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COLLECTIONS OF DISORDER:
STORIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS

by

KALYN HARDMAN

Under the direction of Jody Brooks, MFA and Erin Tone, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis contains five short stories, each narrated by a character with a psychological disorder. The disorders represented are as follows: alcohol use disorder, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease, phobic disorder, and autism spectrum disorder. Research was conducted in two parts: (1) study of psychological texts including peer reviewed articles and case studies and (2) study of literary works including memoirs and novels. The author aims to use storytelling to humanize and therefore generate empathy for those with mental illnesses.

INDEX WORDS: Mental illness, Mental disorder, Alcoholism, Schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease, Phobic disorder, Autism, Creative writing, Short stories, Empathy

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KALYN HARDMAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts and Science

in the college of Arts and Science

Georgia State University

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To my dearest friend Lindsay,
You are my greatest inspiration.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Under a Beaten, Blue Tent.....	3
Amelia Airheart and the Evil Books.....	9
Boxed Memories.....	16
Air. Space. Neither.....	26
You dirty, rotten dog!	31

Introduction

The following is a collection of short stories, each from the perspective of someone with a psychological disorder. I intend each story to provide a glance into the mind of one particular character rather than a generalization of an entire disorder.

I began work on this project by researching the following mental illnesses: bipolar disorder, autism spectrum disorder, factitious disorder by proxy, phobic disorders, dissociative identity disorder, Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, and alcohol use disorder. Because this thesis is interdisciplinary, I studied both psychological and literary texts. For psychological research, I gained a general knowledge of each disorder from textbooks such as James Butcher's *Abnormal Psychology*, a technical understanding from research-driven peer reviewed articles, real world applications from case studies, and modern perspectives from publications such as the *New York Times' Couch Column*. I focused my study on the ways symptoms affect cognitions and behaviors.

For literary research, I studied memoirs by professional psychiatrists with psychological disorders such Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, fictional works such as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, third party accounts such as Tricia Bauer's *Father Flashes*, and a few film representations such as *The Three Faces of Eve*. I continued my study of cognitions and behaviors throughout this literary research. However, I also analyzed form: the way an author uses short sentences to quicken pace, parallels a fractured mind through vignettes, or employs metaphors that evoke the five senses to humanize a character and elicit empathy from a reader.

In all of my research, what I found most surprising was that unless affected (personal or familial diagnosis), few creative writers had published works focused mental illness. I too have

friends and family members with disorders, fueling much of my interest in the subject. One friend expressed extreme reservation to telling her employers of her diagnosis. She feared she would be considered inferior, incapable, and abnormal. I realized that the reason so little literature exists is because people do not know or do not understand mental disorders. In today's society, seemingly benign colloquialisms like "That's crazy!" have been normalized and words such as psycho, insane, and retarded have been appropriated from psychology to mean undesirable. These othering and dehumanizing terms reinforce the negative connotations surrounding mental illness.

Therefore, one goal of this project was to continue my own education and improve my interactions with affected friends and strangers alike. I also hope this collection will elicit empathy, provide understanding, and debunk archaic stereotypes and misconceptions. Those with phobias are not overreacting. Those with mood disorders are not seeking attention. Mental illnesses should be treated with the same care and support as physical illnesses.

With this in mind, I began writing the stories. I wrote and rewrote, scrapped and revised. At its completion, the collection contains five short stories, each representing a character with a different psychological disorder: "Under a Beaten, Blue Tent" (alcohol use disorder), "Amelia Airheart and the Evil Books" (schizophrenia), "Boxed Memories" (Alzheimer's disease), "Air. Space. Neither." (phobic disorder), and "You dirty, rotten dog!" (autism spectrum disorder). However, it is my goal for you to see these characters as humans, not disorders.

I hope you enjoy these stories, but more importantly, I hope you learn from them.

Under a Beaten, Blue Tent

It was the week after Christmas. Poinsettias lined the first step leading to the podium's stage. Marshall Baptist's caretaker apparently thought it not yet time to take down the holiday décor yet some petals had realized their work was done, let go of life, and lay gray and dry on the floor. I stood at the foot of the stairs. My wife's body lay to my right. In a coffin. At the foot of black clad pews. She would be angry to know her remains rest beneath the very baptistry in which she was "reborn" and before the pews where she first recognized clerical hypocrisy. Furious to know the minister—who denied her deaconship because the bible said women ought not hold such positions—was conducting the final celebration of her life. And livid to know I will be hungover for all of it.

When I woke this morning, the world was black at the edges. It was split in two. On the right, loops of beige carpet so wine-stained it could pass as red. On the left, dark wash jeans with gold thread tracks. Trying to see if there were more halves to the world, I raised myself two inches but fell a mile back down. Cheek to carpet.

Demarkus, wearer of gold thread tracks, was there to save my ass. "Come on, man. We have to leave in fifteen minutes!" The skin between his eyebrows creased which meant he was mad. "Let's get you cleaned up." He hauled me up by the wrist, and a bottle of Jack Daniels spun out from my feet. Jack had failed to make the world stay black.

I don't know what the hell minister Charles said for forty-five minutes before I was ushered to stand here at the foot of the stairs alongside Lena's father, mother, and little brother. I do know that Charles said, "She was a fine woman," seventeen times because my sweaty fingers counted. I know Aunt Julie must have restless leg syndrome the way her legs kept bouncing on

the pew. I know the child in the back row was too young to understand death but cried louder than Lena's mother. And I know the teen behind me had more important things to do on his phone than listen to what a fine woman Lena was.

Demarkus seemed to be the only respectful person in the church. Sitting near the window. Silent, solemn, and sober.

Following the diagnosis of breast cancer, Watkinsville's holiest offered Lena a few dull prayers. Yet gossiped like schoolgirls about my after-work drinks. They viewed Lena as the church's fallen angel. And me as the devil who yanked her down. For both of us, they prayed not for comfort and strength. But for forgiveness.

Today, guests filed past saying, "I'm sorry for your loss," and "She's in a better place now." Flinching at their own lies. Their words were useless and borrowed. Yet pointed and dripping accusation. They stabbed at my already pounding head. I quickly learned to ignore the second cousins, the work affiliates, the ex-boyfriends, the attention-seeking "grievers" who boasted of teaching Lena addition in the first grade, discussing haircare treatments in the grocery store, and donating to the GoFundMe that allowed Lena more time. Instead, I watched muted winter light sneak past bare branches and leak through stained glass windows. My eyes craved the dull light's ache, a meager penance.

