

SELECTIONS FROM THE SKELETONS UNDER MY EYELIDS: A MEMOIR

by

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Abstract

At the age of 12, I developed a condition that caused me to hyperventilate, black out, and on occasion, experience horrific visions. Though the visions were sparse at first, they quickly increased in number as weeks progressed. In the eighth grade, they became a daily occurrence. Though at the time I knew there was something wrong with me, I had no idea what was causing my symptoms. Because the episodes caused many inconveniences and embarrassments, I withdrew from social activities and stopped attending school altogether. Believing that my problems were the result of a physical illness, my parents had my blood tested for diseases such as mononucleosis. I also underwent an MRI, which checked for any tumors or abnormalities in my brain. When all of my tests came back negative, I was referred to a psychiatrist. I told the psychiatrist about my inclination to avoid social activities, but refrained from telling her about the hallucinations. Despite my withheld information, she determined I had an extreme case of clinical depression and agoraphobia. Though I was comforted by the notion that I had been granted a diagnosis, I still found it impossible to leave my bedroom without having the strange episodes. As my symptoms of depression increased, my interest in living decreased. But with the help of family and close friends, I was able to persevere and accept my circumstances despite the discomfort they created in my world.

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Dedication

These selections are dedicated to my loving family and friends, those with and without tails.

Preface

The following selections are part of a larger work entitled *The Skeletons Under My Eyelids: A Memoir*. Though I have chosen to include the opening sequences to my book, a chapter entitled “Agoraphobia” has been omitted for purposes of publication. Furthermore, some names have been changed to respect the privacy of some individuals.

CHAPTER 1 - Diagnosis

I blinked and it happened again. A skeletal forearm splintered and split, crackling under the pressure of a sterling red C-clamp. Shards of bone tumbled to the floor. I opened my eyes wide and forced myself to focus on something tangible, something that could get me away from the visions. I stared at the face of my eighth grade science teacher, hoping to focus on the words that were coming out of her mouth. She was saying something about the anatomy of amphibians, using hand gestures to mimic the digestive tract of a common bullfrog. I looked around at the rest of the kids at my table, who giggled and exchanged glances every time our teacher repeated the word “bowels.” I took a deep breath, focusing on each word of the lecture, trying not to blink.

“Mucus-like excretion,” the teacher said, concluding a sentence. My stomach gurgled and I looked down. There, slithering on the surface of my desk, I saw a sickly earthworm, leeching fluids onto the veneer of the tabletop and wallowing in its foreign existence. A razor blade descended upon its tender midsection, slowly slicing through to reveal the worm’s insides. Some of them leaked onto the desk, mixing with its exterior slime. I closed my eyes and saw crushed bones. I opened my eyes again and saw the worm. I couldn’t help but look at them.

I plunged my hand into my backpack to retrieve my coveted Ziploc bag full of antacid, which I had packed in anticipation of the hauntings. A sudden crinkle of plastic caused the kids at my table to turn around and look at me. I pretended like I didn’t notice. Shoving my sweaty fingertips into the bag, I pulled out three of the round tablets. When no one was looking, I popped them into my mouth and began to chew. The chalky substance coated my teeth with a sticky film as goose bumps rose upon my arm. I gripped my hands together underneath the desk,

swallowed the chalky lump of goo in my mouth, then waited for the relief. It didn't come until the bell rang, dismissing class.

I was exhausted by the time I reached the choir room. Feeling my knees beginning to buckle, I stumbled up the risers and found my chair in the alto section, its red, molded plastic a cool comfort against my skin. As soon as the bell rang, though, I felt a tightening in my lungs, a sensation that mimicked the feeling of being submerged under water unexpectedly. As everyone around me began warming up their voices for rehearsal, my throat became tighter and tighter until I had to stand up and push my way through a sea of legs to get to the edge of the room. Humiliated, I could feel every eye in the room trailing my steps to the door. Stumbling into the hallway, I found the nearest restroom and took refuge there. As my ears rang, I sat on the sticky floor with my head in my palms, listening to the dull whine reverberating in my ears.

After that moment, I lost track of time. I lost my vision, too. My eyes were wide open, but I could no longer see the mold growing in the grout of the bathroom tiles. Instead, I saw an image of my esophagus tightening and snapping like a twig underfoot. Still conscious but unable to see, I bit my lip. My stomach lurched. Would I throw up? My stomach growled. No I would not. In my blindness, I carefully moved my foot around until I could feel a wall. I kicked the wall, hoping that the sound would eclipse the ringing in my ears. I could feel the pressure of sudden impact on my ankle, but I could not hear the commotion. Frustrated, I pulled my legs against my chest and buried my head in my knees. I reminded myself that I was alone. There was no one there to bother me. No one there to see me. A few seconds later, I could see again. And then I could hear again. So finally, I stood up. I took a few shaky steps over the wall of mirrors and rinsed my face in the sink, washing away the sweat that had accumulated on my forehead, underneath my bangs. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry. I cupped my hands

underneath the stream of water and drank fervently from my palms. I felt a sharp pain in my throat each time I swallowed. When I finally returned to class, there were only three minutes left of the period. I exhaled a deep sigh of relief, ignoring the jeers that I got from my classmates about “taking too long in the bathroom.”

The very next day, I woke up with a swollen throat and congested sinuses. I smiled. Being sick was my Godsend; it was my valid reason not to have to go to school and worry about blacking out and seeing those disturbing things. At least a sore throat was treatable, and real. Other people could see it. My mom could take a flashlight, look down my throat, and understand my dilemma. I sat up slowly, then reached down to pet Pepsie, my Cairn Terrier, who was resting comfortably at the foot of my bed. When she noticed I was awake, she rose and padded her way to my side. She looked up at me with her big brown eyes, then leaned her whiskered face towards my mouth. Her nose touched my lips, and she inhaled deeply. She must have been able to smell whatever was infecting my throat. She then cocked her head to the side, eyeing my door. Mom was on her way up the stairs.

“You’re running late,” Mom said as she entered my room. “Dad’s already left for work, which means you’ve got to get a move on if you’re going to catch the bus.” Before I could respond, I was distracted by a jingle of keys accompanying hurried footsteps outside of my bedroom. It was the unmistakable sound of my brother.

“I’m getting a ride to school with Jason,” he called from the foot of the stairs.

“Have a good day, Andy,” Mom yelled back. She turned and looked at me.

“You slept even later than Andy did,” she said. “What’s the hold up?”

“I don’t feel good,” I said.

“How so?” Mom asked.

“My throat hurts. And I’m dizzy. And really tired, too. It feels like something’s wrong with my forehead, like maybe I’ve got a sinus infection.” Mom felt my cheeks with the back of her hand.

“You don’t feel warm at all,” Mom said.

“But I still don’t feel good,” I complained, coughing. Mom turned and left my room. I could hear her descending the stairs, her ankles popping at each step. A moment later, I heard a drawer open. I knew she was looking for her little flashlight, the same device that she had used for months to determine the status of my throat’s well-being. Seconds later, she shut the drawer and climbed the stairs once more.

“Open up,” she said, entering my room. I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue. I studied her eyes as they inspected my throat, squinting to see the intricacies of the infection.

“It looks red,” she said, sighing as she turned off the light. “This is your fifth sore throat in two months.”

“I guess I’ll just have to stay home and get some rest,” I said.

“We need to figure out what’s wrong,” she said. “I’m calling the doctor.”

“It’s just another really bad cold,” I argued.

“I wish I could believe that,” Mom said, petting Pepsie. “But colds go away. You’ve been getting sick on and off for a long time. And you’ve been acting differently lately. We need to figure out what’s going on here.”

“But I don’t want to go to the stupid doctor!” I protested.

“You’re going. I’ve got to go call the elementary school and tell them I’ll need a sub today. Again. Now get dressed and let’s go.” I angrily threw my covers off of the bed and glared

at Mom as she left my room. I walked over to my closet, then studied my clothes. It was cold outside, so I decided to wear a sweater. As I pulled it over my head, I noticed that the neck hole seemed tighter than usual. It was an extra large sweater already, so I hoped I wasn't gaining more weight. I felt chubby enough already. I turned around and looked in my dresser mirror. The glands in my neck were swollen up to the size of golf balls. I closed my eyes and saw them pop out of my neck and roll down the front of my sweater, leaving trails of blood and pus behind them. I opened my eyes and gagged. In the reflection of the mirror, I could see that Pepsie was watching me.

"Katie, your appointment's in twenty minutes. We need to go," Mom called from the foot of the stairs. I turned away from the mirror and left my bedroom. It was hard to breathe past the lump in my throat.

The ride to the doctor's office was quiet. I gazed out the window, thinking about all of the things that could have been wrong with me. Maybe I had a rare form of cancer or some sort of brain tumor. Maybe I had a blood disease. Maybe aliens were trying to communicate with me. The latter was doubtful, but at that point, I would go for any explanation.

"I hope I don't throw up," I said to Mom, breaking the silence.

"Do you feel nauseous?" she asked.

"I don't know. Not really, I guess."

"Then you won't throw up, honey." With a click of the blinker, Mom merged into a turn lane, then pulled into a parking lot. I recognized the surroundings and knew that we had arrived at the clinic. I felt another lump rise in my throat, then reached into my pocket for some antacid. I ate three tablets, then got out of the car, careful not to step on the yellow lines separating each parking stall.

The waiting room at the doctor's office was busy. It was full of people sniffing and sneezing, and the clamor of ringing phones at the reception desk was eclipsed by the persistent sound of children crying. While Mom checked me in with the receptionist, I eyed the available chairs in the room. I didn't want to sit too close to anyone else, but I also didn't want to sit too far away from the door. And I really didn't want to sit too far away from the bathroom, either. I wanted to be close to it in case I threw up or felt dizzy or saw worms or something. Given my preferences, I found an ideal spot next to the window. Without waiting for Mom, I went ahead and took a seat there. I relaxed as the backside of my body investigated the plush cushions of the seat. It was a new and interesting feel. But then a thought occurred to me. Could the backrest give me head lice? How many pints of blood can lice consume? Has anyone ever died from losing blood to head lice? I straightened up and pulled my hair over my shoulders, protecting it from the public chair. I looked around, noting that the room that had once seemed so large was shrinking. I eyed the bathroom. Was I about to throw up? Mom took a seat next to me. She peered down at my fingernails, which were digging into the polished wood of my chair.

"Let's read a magazine," she suggested, picking up a *Ranger Rick* and flipping through its pages. They were crinkled, like they had been wet at one point. Had someone wiped their snot on the pages? Had someone dropped the magazine in the toilet? How many germs were on a single page? I inched away from Mom and the magazine, trembling.

"You're going to be okay," Mom whispered. "You're just a little nervous. Everyone gets nervous when they go to the doctor." I nodded, but continued to grip the armrest with my nails. Mom turned a page of the magazine, then pointed at a crinkly picture.

“Look,” she said, “It’s a hippopotamus! Maybe she’s getting ready to practice her synchronized swimming.” I glared at Mom, hoping to tell her with my eyes that I was no longer three years old. She turned the page.

“And here’s a rhinosauras!” she said. “I’ll bet the hippopotamus is his girlfriend.” I looked at the reception desk, then down at the floor. Something tingled in my stomach. Was I going to throw up?

“Oh, look at this one,” Mom said, turning the page and pointing at a grazing yak. “I’ll bet he gets some bad gas.” I studied the yak, his mouth twisting in mid-chew. His rump was squared, and his tail was slightly raised. I supposed he could be getting ready to fart. I cracked a smile. Mom pointed to the rest of the herd in the background of the picture.

