (perhaps to her death) down a “bad egg” shoot. At worst, it suggests I am the proud owner of a weird-ass sexual fetish. I am simply parroting the imperfect way I have come to verbally and mentally distinguish between my biological father and the man I’ve called “Dad” for ten years now (my stepfather, Greg). Mom has also adopted this system, and whenever we talk about Life Before, “Daddy” is the name we use for convenience’s sake. Although I’ve often tried to

remember if this is what I actually called him near the end of his life, I always come up empty. I don't know many 11-year-olds, but my cousin Leah is almost ten, and she certainly doesn't call her father "Daddy" anymore.

But the word *Dad* has too many complicated emotions attached to it now, too many clauses hidden in the fine print. The convoluted nature of my relationship with my stepfather has caused the term to lose some of its inherent warmth, that feeling of easy safety and home. Mom still encourages me to "talk" with Daddy when I'm feeling anxious or stressed, and, on rare occasions, I'll drive to the cemetery on Penn Street to be with him. But even when I'm staring at the headstone he'll share one day with Mom—*Love Never Ends*—my mind inevitably wanders to what I'm having for dinner that night, or what actually remains in that casket now. (When *do* bones disintegrate?) I'm typically at a loss for what to say. How do I open my heart to someone I don't even know how to properly name?

Greg Deck came into my life in 2010, after he invited Mom to his annual house party celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany, which honors the three Magi coming to see Baby Jesus. Our families had met before—we attended the same Catholic church—but never knew each other beyond a passing "How are you?" in the narthex. Greg, a balding accountant thirteen years Mom's senior, had been married twice. His second wife, a frail podiatrist named Francine who'd rolled around in one of the squeaky church wheelchairs I liked to screw around with after Mass, died of multiple sclerosis the summer after Daddy, in 2009. Greg's four boys and Francine's son were grown up when it happened, but their adopted daughter, a girl with pretty long, black hair named Josette whom I knew only vaguely, had been 11 like me. When Greg was making the funeral arrangements, he called Mom after finding her number in the parish directory. The only

available plot was next to the one reserved for my parents, he explained sheepishly, fumbling uncharacteristically over his words. Did she mind terribly if he took it? Mom, confused as to why he'd even ask, said of course he could. And that is how Dr. Ross Lax and Dr. Francine Deck ended up buried right next to one another, their now-married spouses set to lay on either side for eternity. Whenever I describe my family to new friends as the morbid, Catholic *Brady Bunch*, I lead with that.

I was 12 when Mom started dating Greg, and 13 when she married him. With my tall, skinny frame and purple braces, I fit the textbook picture of awkward adolescence, constantly fiddling with my bangs and slumping my shoulders to appear smaller. After Daddy passed, Mom and I became closer than ever. I hadn't yet adopted that clichéd, half-orphaned protection over her, wary of any new man coming into our lives. Weirdly enough, I actually felt excited. Greg seemed nice enough—a little loud for my taste, but he made Mom smile. And I was elated to finally have a sister. Obviously, I still missed my father, but the ache stayed dormant because I stockpiled novelty to guarantee its silence.

Besides, being labeled by my small town as The Girl with the Dead Dad felt way too uncomfortable; most of the time, I barely acknowledged it myself. The morning after Daddy's funeral, I'd asked Mom to take me to my *Cinderella Jr.* rehearsal. Two weeks later, we packed our bags and joined Sarah Myers, my best friend, and her family at our annual violin camp in Ithaca, New York. If I could run fast enough, far enough, maybe the new reality bubbling beneath the surface wouldn't be able to catch up. Mom, not knowing how to cope herself, ran blindly alongside me. Greg and Josette, with their big white house and non-microwavable dinners, promised an elixir that might bend life back into an ordinary shape. I was so eager to see where it would take us that I didn't think to look back.

When I think myself then—that girl who couldn't pause—uncomfortable questions beckon like voices in the dark. Would I have gotten mentally ill if Daddy hadn't died? Would the anguish I'd suffer in my late teens and early twenties exist to the same extreme? And if I had the chance to gamble—to pick such an unblemished life over the one I love now—would I go back in time to change my future?

I wish I could silence these questions, muffle my brain in wall-to-wall carpeting, the kind that stops sound from echoing. On some level, the thoughts feel self-serving; Ross Lax did not exist to be a conduit in my own life experiences. My little cartoon self rolls her eyes: *Of course things would have been different, dummy—you'll just never know how.* This kills me. Yes, I believe I still would have acquired OCD and BDD if Daddy had stayed alive, but maybe it wouldn't have gone as far as it did. Or maybe it would've gone farther.

Here's what I know for sure: According to the International OCD Foundation, OCD—my original diagnosis—may have ties to both genealogical issues and a variety of significant life stressors. It's not exactly a question of nature versus nurture. (Though less likely, the illness can first show up in adulthood. In addition, the way a child is raised doesn't determine whether or not they'll get it.) But mixing a traumatic life event with a genetic predisposition for the disease can be a dangerous cocktail—something I've come to know all too well.

While Mom comes from the more obviously messed-up side of the family, according to my nurse-aunt, Daddy may have struggled with OCD himself. Whenever I read his short autobiography on [virtualtrials.com](http://virtualtrials.com) (usually once every few months), I have to admit this does seem likely. He writes that, as a kid, he constantly compared his academic accomplishments to his valedictorian older brother's, suffering from “tremendous pressure” and “immense stress” to the point where when he graduated in the top 10% of his class, it felt insignificant. When he

describes the torrential downpour of questions that ran through his mind during that first MRI—making, in a matter of seconds, mammoth leaps from “How large *is* this mass?” to “Where will people eat after my funeral?”—I can trace my own thought patterns almost perfectly, as though holding my child-sized hand up to his.

Of course, it would be fair to say that anyone who has just been handed a life-threatening diagnosis might react in a similar way. But what makes OCD such an exhausting illness isn't the intrusive thoughts—everybody has those—but the compulsions sufferers feel they must perform to relieve them. Daddy was constantly on his laptop; I could feel the heat coming off the machine whenever I sat next to him on the couch. He furiously researched cutting-edge treatments and the best anti-cancer diets (and stuck to those diets religiously), even when he'd already found something that seemed to be working well for him. This was the only point of contention I ever saw in my parents' marriage. I remember Mom muttering to me about it on the way home from a violin lesson. “Your dad needs to learn to live life right *now*,” she said, putting extra pressure on the gas. I nodded, silently praying for her to slow down.

And what if time *could* have slowed down? What if, without anyone's faintest knowledge or suspicion, God had decided to turn the clock back, forcing it to tick in a way where life seemed perfectly normal to humans, but real change and growth—the stuff constructed through the everyday but earmarked by polar bads and goods—took place at half the speed? Selfish or not, I don't care much about the rest of the world in this scenario. I just want it to apply to the family I was born into: Mom, Daddy, and me. We'd live in our own little bottle, sloshing around with the same experiences at different states of saturation. Life might be an endless string of mundanities, a pitch without rhythm, but at least there'd be new moments to remember.

Looking through rose-tinted glasses at those 11 years, the ones unaltered by God where the first and last days of our lives align, has its drawbacks. Whatever corner of my brain I mine, it never feels as though I'm actually seeing a 3D picture of Ross Lax—the interesting, flawed human he is in the stories I've heard; the one I'd do anything to get to know as an adult. I squeeze my childhood memories of him so tightly that whenever I reexamine them, they have a little less juice each time.

Mom and I come out the other side of the tunnel squinting from the sun and still silent, almost reverential of this image of the past we've just seen in real time. How can it be that we've only moved forward? Our cave hasn't lost its magic; its ghosts remain, and they've given us song. Sequential thought—sequential anything—seems unholy here. If an echo is both a sound in itself and a reflection of another, who's to say I must choose one to enjoy? Doesn't one need the other to survive?

I start to break the quiet, but Mom pulls me in for a hug, her hair warm against my face. In this moment, I know I would not gamble my life for the world. When I pull away, so excited about what we just saw and starting to exclaim how cool this is, she chokes up a bit.

“That smile?” she says. “That's Daddy.”

## Criminals, Inverted

Of the great many stories I read in childhood, the one that gave me the worst nightmares was the folktale of the three little pigs. To be fair, my edition, innocently gifted by my well-intentioned mother, was very different from the original. This children's book from hell was titled *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* and was told not from the perspective of the pigs, or even a third-party observer, but from the memory of the wolf—Alexander T. Wolf, or A. Wolf, as the author frequently refers to him. The blurb on the back, illustrated to look like a sepia-stained, old-timey newspaper article, assured that kids would finally know what *really* happened to the famous cast of characters. *Didn't your parents tell you? it seemed to whisper. The nursery rhyme got it all wrong!* Mr. Wolf, the blurb promised, was actually the *good* guy; only through a series of gross misunderstandings had he been deemed the infamous “Big Bad Wolf.” The cover art, equally faux-aged and dull, still featured a snapshot of the mistreated antagonist in his signature pose, huffing up a storm. But that titular word—True—promised possibilities my seven-year-old self had never thought to entertain; ones that, after reading, I could not put down. I haven't fully been able to set them down since.

The story itself opens quite innocuously. A. Wolf, who is baking a cake for his granny's birthday, realizes he is out of sugar and decides to borrow some from his neighbor, Mr. Pig, who lives in a straw house. Unfortunately, the wolf has a terrible cold, and this neighbor pretends he is not home due to rampant wolf prejudice. Suffering from an ill-timed sneezing fit, Mr. Wolf accidentally blows the house down, killing Mr. Pig. In a valiant effort of waste-not, want-not, Mr. Wolf decides to eat the remains ("Think of it as a big cheeseburger just lying there," he says) and goes on to the next house. After a similar process repeats with Mr. Pig's second brother, the wolf goes to the third. This pig (the brains of the family, as he lives in a brick home) turns Mr. Wolf away outright, sneering that his grandmother can go sit on a pin (a pre-K friendly "Go fuck yourself"). Here, Mr. Wolf reminds readers that although he is typically a calm fellow, he could not tolerate this grave insult against his dear old granny. He tries to break down the door to talk it out, sneezing and huffing all the way. Mr. Pig's third brother calls the cops, reporters jazz up the headlines, and the rest, as the book claims, is revisionist history. Our story ends with the "Big Bad Wolf" behind bars, dressed in full prison regalia, dirty stripes and chains. The truth, Mr. Wolf's only salvation, gets entirely erased. On the last page, he stretches out a sad, furry paw, asking his newly enlightened readers if they, perhaps, could lend him that cup of sugar.

End scene; cue nightmares.

OCD—a disease I now believe I've always had but which was only formally diagnosed when I was 17—is far too nuanced and imaginative to fit inside a tidy box. Nevertheless, I have found its complexities can be stripped down to one word: *fear*. Ruthless obsessions circle sufferers' minds, round and round, until their tracks are seared into the subconscious, producing fear because they are ego-dystonic. They go against our identities, what we want and value, which can make them incredibly disturbing. Whether performed mentally or physically,

compulsions relieve the discomfort those obsessions cause in the moment (hence why they're so damn addictive). In reality, they maintain and even heighten that fear by reinforcing the falsity that these random misfires of the brain have meaning and thus deserve attention. In turn, OCD becomes both parasite and host—latching onto the things we hold most dear and breeding an environment that makes it progressively easier for these fears to actively disrupt our daily lives. Attempting to separate this phenomenon from discovering your identity—especially when you have no idea that the terror you're experiencing isn't *you* but a legitimate illness—can be hell on earth.

Of all the themes my OCD has raised, the one that haunts me most is a fear of being dishonest, even when, rationally, I know I am telling the truth. When I am afraid I'm lying about something important to someone I care about, whether saying potentially false information or keeping something inside (often both simultaneously), I feel a poison in my chest, and confessing to “cover my bases” *feels* like the only means of properly expelling it. I have always identified myself through my value of the truth—the star ingredient, I believe, in being both a good artist and person. As a kid, the two things Mom told me almost daily went hand in hand: “Keep an open mind, and always be honest.” It was okay to make mistakes, she said, as long as we owned up to them, apologized, and worked to change ourselves for the better.

But acting on such simple advice has never been simple. As mental health advocate Jordaine Chattaway writes, “OCD takes your core values, flips them, and serves them back to you in the nastiest way possible.” (Of the many quotes I've read on the disorder, I'd say that one's my favorite.) The insidious “doubting disease” continually tries to steal my love of the truth, twisting it to funhouse proportions with the fucked-up chemicals in my brain. It can make me feel the guilt of a criminal no matter the gravity of the perceived offense, even when

something in me *knows* I have done nothing wrong. In the past, it's made me fear I might even go to jail, like Mr. Wolf, or—much worse—deserve to be there, and be free instead.

Summer after junior year, high school: I stare straight ahead, back stiff against the sweaty leather as Mom and I pass the Lycoming Mall from the highway, barely registering the miniature storefronts or that unmistakable, 50-foot maroon archway that signals we are almost home. When I was little, the sight of that arch from the north thrilled me; if we passed through it, that meant I'd get a cinnamon-sugar pretzel at Auntie Anne's. If we passed *by* it, we were usually on our way to some great adventure. Today, I try to ignore my mounting anxiety by looking at it closer. I used to think this arch was just some knock-off of that famous one in St. Louis, but I see now I was wrong. While the Gateway Arch is stationary, almost stolid, its frame appears to twist in on itself, squirming from its proper position to a woozy figure-eight, from a wishbone to a smirk. *How have I never noticed that before?* I crane my neck to check again, but the arch dips beyond our rearview, as though it knows it's been caught. Any suggestion of its true nature is struck down by the racing pavement.

Mom, unaware of the heartbeat pounding in my ears, hums to Y2Kcountry, a station we only listen to on road trips. *That's the night that the lights went out in Georgia. That's the night that they hung an innocent man.* Usually, I cherish long car rides with Mom. We have deep talks, sometimes about her past or Daddy's, or what he'd think of the person I've become. But I can't enjoy this one—not at all. I am sitting on a terrible secret, something that's troubled me so deeply I've been holding it inside for months. My month-long acting program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia—something I'm convinced may alter my whole future—starts in a week, and a famous quote on the Meisner technique keeps steamrolling through my brain:

“Acting is behaving truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” How can I be an effective artist if I can’t even be honest as *myself*? If I really want to do this, I’ve got to tell her now.

“Mom?” My voice reverts to its typical pre-audition state, dry and tight, as though any existing substance has been replaced by sand.

Mom’s daydreaming, probably of the hamburgers she and Greg will grill for dinner. It’s the fourth of July; she’s going to drop me off at Wegmans so I can do what every socially acceptable Williamsport kid does on the fourth: make a bunch of loops downtown with my friends, pretend not to be a third or fifth wheel, and have a good time. She sets her dream aside and turns the radio down. “Yeah, Sweetie?”

She only has to glance at me to know something is wrong. I have a ridiculously easy tell for crying—blotchy face and bright green eyes. I turn away but force myself to keep going. I’ve picked this ride home from Grandma’s to force myself under a limited time frame, and the end is near. I swallow.

“I have to tell you something.”

And that’s the first time I let it out: that at 17 years old—a known “good girl” in the community, *her* “good girl”—I have been lying to her.

“I’ve been stealing,” I say. “A lot.”

Not *stealing*-stealing. Never that. I have to make sure she understands this—not because I want her to go easier on me, but because I must make her understand the specifics; if I don’t, then I’m not fully telling the truth. And lying by omission, I remind myself, is even worse than lying on purpose.

“I’ve been using money that isn’t rightfully mine,” I tell her. (Of everything I can’t remember from that first major OCD theme, my repeated use of that phrase is incredibly clear:

“rightfully mine.”) I purge my sins in detail so I won’t have to rehash things later. I tell her that I have been using cash that isn’t mine, taking stuff from her car, not giving her change back. A few years earlier, there had been a sleepover at Kathleen’s, my grade-school frenemy, where some money had gone missing. I still felt scared I’d done it. Did I remember doing it? No! But it *feels* like I remember—that I can see it, feel the money in my hands. So, I use this confessional scene to admit to that, too.

I *must* get this right. I believe I did the same thing with some money Josh, my adult stepbrother who lived with us for a while, left on the counter. He’d asked if I had any idea where it’d gone, and immediately I’d felt guilty and unable to explain. I had thought of giving him \$20 to make myself feel better, but also wanted to keep my \$20. And so on. Out it all goes to Mom. I won’t rest—*can’t* rest—until my soul untwists.

The irony has not escaped me that we are heading to the same grocery store where our Toyota was stolen all those years ago, with eight-year-old me almost inside. I replay the moment I first saw the thief: watching from the backseat as this man comes up behind Mom, thinking he must be Daddy. I can see him sitting down in the driver’s seat, can hear her scream as she uses her foot to block the door from closing. This is a forgotten story now, one that only slips out at parties, yet I find myself wondering about the man who did it, the person they never caught. Nearly a decade later, does he feel guilt from his crime? How does *he* deal with it?

A long, puzzled silence, which Mom has maintained through my whole confession, settles in the space between us like woodsmoke. I concentrate on some early stray fireworks, bursting rubies over the Susquehanna. Eventually, she thanks me for telling her. One of us says, and the other agrees, that I will fix this; that I will begin therapy as soon as I return from Philadelphia. I thank her for listening, apologizing over and over—“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m so

sorry.” Her gaze remains on the road, but it looks heavier, more confused. She takes my hand and squeezes. “I know, Sweetie.”

Once more, I rattle my conscience like I’m shaking jeans for loose change and feel a sense of dizzying relief; if only for a moment, the poison is gone. My guilt feels smaller, manageable enough to cram in my purse. The downtown crowd comes into view; Wegmans’ parking lot is flooded with screaming kids and rednecks, and Mom will have to leave me near the entrance. I practice the art of composing myself. Checking my reflection in the rearview mirror—eyes still shining but blotchiness faded—I hug Mom one last time, screwing on the smile I’ll wear for my friends.

The Pre-College Acting Program at University of the Arts (U. Arts, for short) held the shimmering promise of all the instruction and knowledge I’d been craving since I had decided I wanted a life in the theatre. Ever since the age of six, when I’d played Snore in a local production of *Snow White* (complete with press-on stubble), I’d fallen in love with the art of stories and storytelling. I couldn’t get over how much fun it was to take pretending seriously! It also didn’t hurt that I adored and was not half bad at acting—at least in the local arena. While I often felt pigeonholed by this cloud of shy, painful awkwardness I couldn’t seem to shake in real life, on stage I felt powerful, even unstoppable.