When the last condolence flitted by, I was to follow in line. To see the body.

Why do we put bodies in boxes like they are keepsakes about to be stored in the attic? And just before the lid is sealed and label assigned, we put the body on display. In Lena's display, silk pillows lined veneered wood like tissues in a gift box. When I saw her, all I could think was *Len would never wear that much makeup*. Some idiotic mortician had painted on thick orange eyebrows, black crowed lashes, rosy cheeks, and pink lips like she was a doll.

Then I remembered a meeting and a battery of questions. What Lena's beauty regimen? Does she prefer her face natural or accentuated? How does she wear her hair? Combed forward or with a part? Which side? We had been standing in the church's lobby and this buffoon was keeping me from the bathroom where I planned to sneak a few more swings from my flask. "Do whatever the fuck you want," I spewed. "It doesn't matter anyway."

That mortician was just being lazy. He could have done research. Sifted through pictures. I sure as hell wasn't going to go through them.

He would have learned Lena never wore makeup because, as she said, those social-conformity charged chemicals would be the death of her.

She hated all added chemicals—in makeup, shampoo, produce, and drinks. Once, when I had a rum and coke she had said, "I wish you'd stop drinking that toxic shit. It's rotting you from the inside out."

I took one look at her balding head and laughed. "Says woman always hooked up to a chemo drip."

"My point exactly."

A few days later, she stopped all treatments.

Now, in that silly box, she looked so unfamiliar. She had always been an effervescent woman. One who received her vibrancy from colorful opinions, not bronzer and eyeshadow, and refused to be dulled by the chemicals she despised. Now her gray skin was plastered with kaleidoscope of chemicals. And sprouts of red hair were tucked under an ugly pastel scarf. She said herself the damn thing was hideous. Though Lena thought it ridiculous that women were embarrassed to display bald heads in support meetings of all places, she too wore scarves to

meetings as a sign of solidarity. Here, it was a sign that the mortician and whoever he flagged down assumed Lena was ashamed of her scars. And I had been too drunk to care.

That idiotic mortician dressed Lena in the same unwelcomed way that Demarkus undressed me this morning. One arm draped across his shoulder like a fist on a cane, I fell from one foot to the other, from living room to bathroom. He leaned me against the scalloped wallpaper. “Fucking catatonic...” he grumbled. He pulled my shirt over my head and down my arms. Unbuckled my belt and tugged my shorts down.

I knew I should be able to do this myself. But I couldn’t. And I couldn’t stop him from helping.

He dumped my gelatin bones into the tub and my bare ass smacked the porcelain. Why are my socks still on? Please do not touch them.

“This will wake you up.” With a squeak and turn of the silver dial, water rained down frozen bullets. I retreated into myself. *Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.* I said it three times in my head and gargled it once aloud. Demarkus did not seem to understand. My body convulsed.

“Stand up and wash off, Merc. I shouldn’t have to stand here all day like your warden.” I pushed myself up. My calves felt like newborns. When the room stopped dancing, I reached for Lena’s black castor oil shampoo. It tumbled toward the drain. I nearly followed. But Demarkus caught my shoulder and straightened me out. The crease between his eyebrows softened. “Here.” He squeezed the shampoo into my palm. His frustration became pity. My self-pity became shame.

I used my remaining strength to quell the mutiny under my skin. With shaking hands, I rubbed the liquid into my hair. My teeth clapped together and shivers rippled from my chest to fingers. Indignantly, I turned the dial to hot, but the shivers held fast. Demarkus closed the shower curtain.

Alone.

In my stupor, I watched water tornado and suds swirl into the drain. When there were no more suds to watch, I turned off the water. Feebly, I pushed back the curtain. Demarkus threw me a towel. Lena never threw the towel. She would use the corner to gently dry the skin beneath my eyes, water still dripping from my hair, and say, “No need for tears today.” One morning when I was still stumbling from the previous night, she held my face with her palm and wiped my cheek with her thumb. In broken syllables, she said, “You drink to kill the time, to numb the pain. I take chemo to live, to feel *you* a little longer.”

I shook with fear then. And regret today.

This morning, I left my tears undried. I must have done all the expected menial tasks. Brush teeth. Comb hair. Trim beard.

But I don't remember any of it.

In life she, the braver, the stronger, carried me. In death I, the only half left of the whole, carried her. Organized from father to cousin with me in between, we the pallbearers slopped down the hill toward the gaping earth. The December rain was surely cold, but it did not sting like this morning's shower. It tingled. The line of mourners became a crowd around the grave. Under a beaten, blue tent. I watched their heads bow. One by one. Reciting final prayers for forgiveness. They moved their lips and whispered “Amen” to let others know they were doing

good. Declaring their efforts to save her. Never wondering if she wanted to be saved. I held formation in our rows of three. Flanking the casket. Allowed silver handles to depress my palms, their cargo nearly as weighty as my guilty conscience, because pain was a welcomed distraction.

Before I felt enough pain, before my reparations were made, Charles signaled for us to lower Lena into the earth. We lined the hole, mindful of the slick mud. I saw my foot slip and body tumble, joining hers. Laid to rest together. Forever. How great the murmurs above would be: the drunk fell in the damn grave! I debated letting humiliation wash over pain but finally let the silver handles slide past my finger. I stood back with the others.

We became a smear of grievers, circling and turning and spinning around Lena. I felt sick. My splitting headache rivaled the splitting in my heart. One-half slept in a blurry bed of dirt. The other hung from my sleeve, desperately trying to escape me. To join her.

Revered Charles read proverbs with a practiced tongue. Even through dizzy eyes, this scene of scripted, codified grieving looked ridiculous. Charles seemed to believe that if we wore black, followed the five stages, prayed for guidance, and threw an eight-grand party for someone who wasn't there, we could soon carry on with our lives. But there, buried with her, already decaying in her chest, was my other half.

If she had not found that I was worth living for, why should I?

Amelia Airheart and the Evil Books

“What the hell...” The man who spoke had just busted through the reading room door like there was a fire. Silly campus police.

Now he stared bright eyed and bushy browed at the floor. So I looked at the floor. What a mess! Books were everywhere. They had been torn limb from limb. Pages twitched under air-conditioning vents and pens stood erect, stabbed into every third spine.

Apparently, I defeated the voices’ army this time.

Students peered from behind notes and laptops and phones and non-evil books.

Mr. Officer looked from me to the dead books and from the dead books back to me.

