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To my mom

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PART 1: WHERE I'M AT



one

It's so hard to *talk* when you want to kill yourself. That's above and beyond everything else, and it's not a mental complaint—it's a physical thing, like it's physically hard to open your mouth and make the words come out. They don't come out smooth and in conjunction with your brain the way normal people's words do; they come out in chunks as if from a crushed-ice dispenser; you stumble on them as they gather behind your lower lip. So you just keep quiet.

"Have you ever noticed how on all the ads on TV, people are *watching* TV?" my friend is like.

"Pass it, son," my other friend is like.

"No, yo, that's true," my other other friend is like. "There's always somebody on a couch, unless it's an allergy ad and they're in a field—"

"Or on a horse on the beach."

"Those ads are always for herpes."

Laughter.

"How do you even tell someone you have that?" That's Aaron. It's his house. "That must be such a weird conversation: 'Hey, before we do this, you should know ...'"

"Your moms didn't mind last night."

"Ohhhh!"

"Son!"

Aaron lobs a punch at Ronny, the antagonist. Ronny is small and wears jewelry; he once told me Craig, *when a man puts on his first piece of jewelry, there's no turning back*. He punches back with his hand with the big limp gold bracelet on it; it hits Aaron's watch, clanging.

"Son, what you tryin'to do with my gold, yo?" Ronny shakes his wrist and turns his attention to the pot.

There's always pot at Aaron's house; he has a room with an entirely separate ventilation system and lockable door that his parents could rent out as another apartment. Resin streaks outline his light switch, and his bedsheet is pockmarked with black circles. There are stains on there, too, shimmery stains which indicate certain activities that take place between Aaron and his girlfriend. I look at them (the stains, then the couple). I'm jealous. But then again, I'm beyond jealous.

"Craig? You want?"

It's passed to me, wrapped up in a concise delivery system, but I pass it on. I'm doing an experiment with my brain. I'm seeing if maybe pot is the problem; maybe that's what has come in and robbed me. I do this every so often, for a few weeks, and then I smoke a *lot* of pot, just to test if maybe the *lack* of it is what has robbed me.

"You all right, man?"

This should be my name. I could be like a superhero: You All Right Man.

"Ah..." I stumble.

"Don't bug Craig," Ronny is like. "He's in the Craig zone. He's Craig-ing out."

"Yeah." I move the muscles that make me smile. "I'm just. . . kinda . . . you know . . ."

You see how the words work? They betray your mouth and walk away.

"Are you okay?" Nia asks. Nia is Aaron's girlfriend. She's in physical contact with Aaron at all

times. Right now she's on the floor next to his leg. She has big eyes.

"I'm fine," I tell her. ~~The blue glow of the flat-screen TV in front of us ricochets off her eyes as~~ she turns back to it. We're watching a nature special on the deep ocean.

"Holy shit, look at that, son!" Ronny is like, blowing smoke—I don't know how it got back to him already. There's an octopus on the screen with giant ears, translucent, flapping through the water in the cold light of a submersible.

"Scientists have playfully named this specimen Dumbo," the TV narrator says.

I smile to myself. I have a secret: I wish I was Dumbo the Octopus. Adapted to freezing deep-ocean temperatures, I'd flop around down there at peace. The big concerns of my life would be what sort of bottom-coating slime to feed off of—that's not so different from now—plus I wouldn't have any natural predators; then again, I don't have any now, and that hasn't done me a whole lot of good. But it suddenly makes sense: I'd like to be under the sea, as an octopus.

"I'll be back," I say, getting up from my spot on the couch, which Scruggs, a friend who was relegated to the floor, immediately claims, slinking up in one fluid motion.

"You didn't call one-five," he's like.

"One-five?" I try.

"Too late."

I shrug and climb over clothes and people's legs to the beige, apartment-front-door-style door; I move through that, to the right: Aaron's warm bathroom.