Over the years, I’d developed a good sense of comedic timing and was typically cast in my high school’s musicals as the bumbling side character or the scheming villain (in high school shows, the pair are rarely mutually exclusive). Playing villains was my favorite. They didn’t require the best singing voice and, besides, what on earth could be more fun than pretending to be the bad guy? Some actors talk about how they love the escapism of being someone else on

stage, its masking nature. But riding the high of audience laughter as my character stuffed her fat foot into Cinderella's glass slipper, I had never felt more myself. Still, some part of me suspected that in the actual industry, decent stage presence and a knack for deadpan faces wouldn't cut it. So when my drama/French teacher suggested I apply for a summer study with legitimate theatre professionals to see if I really wanted to work in the business, I jumped at the chance.

You know those rare moments where you stop and think, "Oh, *this* is where I'm supposed to be"? At the U. Arts Pre-College Acting Program, particularly in the beginning of that four-week period, these moments seemed to grow on trees. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to be in Philadelphia, one of the best cities in the country for arts and culture, finally being let in on this secret of what theatre professionals *really* did. Every day, my classmates and I worked through a rigorous schedule: Movement, Acting, and Work Generator (as woo-woo as it sounds, but effective). You could take other classes, but these the three were required for "Acting majors," meant both to expand our creative minds and give us a taste of what it took to be a serious theatre student.

At night, we would participate in or attend some creative event, usually musical in nature, whether it be a local production or a makeshift cabaret. More often than not, I'd leave these performances in awe, totally silent, barely registering the blaring taxis or other kids gabbing as we walked to the dorms. Most of these songs were from gorgeous, complex musicals far outside the limited rural theatre circuit, and I was hearing them for the first time. But what amazed me most was that I was finally experiencing a *story* through song. It was epiphanic. The way both professional performers and the best of my fellow classmates set their egos aside to dig into who these characters were and what they wanted . . . I had never seen something so exciting, so breathtakingly real. I could finally articulate *why* I loved this artform so much. Theatre wasn't

just playing pretend, or a flashy vehicle for showing off; it was an exploration of vulnerability, an intimate search for truth between actor and audience.

Which meant that I, a thief and liar who surely only masqueraded as a “good girl” and couldn’t even manage to be halfway honest with herself in real life, let alone on stage, was in *big* trouble. Where did this discovery of the true nature of theatre leave me? How could I hope to one day make great art and thrive in this business if I was as much of a fraud as my brain suggested? OCD was not yet a phrase I used to make sense of my identity; in fact, it didn’t exist in my vocabulary at all. Like most people, I thought the acronym merely suggested anal-retentive, “neat freak” behavior (which my ever-present clutter didn’t back up). I had no idea this miserable confusion and shame I felt over crimes I couldn’t even remember committing didn’t stem from a deeply flawed character, but a legitimate mental illness. All I knew was the growing fear of what I didn’t know: How could I ever be a real artist?

Along with this poignant self-questioning, the guilt I had been so careful to leave in Mom’s car snaked its way back into my conscience. U. Arts hadn’t just served as an opportunity to learn; it was my escape hatch, where these thoughts and urges could be hidden in the sprawling city streets. I had been careful to only bring certain clothes to Philadelphia, ones I knew I’d bought honestly, and tracked the cash I spent in the city to the cent so I would be less likely to question how it came and went. If I could avoid doubt, maybe my brain could finally stop throbbing.

I began to feel discouraged in my classes, particularly in Acting, where our lovely teacher Amy had assigned me and my partner a scene where I was to play a closeted high-school lesbian falling for her straight best friend. I had never played such a three-dimensional, compelling character, and it showed. My lines came across as stunted and awkward, my objectives

nonexistent. I could feel myself losing focus, forgetting Amy's patient notes, panicking. Where were the bits, those exaggerated polar emotions I could fall back on?! We worked these scenes in front of the class, and nearly every day I sat down after our presentation feeling pissed off and embarrassed. I'd watch the best of my classmates create such authentic and dynamic drama, kids who might end up at programs like NYU or Carnegie Mellon, and feel a pang of searing jealousy. *What do they have that I don't?* I was also afraid that I already knew the answer.

My truth—or at least, what OCD convinced me was my truth—started to seep out wherever it could. One day in Work Generator, when we were given a journal prompt to jumpstart our creative exercise for the day, I wrote: “Forget and move on, or *deal* with and move on? Both sound equally as hard.” I also penned a hilariously atrocious play in a weekend playwriting workshop called *Klepto* (second line: “Last time you ate onions I heard an entire symphony playing out the bathroom door!”), in which a couple dramatically breaks up at the grocery store after the girl is recognized by the clerk as a former shoplifter. Outside of class, I grew less certain about my spending. My suitemates and I shared a common lounge, and when one girl wondered where her cash had gone, I began to fear I'd taken it. I would wrack my brain constantly, scribbling theories on my phone like a mad scientist that might confirm or discredit them. *I know there was \$11 I saw, took, and put back in the plate a few weeks ago. Was there any other money I stole?* Of course, I didn't dare *ask* anyone these questions; someone might believe I had actually done it. Instead, I danced furiously with the guilt of my “crimes,” sweltering under their heat so I could enjoy the program and revel in my Philadelphian theatre life.

*Scene: Spruce Residence Hall, empty hallway. It is the final day of camp—a moment of peace after a morning filled with hectic packing and tearful goodbyes. Most students have left for the Arts Bank, where a final showcase will be performed for family and friends. But Ally lingers behind, visibly frustrated. She cannot decide whether to pack her favorite new dress, a charming A-line she’s bought from a trendy thrift shop on Walnut, or throw it in the trash.*

*Make no mistake: She does not want to throw away the dress. But the thought she may have used stolen money to purchase it nauseates her; she can hardly move. A fellow actor rushes by, lipstick fresh, pillow and suitcase in hand.*

ACTOR: Final dress starts in ten minutes! If you don’t hurry, you’ll be late.

*Ally nods as the actor scurries off, S.L. She looks at the garment in her hand. With its vintage skirt and quirky Peter Pan collar, there’s no better symbol of her new Philadelphian self. Ally pictures showing it off to friends in Williamsport. “I bought this in the city,” she’ll say, smiling.*

*Enter Brains 1, 2, and 3.*

BRAIN 1: Sure—with someone else’s money.

ALLY: You’re wrong. I bought this on my own.

BRAIN 1: But how do you know? Did you keep your receipt?

ALLY: I always do.

BRAIN 2: So, you bought it. Big deal. What if you used Sophie’s cash?

BRAIN 1: She *did* leave that twenty on the counter last week.

ALLY: I wouldn’t, that’s wrong.

BRAIN 3: “Wrong” hasn’t stopped you before. You said you wouldn’t do this, Ally.

ALLY: But I didn’t!

BRAIN 1: Not again.

BRAIN 3: You're better than this!

BRAIN 2: And now you're *lying* about it?

BRAIN 3: Wrong, wrong, wrong . . .

ALLY: I am about to perform. I am *going* to have fun.

BRAIN 2: [*Laughs.*] With us?

BRAIN 3: Acting is behaving *truthfully*—

ACTOR: (*heard from S.L.*) Ally!

ALLY: I don't—

*Brains encroach; hyenas circling prey.*

BRAIN 1: What kind of artist are you?

ALLY: I'm telling the truth!

BRAIN 2: A-S-H-A-M-E-D.

BRAIN 1: How could you?

*She knows she has choices, just as A. Wolf had choices with the first pig, and the second, and the third.*

ALLY: Please—

ACTOR: (*heard from S.L.*) Ally, we're holding the elevator!

ALLY: I didn't—

BRAIN 3: Imaginary circumstances . . .

ALLY: WAIT!

*She balls up her dress and hurls it in the trash. Picking up her script, she runs for the door.*

## Just Look

*Baiting some girl with hypotheses—  
Haven't you heard the word of your body?*

—Melchior Gabor, *Spring Awakening*

I.

*Look again.*

I lock my eyes on my paper, but these multiple-choice questions—How does GIS differ from digital surveying? In a vector data model, which of the following coordinate pairs build curvature in a line?—continue to dance erratically, refusing to stay still or even keep time with the steady pounding in my ears. *What the fuck did I just do?* The Digital Mapping T.A. makes another round past my row in the lecture hall, so I pick up my pen to show him I'm still working, thinking. But my mind has never been farther away from the science of cartography—a mystery I can't seem to understand, no matter how hard I try. Instead, I am grappling with the fact that I have just cheated on one of the first major tests I've ever taken in college . . . or so I think. It feels like I've just compromised my integrity, something I deem precious, and have become the kind of person who cheats.

But I'm not sure I did. Though I survey my brain's map for an answer, somehow I can't actually remember. This searing new brand of anxiety grasped me not even 30 seconds ago, yet I simply can't recall if I looked at that girl's paper on purpose, or if I accidentally caught a glimpse as she flipped over her page. How the hell can't I remember?! This *has* to be me just making excuses. Yes, that's it. Some hidden, broken part of me is simply refusing to accept that I have just done something morally wrong—the kind of thing that people fail classes for, maybe even the kind of thing that gets students *expelled*. I dare to lift my eyes to retrace where they may have wandered, and catch white fringe hanging off the perceived “cheatee's” sweater—fringe I swear I have seen before. If I remember this, which I think I do, doesn't that prove that I *did* look at this girl consciously, to peek at her answers?

As hard as I try to refocus on the task at hand, the questions don't stop; in fact, they only grow louder, faster. Should I tell the professor? This idea is shot down by the sobering thought of flunking the class. Everyone I love would know what a shitty, fraudulent person I really am. But how do I make this right?

In a flash of presumed clarity, I change my first page answers. Who cares if I know they're wrong? I won't be able to live with myself if I get a grade I don't deserve. When I'm done, I feel relief that's quickly replaced by fear: Maybe I looked at White Sweater's second page answers, too. I want to change them but remember that intentionally getting more questions wrong in a subject I'm already bad at might not be the best plan. Resisting the urge to dig myself into an even deeper hole, I finish the test hurriedly and shove it at my T.A. as I rush out the door. Outside, I can no longer identify with the chatty, carefree students streaming across the rain-soaked, October quad. Something I can't name feels utterly and irreversibly changed.

I'd been officially diagnosed with OCD the fall before, near the beginning of my senior year of high school. After I'd gotten home from the U. Arts Pre-College Acting Program in Philly, during which I feared I'd used stolen money to buy a new ukulele (among other things), Mom made me an appointment at a local counseling center. I had never seen a therapist apart from the one who met with me at school a few times after Daddy died, and I felt scared, not sure what to expect. Seeing the office didn't help. With its bare, beige walls and glue-stained carpeting, it should have been a place used exclusively for sickly cats. Instead, it appeared to be a place for sickly people. As I sat in the waiting room, still dressed in my school skirt and knee-socks, I tried not to stare at the other patients—slow-moving, sweat-stained adults in oversized T-shirts, talking too loudly about their med adjustments and children who didn't visit. When the receptionist called my name to say Dr. Jones was ready to see me, I wanted to tell her that there'd been a mistake. Surely, she could see I didn't *actually* belong here. But I stayed quiet and went through the double doors as I was told.

“You have OCD,” Dr. Jones said once I'd talked for a while, pushing her cat-eyed glasses up her prominent nose. “It's probably not the kind you've heard of, with the nit-pickiness and handwashing. You do most of your compulsions in your head—the constant doubting whether you did or did not do something wrong becomes this game of endless, mental ping-pong. You think you might win it by thinking through the “wrongs” long enough, hard enough—but you won't.” She leaned forward and looked me in the eye. “OCD's a tough illness, one that can cause a lot of heartache. But it is treatable with the proper help.”

I don't remember much else from that appointment, or the following few. I didn't continue very long. I thought the diagnosis was kind of bullshit. Okay, fine: so OCD wasn't all about cleaning. I could respect that. But wasn't pinning my bad behavior on some weird mental

disorder—one that implied the bad things I felt nearly certain I’d done probably didn’t even happen—a total copout? I hated the thought of anyone being disappointed in me, but I hated the idea of making excuses for myself even more. I also refused to go on meds, which Dr. Jones had strongly encouraged. Meds were for sad, sick people, I told her, and there was nothing wrong with me except temporary cowardice. Plus, I didn’t want anyone else to know. I pushed away these disturbing thoughts as best I could and went through the rest of my senior year in a teenage stasis, mostly unbothered.

After the Digital Mapping test, I walked back to my dorm and texted Adam, a boy I’d met the second night of Freshman Week. *Can you come over? I’m crying.* A moment later, he replied: *Of course. I’ll be there in 30.* I had never met someone like Adam. He was 19, only a year older, but he talked as though he had already graduated—not in a pretentious way, simply with solid confidence in himself and his abilities. When he’d tell me about his Biomechanical Engineering major, the experiments he longed to try, the machines he’d already created, I never had much to add. But I liked listening. Perhaps what I liked most, at least in the beginning of our relationship, was that, unlike any guy I’d ever been seriously interested in before, this one liked me back.

In my dorm room, Adam and I sat on my pink, twin bed, close but not touching, and watched the rain dribble down my window. At this point, we had decided to just stay friends. Still, as awful as I felt about this weird fear I’d intentionally cheated on the test, it *was* kind of cool to have a guy in my room. The rule in my house had always been ‘No boys upstairs,’ but my stepsister and I both knew that edict had been made for her, not me. Call it sheltered, Catholic upbringing or sheer, unadulterated awkwardness, but I simply wasn’t very interested in sex during high school. I *absolutely* wanted a boyfriend, or at least more guys to like me (other

than Tommy Brenner, the loveable class nerd). Sex, though, seemed as far off and unfamiliar as adulthood itself, and I preferred it that way. I didn't necessarily feel the need to wait until I got married, but at 18, I knew that when it happened, I wanted to be in love.

After a few minutes, I told Adam that I was afraid I'd cheated on the Digital Mapping test and that I felt terribly guilty. The words spilled out swiftly, like steam from a fault line. Much the way I'd handled my "stealing" dilemma with Mom the year before, I made sure to emphasize that I wasn't *completely* sure I'd cheated; I simply could not shake this sickening, mysterious guilt. And just as Mom's brow furrowed from confusion, so did Adam's. Immediately, I changed course—not by saying I hadn't cheated, but by making a definitive statement that I had. This didn't feel right, but I reasoned it better to communicate some sense of certainty, however misguided.

When I finished, Adam sat back against the cinderblock wall, which I had decorated with cheap lantern lights and high-school musical programs.

"So," he began, "what do you want to do?"

If I had known him better, I would have snapped. ("I have no *clue*. That's why *you're* here.") Instead, I leaned back beside him and sighed. I stared at the rain again, dark clouds swirling against my patch of urban skyline. Spires that once pierced the atmosphere now blurred; half the city disappeared in fog. I tried to consider my options, but mainly I thought, *How did things get so screwed up this quickly?*

"I'm not sure," I said, finally. "Maybe I should suck it up and tell Dr. Schlosser."

Adam shifted, moving his arm slightly behind me. "I don't think that's the best idea," he said. "Don't know the penalty for first-time academic dishonesty, but it can't be very good. And you're not even positive it happened," he added, causing me to raise an eyebrow. (He *had*

understood, at least a little.) “If you really feel that bad about it, maybe you could meet with your advisor, see about withdrawing from the class. But honestly, Al, I think it’s okay to move on.”

He left a short while later, pulling on his Texas A&M hoodie to make the wet, five-minute dash from my dorm back to his apartment, but not before giving my hand a squeeze and promising to check in with me later. He didn’t make everything okay, or even most of it, but I still felt glad he came. I switched off the main lights, got under the covers, and turned on my lanterns. They looked like moons you could swallow, and I let their hazy glow lull me to sleep.

The relief, as with any form of OCD reassurance (however well-intentioned), was short-lived. The next day, I woke up as shaky as a whispered secret. The rain continued to drizzle down in lazy lines, muting the whole campus to a soft, neutral palette. Usually, I love rainy days—the way the world slows down, takes a deep, collective breath. But this grayness seemed like a threat.

What if I felt this bad forever? Had I accidentally-on-purpose fucked up my entire collegiate future? Temple University was supposed to be my fresh start: new city, new friends, new experiences—new *me*—and, thus far, it had been. I’d had so much fun, felt such exhilarating freedom and joy exploring Temple and the rest of Philadelphia, rebranding myself as the type of person worthy to fill such a space. That intense, confusing guilt over “stealing” petty cash from family and friends had become a mere blip in my teenage psyche that, thankfully, disappeared as soon as I left home.

But what if it hadn’t? What if Dr. Jones was right—that I *did* have OCD? Worse, what if I didn’t? The thought of these unexpected, shame-filled freefalls being a permanent part of my life made me want to throw up. I *could* keep the guilt inside, I reasoned, and learn to accept that I was simply, on the deepest level, a dishonest person. But then I might never feel truly happy

again. And it had felt so good to be happy! I turned toward the wall so my roommate, bustling around to get ready for her morning class, wouldn't see me cry.

I eventually forced myself out of bed and walked to Tuttleman, Temple's overbooked, understaffed mental health counseling service. At the time, I didn't know its reputation for gym-sock quality. I cleared my throat to get the attention of the receptionist and asked the policy for same-day appointments. She sighed as though preparing to recite the alphabet for the hundredth time and began her well-worn litany: "Do you want to hurt yourself?" Startled and almost offended, I shook my head. Even with this unfamiliar awfulness, I could never imagine doing such a thing. She then directed me into the side room where I filled out a scantron-style intake, stale as old bread, detailing why I was there, what level of distress I felt, and what I hoped to get out of the appointment. I completed it as best I could, even though there didn't seem to be a bubble for, '*Reasonably smart, competent young woman has inexplicable hard-on for guilt and self-sabotage.*' Eventually, a young counselor, green as grass, opened the door and said he was ready for me.

I still chuckle a bit when I think of that phrase: "ready for me." At the time, the idea of a mental health professional, much less a lay person, being truly ready and able not only to understand this weird-ass problem but help me navigate it felt absurd, almost more than the issue itself. Who the hell could be ready for *this*? I did my best, albeit shakily, to explain what I believed had happened, even noting my official OCD diagnosis to provide context. The counselor, an attractive guy I'd have flirted with under different circumstances, stared at me as though I was spouting quantum physics. I don't think I've ever felt more misunderstood.

"I think you should see someone here regularly," he said at the end of our hour.

I almost laughed. (*Gee, you think?*) “I agree,” I said, putting the final touches on composing myself. “When can I start?”

Before I left for the waiting room to set up my appointment at the front desk, I lingered near the door. I needed to ask one more question, but I hated how it sounded.

“Anything else?” the counselor asked, looking up from his notes.

“Can you write down what I said—for me?” I asked quietly. “I don’t want to forget.”