“Oh. This wasn’t my fault,” I assured him. “It was...” Actually, I better not. The other students saw me defeat the evil Book Army, but Mr. Officer would think I was absolutely crazy. “The stress. You know—midterms and shortterms, big deals and cheese wheels. All very stressful. I guess I just lost it.” I laughed encouragingly. “Teachers should really lay off the extra readings,” I said nudging the book-corpses and laughing harder. Some students darted back behind their notes and laptops and phones and non-evil books. Tough crowd.

“I’ll just clean up,” I said sweetly. But first, I laid out three corpses, their chests to the ground and arms spread wide. I sunk one finger between glued vertebrae and flesh and ripped off each spine the way settlers scalped Indians. These three spines will make a lovely necklace.

I then kicked the remaining corpses into a neat pile. “Just cleaning up the chain of command. I’m at the bottom, you know. I used to be God but got demotedⁱ. You’re at the top with a mop, are you not?” I politely asked the officer.

His brows leaned together quizzically as if I had said something odd. “Not at all. Would you mind accompanying me to the health center?” His eyes were blue so I trusted him.

“Sure. It’s a wonderful day for a walk and a talk among stalks.” I dropped the books to their final resting places and grabbed my fancy backpack—an adventure pack. One should always be prepared. “The best route is down that tree and under the quad.” I pushed the window up and planted a foot on the ledge.

The officer placed hands on either side of my shoulders and guided me back. “Actually,” he said, “I’d prefer to take the stairs.”

“Okay, but you will regret not firefighter-sliding down the tree trunk.”

“That’s quite alright. I prefer being an officer anyway.”

“Okay then,” I shrugged and waltzed toward the door.

Mr. Officer stopped at the librarian’s desk to give her a wink and a whisper and then we were on our way. I flew down the marble stairs like Amelia Earheart. When I am reinstated as God, I will resurrect her and she will teach me how to fly. God should know how to fly.

Also, I will rename her Amelia *Air*heart because that makes more sense.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, we walked through the doors that looked like my old pearly gates. Not by the auditorium on the west wing. That’s where the voices meet each day to decide if they want to kill me. I better not disturb the voices today since I murdered their evil book army.

We jaunted across the quad, and I twisted and cracked the three spines until they were soft as flesh. I knotted them around my neck like a daisy chain. This should ward off any more killings.

“How long have you been like this?”

“Like this?” I pondered. Perhaps he meant my hair. “All my life I suppose. Without repose. I have dyed and died a thousand times and always returned a brunette.”

“Really? My son had his first break at fifteen.”

“How preposterous! Not one break all those years? Not at Christmas or Thanksgiving? I would have surely gone insane.”

Mr. Officer did not speak for the rest of the walk. He seemed equally troubled by the current educational system.

We arrived at the health center with its glass walls pressed against the street. The guard at the front desk waved to Mr. Officer as we passed. Her hair fell on her forehead in braids of black licorice. I wished my hair tasted of licorice.

Aboard the elevator, Mr. Officer pushed the second floor button. Bing. Zing. Ping. The door opened.

We approached a counter with two windows. One read testing and the other counseling. They seemed rather exclusive. What if you wanted to get counseling for a failed test or needed brain tests during counseling? Such an idiotic division. On the counter spanning both was a jar of curled colored papers like jelly beans. One, two, twenty-thousand beans. What jovial beings. I wondered if they preferred testing or counseling. By the looks of it, they preferred counseling. Good. That’s what Mr. Officer chose. I would side with the jelly beans too. Some were blue. I wondered if they made him choose counseling.

“How may I help you?” The voice floated from behind the counseling window and over Mr. Officer’s shoulders.

“Hi there. This is Miss...” He paused for me to fill in the blank.

“Airheart.”

“Miss Airheart. She needs to speak with someone as soon as possible.”

I edged out from behind shoulders to look the voice in its eyes. She had sweet hair too but more like cotton candy. I wanted to grab a fistful but thought she might not like it if I ate her hair. What an odd first impression that would be!

To Mr. Officer: “Mrs. Airheart will need to complete paperwork afterward.” Then to me: “If you would please have a seat in the waiting room behind me. The door is to your right.”

Mr. Officer flopped a hand on my shoulder. “Are you going to be alright by yourself?”

“Indubitably!” I decreed.

“Alright. Here’s my number. Call if you ever need me. Take care now.” He winked and clunked off toward the elevator.

Sofas crowded the waiting room like a life-size Tetris game. To my left, fake plants lined blinded windows. To my right, paper quilts hung by the wrists and threatened, “Live, love, laugh!” and “Be well; do well!”

I selected a seat against the far wall. It had a pivoting desk, perfect for serious students like myself. I pulled a non-evil book from my adventure pack. The pages were soft, book light, and words heavy. And it was not trying to kill me. My favorite.

But I was not quite sure which book I was holding. The cover was a ray of red. Each time I was about to make out a crimson title, the letters rearranged with daunting vibrancy. Never mind. One should never judge a book by its cover anyway. I cracked open its spine. I tried to read but the words start jumping all over each other like a page-wide fistfight, their grunts and kapows competing with the ridiculous clamor of the waiting room. A water fixture dribbled erratically while a fish-tank-impersonating television gargled sonorously. How could I be serious when a hydrowar threatened from all sides?

“Miss Airheart?” A woman stood in the doorway wearing a daisy colored blazer and navy, shin-length pencil skirt. Her bra straps showed.

I stuffed the nameless book in my adventure pack and followed Mrs. Daisy Blazer. To the left of the counseling window, she swiped a fancy card and the door beeped its secret passcode. We crept sub rosa down the corridor and breezed through the door only we could see.

Inside, florescent lights scoured over a desk, bookshelf, and end table between two chairs. All were wooden and barren aside from a notepad and tissue box. I was easily the most interesting thing in the room.

“Have a seat wherever.” I sat on the floor. “How are you feeling today?”

“Chipper as a woodchuck!”

“And why is that?” she asked.

“I have slain the evil book army! They inserted their thoughts and infested my brain.” I sat up on my knees and waved a victorious fist. “But their blood runs black tonight!”

“Tell me about these inserted thoughts.”

I sat back down quietly. “I am quite content, thank you. Have you killed today?” I asked sweetly. “I killed roughly twenty-seven thousand with a cherry in the library. It is quite exhausting, you know. That is why I created a day of rest.” I laughed encouragingly.

“No, I have not killed.”