I have a system with bathrooms. I spend a lot of time in them. They are sanctuaries, public places of peace spaced throughout the world for people like me. When I pop into Aaron's, I continue my normal routine of wasting time. I turn the light off first. Then I sigh. Then I turn around, face the door I just closed, pull down my pants, and fall on the toilet—I don't sit; I fall like a carcass, feeling my butt accommodate the rim. Then I put my head in my hands and breathe out as I, well, y'know, piss. I always try to enjoy it, to feel it come out and realize that it's my body doing something it has to do, like eating, although I'm not too good at that. I bury my face in my hands and wish that it could go on forever because it feels good. You do it and it's done. It doesn't take any effort or any planning. You don't put it off. That would be really screwed up, I think. If you had such problems that you didn't pee. Like being anorexic, except with urine. If you held it in as self-punishment. I wonder if anyone does that?

I finish up and flush, reaching behind me, my head still down. Then I get up and turn on the light. (Did anyone notice I was in here in the dark? Did they see the lack of light under the crack and notice it like a roach? Did Nia see?) Then I look in the mirror.

I look so normal. I look like I've always looked, like I did before the fall of last year. Dark hair and dark eyes and one snagged tooth. Big eyebrows that meet in the middle. A long nose, sort of twisted. Pupils that are naturally large—it's not the pot—which blend into the dark brown to make two big saucer eyes, holes in me. Wisps of hair above my upper lip. This is Craig.

And I always look like I'm about to cry.

I put on the hot water and splash it at my face to feel something. In a few seconds I'm going to have to go back and face the crowd. But I can sit in the dark on the toilet a little more, can't I? I always manage to make a trip to the bathroom take five minutes.

two

“How’re you doing?” Dr. Minerva asks.

Her office has a bookshelf, like all shrinks’ offices. I used to not want to call them *shrinks*, but now that I’ve been through so many, I feel entitled to it. It’s an adult term, and it’s disrespectful, and I’m more than two thirds adult and I’m pretty disrespectful, so what the hell.

Like all shrinks’ offices, anyway, it has The Bookshelf full of required reading. First of all there the DSM, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, which lists every kind of psychological disorder known to man—*that’s* fun reading. Very thick book. I don’t have a whole lot of what’s in there—I just have one big thing—but I know all about it from skimming. There’s great stuff in there. There’s a disease called Ondine’s Curse, in which your body loses the ability to *breathe* involuntarily. Can you imagine? You have to think “breathe, breathe” all the time, or you stop breathing. Most people who get it die.

If the shrink is classy, she’ll (mostly *she’ll*, occasionally a *he’ll*) have a *bunch* of DSMs, because they come in different editions—III, IV, and V are the most common. I don’t think you can find a DSM II. It came out in 1963 or something. It takes like ten years to put one out, and they’re working on VI.

Jeez, I could be a shrink.

Now, in addition to the DSMs, there are an assortment of specific books on psychiatric disorder things like *The Freedom from Depression Workbook*; *Anxiety & Panic Attacks: Their Cause and Cure*; and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Always hardcover. No paperbacks in a shrink’s office. Usually there’s at least one book on childhood sexual abuse, like *The Wounded Heart*, and one shrink went to caught me looking at that and said, “That book is about childhood sexual abuse.”

And I was like, “Uh-huh?”

And she said, “It’s for people who were abused.”

And I nodded.

“Were you?”

She had a little-old-lady face, this one, with a shock of white hair, and I never saw her again. What kind of question was that? Of *course* I wasn’t abused. If I were, things would be so simple. I’d have a reason for being in shrinks’ offices. I’d have a justification and something that I could work on. The world wasn’t going to give me something that tidy.

“I’m fine. Well, I’m not fine—I’m here.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’ve been coming here for a while.”

Dr. Minerva always has such amazing outfits. It’s not that she’s particularly sexy or beautiful; she just carves herself out well. Today she has a red sweater and red lipstick that is exactly the same red. It’s as if she went to the paint store to match them up.

“I want to not have to come here.”

“Well, you’re in a process. How’re you doing?”

This is her prompt question. The shrinks always have one prompt question. I’ve had ones that

said “What’s up?” “How are we?” and even “What’s happening in the world of Craig?” They never change. It’s like their jingle.

“I didn’t wake up well today.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“I slept okay.”

She looks completely stone, staring ahead. I don’t know how they do this: the psych-poker face. Psychologists should play poker. Maybe they do. Maybe they’re the ones who win all the money on TV. Then they have the gall to charge my mom \$120/hour. They’re very greedy.

“What happened when you woke up?”