## II.

Keeping note of each shift of my fingers, I turn to my left to get a clear view of Leah, my five-year-old cousin who sleeps beside me. Her blonde, baby hairs, lit by the moon peeking through Aunt Kay’s blinders, remain undisturbed by my effort to scoot her tiny body from the bed’s edge; she’d been so close to falling. To Leah, sleeping in the same bed when I visit, especially now that I’m an exotic college freshman, is a Big Deal. Usually, I’d be lying if I said I minded; I adore my “little sister.” And for only children, playing House never loses its sacredness.

But tonight, I don’t look at her with pride—only confusion, laced with fear. Nothing hot or fast, like what I’d felt during the Digital Mapping test when I feared I’d cheated. Just some creepy, barely there-ness, like the chill of crossing a stranger on an empty street.

*Was that wrong, the way you touched her?*

I wave the thought away before its dust can settle. *You would never*, I assure myself, closing my eyes. Lyrics from *Spring Awakening*, an edgy musical set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany about teenage sexuality, swirl: *Where I go, when I go there, / no more memory anymore. / Only men on distant ships, / the women with them, swimming with them, to shore.*

And I think of Adam. This Thanksgiving, though a welcome break, is the first time we've been apart since school started. Though it's barely been two days, I miss him. We're a couple now, but we haven't had sex; I stand on the coast, only dipping my toes. But I miss the crisp smell of his sheets, the warmth of his arms. A new thought interjects: *Did you touch yourself?* My brain rejects this, but my body can't, and each muscle under the covers stiffens. I distract myself by conjuring less promiscuous scenes from the show, recasting Adam and me as the leads, Melchior and Wendla, and keep my hands where I can see them.

It feels strange writing this now, but whenever I give a “normie” the SparkNotes version of my journey through mental illness, OCD barely gets a mention at all. It's Body Dysmorphic Disorder, I tell them, that destroyed my life in my late teens and early twenties, forcing me into residential treatment and even to the brink of suicide. But if God ever gave me the chance to “choose,” I would pick this over my briefer struggle with pOCD—Pedophilia OCD—in a heartbeat, every time. *Nothing* reflects OCD's serpentine ability to attack the values one most cherishes more. The acronym isn't a formal medical term—no subset of the illness is, really—but it's a life preserver, created for and by sufferers to avoid uttering that dreaded word out loud.

Loosely defined as the fear of wanting to sexually abuse children (or, as was my case, the fear that one already has, or has done something related), pOCD sufferers fold in on themselves, clawing to find—and even create—answers to one of the most terrifying questions a person could ask: *Am I a monster?* To actual pedophiles, I doubt the question ever crosses their minds. People who suffer from this condition (and they do suffer) are statistically proven to be among the least likely to commit such evil acts. But this doesn't stop them from sidestepping potential

landmines: playgrounds, certain movies, being alone with younger relatives. You do anything to keep children safe, to avoid becoming the criminal you fear.

About three weeks later, on the morning of December 16, 2015, I find myself lying on Adam's mother's air mattress, surrounded by unused Christmas decor and sheets I must have torn off in the night. Someone has stitched my legs together, all the way from my thighs to my toes. At least that's what it feels like, because, try as I might, I cannot move. Some people bounce their legs when they're nervous, jitter them like Jell-O, but not me; I do that all the time. When I get scared—not garden-variety anxious, but frightened—my knack for perpetual motion, followed by reason, is the first thing to go.

I've been looking forward to this day for months. Tonight, Adam and I will drive to Aunt Kay's in Reading, Pennsylvania; I will finally have a boy to bring home for Christmas. But I am struck with a gut-wrenching fear: that those thoughts I had about Leah in the moonlight, which I've since all but forgotten, may very well be true. Though I want to cry out, to call Adam for help, I stay silent, paralyzed. What am I thinking? I can't tell him about something like this. I can't tell *anyone* about this!

After Thanksgiving break, I had easily resumed collegiate life. The guilt I felt from the Digital Mapping test, while still present, had subsided (though I still hadn't given up trying to determine whether or not I'd actually cheated, despite therapy). Monologues and stage knots filled my weekdays; on Friday and Saturday nights, I played beer-pong at parties with Adam and Bethy, my best friend from home. In fact, the only thing of note that had shifted was my sexual status: I, Allison Lax, was no longer a virgin. The words still felt foreign on my tongue; this had not been a decision I'd made lightly. While I knew I loved Adam and that he loved me (though I conveniently forgot we were not *in* love, my technical prerequisite), I still felt unsure. Finding a

serious boyfriend wasn't supposed to happen this quickly—much less having sex! A bit from *Mean Girls*, my favorite chick flick, ran through my head like a jingle for months: “Don't have sex. Because you will get pregnant, and die.” Adam, who'd lost his virginity to his high-school sweetheart, respected my doubts but tried his 19-year-old boy best to assuage them. “Sex is a normal, healthy part of a relationship,” he'd say, looking at me in a way I'd never been looked at. At first, I'd blush and change the subject. But time had passed, and I'd come to feel prepared.

Now I lay on his mother's air-mattress, stiff as bone.

“Babe, you up?” Adam says, his head peeking through the doorway. “I made some coffee.” He grins at my bedhead.

I nod, even though my brain is already at Aunt Kay's house, raking through my moth-holed memory to get to the bottom of what actually happened. “Be right there,” I say, pulling my legs apart like cheap chopsticks but failing to push rancid thoughts away. I have no idea how I'll get through this weekend, let alone the rest of my life. But I will start it standing.

“Ben said I wasn't allowed to ice the roof!” Leah says, scowling at her brother below the basement bar. “Ally, am I allowed to ice the roof?”

“Ben, we agreed—you got the sides, Leah gets the roof.”

At 11 years old, Ben is well equipped for his role as Annoying Big Brother. “She won't use enough!” he says. “It'll fall apart!” He turns to Adam and points at the already crumbling gingerbread walls. “Right?”

Adam puts his hands up and mimes zipping his lips. I do my best to grin, which I hope reads more as *Thanks for putting up with this* than *Best birth control ever*. “It's a gingerbread

house,” I say, “not a real one. Relax. She’ll be fine.” I’m supporting Leah, of course, but I’m careful not to stand too close.

As the kids multitask, bickering over the use of Skittles versus M&Ms, Adam smiles and puts his arm around me. I manually relax my shoulders, wanting more than anything to stay in the present, to savor this moment. Part of me does. After all, I’ve daydreamed about bringing a guy home for the holidays since middle school, when I’d watch my adult stepsiblings come to our house with their significant others to celebrate. Something about having a hand to hold at Christmas Eve mass, sharing the songs I’d grown up singing in a church aglow with lights and poinsettias, had seemed so romantic. So grown up. Adam coming to Aunt Kay’s should feel just as good, I remind myself, if not better. Mom’s side—Grammy and Uncle Bill, Aunt Kay and the kids—are *my* family; my home. Seeing how impressed they are by his warmth and intelligence, how quickly everyone gravitates toward him, should fill me with pride.

But it only makes the shame stronger, blacker. How could I have done something so wrong, so morally repugnant, to my own family?! Though it is not my story to tell, I have seen the damage child abuse can cause: its unnerving propensity to destroy, even years after the fact. Even if I only touched myself *near* Leah (which feels more likely and thus more frightening), the idea of having participated in any kind of sexual deviance makes me sick. Part of me—*most* of me—hangs tight to what I pray is the truth: that these alarming thoughts are just some funhouse manifestation of this rapidly unfolding OCD. Though this new strain of self-questioning feels leagues more disturbing than anything I’ve experienced prior, I can’t deny that its pattern—shame and self-hatred, self-hatred and shame—suspiciously follows that of the Digital Mapping test.

Still, these *What if's?* burn like blazing coals. How do I make this okay? I can't reconcile this disgusting self-accusation using my usual strategy: reluctantly letting the guilt fizzle out, accepting that I may well be a thief, a cheater. I can't just live my life regardless. Of course, I'll later be told by a new therapist who specializes in the illness that this is *exactly* what I need to do; that no matter how scandalously one's OCD presents itself, the means to disarm it remain exactly the same. Allow it to sit. Dare it to speak. Certainty, I will someday learn, is a myth, the pot at the end of a rainbow so many people waste lives chasing. "Radical self-distrust"—the OCD description I like most—can only be defeated by radical faith.

"I'm doooooone!" Leah bounds down the stairs, the bells on her reindeer socks jingling. I wake with a start. After Ben inevitably lost interest, she'd taken the gingerbread upstairs to finish it herself, leaving me dozing on Adam's shoulder under a blanket on the basement couch. For a moment I forget myself; I feel warm, safe. Christmas is here, and the people I love, love me. What could be so wrong?

"Wanna see?"

I nod. She takes my hand—I stiffen but let her—and hurries me to her creation. Drenched in frosting (such heavy snowfall) and every goody she could find, the house is an explosion of colors: a Wonkafied supernova. I should tell her how well she did, how pretty it looks, but I'm distracted by its wavering infrastructure. Leah's doused the roof in so many Skittles that the gingerbread walls buckle. I feel the urge to help, to fix it for her, but she doesn't seem to care. She only prattles on about her artistic process, her bold choice to go blue-red-red-blue, not red-blue-blue-red. Stealing a piece of chocolate from the candy cane walkway, she beams up at me, clearly pleased with herself. When does that stop?

I smile as best I can. “Want to show Adam?” She runs downstairs; my body unclenches. Forcing myself to resist fixing the house, I wait for them, thankful no gingerbread people live inside.

## Ojai

“I can’t go, Mom. It looks so bad. It’s so *ugly*. I don’t know how to fix this—the redness, it won’t go away. I don’t know what to do. I don’t think I can go. *I can’t do this.*”

Sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by dirty laundry, tissues, and Annie’s Organic Chewy Granola Bar wrappers, I leaned back against my bed, wary of keeping my dirty phone screen away from my cheek but close enough so Mom could still hear me. The bed’s metal leg, flush against my spine, felt sharp and cold. Outside, water beat down mercilessly in soft, gray sheets, steaming up the window with the pretty hum of the rain stick I used to play with in Mom’s classroom, back when she taught music. This was my favorite kind of Philadelphia weather—a steady summer storm. After bawling to Mom for over an hour, I felt exhausted and undeniably hollow. In just a few days, I was supposed to fly to Ojai, California, for my very first theatre internship, working at a prestigious Playwright’s Conference with some of the finest creative minds in the country. I had been abuzz with excitement for months, so ready to get my hands on the industry I’d adored since playing a dwarf in *Snow White* at age 7. But now, I had fucked everything up, and I had no idea what to do.

Every evening, I rubbed my face with an ice cube, but the previous night the cube had slipped and scraped my cheek with its jagged edge. My careless hands had betrayed me. As diligently as I had worked to keep my face fair and clear, the flesh was now marred by a gash, somewhat like the famous Harry Potter scar but blood-red, fresh, swollen, and right in the middle of my pale face. And because of my Body Dysmorphic Disorder, an unfamiliar diagnosis I'd only officially been given the month before, I had no idea how to cope. I felt entirely distraught. Anger, self-hatred, and the grotesqueness of the small wound had kept me apartment-bound, almost room-bound, for nearly two days. And I didn't know if I could do this internship anymore.

On the other end of the phone, Mom, typically upbeat and chatty, kept silent. When she did speak, her usually warm voice sounded clipped. Distant. I knew that, two-and-a-half hours away in Williamsport, where it also rained heavily, she lay on her bedroom floor, propped up by her elbows. Her long nails clicked against a hard surface, the way they always did when she was angry or nervous, as she leafed through the notes she'd taken from my therapist's emails.

"Honey, you have to make the choice. Either you go to California, or you stay in Philly. Do some more therapy there. Dr. McGee says you just have to choose. Once you decide, you'll feel better—I promise." I could hear her manually softening her tone. "You know I'll support you either way, no matter what."

I took my head in my free hand, doing my best to ignore a heavy throbbing, and tried to stay calm. My tears had finally slowed, and I didn't want to work myself into a frenzy again. "I don't know, Mom." I stared up at the window, following the rain. It hadn't let up. In fact, it pounded even harder, so dense that it was almost impossible to see anything else. I refocused, pinching my palm so the flesh puckered, soft and white between my fingers. "I *want* to go."

And then, for the first time that I could recall since Daddy had passed eight years before, I heard Mom's own voice catch: an awful, unfamiliar sound. Slowly, she started to cry—quietly at first, her breath ragged, releasing something I couldn't name, that I hadn't known was there. I could feel her scrambling to hide it, but the tears kept coming, evolving into long, shuddering sobs. "I know you do, Sweetie."

Immediately, I shifted into fix-it mode, burying my own feelings as if they'd never existed. Hearing Mom cry scared the shit out of me; I needed her to stop. I tried, frantically, to take everything I'd told her—all the horrible thoughts I'd let her in on through the past few months—back. Forcing my brain to come up with the right words, I'd convince her that everything was fine. Maybe I could even convince myself. This had just been another freak-out. Those happen in college, right? They'd been happening a lot this past year in particular, but I always got through them. She knew that. She was the one who'd always tell *me* that. I was over it already—see?

"Mom, I'm fine. It's okay. Don't worry—I'll go, okay? I'll go. I can do it. Everything will be fine. Don't cry, okay?"

"Okay," she said. I could sense her faking a smile for my benefit, but her tone remained a wobbly vibrato. And she kept crying.

The day I found out I'd been accepted as an intern for the Ojai Playwright's Conference was the happiest I'd felt in months. I got the email the morning of May 3rd, 2017: my 20th birthday—a brand, spankin' new decade. I screamed, called Mom, then ran to the kitchen to tell my roommates, who were always up before me and already eating breakfast. This would be my first theatre job not connected with school or home. I would get to meet the most amazing people, professionals who had managed to make an entire career doing exactly what I wanted to

do. Working on the application while pretending to pay attention in Bio-Ethics had actually paid off. My cheeks hurt the whole day; even when I tried, I couldn't stop smiling.

Mom had always made a huge deal over my birthday. In elementary school, she threw me a party every year. At the time, she was a terrible cook, so Marie, her close friend and a former pastry chef, would usually help bake the cake. The prettiest one was for my four-year-old, Barbie-themed birthday; the vanilla cake billowed into a ballroom-skirt around the doll, draped in pink, frosted bows and edible pearls. Mom would usually send balloons or flowers to school, and leading up to my 12th birthday, she gave me a small gift every day for nearly two weeks—"The 12 Days of Ally," she called it, ridiculously pleased with herself. Looking back, I have to laugh: no wonder only-children get such a bad rap. But I knew her intentions came from the heart, and, secretly, I liked all the fuss.

But my birthday freshman year of college had turned out to be different. For one thing, it fell right around finals week, so no one had the time or energy to go out. That year, I'd finished my finals early and spent the day rock climbing at the school gym with Adam, who'd painfully broken off our seven-month-long relationship only two weeks before but still wanted to stay friends. He'd been the first boy I'd ever told "I love you" and meant it, and this would be the last time I would see him before leaving Philly for the summer. I cried the whole ten-minute walk back to my dorm, shielding my face from the chilly May wind.

All this new anxiety had started that summer, two months after Adam had broken things off in April. As much as I still hate to admit it, by the end of our relationship, I had become very clingy. I relied on Adam for every need, and he knew it. He grew distant, and our differences started to fuel bigger problems. Rightfully so, he realized the relationship couldn't go on any

longer, and respected me enough to be honest and end it. But without him, I didn't know who I was anymore.

The stress of losing this new identity, combined with returning home for the summer to Mom and Greg, began to physically manifest itself. Fat, juicy whiteheads began to sprinkle themselves across my cheeks like sea lice. Now, looking back on high school and even early freshman year pictures, I can see that I'd always had typical teenage acne here and there, but I'd never once noticed it till that summer. In the roomy upstairs bathroom, I routinely washed my face with \$8 Neutrogena Fresh Foaming Cleanser in the shower, praying the acne would go away on its own.

But when it didn't, I started to feel a prickly, hot type of anxiety that spread through my chest and up my shoulders, a nervousness I'd never felt before. When I looked in the mirror, all I could see were pus-filled, reddish bumps ruining the most essential part of my face—a damaged foundation. Ever since my violin teacher drilled the importance of practice into my head in first grade, I've understood the importance of a good foundation. Theatre, sports, academics, relationships—it didn't matter. If you didn't have a strong base, the purest possible slate to start with, nothing you built on top would ever work right. And it was in your control. It was always in your own control.

But this year would be different, I told myself; I could already tell. I was 20 now, and this decade promised the start of everything I'd ever dreamed of: a theatre career, big cities, grownup relationships, maybe a future husband, even kids—a *life*. And my skin had never looked better. For as expensive as Emme Diane's skincare line was—a whopping \$181 for the Gentle Cleanser, Calm-Down Toner, Clarifying Serum, Pure Light Lotion, Acne Eraser, and Mineral-Tinted SPF 40—it had done everything she'd promised me, and more. Since I'd started the system after

seeing it on Instagram in January (a belated Christmas gift from Mom, who saw how desperate I was to get rid of the new, stubborn breakouts that had stuck around since July), my face, made-up or plain, had taken on the appearance of glass. Though I'd struggled to be patient through my skin's purging process, frantically emailing Emme herself questions and weekly pictures of how much worse it kept getting, my face had finally turned the corner in late February. Friends stared with envy and awe, commenting on how good it looked. Acne had been eradicated like a strong-willed plague.

Of course, it wasn't *always* gone—not really. There were days when the potency of the creams caused flakes and redness. No matter how careful I was, pimples sometimes sprung up in new places. I didn't deal with those days well at all. But who cared now, right? Today was my birthday! I'd secured my first internship, and my grownup life was finally about to start. I posted a picture of myself smiling in my room on Snapchat, bangs fluffed and straightened, skin fresh and clear. I added a party balloon emoji and captioned it with the phrase, "20 feels pretty damn good."

And now, only two months later, I found myself bawling on the phone to Mom, seriously considering giving this internship up. But I kept my promise to attend Ojai, and a few days after my frantic phone call with Mom, she and Greg drove to Philly to help clear out my room. Mom gave me a roller-coaster hug, a term I'd coined in childhood when we rode the kiddie coaster at Knoebels and she squeezed me so hard I couldn't breathe. "Everything will be fine," I told her again, with a smile that probably looked like melted wax. Though the scratch had started healing nicely, I still felt scared, but early the next morning, the sky still black and hazy above the city lights, my parents took me to the airport. This would be my first time flying alone. Mom sat with me in the backseat on the way, stroking my hair as I frantically backflipped between my skin-

related and flying fears, and later kissing me goodbye with her own frozen grin. When I brought up the moment to her years later, she confessed that she'd half-feared I wouldn't even get on the plane.