“That’s why they’re all standing back there,” Mom explained. “They’re all saying ‘ewww.’” I laughed a little. Mom turned to another page and pointed out the make-believe quirks of the ring-tailed lemurs. As much as I didn’t want to talk, I couldn’t help but add to the scenario.

“This one here,” I said, pointing to a lemur that was perched on his hind legs, covering his eyes with his tiny, human-like paws, “he’s hungry for Chinese food but he doesn’t want to say anything because the others have already decided to order pizza.” Mom laughed, giving a sympathetic “awww” to the poor lemur’s situation. We giggled. I eased back in my chair. Suddenly, a nurse stepped up to the reception desk. She looked over in my direction. My hands began to shake furiously. I glanced at the bathroom, then looked over at the door. I could see Mom’s car through the window. It wasn’t too late to run.

“Katie?” the nurse said. Mom patted me on the hand and led me to the reception desk. The nurse greeted us with a smile, then led us into a back hallway.

“Would you step up here, please?” the nurse asked, pointing to a scale. I slipped off my shoes and stood on the cold metal platform. The nurse slid a bar of metal over one way, then the other, until she seemed content with the results. She jotted a note down on her clipboard then declared, “Your weight is 108 lbs. You’ve lost fifteen pounds in the past six months.”

“Well that’s good,” I said.

“It’s not good,” the nurse explained. “You’re 13 years old. You’re at the age where you’re supposed to be gaining more weight to support your adult body. You haven’t weighed this amount since you were in the fifth grade. Plus, you’ve grown six inches since then.”

“But I was overweight in the fifth grade,” I explained.

“And you’re underweight now,” the nurse said.

After stepping down from the scale, I followed Mom and the nurse further down the hall. I expected them to lead me to the exam room, the same room that I had visited periodically since I was two years old. But instead, they led me to a small procedures room. My heart began to race. I had never been in the small procedures room. It was new, and scary. How would I be able to find the bathroom from there? I shoved my shaking hands in my pockets.

“Have a seat, Katie,” the nurse said, waving towards an adjustable bed. It was next to several large machines, none of which looked pleasant. After some hesitation, I sat on the bed, cringing at the feel of the paper sheets underneath my body. The nurse then grabbed a sleeve off of the wall. She explained that she would be taking my blood pressure. The sleeve didn’t look like it would hurt, so I offered my arm to her willingly. She snapped the canvas sleeve around my arm and explained that I would feel a slight squeeze. The sleeve tightened around my arm. I could feel the surge of my own pulse in my wrist. My arm started to tingle in the same way that

it does when I lay on it the wrong way. I closed my eyes and saw tiny grains of sand traveling through blue veins. I opened my eyes again and jerked.

“Hold still,” the nurse said. I wanted desperately to pull my arm out of the sleeve, but it was too tight. I was trapped. I trembled.

“Almost done,” the nurse explained. I thought for sure I would pass out. But much to my relief, the sleeve loosened and I was able to yank my arm free.

“Blood pressure’s normal,” the nurse said. “The doctor will be in shortly.” She exited the room and shut the door behind her. I took a deep breath and rubbed my newly freed arm.

“What are they going to do to me?” I asked Mom, terrified.

“Nothing more than some extra blood work,” Mom explained. “We’re going to get you tested for mononucleosis.”

“Isn’t that the kissing disease?” I asked.

“That’s its nickname.”

“But I haven’t kissed anyone,” I protested.

“I know. That’s why I didn’t have you tested sooner. But it can be spread in more ways than just kissing.”

“What are the symptoms?” I asked.

“Extreme fatigue and dizziness. And some people with mono get what they describe as the worst sore throat of their lives.”

“That sounds like me!” I exclaimed, relishing the thought of being able to put a name to the horrible feelings I was experiencing. Just then, the doctor stepped into the room. He greeted me with a calm voice, then asked how I had been for the past few weeks.

“Okay,” I said out of habit.

“No she hasn’t,” Mom interjected. “Since December, she has missed a combined total of two weeks of school.”

“What kind of symptoms have you experienced?” the doctor asked me.

“I’m tired,” I admitted. “Really, really tired. I get dizzy and lightheaded when I get out of bed. Plus, my throat hurts. And I get nauseous a lot.” The doctor jotted down a few notes on his clipboard.

“I see you’ve lost some weight,” he said, reading the nurse’s comments. “Has she been eating well?” he asked Mom.

“She hasn’t been eating as much as she used to,” Mom explained. “But when she does eat, it’s generally healthy food.”

“I see,” the doctor said, writing more notes.

“Have you experienced a loss in appetite?” the doctor asked me.

“Yes,” I said, although I hadn’t really noticed until they pointed it out. The doctor stood and grabbed a small needle off of the counter.

“We’re going to test you for mono,” he explained. “You seem to have its symptoms, so it’s very likely that you’ve got it.”

“What happens if I have mono?” I asked.

“Well,” the doctor began, “there’s no real treatment for mono other than getting plenty of rest and drinking lots of fluids. You’ll probably have to miss a few more weeks or even months of school. I would recommend getting a tutor, if this is the case.” Mom and I exchanged glances.

“And now for the icky part,” the doctor said, pulling on some latex gloves. He grabbed a needle from the counter. I reluctantly held out my finger, and looked away as he stuck the needle into the tip. To distract myself, I looked up to focus on the ceiling tile. I wanted to see how many

specks I could count. There was a big one in the center. Then two small ones to the left of the big one. Then I counted eight that looked as if they were recreating a map of Orion. I felt a sting. Another three specks nestled near the edge of the tile. Another sting. Two more specks.

“All done,” the doctor said, removing the needle from my hand. I looked down at my finger, noticing a little bulb of blood that bubbled at the tip. It was shiny and gleamed like a Christmas light underneath the fluorescent glare of the exam room. I closed my eyes. I could see a human figure, stripped of skin so that only the muscles and blood were left exposed to the incriminating air. My stomach turned, and I jolted.

“Are you okay?” the doctor asked, dabbing the fresh wound with alcohol.

“I’m fine,” I lied. The doctor took my vile of blood and exited the room, explaining that the test would take a few minutes to complete.

“I hope I have mono,” I told Mom. “That would explain so much.” Mom nodded and looked at her watch. I knew she was thinking about the work she was missing. I hated that I had made her miss so much of it lately.

“These are some weird machines,” Mom said, changing the subject. I eyed the large mechanical devices next to the bed.

“Maybe that’s an x-ray,” I guessed, pointing at a machine that held cartridges in its side.

“It’s for small arm injuries,” Mom said. “Andy had to have some x-rays like that when he got tennis elbow.” I closed my eyes and saw an arm bone, breaking in two, one piece dangling off of the other. I opened my eyes and took a gulp of air.

“I think this one must be for lobotomies,” Mom joked as she gestured towards a machine with a large point on one tip. I groaned and looked down at the floor. I could hear my own

breaths begin to increase over the hum of electricity in the room. Mom quit joking about the machines.

“It might storm tonight,” she said optimistically. I looked up and smiled.

“I hope so.”

When the doctor entered the room again, I studied his face to see if I could read the diagnosis without having to be told. He wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t frowning, either. He leaned against the counter near the sink.

“You tested negative,” he explained to me.

“So I have mono?” I asked, assuming the term “negative” meant that I was sick.

“No,” he explained. “The tests were negative of mononucleosis, meaning that you don’t have it.” I looked across the room to see Mom’s expression shift from curiosity to that of disappointment. We were both really hoping for a diagnosis.

“We also checked your levels for a few more things while we were at it,” the doctor continued, “but everything looks perfectly normal.” Mom nodded, quietly folding her hands in her lap.

“Would you mind if I spoke with Katie privately?” the doctor asked.

“Not at all,” Mom said, standing up from her seat. I widened my eyes as I tried to communicate silently with her, shouting inside of my mind that I did not want to talk with the doctor by myself. Mom was my moral support. I didn’t want to have to sit there without her. She left the room, though, and the doctor shut the door behind her. I remained perched on the bed, feeling feeble and shy. The doctor pulled a stool out from underneath the counter and took a seat directly across from me.

“I just want to ask you a few questions,” he explained calmly, the fluorescent lights from the ceiling reflecting in his wire rimmed glasses.

“Okay,” I said with uncertainty.

“Have you been experimenting with any drugs lately?”

“No,” I said. I was offended that he even asked. I had never even had the desire to sneak a beer out of my parent’s refrigerator, let alone “experiment” with drugs.

“Have you thought about trying drugs?” the doctor continued.

“No.”

“Have you engaged in any sexual activity?”

“No! I’m only 13! I’ve never even had a boyfriend!” I shrieked. Tears welled up in my eyes.

“Have you experienced any sexual abuse?”

“No!”

“Have you seen anything traumatic happen lately?” he asked. I paused. I wondered if I should tell him about the worms or the skeleton or any of my other conscious nightmares. “No,” I said quietly.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Positive,” I said.

“Is there anything that you’re concerned about, or anything that you would like to tell me in private?” the doctor asked.

“No,” I said. The doctor looked down at his notes.

“Okay,” he concluded, “but if you ever feel like you need to tell me something, you’re free to do so. No one is going to judge you.”

“Okay,” I said, hopping down from the bed. I met my mom in the hallway, and we exited the office together. When we got to the car, I began sobbing. Mom placed a sympathetic hand on my back, but remained silent. I buried my face in my hands. I hated the smell of the Band-Aid on my finger.

Defeated by the day, I went to bed as soon as we returned home. Pepsie followed me upstairs. I was angry with the doctor for asking me those embarrassing questions and I was angry with myself for feeling sick without really being sick. I could hear my Mom speaking to someone on the phone in the kitchen. Determined to find the cause of my problems, she was setting up an appointment for an MRI. I buried my face in my pillow. Not only was I upset that I would have to go to the hospital, but I was devastated by the fact that my throat was no longer sore. It felt better as soon as we left the doctor’s office. And yet I still felt awful. Pepsie nuzzled my ear with her cold nose, then laid down by my side. After wiping my tears away, I looked over at her and realized she had the same intense look of concern on her face that she had that morning. I scratched her ears.

“You puppy dogs always understand,” I said.

After a few more days of bed rest, Mom and I were off to the hospital for an MRI. The doctor had suggested that maybe my symptoms were being triggered by some sort of growth or tumor in my brain. In the hospital waiting room, I gripped the vinyl, upholstered chair with my fingers. It gave into the pressure of my nails easier than the chair at the doctor’s office did.

“What time is it?” I asked Mom.

“It’s almost noon,” she replied. I sighed. At school, my friends were getting ready for lunch, no doubt. Even though I missed them, I was secretly glad that I wasn’t at lunch with them.

That's where all the trouble had started in the first place. That's where the sickness really began. I had been in the seventh grade and outside at what our school liked to call "fresh air," the interval of free time before lunch. I had been talking to my friends Jami and Nell about our home-ec projects.

"I'm making a school spirit football," Jami explained.

"That's a neat project," I said. "But I decided to make the white rabbit. You know I have a weakness for stuffed animals!" Jami giggled. I imagined she was recalling the hoards of animals that have occupied my room since the third grade.

"What did you decide to make, Nell?" I asked.