“It is okay to admit it, Mrs. Daisy Blazer. We all have floods of blood. I killed twenty-seven thousand this morning and I will do it again. Again and again and again. Now doesn’t that make you feel better than a feather?”

“I’m going to call someone who can help you, Miss Airheart. I believe you are having a psychotic episode. You will be just fine, but we need to get you to a hospital.”

Abandoned already. After how encouraging I was and how many compliments I paid her blazer? Perhaps I forgot. “I assure you I am content. That blazer looks mighty fine on you. I used to be all-knowing, but I got demoted. Remind me where you got the blazer.”

“I’m sorry, but I truly believe a hospital is the safest place for you. You are having a break with reality.”

“Really, I’m not. I am just fine at this time.” Goddamn yourself. Hold it together!

She picked up the phone. Its corkscrewed wire tethered her to someone who also thought I was crazy.

“She is going to kill you.” The voice slithered from behind my temple. “She knows you are weak. Kill her. Show her strength.”

Go away!

“Kill or be killed.”

Leave me alone!

“Kill. Kill. Kill!”

I latched onto Mrs. Daisy Blazer’s ankle. “Please don’t let them kill me! Please!”

Words, crazed and disorganized, leapt from her notepad and flew from the receiver. They swarmed my throat. Weak. Lazy. Demented. Worthless. Lunatic. Mad.

“Don’t let them kill me!”

Books flew from empty shelves. Paper cuts patterned the pink flesh of my esophagus. My tongue buckled under mounds of nickels.

“Please!” I gurgled.

Mrs. Blazer's ear pressed deeper into the speaker, drowning out my pleas. Why didn't she hear the voices making choices? For her. For me. For the fractured from enacted life. We are all broken token. In reality.

She, asphyxiated by the pixelated wire, was a shard at home on the phone.

I was a shard alone.

Boxed Memories

I have to physically hold my memories. The ones in my head used to be right at my fingertips. Now they are in boxes.

In 2014, I was fired from my job for poor performance. I had worked at that company for fifty years. They said I lost my touch. A year later, I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, so my wife Eirene and I filed a wrongful termination for disability claim against the factory. We won.

With the money, Eirene and I decided to take a trip we could never forget. One I would not let myself forget. I was to bring along what we called a memory box and fill it with photographs, ticket stubs, pamphlets, receipts—anything that could help me hold on to the memories. When we returned from our trip, I would write everything down. If need be, Eirene would help me fill in the gaps, but the goal was to rely mostly on the items in my memory box. It was and is a challenge to myself. To remember and to hold on.

The plan was not to plan. We bought plane tickets, reserved a rental car, and packed as we ran out the door. Surely I forgot something, but as long as we had passports and working credit cards, we were set.

In our prime, Eirene and I were pro's at last minute world travel. Her father (rest his soul) was a pilot, so Eirene flew standby and I was by her side as a buddy passenger. Our first year together, we snacked on baguettes and macaroons beneath the Eiffel tower, drank pitchers of sangria in Barcelona, contracted hypothermia while skinny dipping in Amalfi, stood speechless at the gas chambers of Dachau, ate nothing but peanut butter and jellies in London, went scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef, and zip lined so high above the treetops in Costa Rica that they looked like broccoli heads. Together, we visited thirty-six countries. We were young and we were adventurous.

Decades later, there was still one item left uncrossed from my bucket list. One more adventure before the hour glass ran out and my memories turned to sand.

A bundle of plane tickets. According to the bundle, we flew out of Atlanta on Friday August 12th, 2016 to Minneapolis and then Keflavík, Iceland. We returned to Atlanta on August 21st after a layover in New York. During that layover in Minneapolis, we probably had a bite to eat and made phone calls to friends and family. On the flight to Iceland, I believe I watched a movie and fell asleep. Airplane food is not worth staying up for anyway.

Once in Keflavík, we must have picked up the car from the airport. Yes, I remember. The car company we chose did not have an office near the terminal, so we waited twenty minutes to ask the information desk where the rental office was. The man pointed down a sidewalk that crept across the parking lot like a rickety, wooden dock. Look for a yellow bus, he said.

In grade school, we learned that Iceland and Greenland got their names from some Viking trickery. But since Iceland was still one-tenth glacier, I dressed for ice. It seems the Vikings had tricked me too. As soon as I was on the asphalt lake, I peeled off my down coat.

Where was I?

At the end of the sidewalk, Eirene and I boarded the yellow bus. It shuttled us in a one-mile loop around the airport and dropped us a few hundred feet from the glass-cased information desk.

The kid behind the desk never looked at me—only at my driver's license and his computer screen. With all that looking at a plastic representation of me, he managed to spell my name incorrectly. I figured that meant I was not responsible for any damages.

The car was oblong and awkward. We zipped around the one-mile loop, and Eirene took the first exit to Reykjavik. Had I been driving, I think I would have spent an hour going around that same loop, memorizing every curve and white line.

The stretch of road that led to Reykjavík straddled earth that was quite different from American soil. This earth was lumpy and gray with pockets of green. Through the haze, we could see the feet of mountains standing tall in the distance.

Soon we would be toe to toe with those mountains.

A receipt from Dive.IS. Now this brings back more memories than you can imagine.

In the spring of 1961, Clark Steven, a travel guru, wrote an article for *Travel Today* called “Trekking Iceland’s Waters.” It was not about the island’s black sand beaches or whale watching ports, but about the interior. A place within the Golden Circle where one could come as close as man ever could to holding the whole world in his hands.

Armed with a dry suit and BCD, Clark Steven submerged himself in the Silfra Strait and squeezed his body through the gap where two tectonic plates were being ripped apart like star-crossed lovers. He had simultaneously placed one hand on Europe and one on North America. Through the dizzying clarity of million-year-old water, he could see stars waving their congratulations above.

At twenty-four, I decided that one day I was going to dive the Silfra Strait, putting it at the top of my “Wishful Thinking” bucket list. At seventy-nine, I decided that day had to be one I would remember.

I printed this receipt documenting our dive reservation on the 11th of August. As to what date we dove, the paper is unclear. It had to be more than a day after the flight to prevent nitrogen poisoning and less than three days after the flight because I wanted to get straight to the adventure.

Directions to get to the dive spot were equally unclear. From the national park that no American can pronounce¹, rangers said to take a right onto the Circle, a right at the rest stop, and right at the small fork. This was only slightly more helpful than standard European directions where they swung an arm down one alley or the other. After a few wrong rights, we parked the oblong car in a lot at the rear of the park. The meeting point was a short walk to another lot, this one filled with Dive.IS trucks and goggle-faced, floppy-footed divers. They mulled around like overloaded camels, their humps not their water source but air supply.