For weeks I had dreaded the dry, compressed nature of cabin air, notorious for causing breakouts, but I lathered on extra moisturizer from a baggie I'd carefully stashed in my purse and boarded the plane. Almost instantly I fell asleep, and when I woke a few hours later, light and warmth poured in across the window seat. 11:15 a.m. One hour 'til landing in Los Angeles, California, at LAX. (I once thought that was my namesake. When I was seven, I saw a man in a T-shirt with the acronym and excitedly pointed it out to Daddy, who broke the news we didn't come first.) I took out my laptop and speed-read the last few play drafts I'd not gotten to. I tried to focus on the words and the heat, how good it felt on my skinny arms, perpetually goose-bumped no matter where I went. *This will be good for you*, I told myself. *You're meant to be here*.

After I landed at the airport, I met five or six of the other interns who had already formed a little group outside the baggage claim. They were all female, pretty theatre girls with effortless, Cali-esque hair, decked out in trendy dresses and shorts. I introduced myself with all the charm I could muster, doing my best to make a good first impression. They greeted me kindly but quickly went back to talking with one another; most had worked the Playwright's Conference the year before and were enjoying their reunion. I didn't mind; it's not as though I had anything genuinely fun or interesting to contribute anyway. ("Oh, my summer? I've just been working at the GAP and spending my free time crying in new places!") The last intern arrived, a friendly girl named Julia with a toothy grin whom I liked instantly, and our driver helped us pile our duffels in the back before driving us the hour or so to the rehearsal site in the country.

Smushed to the end of the backseat by stray luggage and jiggly, tanned thighs, I stared out the window as the girls kept chatting and laughing, desperate to lose myself in the grassy landscape and stainless blue sky. But as much as I wanted to let this experience wrap me up in a creative escape, to soak up every last bit of wisdom and warmth Ojai and its artists could give me, I couldn't let go of my terrible fears around my skin, sticky as dried sweat in the California sun. What would happen if it went south? Somewhere inside, as much as this experience was meant to be a time of professional growth and learning, I knew this would also be a time of surviving.

After we dropped off our things off at the rickety, sunbaked living quarters (one of the girls said it used to be a commune—I swear she said for nuns), we drove down a dusty road, up a gravelly, wild-flowered hill, and finally arrived at that first week's rehearsal site. I don't know what I had been expecting, but this didn't look like a theater at all. Two stucco-walled, one-floor houses, one half the size of the other, sat catty-corner from one another in a dreamy, grass-cleared space. *If this land were transplanted to central Pennsylvania*, I thought, *it'd be perfect for a log cabin*. Between the houses was a long, blue-tiled pool; the water looked bright and perfect, the color of porcelain dolls' eyes. A sea of round, white tables and chairs had been set up outside, accented by a few skinny trees tied up in dead Christmas lights. You just knew the place was owned by very rich people trying to come off as "chill." As if on cue, a middle-aged lady with a brown bob and Talbots-esque sundress hurried out to greet and direct us toward a table with our play assignments and snacks, big bowls of pretzels and chips that I had absolutely no intention of eating.

This would be the start of my dietary struggles at Ojai. I ignored my growling stomach as I compared play assignments with the other interns. I would be working with Julia on *The Last*

*White Man*, written by Bill Cain, a former Jesuit priest/renowned playwright who had workshopped at the conference before, known for his sharp intellect and quirky personality. “Oh, you’ll love him!” someone gushed. Though I’m embarrassed to admit it, I was actually a little disappointed. I’d only skimmed *The Last White Man* because it seemed boring and I didn’t get this play within a play, a production of *Hamlet* with some sort of racial/AIDS-fueled angle. I’d been hoping to work with the *Frenzy* team, a riveting work about a school shooting from the perspective of the shooter’s mother. But I kept my thoughts in check. *You’re happy to be here*, I reminded myself.

The next morning began the first official day of the conference. Those of us on breakfast shift, as I was, needed to be at the site at what felt like the ass crack of dawn, the dry air so dark and frigid you could see your breath. I set my alarm particularly early, eager to be the first one in the bathroom. I needed *at least* 45 minutes to do my skincare routine alone. Careful not to wake my two roommates, I took my product bag from under the bed and softly shut the door.

The relief I felt when I looked in the mirror was palpable; now, the ice-scratch was only a pinkish shadow of its former self, blending in with the rest of my face almost seamlessly. But the comfort was short lived. One future therapist later told me that engaging BDD is like playing Whack-a-Mole: You may think you’re safe when the compulsions solve one problem, but another pops up just as quickly. In Ojai, there would be new threats to my skin, breakout-causing foods and intense sunlight being my two biggest worries, ones that would be difficult—maybe impossible—to control. Dr. McGee, my therapist back in Philadelphia, had challenged me before I left to embrace this uncertainty. But looking at my face, so clear and perfect in the dim bathroom light, I became more resolved than ever to protect it.

Sitting in on the first week's readings of plays, I got to witness creativity that was truly akin to magic. Seeing the works of accomplished playwrights in their nascency felt like being let in on a big secret: that even the work of great, experienced artists is not brilliant in the beginning. It grows and evolves, sometimes into something completely different than what it was before. Seeing the progression of early versions, I knew, was a great privilege.

But no matter how hard I tried, even during these readings, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Wrong. Part of this was obviously due to the anxiety of BDD. Not having total control over my food, which was provided by the conference in one way or another, took a much harder toll than I'd originally anticipated. Mealtimes almost always left me nervous and hungry, as I stayed as loyal as possible to my safe food rules—no gluten, dairy, or soy—foods that were in short supply. But my isolation stemmed from more than that. For as long as I could remember, I'd wanted to work in the theatre. The genuine, all-encompassing nature of stories, how much more important and real they felt than everyday life, was something I'd always felt the need to be a part of. But the avenue for *telling* them that I'd gravitated to, being theatre-making, hadn't felt right since high school. I'd listen to the other interns chattering about the shows they did in college, the plays they were dying to be a part of, their crazy backstage stories and long, arduous rehearsal processes, and just think, *Man, that is . . . a lot*. I'd always simply tolerated the group-oriented rehearsal process and being socially "on" all the time as part of the job, letting out a deep sigh whenever I got to go home at the end of the night. I liked the stories by themselves, getting to know each character and discussing them with people who loved them just as much as I did. I started to wonder whether this coveted workspace was actually meant for me.

But the one thing at Ojai that did feel right was the Intern Writing Workshop. For that first week of the conference, our workday afternoons would end with a monologue-writing class, taught by respected California playwright, Alice Tuan. The culmination of the workshop would be a performance during the next week of the conference, in which each intern would get up and present their piece for the other theatre professionals. In a classic amateur move, I went for shock value, setting out to write a funny piece about the time I gave my new boyfriend a hand-job in a movie theatre, flipping out when he got some Vaseline on my cheek. But somehow, as I continued writing, it turned into something deeper. “I’ve been single for a long time,” I wrote. “Living in myself for a long time. And I hated it until I liked it, and now I love it like I love eating gluten-free blueberry oatmeal drizzled in honey every morning and sometimes at night, but I could use a neighbor. Not a nanny, not a plumber, just a nice, sweet elderly woman to say ‘hello’ to and we water each other’s flower baskets while the other one’s away . . .” The positivity my peers responded with, the new way Alice seemed to look at me, made me feel proud. Though it didn’t stop the hurt, something about using my experiences to create art resonated within me.

The second week, our workspace moved from the secluded property in the country to the Besant Hill School, a palm-tree studded, arts-focused boarding school that the conference used annually for its vast rehearsal spaces and black box theatre. When I was told there’d be a cafeteria, I couldn’t believe my luck: Finally, I’d have some options for meals *I* could decide. Complementing the homes I had seen in the area, the school looked like a palace, with pristine white buildings and hilly flower beds. I tried to psych myself up and put the struggles from the past week behind me.

The other interns buzzed with excitement at the change, not because of the bougie location, but because this week the actors would be joining us. We'd get to see them work over the material with the playwrights, something few of us had witnessed on a professional scale, watching the plays we had come to know evolve to the point of performance. When the actors came that Sunday, we put together their conference binders and directed them to where they needed to go. (It ruffled BDD for sure, how attractive they were; with their tanned shoulders and perfect teeth, most looked like off-duty models.) The cast of *The Last White Man* was the smallest of the bunch—only four actors—but I soon learned that it was easily the most star studded. It included Patrick Adams, who had played Meghan Markle's fiancé on *Suits*, and Zachary Quinto, who played Spock on the new *Star Trek*.

Our rehearsal room looked to be one of the smaller ones—just a few wooden tables and some scattered chairs, a fine blank space for making art. Rebecca, our stage manager joining us that week, gave Julia and me our rehearsal duties: making coffee (which I didn't know how to do), copying scripts (which I *really* didn't know how to do), and taking down Bill's editorial notes during our readings. While I did eventually learn how to make a subpar pot of coffee, Julia took on the other duties, including those which sprung up as we went along since she'd jump at them first and I didn't fight her on it. Yes, I am painfully aware that I sound like a slug, and there's no denying that, in a way, I was. But I felt embarrassed not knowing how to do simple workplace skills, and this didn't feel like the proper place to ask those kinds of questions. Instead, I got by with my old strategy for times when I don't know how to do something—looking busy. For me, this usually takes on the form of gathering supplies (as in high-school chemistry, when my partner did all the actual calculations and let me take half the credit; thanks Leanna). In this case, Julia did all the work.

And I felt annoyed by her during those rehearsals — intensely and irrationally. She wasn't doing anything wrong. On the contrary: in every respect, she played the part of Picture-Perfect Intern. It wasn't an act, either. She formed genuine connections with the cast and crew and was a natural at small talk. She exuded a happy, children's show TV-host personality, and her passion for theatre radiated from every pore.

I hated her for it. She seemed like a theatre-girl Pollyanna, while I was just some quiet, grumpy cat in the corner, and, of course, didn't want to be that way. In normal circumstances, I would have Pollyanna'd my ass right alongside her. But I was just too damn tired to care, too deep in a world quickly shrinking to the size of my face.

That said, I was careful not to look grumpy, and joined in as best I could. One day, during a rehearsal break, Julia and Bill were talking about Barbara Cook, the famous Broadway soprano. (To this day, I still find it frustrating that the only thing I remember Bill saying was that Barbara had been a beautiful ingénue in her hay day but gained a lot of weight later in life. Anytime I listen to her in *She Loves Me* or *Guys and Dolls*, I think of his superficial, unflattering anecdote.) Somehow, Julia ended up singing an impromptu version of the song "Ice Cream," a fun, glitzy piece from *She Loves Me* that really shows off soprano chops, and she did not disappoint, right to the last, make-a-glass-shatter note. Everyone in the room, including Patrick and Zachary, applauded and complimented her generously. I painted a big smile on my face and clapped too, wanting to feel happy for my friend, but inside, I just felt the epitome of shitty.

Not wanting to seem inauthentic, I didn't say much in the room after that, and no one said much to me, either. During breaks, when I'd scroll through my phone as everyone snacked and chatted, I'd sneak glances and try to crawl inside their minds, nervous but eager to know how they saw me. *She doesn't realize how lucky she is to be here*, I'd imagine them thinking,

inwardly shaking their heads. Or worse, maybe they didn't think anything about me at all. I couldn't help but think of that famous quote: "The opposite of love isn't hate; it's indifference." Don't get me wrong; it's not like I desired to be the apex of anyone's every thought. But on some level, I wanted them to know that I *did* appreciate the radiance of Ojai, this invaluable opportunity to make art in such a dazzling place. That for reasons I had no idea how to explain—ones that killed me—I simply could not feel its joy.

Soon enough, our company would regroup, scooting in their chairs and flipping through scripts, renewed in this common love to create. Though I'd imitate these actions, my attention always slid to the screen door, which Bill liked to keep open. A warm breeze seeped through the wires alongside the singsong of birds, beauty only heightened by imperfect pitch. I'd think about my healing ice-scratch, thankful to be sheltered from the sweltering sun but planning how to decrease my next exposure. I couldn't wait to go home.

## Reborn

Renee's face sprung up first. It felt like a dream or a movie, seeing this old, skeletal figure, one I knew rationally must be my fellow patient, bob like an apple on a stick being waved. Of course, not everyone on the unit was underweight. Although I didn't yet think that I had an eating disorder, I would soon learn that people with this disease literally come in all shapes and sizes; some don't have issues with their weight at all. Still, Renee's emaciated physique conjured the image I'd imagined.

"Hi, hi! Are you the new admit?" She looked perky, not in a cheerleader sort of way, but more like a grandma who lived alone, the type who hadn't seen her grandkids, or anyone, in a really long time. The kind who might wear cat T-shirts and have tangled wind chimes and plants rotting on the back porch.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing, instantly conscious not to stare at the milky liquid snaking through the tube in her nose, or the metal pole in her hand. "I'm Ally," I said, forcing myself to smile. It had been an exhausting day: my flight; the car ride with the hyper-friendly driver, Bob; the precursory emergency room visit; the intake I'd completed with the woman downstairs. I was

tired of making my depressed-kid intro charming. Plus, my stomach hurt; it was 4 p.m., and I hadn't told anyone that I hadn't eaten yet. I felt scared of what they'd offer.

"See?" Renee said to the girl standing beside her. "I told you we were getting fresh meat!" She playfully punched her in the arm. The girl smiled awkwardly beneath her shaggy red bangs and horn-rimmed glasses, looking down at my slip-ons. Once again, I did my best to smile back. Renee gestured to the nurses and techs at the nurses' station, who were clearly used to her antics and went about their business unbothered. "They said it'd probably be today or tomorrow, but they didn't know if we'd get a boy or a girl. *I knew you'd be a girl though,*" she added.

I laughed uneasily, unsure how to respond. Not realizing that nearly one million boys and men in the United States also suffer from eating disorders, my first (hangry) thought was, *No shit.*

Mercifully, another staff member, a social worker this time, called me into a side room to do yet another intake assessment. I did the obligatory *Aww darn, gotta go!* shrug, but whirlwind Renee had already lost interest, moving on to bantering with one of the nurses who seemed to be playing her part in this practiced exchange with happy boredom as she filled out some files. Molly, the redhead, still stood to the side, pulling at some loose thread on her sweater. The glass dining table sat in the middle of the room like a gauntlet, and she seemed not to want to be anywhere near it. Before the social worker closed the door, I watched Molly wrap that sweater around her chest so tight it seemed as though she were performing a magic trick, expertly squeezing into the smallest amount of space possible.

During those eleven days in inpatient, what I remember more than anything is feeling frustrated. If I was going to do treatment, I was going to *do* treatment, and this didn't feel like the right place for me at all. I was still convinced that the powers-that-be had made a mistake by

sending me here instead of the OCD-focused program, like the one at Philly partial. Things felt different there. For one, those patients shared my constant need for reassurance. For another, there I'd received one-on-one "coaching" and had grown used to having Nicole, my Behavioral Specialist, on my ass to do my exposures. Obviously, I still had to do most of them on my own (which I hated), but I felt I could always go to her if needed.

Here, it seemed as though I had to do it all on my own, and "it all" didn't seem like all that much. There were two Behavioral Specialists on the unit. Mine was Dana, a doe-like woman in her late twenties. She had *such* a smooth forehead; I'd be lying if I denied wanting to slice it off her face and stitch it onto mine. Every weekday at 2 p.m., she'd gather our group in an office-like boardroom for Check-In, where we'd give a quick description of how we were feeling, and what our goal was for that day's exposure period (e.g., "Today, I will look in the mirror five times without checking my forehead"). But when we'd go back into the group room, people mostly colored or played games. While the therapists encouraged these activities, as they counted as Behavioral Activation, it didn't seem like anyone was actually *doing* their exposures. Dana had me write my hierarchy, the same kind that Nicole had me make, listing tasks that would make BDD tick on a scale of one through seven. But other than that, the time she spent with me was minimal. I didn't yet realize that inpatient's main purpose is stabilization; residential, I would learn, is where the hardest work happens. All I knew was that, clearly, coping on my own had failed miserably. And now I still had to do it alone? More than anything, I felt pissed off.

I had spent my last night in Pennsylvania, July 4th, packing some last-minute toiletries and indulging in one final skincare Research Binge. I wasn't sure if I'd have access to my debit

card at the hospital, or what sites would be banned on the unit computer, so I ordered a batch of spot treatments I considered to be Hail-Mary's and sent them to my new address. The irony of doing this on the Independence Day was something I willfully ignored.

Later that evening, when I went to the supermarket to get more probiotics, I watched a smattering of red fireworks dissipate over the same highway where I had wept to Mom four years earlier, desperate to purge my shame over imagined thievery and deceit before I left for my acting program at U. Arts. In that moment, I had wanted more than anything to be free.

I couldn't help thinking of my other significant July 4<sup>th</sup>s. 2008: I am at a party with my best friend from violin class, Sarah Myers, and her family. Our fitted T-shirts toe the line between child and pre-teen, and smell of burnt hotdogs. As we play cornhole with the other kids, I think how odd it is that Mom sent me here; Daddy died the day before.

2017: Nasim, the guy I've just started seeing, invites me to join his friends for some bands jamming by the Philadelphia Art Museum. I decline, telling him I need to clean my apartment, even though it's because of a whitehead and self-disgust.

2007: I am in the backseat of Mrs. Myers' van, watching the fireworks through the dash in the Williamsport Nursing Home parking lot. That summer, I see Sarah's family more than mine; I even have my own toothbrush at their house. Mom and Daddy are still at Duke in North Carolina, going to see some doctors. As I sit there watching, missing, there's a familiar knock on the van door. Mom pulls me out and kisses me, squeezing till I can hardly breathe. I can't see Daddy in the memory.

When I refocused, the sky looked murky, as though it had been white but God couldn't quite get the stain out.

I tried to satisfy myself by watching the other patients. Most of them didn't seem to care whether I was there or not; they were pleasant enough, but they'd already formed their own community. From my ignorance of mealtime procedures and general psychiatric unit rules, it was clear I'd never done inpatient before, so to most of them I was just another newbie, an outsider. I decided to think of myself as more observer than patient, a journalist going undercover so I could learn their secret world.