"I liked the idea of making a stuffed animal, and the patterns with the Velcro legs seemed pretty easy," Nell explained. "So I decided to make the detachable cow." Like a forest of tiny geysers, the pores on my forearms released sudden gushes of sweat. I shut my eyes as a loud, monotone ring eclipsed all noise except for the words that rang through my head . . . *Detachable cow. Decatchable chow. Delatchable sow. DECAPITATED COW.* After seeing the words spell out across my eyelids, I opened my eyes, hoping to see Nell's pleasant face. Instead, I saw darkness. I panicked; I could feel that my eyes were open as wide as possible, but I couldn't see anything. I began to breathe rapidly. What was going on? Suddenly, something appeared in the center of the darkness. It appeared to be a dull blob of light. Seconds later, it morphed into the severed head of a brown and white cow. Its jelled eyes were rolled back in its sockets. I could feel my own eyes roll back in uncontrollable sympathy. The image of the cow grew bolder, as I could see its dry tongue lying slightly curled between its thin, black lips and brittle teeth. Flies swarmed around its tagged ear and feasted on bloody holes that previous flies had created. I peered down to see blood creating a pool where the flesh of the neck lay in clumps. The blood

glistened in a blaring sunbeam. Maggots flowed out from beneath the flesh of the neck and into the pool of blood. I dry heaved, grateful that my stomach was too empty to vomit. I looked on at the cow with terror as she rolled her left eye down to meet my gaze. A could feel a burst of sweat seeping out of my forehead.

“Too hot,” I whispered to the cow head, immediately wondering why a bloody heap of bio-hazardous waste would have any sympathy for my situation. The cow began to fade away into a shapeless blob of light, and then into darkness once more. I opened my eyes hoping to see reality, but still I could muster no vision. I touched my finger to my eyeball to make sure that it was still there. As I felt the gooey surface of my eye, my body began to shake. The sun felt too intense against my skin. I could feel my blood begin to simmer, bubbling and popping beneath my flesh. The ringing in my ears persisted and sweat blanketed my skin. My arms had the texture of a dolphin’s nose: rubbery, wet and squeaky. Salty sweat burned my blind eyes as I blinked rapidly, trying to regain vision. I vomited air out of my lungs through every exhale. The more I blinked, though, the more I could begin to see as natural daylight infiltrated my pupils. Finally, I could see some of my surroundings polka dotted with the blackness.

After I fully regained my vision, my hands shook as I discovered that I was about thirty feet from where I went blind. I looked down at my palms that glistened with sweat. My whole body had turned a dark shade of red. Sweat from my upper lip dripped into my dry mouth and my heart still beat furiously. I looked around for the cow head, but all I could see was Jami’s smiling face. Had she noticed my black out? Had she seen the cow too? Her pleasant expression indicated that she probably had not.

“You okay?” she asked, “You look a little flushed.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. At the sound of the lunch bell, I walked into the school alongside Jami and Nell, grimacing at the squeak of sweat between my thighs.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked. “You’re shaking.” I opened my eyes and saw the mauve and teal wallpaper of the hospital waiting room.

“Just a little nervous,” I admitted.

“You won’t have to wait too much longer,” Mom said, patting my knee.

After a few minutes, some nurses greeted me in the waiting room and escorted me down a long hallway and into a dark room with a tube-like structure in the center. It looked like a giant, white pipe with lots of little wires hanging off of the sides. I wondered if it looked anything like the shuttles they use to launch dead bodies into space with. What happens to dead bodies in space, anyways? Do they implode or explode? I shivered.

“Remove all clothing and jewelry and put on this robe,” a nurse said, handing me a paper hospital gown. The nurses left the room and allowed me to change in privacy, though I wondered if there were hidden cameras in the room. There were so many blinking lights and buttons and machines, it was hard to tell. After removing my shirt and pants, I slipped the gown over my bare body, cringing at the feel of its scratchy texture against my skin. I felt a slight draft, then realized the entire backside of the gown was open. The two little ties around the waist were not going to aid that problem. Embarrassed, I sat down on the bed and waited, cold and scared.

When the nurses entered the room again a few minutes later, they were in the company of a male doctor. I folded my arms across my stomach as if to protect my torso from prying eyes. The nurses helped me lie back on the slender bed and explained that it would automatically move into the tube. The test would last for several minutes. Terrified, I agreed to lie still during the

procedure. I kept my eyes opened wide as I entered the small tube. I listened to the strange noises of the mechanics in the machine, twisting and grinding and humming. What if there was a technical difficulty and the machine exploded? Would the nurses come try to help me or would they flee for their own lives? And what would hurt more – being shocked or burned?

“Please stop squirming,” a voice said. I held my breath. Just as my ears began to ring, I was pulled from the tube and told that I was finished.

Mom and I were relieved when the results came back negative. There was no tumor or growth detected in the tests. In fact, everything internal looked fine. Physically, I appeared to be a perfectly healthy 13-year-old girl. But what about my symptoms? Mom and I just couldn’t figure out why I was feeling so sick. The whole process was exhausting. Mom and I tried to remain optimistic during the drive home, but it was obvious that we were both worried. During a period of silence, I felt something tense up in my lower abdomen. I knew the feeling.

“Mom,” I said after some hesitation, “could you stop by the grocery store?”

“Sure,” Mom said, “what for?” I was embarrassed to say. I didn’t know how to word it just right. I remained silent.

“What is it, honey?” Mom asked again.

“I need you to buy me some...supplies.”

“Again?” Mom asked, “I just bought some a few weeks ago.”

“I know,” I said. “But I’m out.” A puzzled expression spread across Mom’s face.

“Didn’t you just have your period two weeks ago?”

“Yes, so it’s that time again,” I said, irritated.

“You mean you’ve been getting your period every two weeks?”

“Yes. Is something wrong?”

“Well, you’re only supposed to get it every 28 days or so. Just once a month.”

“I get mine every other Tuesday.”

“I thought you were going through your...supplies...pretty quickly.”

“Why is this happening?” I asked, suddenly feeling overheated. Would I bleed to death?

Was I a freak?

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “But I’m glad you told me. This is important to know.” Mom pulled over the car and parked near the entrance of a grocery store. I stayed in the car as she ran inside to pick me up a package of sanitary pads. As shoppers passed the car window and peered inside, I shielded my face. I felt as if they all knew I was defective.

That evening, as I hid away in my dark bedroom with Pepsie, I could hear my mom crying. I cracked the door to my room open and listened. She was in her bedroom at the foot of the stairs, speaking to someone on the phone.

“I think you’re right,” she told someone on the other end in between sobs. I continued to listen.

“So all of her symptoms are signs of depression?” Mom asked. Then there was a pause. My cheeks flushed in anger. How dare they call me depressed! I wasn’t depressed! I was sick! I had heard enough and decided to return to my room with a giant slam of the door. I huddled under my bed sheets, feeling the humidity of my breath surround my face. After a few minutes, Mom came knocking on my door.

“What?” I asked angrily, hoping to deter her from wanting to enter my room.

“Can I talk to you?” Mom asked in a calm voice.

“Fine,” I said. Mom came in and turned on a lamp. I peeked out from under the covers and glared at her for doing so. She then sat at the end of my bed, holding a glossy book in her hands. The cover portrayed people smiling, but the title said something about depression. I stared at the book and the smiling faces on the cover, hating them all.

“I just got off the phone with the doctor,” Mom said nervously, “and we think we know what’s causing you to feel so sick.” I remained silent. “Depression is extremely common in girls your age,” she continued.

“I’m not crazy,” I said.

“Being depressed doesn’t mean you’re crazy,” she said.

“Yes it does. It means you have to get on drugs because you can’t think right. I’m not crazy.”

“There are many treatments for depression,” Mom continued optimistically, “and it doesn’t have to last forever. Depression can be a temporary condition.”

“I’m not depressed. Do you see me banging my head into walls? No, because I’m not depressed. I’m not a psycho.”

“I’ve been reading this book,” Mom continued patiently, “and it explains that depression actually causes a lot of physical symptoms. You don’t have to bang your head around to be depressed.” Mom opened her book up to a page that she had bookmarked and began to read a passage that was highlighted in yellow.

“Depression is very common in adolescent girls,” she read. “Symptoms may be any of the following: Irritability . . .”

“I’m not irritable!” I protested.

“ . . . fatigue, sadness, confusion, dizziness, the sensation of feeling lightheaded, loss of appetite, loss of interest in friends, and *irregular periods*.” I sat quietly. As much as I hated it, I had to acknowledge that those symptoms sounded pretty familiar.

The next day, Mom and I were headed back to the doctor’s office. My physician had called in a psychiatrist and a counselor and we were all to have a meeting that afternoon. I sat quietly in the waiting room, counting the fibers of carpet beneath my feet. Mom asked if I wanted to read some more *Ranger Rick*, but I shook my head no. The waiting room wasn’t as crowded as it had been during my prior visit. It was getting warmer, and I figured people weren’t getting as sick. When the nurse appeared in the doorway, I knew that she was there to call on me. When I began to head back to the exam room, she corrected my advances.

“You’ll be meeting the doctors in the conference room,” the nurse explained, pointing to a large room with a set of double doors at the end of the hallway. Mom and I followed her lead and entered the conference room. Inside there was a giant, wooden table that was circled by mauve, upholstered chairs with black metal legs. Already seated in some of these chairs were my doctor, and two people that I had never seen before.

“This is Dr. Weston,” my doctor explained, pointing to a thin woman with wavy brown hair. “She’s a psychiatrist with Midwestern.”

“Nice to meet you,” the woman said, extending her hand to shake mine. I reluctantly followed through with the ritual greeting.

“And this,” continued my doctor, “is Kenneth. He’s a very good counselor who has talked to hundreds of girls in your exact same situation.” Kenneth smiled, but did not show any of his teeth in doing so. He extended his hand for a shake so I appeased that greeting as well,

then wiped my hand on my pants. My doctor invited Mom and me to take a seat across the table, so we did. Not wanting to look anyone in the eye, I stared out the window to my right.

“Has Katie missed much school lately?” Dr. Weston asked.

“She hasn’t been to school all week. Not since she tested negative for mono,” Mom said.

“Has she been crying a lot?” Dr. Weston asked.

“Much more than she usually does,” Mom admitted. I continued to stare out the window.

It was strange how no one in the room was acknowledging my presence. Was I invisible? And if so, why couldn’t I harness that power when I needed it the most? Why couldn’t I be invisible at school?

“She also spends a lot of time in bed,” Mom added. “Sometimes it’s because she’s sick. But other times, she seems fine, physically. She just doesn’t want to come out.” I glared at Mom, hoping that my eyes could tell her how angry I was. When she refused to acknowledge my hate, I looked out the window again.

“Is this all correct, Katie?” Dr. Weston asked, startling me. All eyes shifted towards me. I wrapped my hands around my stomach and focused on the wood grain of the table.

“Yes,” I quietly admitted. All three doctors squiggled their pens across their clipboards. I felt like a science experiment.

“What it sounds like you have is clinical depression,” Dr. Weston said. “It is an illness that affects one both physically and mentally. You have been experiencing mental anguish, which in turn, makes you feel physically ill. It’s a vicious cycle.”

“Is depression the reason why she doesn’t want to leave the house?” Mom asked.

“In extreme conditions, depression can cause agoraphobia, which is the fear of public places. It, as well as depression, doesn’t have to last forever as long as you undergo some

treatments. We suggest that Katie meets with Kenneth for some counseling sessions in the near future. Also, I would like to put her on a prescription medication called Zoloft. It's new and seems to be very effective in teens," Dr. Weston explained.