We too became fat and heavy. We were already wearing two layers of shirts and pants when our tour guide Matt stuffed our limbs into dry suits that were in fact wet. The material required four tugging hands to squeak over our fingers and inch over our heads. That was the first time in decades that someone had dressed me, although I fear it will not be the last.

Eirene and I had never worn dry suits before. Once all the gear was on, Matt told us to press here and lift there². It was quite simple, he said.

Our herd of wobbling, black camels was seven strong: five divers and two guides. Once on the other side of the Divers Crossing road sign, we waded onto a steel platform at the mouth

¹ Eirene says it is called Thingvellir National Park. My documents say Pingvellir.

² We were to press the inlet valves on our chests to push air into our suits and prevent it from constricting our limbs. We were to lift our left arms to allow the exhaust valve's release of excess air. If too much air was left in the suit, we could become buoyant and be ripped up to the surface too quickly, causing decompression sickness. I attempted to commit the pressing and lifting to muscle memory. While crossing one final adventure off my bucket list, the last thing I wanted to do was use a puke bucket.

of the strait, kicked back our feet to have fins attached, and finally submitted our cheeks to the frigid water.

We sunk and floated and sunk again like dumb buoys. At last, earth and air sandwiched us between their palms. We balanced on our stomachs, equalized, suspended, serene.

The nameless guide led the caravan, followed by an Australian family, Eirene, myself, and Matt. I watched Eirene float between the stone walls. There was not a spot of wildlife³. The strait widened slightly and deepened dramatically. The water was so clear I could not tell if a particular rock was five feet or fifty yards down. Nor could I tell how far ahead Eirene was. I just flapped my fins and tried to keep up.

Some distance in front of Eirene, the nameless tour guide pointed at stones jutting from either side of the strait. They looked like ordinary stones, but they were exceptionally close together—no more than four feet apart. They were the star crossed lovers, the tectonic plates, the reason for this trip. I shivered. The water had snuck under my hood and gloves. Pockets of iciness tickled the crown of my head and eluding the grasp of my fingers. That was the moment it finally felt real. All those visions of holding the world in my hands were about to come true.

With a feeling of placidity, I rolled on my back and looked up at the same stars that had waved to Clark Stevens.

Slowly, those stars grew plump, as exaggerated as those in my dreams. Then quickly, their waves became frantic. My heart tightened and ears ached. My head swung suddenly beneath my knees. Rocks dashed and water splashed. The surface tension burst around my boots. The water held me there, hanging from the ankles like a ragdoll.

³ In the pictures Eirene later showed me, we were floating past tangles of troll hair, a stringy alga that grew on every head of lava rock in the strait. So to say there was not a spot of wildlife is untrue. My so-called memories were mere composites of scenes I experienced on the dive and those I imagined while reading Steven's article.

Below, Eirene was the size of an Icelandic sheep. She chugged along with the caravan. Then she looked back. She looked forward. She looked up. She saw me. I wobbled and waved.

Eirene paddled back to Matt. There was much pointing. Mostly at me. They seemed to sign some sort of resolution. The nameless guide and Australians paddled swiftly away, getting smaller and smaller. Matt and Eirene paddled slowly upward, getting bigger and bigger. Matt pressed something on my chest. Bubbles erupted around me. What in the blazes was that? Eirene gently pulled down my legs. Once I was horizontal again, Matt asked the okay sign and I flared three fingers. Okay.

Remaining at the surface, we retraced our strokes.

At the steel platform, Eirene removed her regulator. “Sweetheart, are you alright?”

“Yes. But what happened?” I asked.

“You forgot to press the release to equalize the dry suit,” she said.

“What release?” I was bewildered.

So was Matt. “I talked about it four times during the introduction.”

I have never hated my brain more than I did in that moment.

“It’s okay, sweetie. We have one more dive to touch both tectonic plates. Right, Matt?”

He seemed unsure. “Yes, but I’m worried about his health, especially considering his age. If we had been much deeper, an ascent that fast could have injured his ears, lungs, and heart.” I must have looked like a hurt puppy. “If he shows any signs of the bends, he will have to sit this one out. And Eirene, I need you to make sure he equalizes his suit.” He finally smiled. “After all, that’s what dive buddies are for.”

During the surface interval, I swallowed all feelings of dizziness and pain while the Australians dipped cookies into mugs of hot chocolate. I was going to complete this dive if it killed me.

On the second dive, I did not try to look at the stars like old Clark Stevens. I floated along and kept my head in front of my feet. When the time came, I put two dismayed hands on the opposing rocks and smiled for the camera. In the surface interval, Matt had told us that the tectonic plates were actually 5.5 kilometers apart, pointing to the ridges on either side of the park. The idea of having the whole world in your hands had just been a gimmick. Pardon my paraphrasing, but we were just touching two random rocks. The dive was pointless. The trip was pointless.

One day when I look at that picture, I will not remember my disappointment.

A map of southern Iceland. A red line butted up against the coast. The key called it Ring Road. Along it, were red numbered dots. Many dots had been circled with a blue pen. Some of the numbers and names failed completely to jog my memory. Probably because we were hurried to fit them all into one day⁴.

Selfoss. This city had a blue square drawn around it. It was not far from Reykjavík. Yes, I remember. After the dive we had booked an Airbnb for Selfoss. It was not far, but we sure drove a long while looking for the damn place. The GPS kept taking us to the same empty daycare building. It was past nightfall when we asked for directions. We asked a kid passing by on the

⁴ Eirene has informed me we did not visit all the circled numbers. The markings indicated places we wanted to go.

sidewalk. “I am Victor,” he responded with a flourish, “and I will be your tour guide this evening!” Eirene and I laughed so hard. The kid was drunk but quite helpful⁵. We found our Airbnb and rested up for another day of adventures.

Numbers 12 and 14. The next morning, we were off to Seljalandfoss and Gljúfrabúi. The red line took us right up to the feet of the mountains. For every half-mile stretch, we saw twenty waterfalls trickling between the mountains’ toes. It was absolutely stunning. As to which of those falls were Seljalandfoss or Gljúfrabúi, I have no earthly idea⁶.