And I did, quickly. As soon as that first social worker was done with me, a nurse took me to my room. I told her I could unpack myself, but she plopped on the bed, saying she was legally obligated to take anything deemed "unsafe" and place it in storage or my locked cubby. (Skin and hair products with alcohol listed as one of the ten first ingredients fell under this umbrella, which drove me crazy. *Not trying to kill myself yet, guys—just need to fix my face.* Soon, I picked up which techs didn't check to make sure you put things back and asked them to open my cubby instead.) Every morning at 6, the nurses would wake us for weights. You'd get out of your warm bed and put on your gown, clutching its sides together so your ass didn't hang out the back, and line up on the side wall with the others (always stepping backwards onto the scale so you couldn't see the number). Peeing first was frowned upon as most bathroom visits required supervision and a cracked door. I learned the process for snack-times, how a tech would call each patient from the table one at a time like contestants on the worst gameshow ever so we could present what snacks we had chosen from the cupboard. They also needed to make sure the foods met your set number of "exchanges" (higher caloric items, like Clif bars and protein ice cream, equaled more points), a sliding scale determined by your dietitian and doctor. Then you'd show them your trash—*See? Nothing*—before throwing it away.

Meals were different. Each person received individual dishes that we had previously chosen under the watchful eye of our dieticians. You could feel the air shift when that heavy gray cabinet rolled through the unit doors, as though someone had just let a bear inside, but everyone had agreed to pretend not to notice. My own reaction to that cabinet varied considerably, depending on how optimistic I felt about recovery that day. My dietician, Brittany, wanted me to focus on tackling one fear-food for each meal—“We’ll start with gluten,” she’d said—rather than my complex emotions about eating in general. I hated to admit it, but a tiny part of me was actually looking forward to these dishes I hadn’t eaten in years. Although my breath quickened the first night a piece of bread was delivered with my rubbery chicken, I’d be lying if I said something in me wasn’t hungry for a taste.

Renee, when she left her room, was the most fascinating to observe. She was the oldest patient on the unit; while most of us were in our twenties or thirties, she looked around 60. (Anorexia distorts age; she could very well have been 15 years younger than that.) She reminded me of that grandmotherly face in the tree from *Pocahontas*. Her eyes were simultaneously gray and bright, and she always wore her long, silver hair in a high pony, as though she were gearing up for a soccer game or cheerleading practice. So often, she’d argue with the staff like a child—my Grammy would have called her a “pistol.” But her body . . . I had never seen flesh so emaciated and empty, such nothingness where blood and bone are meant to thrive. She walked around in a skin suit with all the contents sucked out. While she was not the only patient with a portable feeding tube on the unit, she seemed to be in the most urgent need of it. She wore clothes you might see in the junior’s section of Walmart, and they drifted from her limbs like those on kids hanging from monkey bars. Even her sparkling, ballet-pink leggings bunched and sagged at her knees.

Perhaps I remember her partly out of narcissism. Nothing about her reminded me of myself—except that my middle name is also Renee, which I recently learned means “reborn.” Mom chose it after Daddy’s aunt, my Grandpa’s older sister who had died at the age of 23 from Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Aunt Renee had been the picture of strength and vivacity: high school valedictorian, a med student who’d made saving the world her personal mission—a pin-curled force of nature. I have only seen two pictures of her. In the first, she stands next to her brother and parents, who are seated on the sofa at some fancy event. (Judging from the huge lily on Great-Grandma Rose’s lapel, it looks like a wedding.) Grandpa Marvin’s just a kid, maybe 12, and with his crooked grin, he looks just as silly and smart-Alek-y as I’d imagine. But Rose and her husband, Sam, are indistinguishable from wax figures, thin-lipped and stiff. Their eyelids appear to be glued open; I can’t imagine them blinking. Sam’s legs are man-spread and firm, his cigar gripped with authority, while Rose, in her soft brown dress with a stripe of sequins on top, crosses her legs so daintily I can only see one. She takes up the least room.

But my eyes always jump to Renee first. How could they not? She’s the picture’s sole source of radiance. In fact, if she had not been part of this portrait, I’m convinced it would have withered with age decades ago. Her green gown perfectly complements her fire-engine curls, as does her red-lipped, toothy smile that takes up half her face.

By objective standards, she’s not uncommonly pretty. She’s wearing too much blush, and her nose, a bit bulbous, hooks in the front. Still, I can’t take my eyes off her. In a way, she reminds me of Mom and how I used to pore over pictures of her taken in high school and her 20’s. I’d wonder if I’d ever have a smile that looked so beautiful, one that screamed such authenticity. Like Mom, Renee had a girl-next-door face. In fact, she reminds me of a young Judy Garland, before she’d been forced to diet and work herself to the point of exhaustion.

The other picture of Aunt Renee used to be hung on Grandma and Grandpa's computer-room wall where they kept all their family pictures. It's a sepia-toned photo, portrait style, and she's wearing a graduation cap. She looks much more serious here; you can almost feel the weight of what she's learned. She's just as beautiful, perhaps more so, but that sense of careless vivacity is gone. Does growing up, gaining depth, mean losing that?

Did something in Renee decide to die out of fear that she might someday become like her parents, thin-lipped and stiff? Naturally, I think of the related cliché: She had her whole life in front of her. I wonder if she thought of it, too, when the doctor knocked, somber and soft, and told her she was ill. Did she know this was terminal? Perhaps. Perhaps she knew even before that—a gut feeling, a pain in her body she knew *really* wasn't right.

On the other hand, maybe she gave it a mere moment's thought and then got caught back up in her textbooks, or daydreams about her date the next night, or of her future as a doctor. Clearly, she wanted to help people. How did it feel to be the one needing to be helped?

At 21 years old, I had never truly been the helper, though I'd always wanted to be. I was usually too scatterbrained, too caught up in the anxieties of my own world for my friends to see me as a rock, one they could lean on. I'd always promised myself that someday I would set my mind to the task of overcoming this selfishness—that I'd become strong by sheer force of will. Now that I was sick, I felt ashamed; not because I had always been the helper and was now on the opposite side of things like Renee had been, but because I'd never gotten the chance to transition to that role, to being the person who is secure in herself and holds up the people who need her. Early in the morning of July 5, 2018, while sitting at my layover in Chicago, I wrote in my phone: *I want to die because I need the pain to stop. I am acutely aware of all the people I would be hurting if I made that choice. I wish I wasn't.* How could I ever be that person now?

I associate anorexic Renee with my bloodline partly because of her name and partly because of her ill health. She's a central figure in what I now call "Inpatient, Round 1," like a placard at a boxing match, although in a psychiatric unit, the rounds seemed limitless. In fact, the first lesson I learned in Wisconsin was that, for some, inpatient merely serves as the first in a series of constantly revolving doors. I'd listen to the conversations at the dining table, and almost every day someone would start off a story with a previous point in therapy: "At Timberline Knolls," or "At the Emily Program," or, perhaps most discouraging, "Last time I was here . . ." I didn't get to know Renee very well, but from what I'd heard, she'd been on the unit for a month or so. (Most patients stay a couple weeks.) This facility didn't seem to be a steppingstone for her; it seemed like her home.

How much of a disease like this is fated, and how much is willed by the human psyche? In no way do I suggest that anyone would intentionally bring such a destructive tyrant as mental illness upon themselves; the idea that some people honestly think we'd suffer for attention angers me deeply. But there must be a balance. What do we have control over? What does *life* control? Watching Renee talk, her cheekbones jutting out like knives, I had to wonder how she'd gotten this way. Though I'd read research pointing to a strong genetic component in the likelihood of developing an eating disorder, surely this couldn't be the whole story. In the lines of her face, even when she smiled, you could tell someone had treated her badly; that over time, she'd grown thorns, the kind that only come from un-loving.

I wasn't unfamiliar with this, having gone to a tiny high school with its standard, adolescent cruelty. But I'd never blamed anyone else for my BDD. This was not out of goodness. Ironically, all the what-if's—wondering whether I'd have gotten sick *if* Daddy hadn't died, *if* I

hadn't been bullied, *if* I hadn't met Adam—seemed totally irrational. I could have developed this illness regardless. Pinning my psychological issues on others, though sometimes tempting, felt wasteful and fruitless, a child's way to make the world make sense.

Pinning these issues on *myself*, however, was entirely fair game. It's not like I meant to be a self-sadist (though my mom might disagree); the shit I was going through, to a large extent, just seemed logically my fault. Each time I snuck into the bathroom to lean into the mirror, examining each pore under the light as though it held the secret to my unhappiness, I chastised my reflection; I knew I was doing myself a disservice. Rationally, everything the therapists said made total sense: if I accepted my diagnosis of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (which I did), by definition, *I could not see myself correctly*. "Why try?" they'd ask. Some days, I'd stride out of their offices, relishing my newfound resolve to beat this thing. But no matter where I next caught my image (or, I should say, where it caught me), the disgust I felt over my acne—that searing urge for beauty—always sounded more convincing. Maybe, I thought, my life wasn't meant to be what I'd pictured.

This, perhaps more than anything else, felt like the worst betrayal. When I'd think of the two Renee's, their separate fates, I felt far less afraid of my aunt's than of this stranger's. Dying young, while certainly tragic, sounded a hell of a lot better than a lifetime spent petering into a shadow. In fact, I *wanted* Aunt Renee's death. Even now, it's hard to describe how humiliating it felt for everyone—my friends living their exciting 20-something lives, my family who'd expected big things from me—to see me fall apart those two-plus years. If I had something like cancer, at least people wouldn't think I wasn't trying to get well.

At Rogers, Renee's one joy, as far as I could tell, was her flowers. She wanted to be with them all the time and talked about them obsessively. Of the day-to-day annoyances of inpatient life, the one that pissed her off most was how little we got to go outside. After all, it was summer, and the facility had such gorgeous gardens, bursting with greenery and buds that were constantly blooming. But we were only allowed out when a tech had time to take us, which didn't happen very often.

"Why the hell does this place have such beautiful flowers if we can't see them?!" she'd say. Her pole squeaked as she'd drag it to her room.

All the other patients, including me, would nod. She was right; I knew that fresh air is routinely touted as one of the best amplifiers of sound mental health. But inside, I didn't much mind having to stay indoors. In fact, a small part of me, one I didn't like, was thankful to be trapped on the unit. Here, there was no pressure to go outside and do things, do *life*, like Mom was always bugging me to embrace. I didn't have to do life anymore because, now, I physically could not. "These people won't let me" was such a delicious excuse. This elimination of choice felt like a white flag, one I wanted to use as a blanket, to sleep in forever.

But when we did get to go outside, especially on sunny days, Renee's whole demeanor changed. "Come on, guys!" she'd say, practically tripping over her pole as she made her way to the outskirts of the garden. For a moment, she'd look like a little girl. Though she'd occasionally pick the lush daisies and irises, most of the time she was content to simply bask in their beauty. "Not too far, Renee," the tech would say, looking the other way as Renee went farther and farther. As the rest of us putzed around, admiring the garden stones and balancing ourselves on the wooden swing, we'd hear her shout over and over, each time with greater surprise and elation. "These flowers are stunning!" she'd yell, laughing, temporarily freed from physical and

psychological restraints. In her next life, when she is reborn, I imagine her as a tiger lily, bold and bright, growing toward the sun.

## Dangerous, Beautiful Boy

Before Rogers, I'd never known anyone remotely like Liam. For one thing, he was the first visibly androgynous person I had ever met. Tall and slender, he wore his hair short, spiky, and blonde—bright as a new paint-store chip. On warmer days, he wore a tea-length navy skirt from Goodwill that looked like it belonged on the cover of *Vogue*. I admired the way he styled it, the *swish* it made between his legs. His most striking physical feature, though, was his skin, so pale it verged on the alien, iridescent when the light caught it right—though, to be real, this was probably from malnourishment. (My own turned yellow-orange from an overdose of sweet potatoes.) He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen, but he also served as a grave reminder: how fucked up perspective can be. How it got us here.

When I first arrived at the EDC, his suaveness intimidated me. Getting sick had jacked up my natural tendencies toward introversion—I'd reached hermit status—so I wasn't exactly seeking out new friends, much less ones who looked like cover models. But my second morning in the cramped meal-room, he looked at me sideways and asked, "Did you say you were here for BDD?"

I finished my water. “Yeah,” I said, tearing the lid off a single pack of Honey Nut Cheerios—the dreaded gluten. Whole Grain Oats, Sugar, Oat Bran, Corn Starch, Honey . . . The label blared like a police siren. “Skin.” Another scoop. Swallow. “What about you?”

He smiled, shyly, and took a bite from his own breakfast. “BDD,” he said, nodding. “I’ve been here about a month. Mine’s skin, too.”

If life were a rom-com, here’s where I’d have spit out my Cheerios. Back in June, when I called Rogers to begin the admission process, I had requested and fully expected to be admitted to the residential OCD clinic in Oconomowoc, one of their other recovery centers in the main Wisconsin hub. It seemed to be the program most similar to the one I’d done in Philly the year before, and it had worked for a while . . . Well enough, anyway. But a few days after my phone interview, when the Rogers lady said that, yes, a bed was open and could be mine, she informed me of a different plan. With my low weight and mental history, doctors had determined to send me to inpatient first—*Eating Disorder* inpatient. I was shocked. Surely there’s been some mistake, I told her. I’d said I had Body Dysmorphic Disorder, an illness well known in the mental health field to be OCD’s ugly first cousin. Yes, I avoided many foods for the sake of my skin, adhering to strict rules that would surely have disastrous outcomes if broken. But I didn’t give a shit about my weight. I didn’t have an eating disorder!

The bored crone seemed to shrug off my concerns. “Well, they won’t treat you if you don’t go. Do you want it or not?”

*You can just explain when you get there, I thought. Then they’ll realize they made a mistake. You’ll get to where you need to go.* I told her yes, please reserve the bed. I called my parents, who were vacationing in Aruba, and arranged to fly out the following week, the morning after the fourth of July.

But there hadn't been a mistake. "The OCD clinic doesn't have the resources to deal with food issues," Dr. Hamlin said during our first meeting. "Once you're medically stable, you'll be transferred to the Eating Disorder residential program." She was a peculiar, black-bobbed psychologist whom other patients likened to Edna, that mad scientist from *The Incredibles*. I looked down and scowled. How was no one getting this? *I don't belong here!* I wrapped my blue Ithaca College blanket around my bony shoulders. "Don't worry," she said, smiling. "Lots of the other EDC patients have OCD too."

*Not BDD, though. You don't know shit. No one here does.* But it didn't matter. After eleven days at inpatient, I was transferred to Rogers' Eating Disorder Center.

Now, after meeting this beautiful boy with the gossamer skin, I realized I was not alone. I'd never expected that someone else at the EDC, or even the OCD center, would suffer from BDD; it's such a niche, almost cultish illness. And here was someone who not only had it but suffered from the same *kind* as I did. I almost didn't believe it. Technically, I had known one other guy with BDD from Philly partial, a certified "bro" I'd been surprised to see in a mental health center, but he had muscle dysmorphia. (I remember how weird it felt when we discovered we both strictly avoided soy for entirely different reasons. He also happened to be terrified of the number 6.) But to meet someone who knew this sick little version of hell—*my* sick little version . . . I smiled back. "I'm Ally."

My friendship with Liam began with activities: basketball and ping-pong. Basketball was somewhat monitored—I think you had to be at a certain level since some people would abuse the exercise—so we didn't play often. But ping-pong was in the basement, unsupervised by the RC's as long as they knew we were down there. During the "work week," after the long hours of ERP and those surrounding dinner, different groups of us would go downstairs and take turns playing.

Although I've always hated the process of making new friends—things can seem so stiff, uncomfortable—my favorite sessions were those just with Liam. In my hometown of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where everyone seems to know everybody, I'd never had to make friends often, and was never too good at it, anyway. But here, I could be whomever I damn well pleased—in a place where I wasn't the odd one out for not being okay. As he taught me the basics of ping-pong—where to dive and when to swerve—I learned more about his own story. We were both 21, and Rogers was also his second official treatment center. He lived in L.A (thus the hipster/model vibe), where he had gone to school for something sciencey—astrophysics, maybe? He'd dropped out twice because of his illness and itched to go back as soon as he got better. He told me about his girlfriend, a freshman named JoAnne, whom he'd met his second time at school. "Long distance is tough," he said. I'd later learn they had an open relationship, but they were still struggling. I listened and empathized as best I could, even though I had no experience with cross-state dating. We paddled back and forth, my swing getting better with every *whack*—an astounding feat, given my complete lack of athletic prowess. At nine o'clock, we'd fold the table back in the corner and head upstairs for Evening Snack.

I never thought of Liam romantically for at least the first month at Rogers. For one thing, despite his girlfriend, his chic, artsy aesthetic suggested he might be gay, or at least gender fluid. Beyond that, I couldn't imagine being romantically involved with anyone given my current mental state. "When you're having a relationship with a body part," my therapist used to say, "it's pretty hard to have a relationship with anyone else."

Mostly, I just relished having a real friend again. Since BDD had come into my life two years earlier, the majority of my friendships had all but fallen apart. Few people from home understood that this monstrous thing taking over my life was a disease, not a choice. Most of my

friends, reasonably swept up in their normal, 21-year-old worlds, simply didn't know how to handle this unfamiliar, scary version of me. Although their distancing hurt, I understood the human instinct to push away difficult things. But when I came to Rogers, the other patients, mostly 20- and 30-somethings like myself, related to me very well. The collateral damage from their own illnesses eerily echoed my own: dropping out of school, losing relationships, quitting jobs. It felt so liberating to be understood, and to truly understand them, too.

With Liam, this warmth of newfound friendship felt that much stronger. BDD is an incredibly isolating disease, and each of us knew what that felt like. Over ping-pong, we'd joke about our stranger past compulsions: how I used to jam my tongue in my cheek to check its redness in the light; how he would steal expensive "safe fruits" from the yuppie grocery store. Both of us feared the consequences of the sun, but he'd offer his baseball cap if it came out during Experiential Therapy. We'd bounce around ideas and philosophies on the established, common credo of our illness: that neither of us craved looking gorgeous, only *normal*. Above all, we wanted to be clean—like those bland, happy ladies in dish-detergent commercials.

While we tried not to share skin-care advice, deeply aware that even one out-of-turn remark could bring a fresh onslaught of self-hatred and compulsions, we cheered the other on when reintroducing new foods or resisting detrimental behavior. Before he left residential for Rogers' nearby partial program—a frustrating time for him, as his parents were not letting him return to school that spring as he'd hoped—I spent Art Therapy making him a jewelry box in the shape of a ping-pong table, complete with cardboard net and two tiny clay paddles, and surprised him with it two nights before he left. Remembering his toothy smile and the glow in his cheeks makes me blush.

Ten minutes across town in Silver Lake, Liam reluctantly worked through partial, texting me every so often with funny updates. (He enjoyed going to Revere's, the local bar, for beer and ping-pong, even though drinking during the program was strictly prohibited.) I strengthened my relationships with other patients, watching raunchy standup specials together in the group room and listening to the last crickets of summer with the smokers under our gazebo.