"Will there be any side effects?" Mom asked.

"Nothing worse than what she's already experiencing," Dr. Weston said. Everyone nodded gravely. Again, I questioned whether or not I was in the room.

CHAPTER 2 - Tick

The digits of my clock radio glowed red in my peripheral vision as I lay in bed. At nine in the morning, I closed my eyes for a moment, avoiding the glare of the double zeroes, the two looming eyes that tempted me with ideas of nothingness. After a few seconds, I looked over and studied the wall clock hung near my window, white in the center with big black numbers forming a circle around the edge. It ticked loudly as the second hand ambled around the face, pointing at each incremental dash as if it were searching for something that it would never be able to find, like a sixty-two. I felt sorry for the clock. I felt sorry for myself.

It was the end of April and I still hadn't returned to school. I had legitimate diagnoses: acute depression and agoraphobia. I also had lots of medication that was supposed to fix the problem. But I was still afflicted, and I didn't know why. I rolled over on my back to stare at both of my clocks at once, noticing that the wall clock was set just a little bit faster than my digital clock. Slowly, the wall clock shifted its second hand to the position of 9:02, while the digital clock remained at 9:01. I wondered what it would be like to be small enough, or skinny enough, or sly enough to squeeze in between the two times and exist in a plane where no one would notice me, a plane where I could truly be alone. I could get lost there in that nether time, peeking out at the world just twice a day. But unlike the elusiveness of time, I was big, and fleshy, and real. My fears were the only things people couldn't see, the illusory ticks reverberating beneath an ordinary face.

At 9:12, I looked back over at the clock on the wall. Three months prior at that exact time, I had been at school like all of the normal kids. Specifically, I had been in choir. But unlike everyone else around me, eyelids lax and voices humming with bored enthusiasm, I sat amidst my invisible terror, knees buckled and throat closed, trying not to fall down from my spot on the third tier riser and into the section of basses below me. Hands shaking, I tried to ignore the girl to my right who nudged me with her elbow, reminding me of the advice that she had given me moments before our winter concert: “Stop singing! I can’t sing next to a girl that has a voice as bad as yours!”

With shaking hands and sweaty palms, I breathed slowly and blinked rapidly, trying to make the image of maggots that sat in greasy piles at the feet of my choir director go away. Sweating and uncomfortable, I imagined waves of cold water crashing through the ceiling and onto my head, cooling me and providing a plausible reason to evacuate class. But as the water never came, my fear failed to dissipate. I then stood as still as I could, hoping that the lack of physical activity would slow down my heart rate. When my chest continued to pound at 9:38, I contemplated my candidacy for spontaneous combustion and counted on one hand the reasons why I wouldn’t want it to happen.

Throwing my covers off the bed, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I hated to think about school. I leaned over and grabbed one of the many stuffed dogs that I kept by my nightstand, next to my telephone and pocketknife. The one I grabbed, a little black and white spaniel with soft fur and even stitches, was a gift from my Grammie, my mom’s mom, years ago. My Grammie and I had always had a special bond. Before I got so sick, I would often stay the night at her apartment, asking questions about France and Japan and the other neat places she lived after the Second World War. She would tell me stories about my late grandfather and his pet

ducks that circled the clock towers of Landis de Bousac every afternoon before feeding time. Then, Grammie and I would speak French as we played hide and seek, stifling giggles to avoid revealing ourselves. I snuggled the little dog close to my heart, wishing that I were a child playing hide and seek with my Grammie again.

At 10:58, I decided to crawl out of bed. Pepsie, who had been lying at my feet, jumped down to the floor and shook out her fur. I stood up and stretched, avoiding eye contact with myself in the dresser mirror. I peeked out the window at the mailbox, its little flag erect on the side. The mail wouldn't arrive for another three hours and two minutes. Turning from the window, I gazed back at my wall clock. Twelve seconds had passed. Annoyed by the ticking, I reached over to my digital clock and switched the tiny lever below the numbers to turn on the radio. I found a station I liked, tuned out the static, and turned up the volume.

With shaky feet, I ambled across my room and over to my desk. There, perched on the veneered maple surface, was a yellow box of crayons. Next to the crayons were an open packet of crackers and a bottle of water. On the center of the desktop, lined up perfectly between two horizontal grains of wood, was a coloring book that Mom bought me. Finally, on the very edge of my desk, towards the corner, sat a bottle of dark blue nail polish, an eyelash curler, and some flavored lip-gloss that my friend Jami had given me as a gift for my 13th birthday. I scooped up the cosmetics and tossed them into the desk drawer where they disappeared into the mess of stickers and pens and other random items that I had collected and forgotten about over the years. I shut the drawer, eclipsing the noise of my wall clock with a resounding slam.

Feeling weak, I took a seat at my desk. After circling three times, Pepsie laid down at my feet on the floor. I carefully opened the coloring book and inspected the various pages, white with empty black shapes of springtime landscapes and smiling monsters. I opened my bottled

water and took a sip, relishing the cool liquid as I studied the layouts before me. There were only a few that I had already completed, each shape gently filled in with dabbles of primary colors. After choosing a page to work on, I opened my box of crayons, admiring their colorful pointed tips in perfect rows. Picking a color to work with, I filled in the blanks, pressing the crayon hard into the piece of paper. Just as I was assigning an orange nose to a roller skating monster, one of my favorite songs began to play on the radio. The last time I had heard it, I was on the school bus with Jami, laughing and gossiping and talking about boys. During the song's chorus, Jami leaned over to tell me something secret.

“I think Derek likes you,” she said, eyeing the boy in the seat across from ours. I carefully looked over in Derek's direction where I saw him in his stocking cap smiling at me, dimples accentuating his curved lips. My heart fluttered.

“I think I'm in love,” I admitted. Jami and I giggled as the song continued. That was back in November, when everything was okay.

I stopped coloring. Looking down at my paper, I saw the monster smiling at me. My stomach lurched, groaning. I studied the monster's neatly colored fur, bright red, and the sun in the sky that I had colored a lemony yellow. I looked at his half-colored nose. My muscles tensed and my throat tightened. I broke the orange crayon between my fingers. Swirling around in my chair, I heaved the broken pieces through the air, dotting the wall next to my clock with a blot of orange wax. I stood up, tears streaming down my face, and threw the coloring book against my closet door. It landed on the floor with a thud. Screaming, I tore the sheets off of my bed as the black and white spaniel whipped across the room, landing in the corner. I looked up and saw my reflection in the dresser mirror. Shocked by my own erratic appearance, I threw my open bottle of water at the glass. With my bare foot, I kicked my wooden desk chair, bouncing it off the

mattress and into my nightstand, knocking over my telephone and toppling a tower of word search puzzles into a pile on the floor. I looked down and saw blood on my foot, but could feel nothing. Pepsie was cowering and trembling under the safety of my desk. By the time the song was over, my room was nearly destroyed, and so was I.

“Grammie’s coming over today,” Mom said at 6:45 the next morning. She was carrying a bowl of oatmeal that I would eat two bites of before refusing. The news made me flush with anger.

“Why? Don’t you trust me?” I asked angrily.

“We just want someone to be here with you,” Mom said calmly, “And Grammie will keep you company. If you want it.” I glared at Mom. Although her returned gaze was kindly, it felt as if her soft green eyes were boring into my head, looking at all of the things that I had seen, those terrible images that came to me when I was at school. My heart sank as I saw her eyes well up with tears.

“We’re just so worried about you, Katie,” she said, bursting into a sob.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I said, patting her on the shoulders in rhythm with the wall clock, “I’ll be okay.” The uncertainty in my voice made her cry harder.

Grammie arrived at 7:46 that morning. Pepsie, excited to have company, trotted downstairs to greet her. I was saddened when she didn’t return. I would have to earn her trust back, and that broke my heart. From my bed, I could hear Grammie downstairs in the kitchen. She watched TV, prepared a snack, then ate it. It was awkward, knowing that there was a guest in my home that I couldn’t entertain. I took bite of a cracker, coughing with the dryness of the snack. After filling up on two and a half pieces, I closed my eyes and listened to the ticking of

my wall clock. Some of the ticks seemed to be louder than others. *Tick. TICK. Tick. Tick. TICK. TICK. Tick.* I listened for a pattern, but couldn't detect one. I eyed the pocketknife on my nightstand. Reaching for it with nimble fingers, I brought it into bed with me, gently tracing my fingerprints with the backside of the blade. I studied the silver shard, too short to do much, but long enough to work. In the kitchen, Grammie coughed and cleared her throat. I threw the knife on the floor. Our coughs sounded alike.

Mom left a secret note for me the next day. She knew I would eventually creep out of my room to bathe, so she knew I would find the sticky note stuck to the outside of my bedroom door. I studied her neat penmanship, its familiar lines and curves gracefully contorting to spell my name. Downstairs, I could hear Grammie getting up from her chair. Afraid that she might interpret my standing in the upstairs hallway as an invitation to talk, I tore the note from the door and scurried back into my room. I listened quietly to make sure Grammie wasn't ascending the stairs. When I heard her open and shut a kitchen cabinet, I exhaled a sigh of relief and sat on the bed to read my note. In her careful writing, Mom wrote: "Katie, Dad and I have faith that you will get better soon. Please don't get discouraged, all of this will soon pass and become nothing more than a tiny little blip in your past. Bigger and better things await you. They will happen when you're ready for them to. Love, Mom." She drew a little happy face next to her name. I felt a lump in my throat rise. Wiping snot from my nose, I found a piece of paper and scrawled "Thank you" across the lines. I stuck it to my door with a sticker in the shape of a dog, then went back to bed.

When Mom arrived home from work that afternoon, I cracked open my door to hear her enter the kitchen.

“Did she come down today?” Mom asked Grammie.

“No,” Grammie said, “She’s been very quiet all day.”

“Do you know if she got my note?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go upstairs to check on her because I didn’t want to scare her. I heard her leave her room once, though.” Grammie paused. “She wasn’t crying,” she added optimistically.

“I’ll go see how she’s doing,” Mom said. I turned the doorknob so the latch wouldn’t click as I shut the door quickly, jumping back into bed and hiding myself under the covers. A few seconds later, I heard Mom’s footsteps approach my bedroom. I could hear her peel the sticker from my note off of the door. A moment later, she entered my room. Saying nothing, she simply came over to the bed and gave me a hug. It was so much easier than talking.

At 4:00 that afternoon, my phone rang. After hesitating for a moment, I reached over to my nightstand and picked up the receiver. The last thing I felt like doing was speaking to anyone, so I breathed into the mouthpiece instead of saying “hello.”

“Hi Katie,” Jami said cheerfully once she realized I was there. A shot of adrenaline rushed through my veins. Jami and I hadn’t spoken since the last day I had attended school – the day I fainted in the arms of a teacher who carried my limp body all the way down the hall and into the nurse’s office. When I awoke, I told the nurse I had a cold, but she knew better. And because Jami’s mom was the nurse, I knew Jami knew the secret reason why I had missed so many days of classes. Scared to say anything, I remained silent.

“How are you feeling?” Jami asked.

“Okay,” I finally said.

“We all miss you at school, you know. It’s just not the same without you. When do you think you’re going to come back?”

“As soon as I can,” I answered with a sigh.

“Well when you do, I’ll be saving a seat for you at lunch.” After thanking Jami for calling me, I hung up the phone, rolled over, and took a nap.

The next morning, Mom wrote me another note. This time, she brought it into my room and put it on my nightstand.