“I was having a dream. I don’t know what it was, but when I woke up, I had this awful realization that I was awake. It hit me like a brick in the groin.”

“Like a brick in the groin, I see.”

“I didn’t want to wake up. I was having a much better time asleep. And that’s really sad. It was almost like a reverse nightmare, like when you wake up from a nightmare you’re so relieved. I woke up *into* a nightmare.”

“And what is that nightmare, Craig?”

“Life.”

“Life is a nightmare.”

“Yes.”

We stop. Cosmic moment, I guess. *Ooooh*, is life really a nightmare? We need to spend like ten seconds contemplating that.

“What did you do when you realized you were awake?”

“I lay in bed.” There were more things to tell her, things I held back: like the fact that I was *hungry* in bed this morning. I hadn’t eaten the night before. I went to bed exhausted from homework and knew as I hit the pillow that I would pay for it in the morning, that I would wake up *really* hungry, that I would cross the line where my stomach gets so needy that I can’t eat anything. I woke up and my stomach was screaming, hollowing itself out under my little chest. I didn’t want to do anything about it. I didn’t want to eat. The idea of eating made me hurt more. I couldn’t think of anything—no one single solitary food item—that I would be able to handle, except coffee yogurt, and I was *sick* of coffee yogurt.

I rolled over on my stomach and balled my fists and held them against my gut like I was praying. The fists pushed my stomach against itself and fooled it into thinking it was full. I held this position, warm, my brain rotating, the seconds whirring by. Only the pure urge, the one thing that never let me down, got me out of bed fifty minutes later.

“I got up when I had to piss.”

“I see.”

“That was great.”

“You like peeing. You’ve mentioned this before.”

“Yeah. It’s simple.”

“You like simple.”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“Some people thrive on complexity, Craig.”

“Well, not me. As I was walking over here, I was thinking ... I have this fantasy of being a bike messenger.”

“Ah.”

“It would be so simple, and direct, and I would get paid for it. It would be an Anchor.”

“What about school, Craig? You have school for an Anchor.”

“School is too all over the place. It spirals out into a million different things.”

“Your Tentacles.”

I have to hand it to her; Dr. Minerva picked up on my lingo pretty quickly. *Tentacles* is my term—the Tentacles are the evil tasks that invade my life. Like, for example, my American History class last week, which necessitated me writing a paper on the weapons of the Revolutionary War, which necessitated me traveling to the Metropolitan Museum to check out some of the old guns, which necessitated me getting in the subway, which necessitated me being away from my cell phone and e-mail for 45 minutes, which meant that I didn’t get to respond to a mass mail sent out by my teacher asking who needed extra credit, which meant other kids snapped up the extra credit, which meant I wasn’t going to get a 98 in the class, which meant I wasn’t anywhere close to a 98.6 average (body temperature, that’s what you needed to get), which meant I wasn’t going to get into a Good College, which meant I wasn’t going to have a Good Job, which meant I wasn’t going to have health insurance, which meant I’d have to pay tremendous amounts of money for the shrinks and drugs my brain needed, which meant I wasn’t going to have enough money to pay for a Good Lifestyle, which meant I’d feel ashamed, which meant I’d get depressed, and that was the big one because I knew what that did to me: it made it so I wouldn’t get out of bed, which led to the ultimate thing—homelessness. If you can’t get out of bed for long enough, people come and take your bed away.

The opposite of the Tentacles are the Anchors. The Anchors are things that occupy my mind and make me feel good temporarily. Riding my bike is an Anchor. Doing flash cards is an Anchor. Watching people play video games at Aaron’s is an Anchor. The answers are simple and sequential. There aren’t any decisions. There aren’t any Tentacles. There’s just a stack of tasks that you tackle. You don’t have to deal with other people.

“There are a lot of Tentacles,” I admit. “But I should be able to handle them. The problem is that I’m so lazy.”

“How are you lazy, Craig?”

“I waste at least an hour every day lying in bed. Then I waste time pacing. I waste time thinking. I waste time being quiet and not saying anything because I’m afraid I’ll stutter.”

“Do you have a problem with stuttering?”

“When I’m depressed, it won’t come out right. I’ll trail off in midsentence.”

“I see.” She writes something down on her legal pad. *Craig, this will go on your permanent record.*

“I don’t—” I shake my head. “The bike thing.”