Plane Wreck. Under Vík, I had scribbled the words “plane wreck.” The plane was just a rusted plane without its back end. What fascinated me was a couple taking wedding photos. They were a strange couple. The woman (wearing a strapless dress despite dropping temperatures) stationed herself in front of the hull while the other (whose gender we were never sure of) ran around in a tux setting up the camera and tripod and dashing back to the woman before the timer ran out. However, I bet they remember us as the strange ones—that haggard couple wheezing in the background of their wedding pictures.

The walk to that crash site is something I would not mind forgetting. It was the longest walk of my life—two miles there and two miles back. My hips ached and feet burned. It was so foggy the road looked infinite. We walked the straight gravel road back while my head looped in circles. Trying to remember every flake of rust, every rotting wire, and every awkward pose. Trying to remember why I wanted to remember. The dive was a disappointment. The plane was a disappointment. I could not handle many more disappointments.

⁵ Let the record show that the kid sent us in the opposite direction of our Airbnb. Eirene said we spent two hours following our GPS down dirt roads. Then we came across a yard lined with glowing lanterns and two ladies. We asked for directions. One of the two women got in her car, led us to the Airbnb, and when the door was locked, used her cellphone to call the owner. Sober Icelanders are overly helpful.

⁶ Eirene says we did not have time for Gljúfrabúi but made time for Seljalandfoss because it is the same waterfall pictured in our calendar at home. We walked behind the fall and took pictures for our own photos.

Vík. That night we stayed in Vík. Our plan not to plan miserably failed. We could not find a single hotel, hostel, or Airbnb vacancy within a six-hour radius. We parked our oblong car in a campground, folded down the seats, and shivered through the night.

A napkin. It is lime green with brown lettering that reads *Símstöðin* Café. It has creases in the shape of a peace sign and one corner holds remnant stains of whatever we ate. That corner is spotted with mold. All the damn thing makes me think of was a cobble stone street and giant goblin⁷.

A map of northern Iceland. I'm not sure how we got from the south to the north, but I assume we drove⁸.

There are so many things on this map that I am supposed to remember. Dettifoss, Myvatn, Husavik, Akureyri, Asbyrgi. But I don't. I can't.

⁷ Eirene says the cobblestone street was in the northern city of Akureyri. The café was a short walk from our hostel where we roomed with a French couple who would not stop kissing and an American woman who would not stop talking about the kissing French couple. We went out to eat in order to escape said roommates. The café had glass cases brimming with authentic meats and pastries, but we wanted pizza. We ordered the closest thing we could find to pepperoni and added some smoothies so it was healthy. We ate at a round table on a cobblestoned street and watched tourists pose with an 8-foot troll mannequin. I complimented Eirene's preparation of the asparagus.

⁸ After Vík, we stayed the night in the eastern town of Höfn and toured Jökulsárlón, a glacial lagoon. Eirene says this in itself was a miracle because somehow I had booked an Ice Cave tour for November. It was August. The caves were melted and dangerous. Cave tours were closed. The nice ticket lady squeezed us on the day's last lagoon tour. We and boatful of 30 other tourists, floated around the lagoon alongside icebergs. As we floated, I nodded off. When I woke, I started yelling at the other tourists to get out of my room. Eirene and the tour guide had to subdue me. This was when Eirene said it was time to go home.

A photo. I'm not sure why this picture is here. At the base of a waterfall stands a couple with skin dryer and more cracked than Arizona. The back of the picture is splashed with Eirene's penmanship: "Skogafoss 2016."

I wonder if her grandparents took a trip recently. Lucky them.

Air. Space. Neither.

“About that metal detector. I have a concealed weapon permit and am carrying a gun. Do you need to see my license before I take it in?”

“Actually, ma’am, we don’t allow any sort of fire arms inside the building. You’ll have to drop that off at your car.”

“Now, I have a concealed weapon’s license, and—according to the second amendment—I have the right to bear arms. Tell me why I can’t protect myself in your theater.”

“Well, ma’am, the Fox Theatre no longer permits the entry of any weapons. It is for the safety of our staff, performers, and patrons like you. We are a private business and all patrons must comply with our rules.”

“Nice,” I say. “Maybe add something about the new security guards who carry guns are here to protect guests,” I tell my partner.

This month’s Fox Academy training is on emergency preparedness. Partners are to act out scenarios in which one person, playing herself (an employee), calms a patron who is upset by the new security policies. If you ask me, I play a damn good patronizing patron.

Round tables lined with employees from the ticketing, tours, operations, security, and maintenance dot the Screening Room (also known as the dungeon’s foyer). Rayna, our boss lady in ticketing, fans her cherry cheeks. The air itself sweats. “Any questions before we move to the next station?” she asks. *Please nobody answer.*

“Yeah.” It was Dee. I knew without looking. He’s the handyman at the back table who hasn’t shut up all night. *Be nice, Jessalyn. You’re just grumpy because it’s crowded.*

“Yes, Dee—”

“What do I tell someone,” —already interrupting Rayna again— “when they ask why I can have one of these on the property and they can’t?” The room pivots on four legs to see what he has. He waves its unsheathed body, smearing silver across sheets of stagnant, dripping air.

The room freezes. Or perhaps I do. All is slow and metallic. My heart clenches into a fist. Lashes erupt outward. Skin gooses. No. Not here.

Then the stopper on time pops out. They are unfrozen. Moving. Something about the Grand Salon. Must beat crowd. Shove chair. Metal squeaks, miles away. Move feet. They’re touching me. Retract limbs. Fat man stumbles on stairs. Don’t fall. Please don’t fall. Keep safe distance. Two steps below. Enough to jump over railing. Few more steps. Round the corner. Through the door.

Air.

I race for the door across the salon.

Space.

Breath crests against teeth. Heart crashes against ribs. In. Out. Breathe.

I put my back against the wall. One less side of the fortress to guard.

Shadows harden. Sounds sharpen.

Fists loosen.

The security guard motions to me. She’s too close. In. Out. Breathe. Don’t touch. *Amy wants us on the stairs.* Guard motions to stairs. No. I can’t move. Not there. Give me some time. Guard motions. Impatient.

One foot stretches out, then the other. But I don’t feel them. Maroon and gold walls shift ten feet on either side.

I lean against the concession bar, employees seated on stairs to my right. They are glossy eyed and yawning. I am glossy eyed and holding back tears. Amy faces them, reading from printed slides, her voice submerged.