“Some light reading for later,” she said with a smile as she handed me some oatmeal. I noticed it was 6:46, and wondered if her tardiness was due to her note writing. A little charge surged through my heart, just thinking that an entire minute of Mom’s morning was dedicated to writing something for me. I grabbed the spoon and began shoveling the oatmeal into my mouth, swallowing the thick lumps with big gulps.

“Is Grammie mad at me for not going down to see her?” I asked.

“No, she understands that you don’t feel well. She knows you love her.”

“Good. It’s not like I want to be rude,” I said.

“I know. And it’s okay. But if you ever do want to go down and see her, she’d love your company. She always has and she always will.” A sensation of guilt quivered in my gut.

“I would if I could,” I said defensively.

“I know, I know,” Mom said, taking my spoon and bowl. After a hug and a kiss on the forehead, she went downstairs to greet Grammie who was just entering the front door. After Mom left for work, the house quieted of all but Grammie’s stirrings in the kitchen.

It wasn't until 10:06 that I decided to read Mom's note. "Focus on good things," it said, "like dogs, word puzzles, your favorite music, your supportive family, your friendship with Jami, your skateboard, and fun times to come." I stuck the note on the side of my dresser, beneath the glow of my digital clock, so I could look at it while I lay in bed. Next, I decided to get up and crack the door to my bedroom open. The springtime weather outside was making my room stuffy, and since I didn't want to open the curtains to my window, I figured I could get some fresh air from inside the rest of the house. Immediately, I felt a cool rush hit my face, chilling the sweat that had formed on my brow. I welcomed the sensation.

Instead of lying back down in bed after cooling off, I decided to stay standing at my cracked door, listening to what was going on in the kitchen. I could hear water running in the sink and imagined what Grammie might have been doing. She could have been washing dishes for my mom. Most likely, though, she was washing her hands. She and I both had a tendency to do that a lot. Grammie turned off the faucet, then all was quiet. Suddenly, I heard a big bang, something metallic hitting another hard surface. My jaw dropped, wondering what in the world had just happened.

"Whoops," Grammie said jovially to herself, emphasizing the "w" sound. I covered my mouth as I smiled. A small thud indicated that she had picked up whatever had fallen and put it back in its place. I listened for more, but everything was quiet again. I figured Grammie had taken a seat at the table to read the paper or look at a magazine. All I could hear then was the *tick tick* of my little wall clock. I turned around and looked at the time. It was 10:36. My muscles felt weak, so I crawled back into bed to lie down.

At noon, rumbles of hunger bellowed in my stomach. I reached over to my dresser and grabbed my packet of crackers, its plastic wrapping crinkling between my fingers. Opening the

packet, I dug out a few saltines. The salt stuck to my fingertips as I ate the crackers slowly, chewing each one into a thick mush before swallowing. I counted the crackers that I ate, measuring them against the amounts that I had eaten for previous lunches. After eight crackers, my stomach felt more full than it had been in days. The feeling made me drowsy, so I eased into a nap.

I awoke at 3:32 with cracker crumbs embedded in my neck. Since school let out at 3:20, I knew the normal kids were on their way home for the afternoon. I sighed, pangs of jealousy twitching in my chest. I glared at my clock. Just then, the phone rang.

“Guess who was asking about you?” Jami said, nearly breathless with excitement.

“Who?” I asked.

“Derek! On the bus ride home he asked me where that ‘Katie girl’ went!”

“You didn’t tell him I was depressed or anything, did you?”

“Of course not. That’s just between us. I told him you’re really sick and stuck in bed.”

“How did he react?”

“He looked super concerned,” Jami said. My heart jumped, and I felt as though I had swallowed a mouthful of bubbles.

“Katie girl,” I repeated, “He remembers my name.”

The next day, I was awakened from a midmorning nap by the sound of Grammie’s laughter. The television was on, and I figured she was watching something funny. I decided to get up and crack open the door to see if I could hear what she was watching. As soon as I did, I recognized the sound of Regis Philbin’s voice, which was followed by more of Grammie’s laughter. Smiling, I opened the door wider and inspected its backside. Sure enough, Mom had

left me a note. “It won’t be too long before you feel much better,” it read, “Have a good day. Hang in there – things are going to get better.” I took the note off of the door, taped it to my dresser, then lay back down, too invigorated to go back to sleep.

At noon, I could hear Grammie bumping around in the kitchen again. She was busy making lunch. Something that she was cooking smelled good, like something my body was craving that I hadn’t had in a long time. I stood up, walked over to my cracked bedroom door, and opened it wider. It was then that I could recognize the smell, the aroma of sweet peas as they simmered on the stovetop. My stomach growled. I looked over at the stash of crackers on my desktop, but they no longer seemed appetizing. The peas smelled much better than the crumbly squares of bleached wheat that I had grown so accustomed to. I began to pace around my room, wringing my hands together and nervously intertwining my fingers. I engaged in conversation with myself:

“Should I go eat some lunch with Grammie?”

“Of course not. That’s a stupid idea.”

“Why?”

“Because you will probably close your eyes and see something horrible. Or even worse, you could throw up.”

“She’s my Grammie, she won’t mind. She’s seen me sick before.”

“What if you stop breathing? What if you pass out? What if you choke on peas? I can just hear the doctors now, saying you did it on purpose, killing yourself on peas.”

“That would be funny.”

“That would be tragic. Think of how your family would feel. They would blame themselves. If you’re smart you won’t go down there.”

“I’m going.” I grasped the cold doorknob and opened my bedroom door all the way. The aroma of the peas grew in intensity. I could hear Grammie scraping the pan with a metal spoon. I eyed the staircase to my left, but decided to turn right instead. After a few steps, I entered the bathroom, looking down to avoid the mirror. I leaned on the counter and sighed before stepping over to the sink and turning on the faucet. Cold water flooded the basin. I plunged both of my hands into the stream and soaked them thoroughly before dabbing some soap into my palm and working up a lather. After my hands were fully rinsed, I dried them on my shorts and left the bathroom. I considered turning back to wash my hands again, but decided against it.

I took a deep breath as I turned left and approached the staircase. My heart pounded as I descended the stairs, one at a time. Halfway down, my stomach shifted. I no longer felt hungry. I peered back up to the top of the stairs. My closed bedroom door looked so inviting. I took a step back up the stairs, my sweaty palm squeaking as it gripped the handrail. Grammie scraped the pan of peas, causing them to sizzle and hiss with steam. My stomach growled. I crept downwards again. I could feel sweat collecting on my forehead as I neared the bottom of the stairs. Once I landed both feet on the ground floor, I shifted my rubbery legs to the right, walked through the living room, and into the kitchen. Pepsie was lying next to the fireplace, napping on the rug. As I quietly approached her, she opened her eyes. My heart fluttered. After stooping to gently scratch her ears, I stood and walked towards the back of the kitchen. Grammie was there, busily scooping peas from the pan to her plate. I watched her silhouette move carefully, assuredly. She slowly turned from the stove and met me eye to eye. Startled, she let out a little gasp and nearly spilled her peas onto the floor.

“You scared me,” she said with a smile, placing her palm on her chest for reassurance.

“Can I have some lunch?” I asked. Without hesitation, Grammie walked over to the sink and turned on the faucet, lathering her hands with thick suds of soap. After drying her freshly washed hands on a towel next to the stove, she reached into the cabinet and grabbed an extra plate, using heaping spoonfuls to fill it with peas.

“Would you like a sandwich, too?” she asked. My tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, but before I could respond with a “no,” I nodded. Grammie dug her hand into the bread bag, pulled out a few slices, and whipped a couple of tablespoons of peanut butter and jelly in between. I was amazed at her dexterity, probably mastered by making sandwiches for my mom years ago. As a finishing touch, Grammie put a handful of cheeseballs on the plate, remembering that the cheesy snacks had always been a favorite of mine.

“Take a seat,” she said cheerfully, eyeing the table as she walked towards it with plates in hand. The wooden chair that I had once claimed as my seat felt as if it weighed two tons when I pulled it out from beneath the table. I sat down on the cushioned chair and studied the food before me. As soon as Grammie took a seat in the chair next to me, I took a bite, mindful not to put more than three peas in my mouth at once. The texture felt strange compared to the crackers that I was used to eating. Still, I chewed the peas until they were a mushy paste before swallowing. I looked at Grammie, who I was sure would be looking at me, but instead she had her eyes on the television, smiling as a news anchor held an adoptable puppy. Satisfied that I wasn’t being watched, I took another bite of peas, buttery yet sweet as they melted on my tongue.

“It’s a nice day out,” Grammie said, startling me. I averted my eyes away from the television to see her peering at me over the sandwich that she held up to her mouth.

“It looks like it,” I said, turning back towards the television to watch the weatherman segue into his segment. I took a bite of my sandwich, wondering if the peanut butter would cement my throat shut. After I swallowed successfully, I took another bite. I had forgotten how good real food tasted.

“Is your sandwich okay?” Grammie asked, wiping jelly from the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

“It’s great,” I admitted, looking back over towards the television. The weatherman, in front of his map, was gesticulating wildly towards the south central Kansas.

“Looks like we may get some rain,” Grammie said.

“I hope so,” I said.

“It looks like you may get your wish,” Grammie said, looking out the window. “It’s really starting to cloud up out there.”

“Could you pass the cheeseballs?” I asked. Grammie reached over and handed me the blue canister, still halfway full of cheeseballs. I dumped a heaping pile onto my plate and ate them two at a time as I eyed the television.

“Did you have rainstorms in France?” I asked Grammie.

“Oh sure. We had thunderstorms, snow, sleet. You know, the works.”

“What about tornados? Did you have those in France?” I asked.

“No, but the deadly tornado in Udall made headlines in the French newspapers. My friends who read the paper knew that I had family near that area. As soon as they read about it, they rushed up to tell me the news. They were so worried.”

“Did any of your family get hurt?”

“Luckily, they didn’t.”

“It’s nice that you had friends that were so concerned.” I reached over to the canister of cheeseballs, but found that I had eaten them all. I looked at the clock on the microwave and saw that it was 12:32.

“I think I’m going to go back upstairs now,” I told Grammie.

“That’s just fine,” Grammie said, “Thank you for eating lunch with me. I really enjoy your company, you know.” After slowly climbing up the stairs, I entered my room, gently closing my door behind me. Just as I took a step towards my bed, I heard a small tap at the lower left-hand side of the door. I creaked it open just a bit, then looked down to see Pepsie’s big brown eyes peering up at me. Her tail wagged slowly. She was forgiving me. I smiled and let her inside. Downstairs I could hear Grammie cleaning up from lunch – washing the dishes and putting away the leftover peas. I eyed my bed, disgusted by its crumpled sheets littered with crumbs. Instead of crawling back into the mess, I lay down on the floor, the prickly carpet tingling my arms. The light sounds of rain began to patter across my windowpanes, intensifying in sound with every gust of wind. Through the rain, I could hear the ticking of my clock. I stared at the second hand as it twirled around, making one circle after the other. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* It was 1:00. I had two and a half hours to spare before Jami was due to call me again.