“What? What were you going to say?” This is another trick of shrinks. They never let you stop in midthought. If you open your mouth, they want to know exactly what you had the intention of saying. The party line is that some of the most profound truths about us are things that we stop saying in the middle, but I think they do it to make us feel important. One thing’s for sure: no one else in life says to me, “Wait, Craig, what were you going to say?”

“I was going to say that I don’t think the stuttering is like, a real problem. I just think it’s one of my symptoms.”

“Like sweating.”

“Right.” The sweating is awful. It’s not as bad as the not eating, but it’s *weird*—cold sweat, all over my forehead, having to be wiped off every two minutes, smelling like skin concentrate. People notice. It’s one of the few things people notice.

“You’re not stuttering now.”

“This is being paid for. I don’t want to waste time.”

Pause. Now we have one of our silent battles; I look at Dr. Minerva and she looks at me. It’s a contest as to who will crack first. She puts on her poker face; I don’t have any extra faces to put on, just the normal Craig face.

We lock eyes. I’m waiting for her to say something profound—I always am, even though it’ll never happen. I’m waiting for her to say “Craig, what you need to do is X” and for the Shift to occur. I want there to be a Shift so bad. I want to feel my brain slide back into the slot it was meant to be in, rest there the way it did before the fall of last year, back when I was young, and witty, and my teacher said I had incredible promise, and I *had* incredible promise, and I spoke up in class because I was excited and smart about the world. I want the Shift so bad. I’m waiting for the phrase that will invoke it. It’ll be like a miracle within my life. But is Dr. Minerva a miracle worker? No. She’s a thin, tan lady from Greece with red lipstick.

She breaks first.

“About your bike riding, you said you wanted to be a messenger.”

“Yes.”

“You already have a bike, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you ride it a lot?”

“Not that much. Mom won’t let me ride it to school. But I ride around Brooklyn on weekends.”

“What does it feel like when you ride your bike, Craig?”

I pause. “. . . Geometric.”

“Geometric.”

“Yeah. Like, *You have to avoid this truck. Don’t get hit in the head by these metal pipes. Make a right. The rules are defined and you follow them.*”

“Like a video game.”

“Sure. I love video games. Even just to watch. Since I was a kid.”

“Which you often refer to as ‘back when you were happy.’”

“Right.” I smooth my shirt out. I get dressed up for these little meetings too. Good khakis and a white dress shirt. We’re dressing up for each other. We should really go get some coffee and make a scandal—the Greek therapist and her high school boyfriend. We could be famous. That would get me money. That might make me happy.

“Do you remember some of the things that made you happy?”

“The video games.” I laugh.

“What’s funny?”

“I was walking down my block the other day, and behind me was a mother with her kid, and the mother was saying, ‘Now, Timmy, I don’t want you to complain about it. You can’t play video games twenty-four hours a day.’ And Timmy goes, ‘But I *want* to!’ And I turned around and told him, ‘Me too.’”

“You want to play video games twenty-four hours a day?”

“Or watch. I just want to not be me. Whether it’s sleeping or playing video games or riding my bike or studying. Giving my brain up. That’s what’s important.”

“You’re very clear about what you want.”

“Yeah.”

“What did you want when you were a kid? Back when you were happy? What did you want to be?”

when you grew up?"

~~Dr. Minerva is a good shrink, I think. That isn't the answer. But it is a damn good question. What did I want to be when I grew up?~~

three

When I was four, this is how things were:

Our family lived in a crappy apartment in Manhattan. I didn't know it was crappy at the time, because I didn't have our better apartment to compare it to yet. But there was exposed piping. That's no good. You don't want to raise your child in a house with exposed piping. I remember there was a green pipe and a red pipe and a white pipe, gathered near the corner of the hallway just before the bathroom, and as soon as I could walk I investigated them all, walked up to them and put my palm about two millimeters away from each one to test if it was hot or cold. One was cold, one was hot, and the red one was *really* hot. Two millimeters wasn't enough. I burned myself on it and Dad, who hadn't realized ("It must only get hot in the afternoon"), encased it in dark gray foam with duct tape, but duct tape never stopped me and I thought the foam was fun to pick at and chew so I picked it off and chewed it and then when other kids came over to my house I dared them to touch the re-exposed pipe. I told them anyone who came in *had* to touch it, otherwise they were a *pussy*, which was a word I learned from Dad watching TV, which I thought was great because it was a word with two meanings: the cat that girls liked and the thing you called people to make them do stuff. Just like *chicken* had two meanings: the bird that walked around and the white stuff you ate. Some people touched the hot pipe and you called them *chicken* as well.