According to policy, current residents were forbidden to meet with past ones, but, of course, this only increased the desire to reunite with old friends. So, one warm Friday in September, Liam and I made secret plans to see each other at the local coffee shop, Milwaukee Street Traders, during my night's planned pass.

At this point in my stay, I actively worked to put myself together, doing my hair and makeup even when BDD hissed not to, wearing actual outfits rather than a string of t-shirts and the same bleach-stained sweatpants. Change the behavior and the thoughts will follow, right? My mom had just come up for her monthly visit and seemed elated to see the weight I'd put on, the color in my cheeks. She'd taken me to the local mall and bought me a small suitcase worth of beautiful clothes, including a flouncy blue dress from Francesca's, covered in creamy, delicate tulips. Tulips, pink tulips, have been my favorite flower since childhood, when we lived on Quaker State. Mom would plant them along the brick walkway every April so they'd be in full bloom by my birthday in May. Light and flattering, the rayon dress clung to all the right places. I was going to wear it for Liam. I was going to be a 21-year-old woman, and I was going to have some fun.

That evening, I waved a happy goodbye to the other residents as my roommate, Abbie, and I stepped outside and into our Uber to downtown Delafield, where she too had secretly planned to meet up with former Rogers residents at Milwaukee Street Traders. Everyone,

including Liam, had already been there for a while when we arrived, so we left for Erin's and Alyssa's apartment at Walden, the complex where the Rogers partial residents lived. Liam and I made stilted small talk on the walk over. I asked how partial had been; he wanted to know if anything new was going on at residential. In the post-summer air, hazy as watercolor, something had shifted.

At the complex, Liam suggested we go up to his apartment, just a floor above this one, and talk. We told the others, who smirked, waved us off, and told us to have a good time. Soon we were alone.

The upstairs apartment, with its geometric wall art and spacious hallway, suddenly felt much too large. Not one to force conversation, Liam suggested we put on a movie; his roommate had a collection that ranged from *La Enfants du Paradis* to *Mean Girls*. We chose *Superbad* and settled into the deep red couch, sitting at a questionable distance from one another, very conscious of the space between our thighs. I mentioned I felt cold (not a move; I'm cold at least 85% of the time), and Liam draped a blanket over us both, moving closer. Suddenly, his lips were on mine, the clunky, tender mechanics highlighting our inexperience. Neither of us had been kissed in a long time.

In a soft voice, he asked if I would like to move things to the loft. I said yes without hesitation. No time to be coy: my phone read 9:20 p.m., and all too soon it would be time to head back to res for the 10 o'clock curfew. With his insurance threatening to cut funding (a horribly common problem), nothing guaranteed we would see each other again. I saw the ping-pong box on his nightstand and smiled at our game. But I did have a caveat. As he slipped the tulip print over my head, I turned to him and stammered, "I . . . don't want to have sex."

This I'd known from the start. I'd only ever slept with one person, my ex-boyfriend Adam, almost three years before, and that had happened after months of trust-building and anxiety-ridden deliberation. Liam said it was totally fine, whatever I was comfortable with—a line I'd heard before but seldom sincerely. I sighed.

Then he asked if I was clean.

My first thought was, *Um, yeah—I wiped?* I almost laughed out loud when I realized what he actually meant. “Yes, I’m clean,” I said, smiling in the dark. I’d never been tested, but I reasoned it unnecessary because my number of partners was a grand total of one. Liam assured me he was, too, and I could tell he was speaking the truth.

I heard his roommates talking downstairs, voices rough as sandpaper. We resumed kissing, folding over one another, one eye still on my phone. All too soon, the time came to turn on the light, to search for a lost earring. Liam pulled the tulips back over my head. We walked downstairs, nodding red-faced hellos to his equally red-faced new friends. He kissed me goodbye and I hurried back to Erin’s apartment.

The scene when I opened Erin’s door could have been plucked straight from a ’90s sitcom. Everyone swung their heads toward me in one cartoonish, synchronized sweep. Erin’s eyes shined bright and wide.

“So, did you *do* it?!”

I was utterly flustered and can’t recall my exact response. Given my awful tendency to overshare when nervous, I’m sure I gave a short but vivid rundown of the entire thing. Everybody cheered me on for “getting some,” and, weirdly, I felt proud. I’ve always liked the role of ingénue, even in this twisted sense. When I rode back to res in Sam’s old SUV, my

carriage back from the ball, I grinned when Natalie, our resident tough-girl, clapped my back, saying she had a new level of respect for me.

Thus began my short friends-with-benefits stint with Liam—our “morethanthatship,” as I now like to call it. For the next two weeks, we flirted over text and secretly met up twice more when I went to downtown Delafield on pass. One Saturday, the weather uncharacteristically hot for Wisconsin in September, we decided to walk to the local park. After all, the day felt so nice, and both of us had grown braver toward the sun. Holding my hand, Liam led me down a wooded pathway, which would have been lovely had it not been for the buzzing mosquitoes making meals of our shoulders and thighs. The park itself—an old, mulched-over play area with rickety towers and swings—felt eerily empty, and we soon grew antsy with sweat. Liam spotted a small creek near the playground, the water whooshing past the mossy rocks like windchimes. He said we should take off our clothes and go in. I laughed.

“This is a kids’ park, you idiot,” I said, shaking my head. Besides, I’d started to grow wary of the brightening sun. But Liam only offered that cool, California grin and quickly stripped down in broad daylight, throwing his jeans in a tidy lump on the bank. I watched nervously, scanning the area for potential onlookers. I wanted to yell, *You could get arrested!* while he laughed and sloshed around in the water, his skinny chest dripping and pink. Finally relenting, albeit more tentatively, I hiked up my jeans and got my ankles wet, determined to show that I, too, was cool and spontaneous, which we both pretended was the truth.

I don’t remember many specifics of our time back in Liam’s bed that day, nor of our “date” the week prior. The only sensation I can conjure clearly is the taste of his kitchen’s gross, metallic tap water after we got up. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy our sexual encounters—or at the least, I can’t define it in such black-and-white absolutes. As an L.A.-esque, new-agey bisexual

man in an open relationship, Liam was much more versed in the world of sex, and therefore more enthusiastic and knowledgeable. As we went further and further, not quite having intercourse but getting awfully close, I felt my usual, unsettling mixture of awkwardness, timidity, and boredom. I *wanted* to like the way he touched my body, how I touched his, but my usual anxieties and unanswerable questions kept getting in the way. *Am I doing this right? Does he actually like this? Should I make certain faces and groans just in case? I'm supposed to put my tongue where?!* I'd never been good at expressing what I wanted from a partner, or even knowing what it was I wanted. Growing up in a stereotypically sheltered Catholic school and household, I learned most of my sexual knowledge from my two best friends in public school. Even in high school, I would recoil whenever my younger sister brought up the subject of blowjobs. My go-to response was a mortified question: "Don't you know how many sweat glands are down there?!"

There was also the fact of Liam's androgyny. I'd been attracted to plenty of gay and bisexual men (such is the plight of female theatre majors), but this felt different. Though I tried not to dwell on it, I didn't know what to think of liking a boy who wore dresses and makeup. In the deepest part of my heart, I wasn't sure if I'd be brave enough to act on this attraction if he showed up in my "real world," back in conservative, Red-leaning Williamsport. I'd told Mom about Liam, and in her typical, open nature she approved, but what about the more close-minded people in my life? What would certain people from St. John Neumann Regional Academy say if they saw us in Starbucks together, or eating at the Moon and Raven? I hated that I even considered this, but the questions kept coming. Did I only like him because he was the first guy who had shown interest in me since I had gotten so sick and pathetic?

No, I rebuked myself. Liam was a good guy; that was why I wanted him. His looks had drawn my eye, but his wit, intelligence, and the beautiful way he saw the world made me stay. The fact that he understood *my* world made me stay. But would I have returned his interest had I been totally healthy? As we continued to touch, to feel the smoothness of each other's skin, I didn't know if I could say.

Weeks after Liam and I started meeting up like this, I was cornered into confessing our relationship to my new therapist, Tricia. A stout, elegant woman with thin lips, Tricia had recently filled in at Rogers for the therapist on leave and clearly did not mess around. Our session started out innocently enough. She asked how I'd been, if any changes had been made in my meal plan, what exposures I'd recently gotten to in my hierarchy. For reasons I still don't entirely understand, I started babbling about Liam: how I missed him but felt glad we'd kept our promise of keeping in touch. Tricia raised one perfectly manicured brow.

"How *is* Liam?" she asked.

And just like that, the metronome of my jittering leg froze in place, and my cheeks became pale. With those three words, the way her pencil stopped bouncing on the tin of her clipboard, I knew: somehow, I'd been caught. Guilt flowed out of my mouth faster than I could speak.

"Well, I've been seeing Liam," I said, my eyes glued to a gray, gummy stain on the floor. I explained that, yes, we'd become romantically involved, but it wasn't serious, so could we please just forget about it so no one gets in trouble? Tricia maintained her stare and shook her head. No, she said; I would have to be moved down a level immediately, which meant no more passes—a huge breach of trust. More seriously, I might not be allowed to move on to partial, a crucial next step in my recovery.

I spent the rest of the day in my room, either sobbing or sleeping, deeply embarrassed at this uncharacteristic experience of being in trouble and having everyone on my treatment team *know* I had done something terribly wrong. All for the boy with beautiful skin.

Two days later, I felt the rash—that first bump—and everything changed.

I didn't know what to do, what to think. *Is this what a yeast infection feels like?* I told myself to relax. This must be a new physical symptom of my anxiety, plain and simple. The humiliation of the past two days had just started to wane; surely God had finished fucking with me by now. But as hard as I tried to ignore the burning sensation, the raw sores blooming between my thighs, the pain grew steadily worse. Urinating became dreadful, like battery acid poured slowly on delicate flesh. I'd never felt such physical pain. Even so, my gaping lack of sexual education prevented me from truly believing the sensation was connected to Liam.

The next morning, I gave my Behavioral Specialist Mike a vague description of the problem, and Alexa, one of the younger RC's, drove me to the local MedExpress. I didn't have to wait long. Someone gave me a gown, asked some background questions, and said the doctor, Dianne Something-or-other, would be in to see me shortly. I passed the time looking at medical posters. With their red, puffy body parts, blue veins, pink babies, they looked almost pretty, or fun, like a board game. When the doctor came in, we made small talk, some benign complaints about the gloomy weather, and then she asked me to lie back on the table.

I recall the tone of her voice more than anything. "Oh, dear," she said, prodding at the skin below my waist. I didn't pay much attention; I knew she was just doing her job, but mostly I wanted her to stop touching those painful sores. She took a few swabs, sweeping them over the exposed skin like feathers, and told me to put my clothes back on. In a few minutes, she sat on the metal chair by the table and pulled up some papers.

“Well, Hon. We’ll have to send this to the lab to be sure, and I’ll refer you to an OBGYN at the hospital just in case, but this looks like a pretty textbook case of the Herpes Simplex Virus. I’m very sorry.”

From her look and tone of voice, I knew I should be at least a little upset. But I primarily felt confused. *How had this happened? We didn’t even have actual sex! Is this one of the bad STD’s? What does all this mean?* Dr. Dianne patiently explained that, yes, while HSV is a chronic condition, possible to contract from either oral or vaginal contact, it is a very common virus. She was quick to add that sufferers can have normal sex lives with additional precautions.

At that moment, bizarrely, my brain traveled to its favorite, familiar topic: skin. Tretinoin had cleared facial bumps that had caused BDD to spiral so terribly, but my complexion was still not good enough. Would it ever be? The endless loop—the disease that would stop for nothing—drowned out Dr. Dianne’s rehearsed spiel. And then there was Liam’s skin. How lovely it had looked in the sun that day at the creek. Had he been telling the truth when he said he was clean? I knew the answer before my mind could finish the question.

Tuesday nights meant movie outings, so most of the other residents had left the house when I returned, including my roommate. I decided to call Liam. Full of burnt chicken I’d barely tasted, I paced my side of the room, stirring a heap of dirty laundry with my foot as the dial tone hummed. He’d been enjoying relearning to cook since partial and had made black bean burgers that first night I’d come over; perhaps he was making dinner. *Please don’t pick up*, I prayed. The hum stopped.

“Hello?”

*Shit.*

“Hey there,” I said, my mouth filled with sand. “Got a minute?” I could feel him nod over the phone.

The words tumbled out, tangled in a mess of apologies: “So I’m really sorry but I went to the doctor today and it turns out I have herpes. But I *swear* I had no idea. Most likely it came from you—but I know you didn’t know you had it either.” Pause. “I’m sorry.”

I sensed him erasing sentences before he spoke.

“Wait, what?”

My free hand formed a fist, the way it does when I’m trying to be brave. As succinctly as I could, I explained everything: the rash, the doctor, the diagnosis. More silence. Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Are you mad?”

“Mad?” The question sounded like a wound. “Of course not. Ally, I’m so, so sorry.”

I know it’s irrational, but in that moment, I felt relief. Even as Liam sputtered his own string of apologies—“I can’t believe this. I’ve been tested before, but it’s been so long since Joanne and I . . . but, God, it’s my responsibility to know. Fuck. This is all my fault.”—I just felt glad he wasn’t angry with *me*. Ironically, the small group of people I’d told since the visit (Tricia, Mom, my Aunt T., who’s a nurse) had all implied that I should be *very* upset with him. But to this day I’ve never doubted that he was unaware of his status. Liam was a friend, through and through.

“Ally?”

I tuned back into the conversation. Liam’s voice sounded softer now, cool, or perhaps reserved. “Can we talk about this later? I’ve—I’ve gotta go.”

I agreed, and he ended the call. I slumped onto my bed. *What now?*

The night passed. We exchanged texts of reassurance—Me: *Are you ok?* Liam: *Are you ok?*—including a long message from him, reiterating how stupid he felt, how sorry he was for not being a more knowledgeable sexual candidate. I reminded him as gently as I could that it was okay, that I didn't blame him. Even though part of me felt like I *should* blame him, I couldn't. BDD doesn't allow its prisoners to stray for long. My dating life, my whole future really, seemed so abstract; getting better still looked like such a dicey “maybe.” Rationally I understood that HSV, though not a serious condition, would be something I'd now have to factor into all future relationships. But that prospect felt so far off—the way having grandchildren currently does, or dying.

Bit by bit, fool's summer (which I like to call “fool's fall”) faded, the dark green Midwestern foliage giving way to brilliant golds and reds, just like Octobers back on the East Coast. On the morning of the seventh, as I watched leaves drift near the window, daydreaming instead of paying attention to our Dialectical Behavioral Therapy group, an RC knocked on the side-room door: Mom was on the phone and needed to speak with me. I walked to the dayroom, my heart pounding since Mom never called in the morning. When I picked up, her voice sounded tight, kind but business-like. She said her mother, who'd been living at home with us the past year after a stroke and aggressive bone cancer diagnosis, had taken a turn for the worse. She and Dad had arranged for me to fly back to Pennsylvania in a few hours so I could say goodbye.

I didn't feel shock; I didn't feel much at all. Grammy and I had been close, but in the past year, BDD had soured that relationship as well. I'd known she was dying. I told Mom I was sorry and packed up my things.

I got home around midnight and, in the morning, left with my parents for the hospital. My aunt, uncle, and cousins greeted me warmly in the dim, white hallway before they left for the cafeteria. Mom, who stayed behind, leaned closer to the bed, nestling her lips in her mother's matted hair: "Mom, guess who it is!"

When Grammy opened her eyes, I grinned. I'd forgotten she could smile that big.

As visits with the ill often are, our conversation was mostly one-sided. I told her how treatment had been going: the places I'd been, the foods I was eating. I told her about my new friends, Matt and Maddie—recent admits and ping-pong buddies. (Mom laughed at this. My uncharacteristic zest for ping-pong was quickly turning into a family joke.) Grammy kept giggling to herself after *The Price is Right* came back on, and our talk died out.

For about ten minutes, we watched the contestants flirt with Technicolor games of chance and knowledge. Some seemed quite practiced, as though they had played many times before, while others were simply punished by bad luck. All seemed entranced under the spell of the game.

At the next commercial, I glanced at Grammy, who grinned with a curious combination of wisdom and innocence.

"So," she said. "How's Liam?"

## My Only Sunshine

It's January, 1985, but the roads are clear—although that hardly makes a difference, given the way Danny is driving. He and Mom, full of forgotten food and conversation from Bennigan's on Columbia, race down the backroad leading to her house in Shamokin, 20 minutes away if he guns it. *Why the hell are you gunning it?!* she thinks. Mom, 22 years old and as mild mannered as they come, seethes as Danny continues to accelerate, the speedometer jumping to 70, then 75, blackness flashing in their wake. She wants to tell him to stop, or at least slow down, but she can't catch his gaze. A curve comes, and the wheels *SCRREEECH* as he fights velocity and time to keep control of the car. Seconds later, he brings it to a complete stop. Mom, at this age rarely one to express her anger out loud, even in the worst of circumstances, stares straight ahead, her grip still white on the roof handle.

*If you're going to kill yourself, don't take me down with you,* she thinks, stuffing her fury in the car door pocket.

Two months later, his mother found him hanging in the bedroom closet.

I've always felt a strong connection with Danny Fabrezio, Mom's on-again, off-again boyfriend from her senior year of high school. Maybe *fascination* is a more accurate word—at least when I was younger. Stories from Mom's past, back when she was little Debby Washleski, were typically fun and exciting, and Danny happened to play a part in many of them. On car rides to Grammy's, the same unassuming house Mom had lived in since she was ten, I'd make her tell me the same ones over and over: the merciless way Danny would tease her during band, or the time he came to see her play the lead in *Camelot* and swooped in for a post-show kiss right as her current boyfriend walked down the aisle to give her roses. Some dark part of me I never quite understood usually wanted to hear his death story, too. I'd approach it with caution, even though Mom always told it with the same calm precision.

I thought about dying a lot when I was at my worst with BDD. When I did treatment for the first time in Philly, the thoughts were abstract, the way you mull over comebacks you'd never say in arguments you'd never start. But the March after I came home, the forehead bumps appeared—dozens (it may as well have been hundreds) of flesh-colored pinheads that clotted together seemingly overnight. Their texture resembled rough stucco, the face I'd fought so diligently to keep clear ironically stained. When I'd study the bumps in a mirror, I'd lean in as close as I could and turn my head back and forth so the light would catch each one. The worst part was, I couldn't fix it. No matter how many expensive products I bought or foods I cut from my diet (Greg later told me he'd feared I'd soon be down to water), the closed comedones only seemed to grow and multiply. It was entirely out of my control, and I couldn't handle it. After washing my face, meltdowns of full-blown sobbing became part of my bedtime routine. If I examined my journals, it might take hours to count how many ways I wrote, "I want to die."