As I watched the time pass, I thought about the stagnancy of my routine, every action based within the confines of one house, and every moment accompanied by the sound of one clock. Then I thought about the routines of those around me: Mom and Dad driving from home to work and then back home to see me, my Grammie coming from her home to mine to watch me before returning to her apartment, my friend Jami going from her house to school, then back home where she would call me just as soon as she could, and Pepsie going up and down the stairs to entertain Grammie and monitor me. The coordination seemed so complex, yet the results

were so simple – everyone made their rounds. And then there I was, like the screw in the center of a clock, stationary yet observant of the circles others made around me. Although I felt distanced from the mobility of my helping hands, I realized that they were always connected to me, never straying from the central point. It was then that I understood my duty to keep ticking, to keep going despite the temptation I had to give up. For had I chosen to come unscrewed, they too would have fallen.

CHAPTER 3 - Therapy

“You’ve got to get out.” Mom had a firm grasp of my arm as she pulled me out of the comfort of my bed. I resisted.

“I eat lunch with Grammie during the weekdays. Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s very good,” Mom said, giving my arm a good tug, “but you need to get out of the house, too.”

“I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Please get out of bed. We can go to the mall and do a little shopping if you want.”

“I hate the mall,” I growled. Pepsie, upset by the altercation, jumped off of the foot of my bed and sat on the floor. Mom continued to pull at my arm. I rolled over on my stomach, grabbing the sheets as she slowly pulled me down the length of the bed.

“Please, Katie, I’m begging you. We can go to Taco Bell. I’ll buy you a Coke. Just please get out of bed.” I saw my pillow moving further and further out of my reach as Mom pulled me towards the edge of the bed.

“I don’t want to!” I screamed, digging my nails into the mattress. Mom pulled the covers off from the top of my body, exposing my skin to the warm and stagnant air of my bedroom.

“What if we just go for a drive? You won’t have to get out. We can just drive around for a while and then come back home. Would you do that?” Mom let go of my arm. I propped myself up on my elbows and turned to look her in the eye.

“You promise I won’t have to get out?” I asked.

“I promise,” Mom said. I sat up and studied my feet, bare with nearly translucent skin that had been hidden under the covers for so long. I supposed going for a short drive wouldn’t be so bad. After all, if I wore shorts, I could work on a tan. But what if someone from school saw me in the car? What if I threw up in the car? What if my heart stopped and Mom had to pull over at McDonald’s to call the ambulance where children eating Happy Meals would watch the paramedics use the defibrillator on my chest three times before my heart started to beat again? And worst of all, what if Derek Walker happened to be at that same McDonald’s, eating his quarter-pounder with cheese, observing the inevitable trail of drool that would slowly ooze its way past my lips and down my chin as a electric shocks zapped my body back to life? I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take that chance.

“You know, going for a car ride is much better than being stuck at St. Joe for in-patient care,” Mom reminded me. “At least when you go for a car ride you can wear whatever you want. No paper gowns for you.”

“I know,” I sighed with a roll of my eyes.

“I just couldn’t bear to see you locked up in some institution like that. I told the doctor that we would work with you here, so please do me a huge favor and get out of bed.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll go,” I said with a sigh. First I let one leg fall to the ground, then the other. I felt the carpet beneath my toes. It was scratchy and soft at the same time. I wondered what it would be like to be a carpet mite, living in the jungle of interwoven beige fibers that covered a vast expanse that I would, in no way, be able to travel in one lifetime.

“Come on, let’s go,” Mom said as she gently placed my hand in hers. With a pull of her arm, she coaxed me out of bed. I stood wobbling on my narrow feet, growing accustomed to my new, vertical stance.

“I’ll let you get dressed,” she said. “But please try to come down in ten minutes.”

“Okay,” I said, rubbing my eyes, wondering if enough pressure would pop them like balloons. As soon as Mom closed my bedroom door, I sat down on my bed. The sheets were so soft and inviting. I lay back down and pulled the comforter over my head. The door creaked.

“You can’t hide forever, honey,” Mom said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you have to get out. You have to live life. Now let’s go.” My eyes were overcome with light as Mom pulled the covers off of my bed once more.

“Get dressed,” she said in a more serious tone before exiting my room with a gentle click of the door latch. Once again I stood up, this time resisting the temptation of my beloved bed sheets. I walked over to my closet, flung open the door, and inspected the clothes inside.

“I don’t want to wear my favorite navy blue shirt, because if I throw up in it, I will never want to wear it again,” I said to myself as I sifted through the hangers. “But I don’t want to wear my crappy off-white shirt, because if I have a heart attack, I don’t want to die in that.” I tore the off-white shirt off of the hanger and threw it at the wall. “So what do I wear?” I inspected every article of clothing before deciding on a grey shirt and jean shorts. They weren’t my favorites, so if my stomach acid stained their exterior, I wouldn’t be heartbroken. But if I collapsed from heart failure at McDonald’s and my crush happened to be there to see me, I wouldn’t be embarrassed by the shirt, either. I pulled the grey shirt over my head, then lifted the jean shorts up to my hips. It had been months since I had worn them. The shorts seemed baggier than usual. I held them up with a fist as I walked out of my closet and back to my bed where I sat down to put on my sandals. Pepsie was waiting for me at the door.

“You ready?” Mom called from downstairs.

“I guess,” I said. Holding my shorts up with my hand, I stepped out of my bedroom and headed down the stairs. “I hope nothing bad happens,” I whispered to myself.

Mom was waiting by the back door with her keys in hand.

“You look nice,” she said. I wondered if she was just saying that to make me feel better. I looked down at my feet.

“Maybe I should trim my nails before we go,” I suggested, suddenly realizing how embarrassing it would be if we got in a wreck and the only thing visible to the spectator’s eye was the sight of my pale leg jutting out of the windshield, crooked, broken, and bloody with a horrific set of nails to top off the foot.

“You can do that when we get home,” Mom said. “We could paint your nails, too! Wouldn’t that be fun?” I sighed.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said. Mom smiled and led the way to the garage. I followed, slamming the door behind me. As I traipsed over to the car, I looked at all of the things in the garage that I had long forgotten about – my bike, my pool toys, my duffel bag from when I was on the swim team – I wished I could burn them all. But that would have required leaving the house.

“Let’s go,” Mom said cheerfully. She was in the driver’s seat, turning the key to the ignition. I stepped up to the door and opened it carefully. The cold metal of the handle felt strange on my clammy skin. I closed my eyes and saw the passenger side door stuck in a tree with a bloody handprint on the window. I opened my eyes and shuddered.

“It will be okay,” Mom reassured me. “We don’t have to go far.” Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the car. The aroma of leather filled my nostrils. I closed my eyes and saw a dead cow. I twitched and dug my nails into my kneecaps. I opened my eyes again.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked.

“I don’t want to do this.”

“I’ll just drive around the block and then we can come home.”

“Fine.” Mom opened the garage door and backed the car out onto the driveway. I lowered my head so my hair would cover my face. I listened to the quiet lull of the engine and closed my eyes. We rode around the block in silence.

As I listened carefully to the ambient noise of the ride, I thought I could detect patterns in the sound of the engine. The sound at first was a consistent hum, but when I really focused on the noise, I could sense a regeneration of the reverberating hums. In musical terms, it seemed to carry a 4:4 time signature, as if every fourth hum was the end of a measure. A melody came to mind as I listened to the beat. At first it was sporadic, like the improvised notes in a jazz piece, but then a tune developed. Against my eyelids, I could see the notes on a staff of music, spotted out in a simple pattern.

“Are you ready to go home now?” Mom asked. I opened my eyes and looked at the clock. Ten minutes had already passed. I looked out the window and saw that the sky was clouding up. If it was going to storm, I wanted to see it.

“Let’s keep going,” I said. Mom widened her eyes in amazement, but said nothing. As she pulled out of the neighborhood and onto the busy road, I propped my elbow on the armrest and cupped my chin in my hand as I watched the world outside the window. Slowly the houses disappeared and were replaced by bigger structures, industrial brick boxes that housed groceries and clothes and food. We passed McDonald’s.

“Would you like something to eat?” Mom asked. My stomach turned.

“No thanks.”

“What about a drink?” I waited until we were all the way past McDonald’s.

“Okay,” I said. Mom merged into the turn lane and pulled into the Taco Bell parking lot. Before I could protest, she made another turn and entered the drive-thru.

“What would you like?” she asked as we waited in line. I looked down at my lap, suddenly feeling good about the clothes I was wearing. I turned and saw my face in the side view mirror, and straightened my hair to my liking. I thought about Derek Walker.

“Diet Coke,” I said. Mom rolled down the window and placed our order. The electronic voice told her the total, and we pulled forward to the next window. Suddenly, I felt anxious. I turned my face to the right and hid underneath my hair as I felt the car come to a stop again.

“That will be \$2.53,” a man’s voice said. I wondered if he could see me. I leaned against the passenger side door and rested my forehead against the window. I gripped the armrest, as if exerting enough energy in the opposite direction of the stranger could make me disappear altogether. Coins clinked in the background. I chewed on some of my hair. Then I realized that the car was full of windows, and even if the drive-thru man couldn’t see me, passersby could. Embarrassed, I positioned myself back into the center of the seat and stared forward. The man handed Mom a cup of Diet Coke. I acted like there was something right in front of me that was very interesting, and kept my eyes glued to it. I rose an eyebrow in mock surprise, as if my imaginary point of interest were doing something appalling. I then tossed my hair over my shoulder and sighed. Mom handed me my drink. I continued to look forward. Mom thanked the man and we drove off.

“Thank you,” I said to Mom, taking a giant gulp of my pop.

“More driving?” she asked. I chewed my straw as I continued to drink, then glanced up at the darkening sky. I heard a boom of thunder in the distance. It was a nice addition to the symphonic lull of the engine. “Let’s keep going,” I said.

“Here’s your breakfast,” Mom said as she entered my room. Despite the previous evening’s storm, the morning sun was filtering in through my curtains. Pepsie had found a nice patch of sun on the floor to lie in.

“When will Grammie get here?” I asked.

“She’s not coming over today. You’ve got an appointment. Your first session with Kenneth begins today.”

“I don’t need a stupid counselor,” I said. “I’ll get better on my own.”

“And going to a counselor will help speed up your recovery.”

“No it won’t! It will make it worse!”

“You don’t know that.”

“Well you don’t know that it will help, either!”

“You’re going and that’s final.”

“I won’t go! It’s stupid!”

“It’s not stupid and you will go. Now, eat your breakfast.” Mom handed me my bowl of oatmeal. I threw it on the floor. The contents were so thick, they did not spill.

“You can throw all the tantrums you want, but you’re still going, Katie. If I have to pick you up and drag you out of bed again, I will.”

“You can’t carry me down the stairs,” I said, folding my arms across my chest.

“No, but I can call the police and they can carry you down. Do you really want to take it that far?” I turned my head and stared at my curtained window. What if I went to Kenneth and the decapitated cow came back? What if I threw up in his stupid counselor chair, or whatever stupid thing he had me sit on? What if in the process of throwing up on the stupid chair, the stupid cow came up to me and lit an invisible fuse on my stupid body and caused me to spontaneously combust all over his stupid office?

“You just don’t understand!” I wailed, covering my head with my sheets. Mom sat down on the bed next to me and stroked my head through the covers.

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t understand. But Kenneth will. He knows all about depression. He talks with people about their depression everyday. He won’t think you’re weird or crazy, if that’s what you’re worried about.” I cried underneath the sheets, collecting snot in my palms. A moment later, Mom’s hand emerged into the darkness, holding a tissue for me. I took it and wiped my face, then came out from underneath the covers.

“Can we go for a drive afterwards?” I asked.

“We can even get drinks.”