Do I tell Rayna I have a family emergency? Mom got in a wreck? Grandpa's in surgery? The dog got out of the fence? I watch myself whimper excuses to Rayna and burst into tears. Tears that flood the carpet and lap the stairs, stranding employees like castaways searching for higher land. They blame me. They leer. And learn. And find my secret. Hidden in the fortress. Flashes of silver. Puncture stomach. Waves of nausea. No. I can't tell Rayna. Just bottle it up. Add it to the rack.

They're moving again.

I hold on. Wait it out. Let them pass.

I stagger into the Egyptian Ballroom. Only seat is in the front row. Hide oddly glazed gaze in carpet. *Please say it's almost over.* Alden distributes pens and surveys. I accept and pass with quivering wrists. Pen taps paper. Tap, tap, unintended tap. A meal from years ago fills the paper. A night whose fluttering fork betrayed me. *Jessalyn, what's wrong?* they asked. No one can ask tonight. Conceal. Suppress. Move past.

Fingers coil around the pen and side of hand leans on thigh. Focus.

List the signs of a nervous perpetrator. *Sweaty palms, fidgeting, avoidance of eye contact –all traits I currently exhibit.*

How might you subdue a patron who is acting unstable, irrational, or erratic? *I hope it's gently.*

What have you learned from this month's Fox Academy? *I should get out of here before someone tries to subdue me.*

“You may go as soon as you complete the survey,” Alden says. I scribble *sweaty, calmly*, and *a lot*, leaving all others blank.

I bolt to the ticketing office. The computer loads TimeClock with excruciating indolence. I grab my bag from locker. Watch the hourglass dump pixels back and forth.

Evan and Saleh swing through the door. Glazed gaze averts too slowly.

“You okay, Jess?”

“Yeah. You look sick.”

“Just tired.” Click clock out. “Night, guys.”

Cross the hall. Through the lobby. Down dark streets. Past men in shadows and women on corners. I pass accosted. Until.

The noise that makes my chest tighten, stomach turn, and feet stop. A scrape. A flick. A rasping flare. Fingers clench and toes grip. I prepare to fight. I prepare to fly. Turning, turning, turning to the source.

I breathe again. It’s just a lighter. In. Out. Breathe. Almost there.

At just under a jog, I fumble for my keys. I pull them from the side pocket and shove them around the ring. Apartment. Safe box. Toyota. She’s there under the lamp. I see her cousin in a parking garage. In an old safety video. A murderer stowed beneath her chest, poised to slit the driver’s Achilles. That cannot be me. I lean and stretch and reach to unlock the Toyota. Jump in. Lock doors. Start engine.

I realize I had not been breathing. Air explodes from my lungs and collects again. In. Out. Breathe.

Safe. I’m safe.

Every restraint falls away. My fists flail wildly. Red blotches burst and bloom across my cheeks. Tears shower down on the buds. I hear myself sob. It's a jagged, desperate sound.

My temple sinks into the wheel. Tension drains into its spokes. All energy spent. All strength given.

Conceal. Suppress. Move past.

You dirty, rotten dog!

Stop thinking. Stop thinking. Stop thinking.

Mrs. Reynolds says that I think too much, and this is true because sometimes I have a lot of thoughts, and they get jumbled up in my head, and the thoughts make my head hurt. For example, when I am in a new classroom, and I think about the new desks with the attached chairs so you do not know if they are desks or chairs (the correct answer is that they are neither; they are a combination of the two), and the walls that are 14 concrete bricks by 30 concrete bricks instead of 14 concrete bricks by 32 concrete bricks, and there is a new map on the wall next to the globe, but a map can never be exactly right because the earth is spherical and maps are flat.

Stop thinking. Stop thinking.

Mrs. Reynolds says that I should not repeat things. This is silly because sometimes repetition is good. It can be used for emphasis. Someone may ask you to repeat yourself because he did not hear you. Repetition is useful. I use repetition to clear my mind. I am thinking about not thinking. You may think that this is ironic, but you would be wrong. Irony is when the intended meaning of words is different from the actual meaning of the words, and I always mean what I say, so I am never ironic.

I like grammar. Sentences are difficult to understand, and they need rules. There is a correct way to speak, and there is an incorrect way to speak. Except, some people say it is wrong for me to use run-on sentences and they are wrong for two reasons. They are wrong because I use proper conjunctions and punctuation, so I write with long compound sentences, not run-ons. They are also wrong because sometimes one thought or sentence leads to the next thought or sentence, and it is important for people to follow your train of thought ('train of thought' is not actually a train; it is an idiom which is a phrase that has a meaning different than what individual

words mean; this idiom means a sequence of thoughts). People do not always say what they mean, but knowing literary devices helps me to figure out what they mean. For example, on Wednesday, Mrs. Reynolds said that it was raining cats and dogs. This is also an idiom because clouds cannot produce small mammals, and even if there were a bunch of people dropping cats and dogs off of rooftops to make it seem like it was raining cats and dogs, this would hurt the cats and dogs, and Mrs. Reynolds likes cats and dogs, so she would not use this phrase with a literal meaning. I wrote this in my metaphor journal so I could remember it:

Raining cats and dogs \approx raining heavily

Sometimes when I cannot understand something that is said to me, I diagram the sentence because then I can organize the words. I look only at the base line which has the subject, verb, and object or compliment so that I see the sentence without superfluous information. For example, I peeked in Mr. Sox's window because his ceiling fan was going really fast, and I like the sound that ceiling fans make when they go really fast and how the five spokes look like a circle (this is an optical illusion), but Mr. Sox's bed was squeaking, and it disrupted the white noise of the fan, so I groaned. Mr. Sox said, "Get out of here, you dirty, rotten dog."

This command was very confusing because I was already outside and I am not a dog. Mr. Sox began to stomp toward the window and wave his finger at me, and I do not like stomping noises or waving fingers, so I ran. I ran all the way home and up the stairs and through my bedroom door. I sat down at my desk to diagram.

"Get out" is the sentence's verb phrase and the subject phrase is you understood (which refers to me), but Mr. Sox said you, so the subject is both implied and expressed.

Mr. Sox called me a dog that is dirty and rotten. Mr. Sox is dumb because I am a human, not a dog. I do not like hypotheticals because they are silly because they are not real, but Mrs.

Reynolds says they can help prove points, so I will use one. If I was a dog, I would not be rotten because dogs rot when they are dead, and I am alive. Maybe Mr. Sox was trying to kill me.

I best tell Mother that Mr. Sox was trying to kill me. I promised to tell her if someone tried to hurt me, and I always keep my promises.