I never came close to acting on those wishes, but I had a morbid interest in imagining how certain people might react to my death. Sometimes, to fall asleep, I'd take my time visualizing friends, past romantic partners, and old teachers being told by parents or colleagues, sitting in shock as they realized what they'd just heard. The reveries were always compelling; it felt intriguing to wonder how much they might care, what they'd wish they could have said. To be sure, I didn't want to hurt them—only to know how they truly felt about me. But when I thought about Mom, those images would halt faster and harder than Danny's car.

Mom and I have always shared a special bond, one that she often refers to as “precious.” I've never loved anyone more, and Daddy would sometimes joke that he felt like a “second banana” in our house, a thought that now makes me squirm, considering how I know this would have balanced out had he lived longer. But he was right: as a child, Mom was the epicenter of my world, and I in hers. She'd had such a terrible time getting pregnant due to severe endometriosis, watching with quiet despair as dozens of her fellow teachers and friends announced their baby news, often having multiple babies before her. And since Daddy didn't want any more children because of his cancer diagnosis, I was all she had.

While there were certainly times she had to play disciplinarian in my childhood, for the most part, being together felt easy, effortless. An elementary school music teacher and beautiful singer, she would teach me all her classroom songs, instilling a love of music as I'd repeat each section after her. My favorite was “You Are My Sunshine.” On the days she'd burst into my room singing it to wake me up for school, getting up early seemed a little less bad.

I sometimes wonder about nature versus nurture: Had Mom not been musically and theatrically inclined, would I be? I'd like to think so, but the fact is I don't know. In that sense,

she's served as a big sister; I've always wanted to be just like her. As a kid, I loved going to Stevens Elementary after hours and running across stray students of hers. They'd smile widely, staring at my knee socks and plaid school uniform as though I were some exotic zoo animal. "Mrs. Lax, is that your daughter?!" I'd feel a silly sort of pride well up in my chest when she said, "Yes."

Ironically, that closeness fueled one of the most damaging aspects of my BDD: For the first time, it created a space in me that Mom couldn't reach. My whole life, she had been my confidante. When my friends and I entered our teenage years, I'd listen as they complained about their mothers: what they wouldn't let them do, how they didn't understand them. I couldn't relate. The bond between Mom and me only got stronger as I grew into a woman. That's not to say we never fought; our conflicting views on my new stepfather, Greg, and how I was to handle him caused several heated arguments over the years. But after one of those storms had passed, I could always expect her to come up to my room and wrap me in a hug, refusing to let go till I relented and hugged back. She'd pull away, search my face for a smile, and say, "You are the most important thing."

When my skin-focused BDD symptoms first appeared the summer after freshman year of college, weeks after my painful breakup with Adam, the first boy I'd ever loved, neither of us knew they were symptoms at all. Sure, I'd been diagnosed with OCD, a disease we've since learned is a well-known first cousin to the illness. But that dealt with my fear of dishonesty, not *pimples*. When I began to express growing concern to Mom over the minor acne that had suddenly sprouted (likely from stress), she wanted to help, even though she couldn't see my face the way I did. Somehow, I convinced her to buy me a set of expensive skincare products, including a \$100 Clarisonic face brush. The day she brought them home, she told me I could

have them once I'd cleaned out the closet in my old room, a task she'd been requesting for a few days. In a sudden fit of anger I didn't understand, I started crying, pleading with her that I needed them right now. Her brow furrowed as she relented, walking down the stairs in silence as she left me standing before the bathroom mirror, hovering over my new stash of cleansers and creams.

Two summers later, I found myself in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, receiving treatment for BDD at Rogers Behavioral Health's residential Eating Disorder Center and talking to Mom on the phone almost every night after Evening Snack. On good days, I would fill her in on the new friends I'd made, the gluten and dairy I was adding back into my diet, the way I hated some of the exposures my behavioral specialist Mike made me do (particularly mirror retraining), but that some part of me I couldn't deny felt myself getting stronger. On bad days, I would launch into a well-worn diatribe of how terrible my forehead still looked, usually peppering in not-so-subtle requests for reassurance that the acne wouldn't last or didn't look as awful as I feared.

But by that point, Mom refused to be fooled into answering. Her days of buying me luxury skincare products to soothe this prickly anxiety were long gone. When I'd underwent partial treatment in Philly, my behavioral specialist had taught her that funding my compulsions and offering constant reassurance that my face didn't look as gross as I thought was actually hurting me, not helping. One of the more exasperating qualities Mom and I share is all-or-nothing thinking, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Mom took this advice and bolted with it. Almost overnight, she'd stopped answering these frantic questions cold-turkey, a resolve that pissed me off exponentially. After all, even my therapists offered a little reassurance now and then, especially if I manipulated the request the right way. When my phone calls back home veered toward the negative, she would immediately steer the conversation in a stubbornly positive direction, shifting to unrelated stories of everyday minutiae going on back home.

Sometimes, I knew rationally her redirection was justified; others, it just made me feel unheard. Whenever I'd object, she'd say in a tight voice that she didn't want me going down the BDD rabbit hole again.

The fact was, I was already there. I just needed her to know what it felt like.

Eventually, July crept into August, August into September, and soon enough I encountered my first Wisconsin autumn. I'd thought the Northeast held a monopoly on pretty fall foliage, and it delighted me to learn that I was wrong. The Shumard oaks and sugar maples surrounding the EDC quickly blossomed into rich golds and reds, shedding the summer clothes they'd outgrown. Jonathon, the groundskeeper, even planted a small, straggling pumpkin patch down by the kids' building.

Somehow, everything began to feel crisper and lighter, including me. While I still struggled with negative feelings about my face, I had begun to buy into the idea that while I couldn't change the thoughts, I could change the behaviors that exacerbated and maintained them. My assigned exposure of dressing well and doing my hair and makeup everyday (a habit I'd long since given up, reasoning that my skin looked too ugly to match) began to feel less difficult. Sometimes, I even found myself looking forward to it. Of course, it didn't hurt that the cream prescribed by my dermatologist at the beginning of my stay had almost completely cleared up the forehead bumps that had brought me there in the first place. Maybe, just maybe, I was finally getting my brain back. For the first time in years, I had the itch to make a change to enhance my appearance, rather than hide or fix it. So, I decided to get bangs.

The morning of the highly anticipated haircut, Mom called the patient phone during DBT group to let me know that Grammy, her mother, had died. I still don't like admitting it, but I didn't really feel anything when she told me. I'd known it was coming. Grammy and I had been

close when I was little, but she could be a difficult person, and BDD had created further distance between us. Mom didn't seem exactly sad, either. After sitting at her mother's hospital bedside for the past few weeks, pressing cool washcloths to her mother's forehead and watching *The Price is Right* reruns, she just sounded tired. She told me that she, Greg, and my uncle's family were about to head to the funeral home in Shamokin to make the proper arrangements. I asked if she was okay, and she said yes.

BDD's a funny thing in the sense that when it has you, it *has* you—no matter what else is happening in your life, no matter what else is going on with the people you care about. I'm sure I informed my care team and fellow patients, who knew the situation, of Grammy's passing. But after the group ended, I attended Morning Snack and went on with my day, doing my best to push away the numb weirdness of Grammy dying and refocusing on my nerves and excitement over the scheduled haircut. I longed to look “put together” again, to finally go for the stylish, blunt bangs I'd been toying with but had been too afraid to try since high school. That afternoon, when I sat down in the salon chair, shampooed by this gorgeous 20-something fresh out of beauty school, it felt like I'd ascended to the tipping point of a roller coaster.

Then came the drop. When the stylist turned me toward the mirror for the first reveal, before the rest of my hair was done, I didn't feel shock or panic—just quiet. *Why are they so short?* These bangs didn't look at all like the sleek, Taylor Swift variety I'd shown her dozens of pictures of—more like those of a little, blond Dutch boy. Even though I'd told myself to wait to look again until I could see the finished product, I found myself sneaking glimpses as the girl wrapped each lock around the curling wand in her hand. The first stage of grief is denial, and as I dug my toes into my sneakers, I kept reminding myself that the whole cut would surely look different, much better once she finished styling it and added product. But when she turned me

around once more, my hair did *not* look better. It looked as though it had been transplanted from the head of a dead, 1970's soccer mom.

I suspect this sounds so silly, something from a B-level chick-flick, and for anyone else, it probably would have been. But as I sat in the backseat of my Uber, hot tears pooled and a lump bulged in my throat. A new BDD obsession, this time brought on by my own insistence, had begun.

After offering shaky smiles to the patients and staff members on their way to dinner who said they liked my new 'do, I got permission to step inside the front office to call Mom, although I didn't know what I was going to say. The rational parts of my brain, rarely fully drowned out by BDD, kept tugging at me, gawking at this new level of selfishness. *She lost her mom today, you asshole.* But I couldn't help it, so I dialed. As soon as she said, "Hello," tears streamed. Gasping between sobs, making each phrase almost unintelligible, I said, "Mom, I got blunt bangs today and they look fucking terrible. I'm so ugly. It's all my fault."

Even though Mom and I have since talked about that conversation, the dark beginning of the worst depressive episode I've ever experienced, I'll never be able to fully understand what went through her mind that night. Here was her 21-year-old daughter, frantically calling on the day her mother died to bawl over a bad haircut. Of course, she had seen me through enough of this illness to know that BDD couldn't care less about convenience. When the disease flared up, it transformed into a beast nearly impossible to control. But that knowledge couldn't have made this unexpected, ill-timed outburst any easier. Neither of us remember much of her side of the conversation, and when I brought it up recently, she simply said, "I had to put my stuff aside and be Mom."

My view of this self-perceived “terrible haircut” didn’t improve overnight; instead, it steadily grew worse. Not even 24 hours before, I had felt good enough about myself and my appearance to play with it, even feeling excited for my nearing discharge into partial care, the last clinical step in regaining my physical and emotional freedom. Now, that girl seemed hundreds of miles away. With each illicit mirror visit, my fingers moving in endless combinations to try and make my hair look okay again, I felt more and more angry, more and more hopeless. I’d stare at myself, seeing only those off-kilter bangs, and ask the same question over and over: *How the hell could I have been so stupid?*

I’m not one to hide when I’m hurting, especially in Therapy Land. Even if I hadn’t told my team the dark thoughts going on inside my head, they would’ve easily been able to tell that something had gone very wrong. Suddenly, the talkative, dry-humored patient they’d come to know over the last few months had disappeared, replaced by a listless, distraught drone even worse off than when she started.

My step-down to partial care, scheduled for October 25, suddenly got postponed indefinitely. Progress ceased. The intense heaviness of the following month, during which Rogers temporarily transferred me back to inpatient for high suicidal ideation, now blurs together, an Ativan-fueled nightmare drenched in watercolor. I vaguely remember having trouble keeping food down and crying more often than not. But I can vividly recall the hurt and resentment I felt toward my care team, that sting of abandonment when they’d turn me away at their office doors, gently but firmly reminding me to use my coping skills (the equivalent, I believed, of yelling at a drowning man to doggy paddle). And through all this, the person I resented most was Mom.

Why couldn't she just let me die? More than that, why couldn't I force myself to let *her* go? Since BDD had taken over two years earlier, my quality of life had depleted to the point where living took place almost exclusively inside my head. And that had become such a terrifying place. My world had shrunk to the size of my face, causing any perceived affront to my appearance to spur immense pain and suffering. I had read the International OCD Foundation claim that approximately 80% of BDD patients experience suicidal ideation. I knew that one in four attempt suicide. Couldn't she accept that I couldn't bear to live this way anymore? If someone like Danny—so full of buoyancy and delight, of confidence and fearlessness—could give up so completely, how was I expected to survive?

After Danny died, Mom forced herself to drive to his house and visit his mother, Connie Fabrezio. When the door opened, Mom found herself facing a ghost. Connie, a short and stout brunette who'd always had an air of confidence, if not unapproachability, had been reduced to the two-dimensional. Mom says her eyes looked listless and bewildered, as though pleading for a response to the question she didn't know how to ask, the one Mom didn't know how to answer.

Has she ever stopped wondering? From what Mom has told me about Shamokin, the small, Catholic coal-town where she and Danny grew up, talking openly about poor mental health, even to one's parents, wouldn't necessarily have been well received (thoughts of suicide—the ultimate sin—even less so). What did Danny share, if anything? I picture Connie in the months and years after his death, long after life had returned to normal for most, searching every word they'd exchanged for some sign that her son needed help, that he had been falling. Even now, in her late 80s, I imagine she wakes each morning asking God for wings, so she can fly around the sun to catch him.

As they sat at the Fabrezios' dining table, nursing cold coffee, Connie asked Mom if she'd cried yet. Surprised by the question, Mom told her that she hadn't. When Connie asked why, Mom said she was too scared. Mom would continue to stay numb until the funeral, when the organ, Danny's favorite instrument, began to play. After that, she can't remember when the tears stopped.

Sometimes, when the sky turns black, I find myself asking the same question I asked two years ago: Why did *I* survive? Though I still don't have an answer, I do know I have Mom to thank. I don't mean to discredit myself; my strength and resiliency pulled me through. But without Mom's light, I never would have seen them. For reasons I doubt I'll understand until I become a mother, her confidence in me never faltered; even when my mind was at its darkest, she knew that she could illuminate the path home.

Usually, I don't get gut feelings (or, more accurately, rarely can I properly decipher gut feelings). But for about two years now, I've had this weird sense of certainty that someday I'm going to have a son. In my mind, I picture a blond little boy, almost like that kid in *Forrest Gump*, sitting in the backseat of my Toyota Camry as we take a road trip down to Grandma's. I'll tell him stories and teach him songs, and we'll sing together. His name will be Danny, and he will live for the one who could not.

## Burning the Mask

*Fire that's closest kept burns most of all.*

—Lucetta, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

I stare at my mask, unhearing, mesmerized by how quickly it's found a home in the flames. It doesn't burn right away—at least, not in the way I'd imagined. The colors of the face—the peachy tan I've used for skin, golds and reds for cosmetics, blacks and blues for tears—don't melt into one another the way I thought they would. Flames shoot through, electrify its eyes (such hollow sockets), but the surrounding material, including my self-driven slurs scribbled on its right side, remain almost entirely unharmed. Instead of disintegrating into endless ash, the whole visage seems to glow deeply from within; it barely even browns. DISGUST, stamped across its comedone-riddled forehead in clay bubble letters, looks as sturdy and cheerful as a theatre marquee. That word mocks me with its permanence—even in fire!—but I still feel this urge to jump in after it. Those full, red lips, eerily similar in shape to my own, seem to be smirking: *Is that all you've got?*

“Ally?”

I don't know. I don't know why I've decided to burn this mask in the first place. At the last fire, the one Art Mike arranged in August, I'd chosen something far less personal—cheap dinner plates. I'd gotten the idea from Mom, when she'd mentioned over the phone that Dad had been standing on the countertop, trying to fix the top shelf without taking the dishes out first (an old set his late wife bought in Paris). They'd all crashed, shattering on the floor in irreparable pieces. She'd expected him to be upset, but after a minute he laughed, and they ended up smashing the rest just for fun. After all, the plates no longer served him; since they'd been collecting dust on the top shelf since before Francine died, nearly ten years prior, it seemed unlikely they ever had. With all the BDD-fueled rage I had inside me, the idea of busting china sounded wonderful, as soothing as I imagine a puff of tobacco does to a smoker trying to quit.

On our next public outing, I'd stopped in the Dollar Tree and picked up three plates, bordered with garish sunflowers, and Sharpied them with the horrible ways BDD made me feel: Gross, Ugly, Pathetic. I had thrown them to the flames almost gleefully, hoping they would *pop!* and *sizzzzle* from the heat, but two of the plates just ended up withering away; the other cracked lamely in half. Once everyone else took their turn and the fire was put out, Mike offered me a shovel to finish it off (“Smash the motherfucker”), but I was still disappointed. The shovel was too heavy and clunky in my hands to do much damage. It hadn't felt the way I'd wanted it to feel. It hadn't looked the way I'd pictured it.

Burning this mask was supposed to be my big send-off, my spectacular “fuck you” to BDD once and for all before leaving residential treatment in two weeks; I'd been there for almost five months, but it felt like at least a year. I'd worked so hard to change, to choose to practice radical faith each time I saw a choice, letting the compulsions that might feel like an instant high pass in favor of the harder decisions that would get me back to actually living. But staring at the

mask's hardness in the flames—this “being,” this separate entity—I had to ask, *Is this really being realistic?* I knew that, once released, all those real-world triggers would be back in full swing, just like Mike warned. I'd learned this art of recovery, the tools and strategies for managing my illness, in an opaline bubble. Did I really expect it not to splatter its contents once I dared to leave?

Now, in the flames, the mask transforms into something strangely important, even beautiful. I'm reminded of how diligently I worked on it, how much it means to me. *Why the hell would I just throw that away?* I want it back.

“Ally.”

I look up to see Dwight, our Experiential Therapist, his sun-beaten face patiently smiling at me. (I think, *Sunscreen, man. Don't you know you work outdoors?*) He's wearing sturdy boots, and the mask isn't far from the edge. Maybe he could kick it out of the pit if I asked, if I told him I'd made a mistake, changed my mind—that I don't really care about this silly ritual anymore. All I want is my face back.

Instead, I stare blankly and reply, “I'm sorry?”

“What are you losing, by giving up this mask?”

*Oh, you mean getting rid of this piece of artwork, that won't change anything at all? My sanity, clearly.* But I push the snark back down; it's not his fault I'm having a shit day. I play dumb instead. “What do you mean?”

Mike, my Behavioral Specialist/stand-in dad, shoots me a look. He knows I understand the question. Dwight pretends to ignore this and clears his throat. “Everyone's given up something today, something they want to let go. What do you have to lose?”

This depends entirely on the syllables stressed. What do I *have*, or what do I *have to*?

*Everything*, a voice inside says.

*Nothing*, whispers another.

*You keep me trapped*, I retort.

*No—I keep you safe*.