I had my own room but I didn't like to be alone in it; the only room I liked to be in was the living room, under the table that held all the encyclopedias. I made it my little fort; I put a blanket over me and worked in there, with a light that Dad rigged up. I worked on maps. I loved maps. I knew that we lived in Manhattan and I had a map of it, a Hagstrom Five Borough Atlas with all the streets laid out. I knew exactly where we lived, on the corner of 53rd Street and 3rd Avenue. Third Avenue was a yellow street because it was an avenue, big and long and important. Fifty-third Street was a little white street that went across Manhattan. The streets went sideways and the avenues went up-and-down; that was all you had to remember. (Dad helped me remember, too, when we went out for pancakes. He would ask, "Do you want them cut in streets and avenues, Craig?" And I'd go "Yes!" and he'd cut the stack of pancakes in a grid, and we'd name each street and avenue as we went along, making sure to get 3rd Ave. and 53rd Street.) It was so simple. If you were really advanced (like I was, *duh*), you knew that traffic on the even streets went east (East for Even) and the odd streets went west (West is Odd). The every bunch of streets, there were fat yellow streets, like the avenues, that went both ways. These were the famous streets: 42nd St., 34th St. The complete list from the bottom up was Chambers St., Canal St., Houston St., 14th St., 23rd St., 34th St., 42nd St., 57th St., 72nd St. (there wasn't any big street in the 60s; they got shafted), 79th St., 86th St., 96th St., and then you were in Harlem, where Manhattan effectively ended for little white boys who made forts under encyclopedias and studied maps.

As soon as I saw the Manhattan map, I wanted to draw it. I should be able to draw the place where I lived. So I asked Mom for tracing paper and she got it for me and I brought it into my fort and I pointed the light right down on the first map in the Hagstrom Atlas—downtown, where Wall Street was and the stock market worked. The streets were crazy down there; they didn't have any kind of streets and avenues; they just had names and they looked like a game of Pick-Up Sticks. But before I could even worry about the streets, I had to get the land right. Manhattan was actually built on land.

Sometimes when they were digging up the streets you saw it down there—real dirt! And the land had a certain curve to it at the bottom of the island, like a dinosaur head, bumpy on the right and straight on the left, a swooping majestic bottom.

I held my tracing paper down and tried to trace the line of lower Manhattan.

I couldn't do it.

I mean, it was ridiculous. My line didn't have anything to do with the real one. I didn't understand—I was holding the tracing paper steady. I looked at my small hand. "Stay still," I told it. I crumpled up the paper and tried again.

The line wasn't right again. It didn't have the swoop.

I crumpled up the paper and tried again.

This line was even worse than before. Manhattan looked square.

I tried again.

Oh boy, now it looked like a duck.

Crumple.

Now it looked like a *turd*, another word I picked up from Dad.

Crumple.

Now it looked like a piece of fruit.

It looked like everything but what it was supposed to look like: Manhattan. I couldn't do it. I didn't realize then that when you trace stuff you're supposed to have a tracing *table*, lighted from below, and clamps to hold the paper straight, not a trembling four-year-old hand, so I just thought I was a failure. They always said on TV you could do anything you wanted, but here I was trying to do something and it wasn't working. I would never be able to do it. I crumpled up the last piece of tracing paper and started sobbing, my head in my hands in my fort.

Mom heard me.

"Craig?"

"What? Go away."

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Don't open the curtain! *Don't open it!* I have things in here."

"Why are you crying? What's the matter?"

"I can't do it."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing!"

"Tell Mommy, c'mon. I'm going to open the blanket—"

"No!"

I jumped at her face as she pulled the blanket aside, bringing it taut under the encyclopedias. Mom threw her hands up and held the books in place, saving both of us from getting clobbered. (A week later, she'd have Dad move the encyclopedias.) With her occupied, I ran across the room, streaking tears, wanting to get to the bathroom, to sit down on the toilet with the light off and splash hot water on my face. But Mom was too quick. She shoved the encyclopedias back and loped across the room, swooping me up in her thin arms with the elbow skin that you could pull down. I beat my palms against her.