The counselor’s office was located at the edge of our neighborhood, next to the dentist and in front of the golf course. It took us two minutes to drive there. As soon as we pulled into a parking space, I felt a lump in my throat and an acid rising in my stomach.

“I don’t feel good,” I said.

“You’re just nervous,” Mom reassured me.

“I hope I don’t throw up,” I said.

“You won’t.” Mom stepped out of the car, but I remained inside. She calmly walked over to my side and opened the door for me.

“Come on,” she said, holding out her hand. I slowly unbuckled my seatbelt then stood up on my own accord. The ground was damp, but the sun was blaring. It was muggy and uncomfortable.

“I don’t want to do this,” I said quietly.

“I know, honey,” Mom said, “but it will be over before you know it. Then we can go for our drive.” I looked over my shoulder at the Taco Bell. I wanted another soda badly. Mom led me to the front door of the clinic, which was tinted black. As we stepped inside, a strange smell hit my nose. It was a stuffy smell, like the stench of old upholstery in a wet sauna. The lighting was dim, and the waiting room was lit only by lamplight. As Mom checked me in at the front desk, I sat in one of the mauve chairs. There was an end table to my right that was covered with magazines, but they were wrinkly and torn and I assumed they were infested with germs. I folded my hands in my lap and sat quietly.

“This is cozy,” Mom said as she sat next to me. Even though she was trying to be optimistic, I could tell that she was very uncomfortable. She kept eying a white round machine that was set underneath the lamp. The machine, with its tiny slots that appeared to be vents, seemed to serve no purpose other than to make white noise. Just then, another person stepped into the room and took a seat across from us. She looked older than I was, but she was still a teenager. Her complexion was fair, but her lips were darkened with a thick coat of lipstick, and her eyes were coated in layers of makeup. As her Mom talked to the people at the front desk, she reached into her purse and took out some mascara, glopping layer after layer on top of her already made-up eyes. She continued even after her mom took a seat.

“When are they going to call me in?” I asked, resting my hands in my lap. They felt bigger than usual, as if they were awkward, fleshy water balloons. Would they pop, splattering blood all over the girl with the makeup? Would she get up and punch me for ruining her mascara? Would I be forced to fight her with my deflated, awkward stump hands? I lurched in my seat.

“They’ll call you in soon,” Mom said. We sat in silence, though the white noise continued to roar. Suddenly, there was loud creak. Someone else was entering the building. I looked up and saw a man come into the clinic with his young son, who was hanging off of his arm.

“Stop it,” the man commanded.

“Stop it!” the boy shouted, swinging and kicking his legs as he dangled. The man pried the boy off of his arm and stood him on the floor, placing a stern hand on his shoulder.

“Boom!” the boy shouted. “It’s a bomb! Boom!”

“Shh,” the man said. The boy darted into the waiting room and made a b-line for the small box of toys in the corner. He dug through them, tossing the plastic trinkets aside with reckless abandon. The man entered the room.

“Sit down,” he said.

“Sit down!” the boy mocked. He took a seat on the floor, but rocked back and forth wildly. “I make a bomb and blow you up! Die, die, asshole!”

“Katie?” a voice startled me. I looked away from the boy and saw Kenneth standing near the reception desk.

“Go on,” Mom said.

“But I don’t want to,” I whispered.

“It will be okay.” Reluctantly I stood up, then slowly walked in Kenneth’s direction. I wanted to waste as much time as I could. When I reached the reception desk, Kenneth extended his palm to shake my hand. I cringed as I did the same.

“It’s good to see you,” Kenneth said in his calm voice. “We’ll just come back here to my office and get started.” He led me away from the waiting room. I looked over my shoulder at Mom, who was waving. I followed Kenneth down a long, narrow hallway, then through a door to the left.

“You can just take a seat wherever you like,” he said. I looked at my options, which included a wooden chair, a plastic chair, or a cushioned loveseat against a window. After weighing my options, I chose the left cushion of the loveseat, the farthest possible place to sit from Kenneth’s upholstered chair in the right hand corner of the room. Kenneth took his seat and grabbed a yellow legal pad off of his desk. Crossing his legs, he angled his chair to face me. I crossed my arms across my chest and looked down.

“How do you feel today?” he asked.

“Bad.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Are you feeling sad?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Kenneth wrote a few notes down on his legal pad. I glanced up to watch when he wasn’t looking. As soon as he finished writing, I looked back down.

“Are your medications helping?”

“No.”

“How long have you been away from school?”

“Two months. Maybe three. I don’t know. I lost count.” Kenneth wrote a note. I could hear a clock ticking somewhere.

“Do you want to go back to school?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Because the schoolwork is hard?”

“No.”

“Because the teachers are mean?”

“No.”

“Because you are afraid?”

“Yes.” Kenneth took note. I turned around and looked out the window. I could see the green grass of the golf course gently swaying in the wind. A couple of men were in the distance, walking towards a small white dot on the green, carrying silver clubs and laughing heartily. I wondered what kinds of things they worried about. Maybe they didn’t worry about anything.

“Has anything traumatic happened lately?” Kenneth asked. I gazed at his forehead, which was somewhat damp with perspiration.

“No,” I replied, trying to act as bored as possible. I continued to study Kenneth’s head, focusing on the way his eyeglasses created small, fleshy divots in the skin above his ears.

“Have the kids at school been pressuring you to do bad things?” he asked. I watched as his temples contracted as he spoke. My stomach turned. I closed my eyes and saw the hinges of Kenneth’s jawbone grinding against his skull.

“No,” I replied as I forced my eyes open.

“Have you seen anything that has really disturbed you? Maybe on television or at school?” I knew that he was trying to get me to talk about the worms. Or the cow. Or even his own skull. But I wasn’t about to tell him about those, or any of the skeletons under my eyelids.

“No,” I replied.

“Are you uncomfortable here?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Why don’t you like talking about the way you feel?” I thought about his question quietly. Kenneth sat forward in his chair, studying my contemplation.

“It’s like having a broken foot,” I finally said, “and someone comes up to you with a hammer and hits you right on the fractured area. Then that same person says, ‘Tell me how that feels. Does it throb? Is it painful? Exactly how much does it hurt?’” Kenneth thought for a moment, his brows furrowed as he wrote something down. After a moment, he smiled.

“That definitely makes sense,” he agreed. “What would you rather talk about?”

“Nothing,” I stated honestly.

“What about your friends? Have you talked to any of your friends about your depression?”

“Just one. But she swore she wouldn’t tell anyone else,” I said.

“Are you embarrassed to have clinical depression?”

“Of course I am! Kids my age believe that anyone who’s depressed is crazy and will spend the rest of their days locked up.”

“I see.”

“And just because I get these weird dizzy spells where I feel like I can’t breathe and sometimes I even black out doesn’t mean that I’m crazy.”

“No, it doesn’t mean you’re crazy at all. How long do your dizzy spells last?”

“Anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.”

“Do you feel trapped during these spells?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Does it feel like you need to escape, but no matter what you do, you can’t change the way that you physically feel?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel like something significantly bad is going to happen even though you know consciously that you are not in any immediate danger?”

“Yes! Yes! That’s exactly it! I hate being depressed!”

“Those aren’t symptoms of depression,” Kenneth explained. “Those are panic attacks!”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Panic attacks,” he explained, “are just as they sound. They are the sudden onset of panic-like symptoms such as heart palpitations and sweating. Your body reacts as if it were under sudden danger even though you may just be sitting in a classroom. This is why it is called an attack. Are these sensations common occurrences?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “They happen several times a day when I’m at school.”

“Well no wonder you’re agoraphobic,” Kenneth said. His empathy was comforting. “Everyone,” Kenneth continued, “experiences a panic attack or two at some point in their lives. This is absolutely normal. It becomes a problem when it becomes a daily occurrence. At this point, it becomes a disorder.”

“It seems like I get them all the time.”

“And this wears you out.”

“Yeah, then I get a sore throat or something.”

“These attacks are hard on your immune system. Your body uses way too much energy in these short periods of time, making you susceptible to even the smallest germs. Then you get sick a lot, and in turn, you get frustrated and sad. As a result, you develop depression.”

“So I am depressed because I have panic attacks?”

“Exactly. But both are treatable. The key is acknowledging the problem.” I thought for a moment as Kenneth caught up with his note taking on his legal pad. The word “disorder” rang through my mind over and over again. In some ways, it was comforting. If something is labeled as a disorder, then it means it’s common enough in society to have a label. This meant that there were others out there just like me. But the word also had negative connotations. It meant that something was flawed in me. More devastatingly, something was flawed in my mind.

“Well, Katie, I want to thank you for talking with me. Now that we know about your panic attacks, we can start working through those in future sessions. Our time for today is up, but I’d like to schedule another appointment with you next week.” Kenneth stood, so I followed his lead. Before he could offer another handshake, I bolted out the door and down the hall. I found Mom in the waiting room sitting quietly next to a woman with cuts up and down her arm.

“Let’s go,” I said.

After getting our drinks at Taco Bell, Mom and I began our soothing drive. I chewed on my straw and watched the other cars go by as the scenery changed before my eyes.

“How was your appointment?” Mom asked.

“I didn’t like it. It was uncomfortable. Kenneth asks too many questions.”

“Did you talk about school?”

“Sort of.” I sipped my Diet Coke and chewed at the straw some more. Mom turned on another street, and I enjoyed the sights that had become nostalgic in my mind, the sights of buildings and surrounding that I hadn’t seen for months.

“Kenneth says I have panic attack disorder.”

“Really?” Mom asked, shocked.

“I guess I’m depressed because I’m agoraphobic and I’m agoraphobic because I have panic attacks.”

“That explains so much,” Mom said in a relieved tone. “Well, now that we know the problem, we can start fixing it, right?”

“I guess,” I said. Mom pulled into the parking lot of an old drug store. It had been my favorite place to shop before I got sick.

“I need a few things, do you want to come in with me?” Mom asked.

“No,” I said, shuddering at the thought of entering the public.

“I’ll be back, then,” she said, locking the door as she stepped out. As Mom shopped, I studied the sky through the window, looking for any inkling of a spring storm. Much to my despair, the sky was clear. I thought about the old days in the summertime, when I would swim all day in the afternoon and pray for storms in the evening so I could cozy up inside and watch

the lightning from my bedroom window and fall asleep to the pleasant sound of raindrops against the glass panes. I wondered if I would ever get to swim again. I doubted it.

Mom returned to the car with a plastic bag full of groceries.

“I got what I needed,” she said. “But I also found some fun stuff.” She pulled out a compilation CD called *Summertime Favorites*. She quickly tore off the wrapping and put it in the stereo. She then dug into the bag again. “I also got you a notebook,” she said. I took the notebook and flipped through its blank pages, eyeing the potential that lay between each line.

“Thank you,” I said. As Mom shifted the car into drive, the stereo began to play “Brown Eyed Girl,” and we were off for another few laps around the block.

It was nice to bring my notebook into my room. It was something new to look at, something exciting to disrupt the monotony of all the shapes and colors that I had memorized after staring at them for months on end. It was shiny and bright, and the new object of my infatuation. I wondered what I would write in it. When I was young, before I could even read, I began a series of comic books starring four dogs as the main characters. I had completed over 15 entire notebooks of drawings over the years, as the four dogs improved in design and complexity. I considered making a new adventure for the dogs in my notebook, but something about that idea just didn't seem right. The four happy dogs seemed so trivial now that I had skeletons and cows in my brain. Back when I thought I was sick physically, I wrote a few little chipper poems on some scratch paper with opening lines that sounded something like: “You know what? It sucks to be sick! There's nothing worse than a bed ridden chick!” But I was no longer chipper enough to write bouncy poems that asked rhetorical questions and referred to my person as a chick. I still liked poetry, though.