I look around at my fellow patients, their bodies in various stages of refueling, shivering in their hoodies and blankets, feeling more than a little embarrassed. It's mid-November, 37 degrees, the logs for seating still somewhat damp from the rainy night before (the fire nearly didn't start). We've been out for almost an hour. I know my friends love and support me, but I sense fingers starting to tap, knees beginning to jiggle. After kicking the ceremony off by thanking the Grandfathers for letting us use this land and sprinkling tobacco on the ground in gratitude (Dwight's a little hippy-dippy, but sincere), he had told us to go up to the fire whenever we felt like it; if we didn't, that was all right, too. But with a group of clinically anxious people-pleasers who don't want to draw attention to themselves or step on anyone's toes, offering options has not turned out to be the most efficient strategy. For a while, we've sat in silence, watching the fire burn. But once De Ette, a jokester with the prettiest brown eyes, stood up and read a scalding "fuck you" anthem to her childhood ghosts, things got going. Some people chucked stuff in, notes or objects that no longer served their mental health, while others just spoke. Maddie, an atypical anorexic and my best girlfriend here, burned two of her old suicide letters. Watching them smolder made me think of a poem I liked, "Fourteen Lines from Love Letters or Suicide Notes": *4. I bought the kind of crackers you like. / They are in the hall cupboard.* I'd actually taken a turn once before today, dropping a letter I wrote on-site to my intrusive thoughts in the heat. With the pounding fear I'd purposefully looked at Kate's butt in a

sexual way during Morning Snack (she's barely 18), OCD has won top spot today; I wanted to put the elements between us. "I am not bad, I am human," I said before letting it drop.

I still squirm with this—the connotation of that phrase, "I am human"—most of all when there's an "only" in the middle. It's fine for other people, like smoking weed or getting butterfly tattoos, but it's not something I've ever particularly wanted to be a part of. "I'm only human" seems like a convenient copout, a salve passed like whiskey 'round a bonfire to make failure that much more palatable.

I miss the bonfires we used to have at my house, those orangey reds and golds crackling against the backdrop of deep pond water and starry night sky. It's never felt completely like my house—still doesn't—but its size made it great for high-school parties. I think back to the one celebrating my graduation, our class's last hurrah, how I stood to the side, quietly shielding my eyes from the smoke. Some classmates who I wasn't particularly close with appreciated the sociability the fire provided. I didn't feel particularly connected with them, even at my own home, but I didn't mind much. I just wanted to be there and look at the flames.

When our ancestors discovered fire, what did they think? I picture two lovers, black hair sweeping over their shaking chests, staring at a lone flame for hours, maybe days, wondering what to do. How to feel. Was this good? If this was a god—for what else could it be—was he merciful, or did he seek vengeance? I wonder how long they sat before one convinced the other to creep closer; its heat, more pointed than human touch or animal hide, must have felt rhapsodic on bare hands. When did they let their guards down? Who was the first to get too close? I picture the woman, the brave one, swallowing the flame whole for its beauty, screaming as she learns what it means to be burned.

When I first got to Rogers, I tried to get my team to see how the dozens of braille-like bumps on my forehead ruined any chance I had at being beautiful. Most would lazily spew some variation of that canned phrase, “You’re only human.” The more experienced staff members like Mike challenged me on this aversion to imperfection, something I still wasn’t entirely convinced I had—Had they seen my average gen-ed grades? My Narnia-deep purse?—by offering tangible solutions. In the beginning I heard something like this: *Track your bans. Mark down every time you submit and resist what your illness wants you to do in this tiny green notebook. You will lose it approximately three times a day. Pay attention to the panic; let it sit. It may hurt like hell FOR SO DAMN LONG but eventually you’ll be too tired and/or dead inside to care!*

The bottom line, apparently, was that this sadness, this elephant of pain that had set up camp on my chest, would eventually pass. “If you change these destructive behaviors,” Mike would say, trying to appeal of my better nature, “your thoughts might change, too.” But when I first started at residential, I didn’t *want* to change my behaviors; I certainly didn’t want to pay attention to them. Those behaviors, like restricting my diet, researching constantly, and spending significant time and money on my skincare routine, were exhausting, yes—but they numbed what hurt. I used to like describing the buzz they gave me as zoning out to elevator music. As long as I gave in to those urges without thinking about them too much, the anxiety over my appearance simmered down; if only for a moment, I could ignore everything else I’d lost. Better yet, I could pretend I hadn’t lost a thing. If I could fix my face, that would fix my depression and anxiety, which in turn would fix my mood, which would fix my life and let me be pretty and successful and loved and anything else I’d ever wanted. I could forget this whole thing ever even happened. That diehard focus on fixing, always fixing, made all the bad stuff go away. Couldn’t Mike see? Those compulsions, the ones the professionals said were killing me, were the only

things protecting me from facing the gravity of who I'd become; of feeling more disgusting than I already did.

I started making my mask during that first week at residential in Art Therapy, which was held in the basement across from Dr. Smith's office. Seeing that therapy "extracurricular" on the schedule in my intake packet wasn't unexpected—they'd had the same sort of deal at Philly partial and Wisconsin inpatient—but this atmosphere was a pleasant surprise. The space was colorful and startlingly messy, its four long tables covered in ten variations of paint splatter, overflowing with art supplies and half-finished projects. It looked nothing like the other two rooms, with their clinical white walls and worn materials that had to be whisked back to the closet at the end of the hour before the next set of patients came in. There was nothing inherently wrong with the other art therapists I'd known, both plump ladies with bad haircuts and horribly upbeat speech patterns, but I didn't particularly like either of them or the classes they ran. Their "therapy talk" felt embarrassingly clichéd, as did their art prompts: if I had to explain my reasoning for scribbling some meaningless lines and patterns that were supposed to represent my inner turmoil and deep-seated sadness one more time, I was gonna lose my shit.

But this therapist, whom everyone called Art Mike, seemed better. With his thick Wisconsin accent (think Canadian) and goofy head of hair, he reminded me of a Midwestern Jay Leno, sans irony. What I liked best was that he stayed out of our way. If anyone wanted help, he would certainly offer it, but he didn't ask many questions and mostly just joked with the people who felt like talking. When I first saw the masks on the wall—a batch of clumpy, twisted faces shed by former patients—something inside shifted. I felt a surge of creative excitement that I hadn't experienced since those first few weeks when I was discovering all the creative

opportunities at Temple. Finally, I saw a tangible way to make other people see what I did—to actually make them understand what was so wrong: *You see, I'm sorry, but here's why I just can't be "me" anymore.*

Was there even a real me left, or was she all gone? I'd chewed on this as everyone else kept talking when I started building the foundation of the mask (the most important part—how could anything on top look nice if that wasn't right?), and I chew on it now as I begin to lose sight of my original target in the growing blaze. I've been here for months. Will this *ever* not be a thing for me? Ignorantly, I used to be jealous of people with weight-related disorders or different, more physical OCD themes: from my perspective, they didn't have to be in the active state of eating all the time, or getting dirty, and I wanted to be able to “take breaks” like them. Though I'd since learned how wrong I was, it still bothered me that I couldn't set aside my face. But with this mask, I could; I could hold the face I *knew* was there, despite all these therapists telling me it was an illusion, a badly broken perception, right in my hand. On the flesh-colored cheek, I wrote thoughts that repeated like a scratched record: “You looked prettier last year. What did you do wrong? What are you missing? So bumpy . . . Your foundation is ruined.” I couldn't stop. The other cheek—the one that is meant to represent my inner self—looked like a stained-glass window, featuring different shades of the same dark palette: blacks, grays, and blues. One small “pane” is gold, with the question *Hope?* written on it in fading Sharpie. Both sides are stitched together down the middle with pen-stroked sutures. As the flames finally begin to melt those phrases and they become harder to read, I try to go back, to meditate on why I'd sought out Rogers in the first place.

I'd been dying before. That I now knew for sure. In fact, some part of me had known that for over a year, ever since the previous summer when I'd watched Ethan Smith's 2014

International OCD Foundation keynote speech in a cramped, dark, group-TV room at Philly partial, the only light from a raging sun fighting its way in through the blinders. (I sat strategically in the corner, wary of the UV rays.) What did I have to lose then? Up until that point, I'd resented having to be in treatment at all. Rationally I knew I was lucky to be getting help, but I missed school so much, and my Behavioral Specialist, Nicole, made an obscene number of corny jokes. Also, her instructions to do things like lean my nose into a cup of bleach (the potential irritation of the chemicals worried me) were pissing me off. At best, it felt like a waste of time. This was simply another extracurricular to put aside difficult relationships, my part-time poetry class, and my job at the GAP. Surely, I would be back in school in no time. But watching Ethan Smith, so poised and authoritative on stage, share videos of himself tackling exposures (still a new concept to me then) at the height of his illness absolutely melted me. We witnessed him bawling and screaming in a primal, helpless way; it was almost impossible to believe this was the confident man speaking before us. And I saw myself in those videos. Watching this disease onscreen, where I could clearly see its lies objectively, produced a concoction of grief and terror that I had never known. For the first time, I realized I wasn't dealing with more traditional depression, or even with an unnaturally long slump. I was in *danger*.

Now, more than a year of collective treatment later, was I not right back where I started? Christ . . . My pimpled forehead—the longest, most painful BDD obsession I'd ever experienced, one that had driven me from being housebound to getting treatment in Wisconsin—had inspired the mask. Hell, the damn forehead was a mask in itself. But those blemishes had almost completely cleared up; ironically, that fateful flaw on the burning face created during my first week in that art room had disappeared, ash risen from a chimney.

I knew the therapy had helped enormously and could sense change, could feel my strengthened sense of power and resistance when BDD pushed me to self-soothe in unhealthy ways. But I was scared to answer a nagging question: If the bumps *hadn't* cleared, would I have made the same progress? After all, as every professional had promised, new themes continue to pop up anyway. Some, like hating my right eyebrow, lost hold in a week or two, but others, like the bangs that had driven me back to inpatient just a few weeks before, metastasized the roots of my former obsession.

*Will I ever get past this?*

The silent shriek of the mask's contorting face calls me back. I pay attention to the cold permeating my fingers, and my self-conscious reverie recedes like a sleepy tide. Suddenly, everyone is huddled around the pit. Mike stands next to me, his gloved hand comforting against my back. We all stare as those red lips wail for the last time. This creature, that awful thing that had relished in the flames, suddenly shrivels. There's nothing left. I am stunned. Somehow, I'd convinced myself this mask would fight the flames forever. Now I stand before a fire that seems to have forgotten me completely. In its embers, I have lost self-hatred, if only metaphorically, so a new identity can burn within.

## Lady and the Sun

*How do I explain the hatred of the sun,  
the terrible wonder of being alive?*

—Erika L. Sánchez

February 2020: Sun streaks through the windows of room B-306, where I sit at my desk chatting with a friend about our upcoming midterms, right knee jiggling as we wait for American Lit to start. When Professor Hebert-Leiter, a bird-like woman with the soothing voice of a flight attendant, tells us we will begin class a bit differently today, I hold my breath. Between extra choir rehearsals to prepare for the spring break tour in D.C. and my work for other classes, I haven't managed to get to last night's required reading, and a different start to class could mean I'll be exposed. Clapping with excitement, she tells us that since we are studying Emerson, a leader of the transcendentalist movement of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, she'd like to kick things off by having us free-write for ten minutes on the gorgeous weather outside. I exhale. *Easy*, I think. She encourages us to move wherever we need to get the best possible view. I feel a silly sense of pride when I realize I have the best one.

When it comes to actually writing, though, my pen hovers above the page, stuck in a holding pattern. I want to lose myself in the day's sparkle the way Emerson might, noting how

the cloudless blue breathes life into the winter grass, students trickling like ants on the ground below. But even now, over a year after having successfully completed BDD treatment in Wisconsin and resuming my formal education, the first emotions I associate with beautiful days remain decidedly negative. Inwardly, I roll my eyes at this characteristic neuroticism. *Can't even enjoy something as simple as the sun, can you?*

When BDD got bad, sunshine was one of the first of life's pleasures to sour. Physically, when I had to go outside, it demanded further compulsions to ensure my skin's safety, forcing me to beware the added threats of heat and sweat. I recall one day leaving Philly partial using an umbrella as a parasol, shielding my face and squinting yellow as I waited for the bus. Sure, sun could peel flesh, fry it like the fringe of an overdone egg, but, strangely, this symptom didn't worry me, nor did the threat of cancer. Instead, I agonized over redness. Though I loved the look of cosmetic blush, the painted rose of a baby-doll's cheek, real sunlight was much messier. On the off occasions I left myself exposed, uneven, unsightly blotches appeared, leaving me ashamed and questioning my commitment to beauty. Where most would see a robust flush, a sign of a healthy human enjoying the outdoors, I saw stain.

The sun exhausted me. When I'd moved back home, mornings where the sky looked pregnant with rain filled me with relief; for a little while, I'd be able to hide. Tucked under my cream, quilted covers, re-watching *Breaking Bad* or sleeping, I felt safe, secure in the knowledge that the rest of the world might be taking a break, too. But when summer rays streamed through my linen curtains, exposing the dust that had filmed over my jewelry stand and books I no longer had the concentration to read, playing pretend became much harder. Suddenly, my nerves felt on display. I'd sit up and look across the road at our pond, watching Canadian geese make ripples in the water, and feel utterly separated from the vitality of the natural world. Ugly. Frozen.

When Dr. Hebert-Leiter calls us back and asks if anyone would like to share what they've written, I shyly raise my hand. I read a watered-down description of this pressure I feel from the sun and the soft spot I have for rainy days because there are no expectations. People move slower, speak softer. Unlike sunshine, which too often spurs jerked movement and false smiles, rainfall provides a blank slate, a stage better suited for authentic connection. It doesn't just discourage masks; it washes them away.

When I'm done, no one speaks. Finally, Hebert-Leiter clears her throat. "Doesn't it feel like we know Allison better now?" The class nods. My ears grow hot; I didn't mean to be dark, or to reveal that much. When she calls on someone else, I feel as though July sun has dipped behind a cloud.

I still suffer from an irrational, Gen Z-esque fear that everyone knows and cares about my every thought, rendering me emotionally naked. In March, I went on a few dates with a psychology/philosophy major who said I was experiencing a phenomenon clinically referred to as the Illusion of Transparency: No matter how sane they might be, humans have this knack for assuming their brains are see-through. I've always pictured mine as being housed in smudged glass. It's not that I *want* everyone to know my most protected secrets, but if they're going to see my strangeness, they may as well see it clearly, in the proper light.

Emerson famously wrote, "Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, drink the wild air." That's all well and good, BDD still likes to whisper, but what about the physical consequences? It's not as though Emerson takes into consideration the dangers of the natural world on our complexions. What does he know about the ugliness of sunburns, or the complexities of sea and air that expose delicate flesh to imbalances, throwing our largest organ all out of tune? Nothing, I remind myself, because our skin is not the instrument; our bodies are. That's not to say earthly beauty is

invalid. Our brains are wired to adore loveliness, and to deny its pleasures would be dishonest, if not foolish. Still, skin's primary purpose, I now know, is to serve as armor, protecting the sacred vessels from which we sing, that allow us to sail our way through the world.

Now I stand at the helm, steering the ship. Making choices and sticking to them has never been my strong suit (just ask my writing professors), and as a 23-year-old woman nearing the completion of undergrad, that's all life seems to hold these days. Where will I go next? On what island will I land? I read somewhere that people with OCD and related disorders struggle with the decision-making process because they are acutely aware of the options they're giving up, the dangers that lie in the path they choose. This may be so, but as I continue to streak through life's sparkling waters, maybe I can learn to see uncertainty as a buoy rather than a stone. Perhaps a state of unknowing, though often uncomfortable, is essential for the pleasures only chance can bring.

Strangely, when I made the choice to transfer to Lycoming College in January of 2019, just four weeks after I'd flown back from Wisconsin in time for the holidays, I had no hesitancy at all. In an odd role reversal, Mom was the one who felt apprehensive. Although excited for me, she worried how I'd handle being back in an academic environment, associating with kids who'd been living in the "normal" world all this time. As I gathered the last of my things before making the drive to my dorm, she surprised me with a beautiful, novelty pillow, stitched with lacy cursive: "You Are My Sunshine." I knew the gift was meant to inspire what already radiated from inside, and it did.

But, nearly two years later, I've also learned how easy it is to forget that warmth. My relationship with the face I see in the mirror—the hairline that's too thin, the nose that slants the wrong way—continues to challenge me. It's still hard not to see my body, my self, as an endless

series of pieces and projects, only acceptable once put together or complete. Since BDD is a disorder of perception, I know I'll never be completely separated from that anxiety, and remembering the good things—how far I've traveled—can be difficult, too sun-struck to visualize.

What *should* sunshine feel like? When I ask myself that seemingly obvious question, I'm often lost in experiences that *felt* like the way I believe sunlight should feel. Singing in the car again. Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* late at night last January and sobbing, mostly because of the plot, but also because it was the first book I'd read in years where I actually felt something. Holding my best friend after a fight with her boyfriend as she cried into my shirtfront. Laughing at *Glee* with Mom.

Today, though, I take a late-afternoon walk around downtown Williamsport to see if I can capture the sun's essence, its promise of beauty and light. For Pennsylvania in October, the air, though breezy, feels uncharacteristically warm. I wear my favorite jacket, the navy one I've had since high school whose insides are pilling, and as I pass The Moon and Raven, I think of the huge coat worn by the woman in the snowy street. In two months, all these streets will freeze over, but for now, tiny weeds still sprout from the cracks. I peer inside the large side window and see the bartender hand a man his drink, sunlight glinting off the glass.

Maples help to illuminate each street corner, so saturated with vivid gold you'd think God painted the leaves. I catch a whiff of pizza, the cheesy, delectable slices from Vinnie's on West Fourth, and my mouth waters. How lovely it is to eat pizza again; I make a mental note to pick some up for dinner. The streets are quieter than normal, hushed as though, if we remained still enough, the world might whisper how to heal the pandemic. But I can still hear restaurant patrons chatting outside, that slow, sleepy way one talks with good friends on a weeknight. As

the sky dims, transforming into a rosy twilight, I cup the back of my neck, relishing how warm it feels. I catch my reflection in the bookstore window, smile, and keep walking.

## Acknowledgements

For the sake of privacy, certain names in this story have been changed.

I could not have taken on this project without the support of my parents and chosen family of friends. Writing this memoir kicked my unique brand of neuroticism up a notch (sometimes six), but instead of telling me to cool it or text back in eight months, they listened with infinite patience, making me feel safe and loved.

Dr. Sascha Feinstein, my professor and mentor, also granted me this much-needed grace. His willingness to meet me where I was while always pushing me to dig deeper, to find the ‘why,’ is a testament to his dedication and care for his students. I could not have asked for a better guide.

Lastly, I would like to thank the mental health professionals who have led and continue to lead me toward recovery from OCD and BDD. The path isn’t linear, but I wouldn’t be on it without their stubbornness and compassion.