"Craig! We do *not* hit Mommy!"

"I can't do it I can't do it I *can't do it!*" I hit her.

"*What?*" She hugged me tight so I had no room to hit. "*What can't you do?*"

"*I can't draw Manhattan!* "

“Huh?” Mom drew her face up and away from me, looked me in the eyes. “Is *that* what you were trying to do down there?”

I nodded, sniffled.

“You were trying to trace Manhattan with the tracing paper I bought you?”

“I can’t do it.”

“Craig, *no one* can.” She laughed. “You can’t just trace freehand. It’s impossible!”

“Then how do they make the maps?”

Mom paused.

“See? See? Someone can do it!”

“They have *equipment*, Craig. They’re grown-ups and they have special tools that they use.”

“Well I need those tools.”

“Craig.”

“Let’s buy them.”

“Honey.”

“Do they cost a lot of money?”

“Honey.”

Mom put me down on the sofa, which turned into a bed for her and Dad at night, and sat next to me. I wasn’t crying anymore. I wasn’t hitting anymore. My brain was all right back then; it didn’t get stuck in ruts.

“Craig,” she sighed, looked at me. “I have an idea. Instead of spending your time trying to trace maps of Manhattan, why don’t you make your own maps of *imaginary* places?”

And that was the closest I’ve ever come to an epiphany.

I could make up my own city. I could use my own streets. I could put a river where I wanted. I could put the ocean where I wanted. I could put the bridges where I wanted and I could put a big highway right across the middle of town, like Manhattan should have but didn’t. I could make my own sub-way system. I could make my own street names. I could have my own grid stretching off to the edges of the map. I smiled and hugged Mom.

She got me some thick paper—white construction paper. Later on I grew to prefer straight computer paper. I went back under my fort and turned the light on and started on my first map. And I did that for the next five years—whenever I was in class, I didn’t doodle, I drew maps. Hundreds of them. When I finished, I crumpled them; it was making them that was important. I did cities on the ocean, cities with two rivers meeting in the middle, cities with one big river that bent, cities with bridges, crazy interchanges, circles and boulevards. I made cities. That made me happy. That was my Anchor. And until I turned nine and turned to video games, that was what I wanted to be when I grew up: a mapmaker.

four

“I wanted to make maps,” I tell Dr. Minerva.

“Maps of what?”

“Cities.”

“On the computer?”

“No, by hand.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think there’s much of a market for that.” I smile.

“Maybe not, maybe so.”

What a shrink answer.

“I can’t take maybes. I have to make money.”

“We’re going to talk more about money next time. We have to stop now.”

I look at the clock. 7:03. She always gives an extra three minutes.

“What are you going to do when you leave, Craig?”

She always asks that. What am I always going to do? I’m going to go home and freak out. I’m going to sit with my family and try not to talk about myself and what’s wrong. I’m going to try and eat. Then I’m going to try and sleep. I dread it. I can’t eat and I can’t sleep. I’m not doing well in terms of being a functional human, you know?

Hey, soldier, what’s the matter?

I can’t sleep and I can’t eat, sir!

How about I pump you full of lead, soldier, would that get you motivated?

Can’t say, sir! I’d probably still be unable to sleep or eat, just a little bit heavier from the lead.

Get up there and fight, soldier! The enemy is there!

The enemy is too strong. I can’t fight them. They’re too smart.

You’re smart too, soldier.

Not smart enough.

So you’re just going to give up?

That’s the plan.

“I’m going to just keep at it,” I tell Dr. Minerva. “That’s all I can do. I’ll keep at it and hope it gets better.”

“Are you taking your medicine?”

“Yes.”

“Are you seeing Dr. Barney?”

Dr. Barney is the psychopharmacologist. He’s the one who prescribes me meds and sends me to people like Dr. Minerva. He’s a trip in his own way, a little fat Santa with rings embedded in his fingers.

“Yes, later in the week.”

“You know to do what he says.”

Yes, Doctor. I’ll do what you say. I’ll do what you all say.