I sat on my bed, pen in hand, in front of my notebook, thinking. Then I began to write. The lines poured forth from my mind faster than my hand could write, and I scribbled idea after idea down, making sure not to cross the vertical pink line on the right side of the paper. As I wrote, I scratched out words that suddenly didn't fit, and replaced them with new words that had better meaning or necessary syllables, whatever I needed to make it feel right. The scribbling of my pen was a complementary sound to the ticking of my clock, which seemed to urge me to continue writing. I felt a rush of adrenaline pump through my veins, but for once it was not accompanied with shaking and terror. I drew an exclamation point. Then I scratched it out and dotted a period. My poem was complete. Now it was time to proofread. I held my notebook up to my eyes and began to read:

The light at the end of the tunnel is a reflection in a house of mirrors.
You grasp at random illusions, until you find that the light never nears.
You see the light shine before you, in every little place you stare.
Then what you thought was the end, is a taunting and hypnotic glare.
Now you're left alone in confusion, with thoughts and sickening fears,
Screaming, reaching for relief, walking circles through the house of mirrors.

I smiled. I was pleased with my poem. On the top line, I wrote the title, "House of Mirrors," and the date. For the first time in months, I felt as though I had articulated my being. I had learned how to speak for myself.

"How has your writing been going?" Kenneth asked as I stepped in his office and sat down on the loveseat.

"Pretty good," I said, "I've been writing every day for four weeks now."

“Still writing poetry, or have you tried other things?”

“I’m still writing poetry, but I’m also journaling a lot. I started a scrapbook out of my notebook. I’ve pasted some of my get-well cards into it. I’ve been getting a lot of those lately. I think everyone at school realizes that they won’t see me again for a long time, now that there are only two days of school left.”

“How are you keeping up with your homework?”

“I’ve been keeping up pretty well. Mom found a tutor lady to come pick up my work and help me with math. She says I’m going to pass the 8th grade, at least.”

“What do you plan on doing this summer?” Kenneth asked. I sighed. I wished I could tell him that I would be hanging out with Jami and swimming, but I knew I wouldn’t be leaving my house. My summer would be exactly like my winter. And spring.

“I guess I’ll keep writing,” I said.

“Do you think writing helps you?” Kenneth asked.

“It helps me more than talking does,” I said, looking at him. I immediately felt guilty for being so blatant. Kenneth wrote something down. I decided not to apologize.

“Everyone has different ways of venting,” Kenneth said. “Yours just happens to be writing. I’m happy you’ve discovered that about yourself!” I nodded and looked at the clock. Kenneth glanced at the clock, then back at me.

“Would you prefer to leave a little early? We’ve only got five minutes left,” he said.

“Yes, thanks,” I said, standing up and heading for the door. Kenneth shook my hand, then followed me down the hall to the reception area. Mom had her purse gripped in her hand and looked more than eager to leave the full waiting room than I was. It was only 11:00, so we decided to go for a drive.

After buying me a drink, Mom pulled into the drugstore parking lot.

“Want to come in?” she asked. I chewed on my straw for a moment, peering into the wall of windows near the entrance of the building. I could see rows of shelves glittering with trinkets and doodads of various sorts. I could almost smell the store’s interior, an aroma that would forever be ingrained in my memory – the stench of a drugstore, the sweet smell of normalcy. I missed that smell, the smell that reminded me of buying lip gloss and school supplies, the smell that reminded me of playing with wind-up toys in aisle 12. I wondered if the store still smelled that way. Surely it wouldn’t change, would it?

“I guess I’ll go in today,” I finally answered. Mom looked at me, amazed.

“Really?” she asked after a pause. “You want to go in with me?” I considered my decision for a moment, then nodded.

“All right!” she said. “Let’s go!” As I stepped out of the car, my knees grew wobbly. I couldn’t believe I was actually leaving the car without being made to. When we approached the big sliding doors, I hesitated.

“I don’t know,” I said, squeezing my arms around my stomach.

“You don’t have to go in,” Mom said. “But if you want to, we can leave whenever you’re ready.” I peered in through the doors, which had opened automatically, and studied the store. Its walls were painted with orange and olive green signs that read things like “Cosmetics” and “Floral” and “Drugs.” There weren’t very many people inside, since the bigger corporate chains overran the store’s popularity.

“Okay, I’ll go in,” I said. Staying close to Mom’s side, I stepped in through the open door. The smell of the store automatically triggered happy memories of shopping there years prior, picking out random items like jumping beans and Venus Fly Traps to buy with my

allowance. The only people that occupied the store were elderly couples who were shopping for salves and cotton balls and aspirin. If I threw up in the store, I figured I would have enough time to run away before they had the energy to turn and see what was the matter. I smiled to myself, wishing all public places were that easy-going.

“Let’s look at the makeup,” Mom suggested. I walked over to the displays, eyeing the variety of colors and packages.

“I think I want some of this,” I said, holding up a tube of hot pink lipstick. Mom studied my eyes for a moment, probably wondering why in the world I would pick such a loud shade as my first choice. I tried not to smile, but I couldn’t stifle my laughter for much longer.

“I’m just kidding,” I laughed. “But I would really like this.” I held up some neon green eye shadow. Mom rolled her eyes and we both laughed. Suddenly, I felt a twinge in my wrists, a surge of adrenaline that cued my brain to enter panic mode. I looked down at the floor, becoming uncomfortably aware that I was in public. I put down the makeup and eyed the sliding doors.

“Do you want to leave now?” Mom asked. My right hand shook, but I covered it with my left hand. I knew I had to fight the panic. I had to stay in the store for just a little longer.

“No, I’m okay,” I said.

“Good, because I really want you to try on this hat,” Mom said, holding up a hideous yellow rain cap. I belted out in laughter as the anxiety dissipated.

When Mom and I returned to the car, we were still laughing.

“I am so proud of you,” she said.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. And I didn’t even throw up!”

“You did very well.” Mom started the car and I picked up my drink. She turned on the stereo, and we listened to our special CD. “The Lime and the Coconut” came on next. It was my

favorite. The beat was uplifting, and the song itself made me smile. As I listened to the melody of the acoustic guitar, I imagined I was going for a walk downtown with Jami, the warm sun a radiant halo above our heads. I imagined laughing with her, making nonchalant comments about boys and fashion and weather. I imagined the two of us happening upon Derek Walker. Perhaps he would be riding his skateboard. I would then coyly ask to skate and proceed to impress him with an exquisite array of footwork. With his jaw dropped and his eyes aglow, Derek would immediately ask me out. I would say yes. Jami, Derek, and I would then walk to the ice cream store. When the vendor asked what flavor I would like, I would respond, simply, “Coconut, please.” Derek would choose lime.

I peered out the window, watching the hood of our car devour the white lines of the street. I bit my lip. Would I ever be able to hang out with Jami again? Would I ever get to eat ironically flavored ice cream with Derek? I sighed. I knew I wouldn’t. There was no way I could do all of that when I couldn’t even get myself to go to school. Suddenly, I felt a tickle in my stomach. It was similar to the way I felt at the onset of a panic attack, but it was different somehow. More joyful.

“I think I’m ready to go back to school,” I said. Mom, who had been bobbing her head to the first few measures of “Montego Bay,” slammed on the brakes. She placed her hand on her chest and looked at me.

“Are you serious? Don’t joke with me about that.”

“I’m serious. I think I’m ready to go back.”

“Right now?” she asked. I looked at the clock. Math class would be starting in twenty minutes. Since it was the second to the last day of school, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t have to worry about any pop quizzes.

“Yes. I’m ready to go now. There are only two classes left in the school day. Then I can come home.” Mom took an immediate turn on the nearest northbound road so she could head for the school as soon as she could. I wrung my hands together in nervous excitement. I eyed my jean shorts and grey tee shirt with the hula dancer on the front, wondering if I had made the right choice in getting dressed that morning. After all, I had no idea I was going to go back to school!

“Do I look okay?” I asked.

“You look great,” Mom said. The music continued to play. I felt good about my decision, but was beginning to get nervous.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” I said as we entered the school district.

“You will be just fine,” Mom said. “Remember how well you did at the drug store?”

“But there weren’t very many people there.”

“Once you get to school and meet up with your friends you’ll feel better. Are any of your friends in your math class?”

“Jami is,” I said.

“That’s perfect! Just go in and sit next to her and you’ll be fine.” Mom pulled up to the junior high, with its sickly yellow bricks gleaming in the sun. My stomach turned. I buried my face in my palms.

“I can’t do it,” I cried, tears welling up in the corners of my eyes.

“I think you can,” Mom said. I looked back at the school.

“I hate this place,” I said.

“I know, but there’s only two days of school left. Then you’ll be done with this building forever.” I sat quietly, contemplating the warm security of my bedroom.

“I can go in with you if you want,” Mom said.

“No thanks. I can do it,” I said. I was already embarrassed that I had missed so much school. The last thing I needed was to be seen holding my mommy’s hand. After taking a deep breath, I put my hand on the door, then opened it slowly. I stopped.

“I hope I don’t throw up,” I said.

“You won’t,” Mom said. I opened the door all the way, then stepped outside. My hands shook as I shut the door behind me. Mom rolled down her window. “You’ll be just fine,” she said. I waved at her, then quickly walked up to the doors of the building. I heaved the heavy glass door open. I looked back at Mom. She was cheering me on from inside the car. I waved once more, then stepped inside. The dim lights and muffled ambience immediately triggered a sense of anxiety. I wanted nothing more than to turn around and leave. But I had made it that far. The bell rang, startling me. Suddenly, warm bodies filled the hallway, and I was caught in a sea of students, whooping and hollering amongst themselves. Feeling extremely claustrophobic, I made my way to the front office to check in. After signing my name on the clipboard, I ambled back into the hallway. I stared at my feet as I walked, and I walked as quickly as I could to reach my math class. Halfway there, I decided to look up. When I did, I saw the wide eyes and startled faces of students as they passed me. Some of them whispered to each other while others just stared. I didn’t recognize most of them.

I was relieved to get to my math class. At least there I would be in a room with only 21 other students. I would have room to breathe. As I opened the wooden door and stepped inside, I heard a unison of gasps. Ignoring the dramatic greetings, I singled out Jami’s face. She was surprised, but she was also smiling. She waved me over.

“Congratulations!” she said, urging me to sit next to her.

“We thought you were dead,” the boy in front of her said.

“No,” another boy said, “She was just skipping to watch TV all day. She’s not fooling anyone.”

“No, she was definitely sick,” a girl said. “Look how pale she is! And look how skinny she’s gotten!”

“Will you sign my yearbook?” a boy I didn’t recognize asked, shoving the book in my direction.

“Mine too!” said the girl. Before I knew it, book after book was tossed in my general direction. I kept looking at Jami for reassurance.

“You’re a legend,” she laughed.

“So where were you all that time?” someone else asked as they shoved their book in my hand. I could feel tiny droplets of sweat forming underneath my bangs. I had no idea what to tell them. If I said I had been depressed, they would have called me crazy. But if I said I was sick, they would want the gory details of my disease. And that would make me queasy.

“Seriously,” another person chimed. “Where have you been?” I bit my lip and smiled.

“On Mars,” I said. The bell rang and class began.

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