When Mother came home, she hung up her keys and walked directly into her bedroom. I know this because I heard her jingling keys and loud stomping from my bedroom. When the stomping and jingling stopped, I came downstairs. She was sitting in the living room, watching television, and wearing her Moo Moo. Once, Father explained that a Moo Moo is a dress that makes Mother look like a cow. Mother explained that a Moo Moo is a sign that tells me she had a bad day at work and does not want me to talk.

Today, I have to talk because I promised.

“Mr. Sox tried to kill me,” I said.

“Michael, sit down and don’t talk. *Braveheart* is on.”

Mother did not understand. I should provide context. “The bed was squeaking, and he was groaning, but when I groaned, he got angry and told me I was dirty.”

“He was what?”

“He was groaning. He was loud. He was naked.”

“I swear to God if that sick bastard molested you!” That was an incomplete sentence. “The sheriff’s going to get an earful about this one!” Mother uses a lot of dumb idioms. This one means she is going to yell.

She picked up the phone. Phones hurt my ears the way earfuls hurt my ears, and the person speaking into the phone expects me to talk, and I usually do not talk because talking usually gets me into trouble. “Sheriff, I’ve got a situation with Mr. Sox that I need you to handle. Michael, tell the sheriff what happened.” She shoved the phone toward me.

I did not want the phone. I did not want it to hurt me. Get the phone away from me! She slams it against my ear. I panicked. “I won’t say a goddamn word. Why? They won’t understand. They won’t understand why we do it,ⁱⁱ” I said with precision. Mother yanked the phone away.

“Michael, don’t pull that shit again. Anyway, officer, that old geezer Mr. Sox sexually assaulted my son. Yes, sexually!” she yelled into the phone. I thought he tried to kill me, but I won’t say a goddamn word. “That son of a bitch must like that sort of thing. Michael said he was groaning the whole time. Okay. Thank you, officer.” She hung up. “Michael, we are going to the police station.”

If the police station is like the train station, I will not like it. Train stations are loud and confusing and people touch you when they pass because they are walking quickly.

Mother handed me my coat and said to wait in the car. I got in the car and counted from memory each tile touching the train station ceiling. One hundred and fifty-seven tiles touch the glass ceiling. Mother got in the driver’s seat after I counted the tiles three whole times. She was wearing her Friday night clothes and red lipstick. Mother wore her Friday night clothes and red lipstick when it was Friday and she was going to the bar to smell cigarettes, but it was Tuesday and we were going to the police station.

I wish I could diagram situations like sentences.

I followed Mother into the police station. Before we got to the counter, a blue-wearing man stopped Mother, and I almost walked into her butt. “Follow me, Mrs. Dailson,” he said.

We followed the officer through the doors beside the counter, down a hallway, past a space with lots of desks and fast-walking people, and into a room with a rectangular table, four chairs, and a whiteboard without pens.

The police station was a lot like the train station but all the fast-walking people were dressed in blue. A blue-wearing woman was seated at the table. The blue-wearing man sat beside her and mother sat across from him. She squeezed her red lips into a circle and twirled her hair.

The blue-wearing man said, "Okay, son. Tell me what happened." He was looking at me, but he is not my father, so he must not be talking to me.

"Michael," Mother said loudly, "tell him what happened."

"Mr. Sox was groaning. I groaned. He yelled." I must find words to keep me out of trouble. I must concentrate. Mother tapped her foot. I groaned. "He yelled."

"Really, Michael. Don't be redundant." The blue-wearing man clicked his pen.

I groaned. "He yelled." The light flickered. It was too bright. I groaned. "He yelled."

Footsteps thumped and voices shouted outside the door. Stomping. Shouting. Tapping. Clicking. "Michael, finish your damn story!"

"You can't handle the truth!ⁱⁱⁱⁱ" I said with the same inflection so they would understand. I sat down, covered my ears, closed my eyes, and rocked. Back and forth and back and forth.

"Is this normal?" the blue-wearing man asked.

"Nothing is normal about this kid. He quotes movies when he's nervous," Mother said. She got up. "Sit in the damn chair, Michael. Finish your story." She grabbed my shoulder. It hurt. Lights burst under my eyelids. I rocked harder, going back and forth and back and forth.

"Looks like he's about to combust," the blue-wearing man said.

Stomping. Shouting. Clicking.

"Mrs. Dailson, if you'll follow my colleague here, I'd like to talk to Michael alone," said the blue-wearing woman.

"Gladly." Mother twirled her hair as she followed the blue-wearing man. The door shut.

“Okay, Michael,” the blue-wearing woman said softly, “you don’t have to sit in the chair. You can do whatever makes you comfortable.” I kept rocking. “I’m going to ask you a few questions. Will you try to answer them in your own words?” She was kind. I stopped rocking. I put one hand under my shirt and rubbed my shoulder because it was soft. Soft things are calming.

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay. Where were you when Mr. Sox yelled?”

“I was in the yard.”

“What did you see from the yard?”

“I saw the fan making an optical illusion. Then I saw Mr. Sox pointing and yelling at me. He was naked.”

“Did he touch you?”

Rub. Rub. Soft. “No. He tried to kill me.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I diagrammed the sentence. Mr. Sox called me a rotten dog, and dogs rot when they are dead, so Mr. Sox wanted me dead.”

“Hmm. I think there was a misunderstanding. Mr. Sox meant you were like a bad dog because you snuck into his yard when you shouldn’t have. He only metaphorically called you a rotten dog.” I hate metaphors. I groaned. “It’ll be okay, Michael. Let’s get your mother in here and see if we can pretend this never happened.”

The blue-wearing woman opened the door. The blue-wearing man entered. Mother entered. Her skirt was shorter than normal. All three sat down.

“Mrs. Dailson, I was able to match Michael’s story with Mr. Sox’s. Michael was in Mr. Sox’s yard and looked through the window at a rather private moment. Mr. Sox said he will drop trespassing charges if you drop the investigation. Would you like to drop the investigation?”

Mother groaned. “Fine.”

When we got home, I made another entry in my list of metaphors:

Rotten dog \approx sneaky person in someone else’s yard

ⁱ “I used to be God but got demoted.” From *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey through Madness* by Elyn R. Saks

ⁱⁱ “I won’t say a goddamn word. Why? They won’t understand. They won’t understand why we do it.” From *Black Hawk Down* directed by Ridley Scott.

ⁱⁱⁱ “You can’t handle the truth!” From *A Few Good Men* directed by Rob Reiner.