“Here,” I hand Dr. Minerva the check from my mom.

five

My family shouldn't have to put up with me. They're good people, solid, happy. Sometimes when I'm with them I think I'm on television.

We live in an apartment—a much better one than the Manhattan one, but still not good enough, not something to be *proud* of—in Brooklyn. Brooklyn is a big fat blob with its own ugly shape across from Manhattan; it looks like Jabba the Hutt counting his money. Its bridges connect to Manhattan and it's split up by canals and creeks—filthy green streaks of water that remind you that it used to be a swamp. There are brownstones—limestone and maroon houses that stand like fence posts and always have Indian men refurbishing them—and everybody goes crazy for those, pays millions of dollars to live in them. But other than that, it's a pretty statusless place. It's a shame we moved out of Manhattan, where all the real people with power live.

The walk from Dr. Minerva's office to our apartment is a short one, but loaded with mocking stores. Food stores. The absolute worst part of being depressed is the food. A person's relationship with food is one of their most important relationships. I don't think your relationship with your parents is that important. Some people never know their parents. I don't think your relationships with your friends are important. But your relationship with air—that's key. You can't break up with air. You're kind of stuck together. Only slightly less crucial is water. And then food. You can't be dropping food to hang with someone else. You need to strike up an agreement with it.

I never liked eating the traditional American things: pork chops, steak, rack of lamb ... I still don't. Never mind vegetables. I used to like the foods that come in abstract shapes: chicken nuggets, Fruit Roll-Ups, hot dogs. I liked junk food. I could demolish a bag of Cheez Doodles; I'd have Doodles Cheez so far infused into my fingertips, I'd be tasting it on myself for a day. And so I had a good thing going with food. I thought about it the way everyone else did; when you're hungry, you have some.

Then last fall happened, and I stopped eating.

Now I get mocked by these groceries, pizza places, ice-cream stores, delis, Chinese places, bakeries, sushi joints, McDonald'ses. They sit out in the street, pushing what I can't enjoy. My stomach shrank or something; it doesn't take in much, and if I force in a certain amount it rejects everything, sends me to the bathroom to vomit in the dark. It's like a gnawing, the tug of a rope wrapped around the end of my esophagus. There's a man down there and he wants food, but the only way he knows to ask for it is to tug on the rope, and when he does, it closes up the entrance so I can't put anything in. If he would just relax, let the rope go, I'd be able to give him all the food he wanted. But he's down there making me dizzy and tired, giving extra tugs as I pass restaurants that smell like fat and grease.

When I do eat, it's one of two experiences: a Battle or a Slaughter. When I'm bad—when the Cycling is going on in my brain—it's a Battle. Every bite hurts. My stomach wants no part of it. Everything is forced. The food wants to stay on the plate, and once it's inside me, it wants to get *back* on the plate. People give me strange looks: *What's wrong, Craig, why aren't you eating?*

But then there are moments when it comes together. The Shift hasn't happened yet, maybe it never will, but sometimes—just enough times to give me hope—my brain jars back into where it's supposed to be. When I feel one of these (I call them the Fake Shifts) I should always eat, although I

don't; I sometimes stubbornly, foolishly try to hold the feeling and get things done while my mind can't operate, and neglect to eat, and then I'm back where I started. But oh, when I slip back into being okay when I'm around food, watch out. It's all going in. Eggs and hamburgers and fries and ice cream and marmalade and Fruity Pebbles and cookies and broccoli, even—and noodles and sauce. Screw you; I'm going to eat *all* of you. I'm Craig Gilner, and I will make myself strong from you. I don't know when my body chemistry is going to line up to let me eat again, so you are all getting in me right now.

And that feels so good. I eat it all, and the man is away from his rope. He's busy down there eating everything that falls inside, running around like a chicken with its head cut off, the head on the floor, munching food of its own. All my cells take the food in and they love it and they love my brain for it and I smile and I am full; I am full and functional and I can do anything, and once I eat—this is the amazing part—once I eat I *sleep*, I sleep like I should, like a hunter who just brought home a kill. . but then I wake up and the man is back, my stomach is tight, and I don't know what it was that got me to have a Slaughter eating experience. It's not pot. It's not girls. It's not my family. I've started to think it must just be chemistry, in which case we're looking for the Shift and we haven't found it yet.

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