

THIRTEEN THURSDAYS

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ABSTRACT

Thirteen Thursdays

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The novel *Thirteen Thursdays* tells the story of a seemingly privileged thirteen-year-old girl, living with her single father in Greenwich Village, New York City. Her mother, who Thora later realizes has depression, has left her and her father. The story is told by Thora, in the present tense, and only on Thursdays. She was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), early, when she was just eight years old. Thora knows she was one of the lucky ones, if the term *lucky* could ever be applied to OCD. Except for her mother's absence, Thora appears to have the life of a "normal," functioning teenager. But life inside Thora's head is far from typical. She tells her story, to try, if possible, to reveal her deep pain, as only a middle-schooler could narrate.

The introduction provides a reflection on the writing process and influences of modernist literature on the composition of the novel. This project examines not the role of mental illness in fiction, but the opposite—fiction's role regarding mental illness, possibly considering narrative as an occasion for mental health awareness. Often, fiction writers see illness solely as a vehicle for character development—to make a character interesting, to move a story forward. The question to ask is, can both of these things be accomplished at the same time? Can we think about novels as doing political work without reducing characters to their disabilities? Mental illness might be seen not just as a medical condition, but a social and cultural experience. Through the perspectives of a few

modernists' secondary characters, this work attempts, while using disability theory, to find clarity in the muddled world of the mentally challenged. It is intended to increase awareness through a quest narrative vs. one of chaos, and to share a story of hope in an all-too-often dark world.

DEDICATION

For my mother, who instilled in me the love of words and wisdom.

And for all those who silently battle their own invisible demons.

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THE VISIBILITY OF PAIN:
STORYTELLING OF SUFFERING THROUGH UNUSUAL PERSPECTIVES

“Each of us narrates our life as it suits us.”

-Elena Ferrante

When I began this project, I thought I knew where it was headed. I didn't. I thought I had a handle on perspectives on mental illness in and out of fiction. I didn't. When we found ourselves surrounded by a pandemic, things changed. A tiny microbe had spread quickly around the globe, both unifying and dividing us. Hundreds of thousands of people suffered and died, while the rest of us fought over masks and eventual vaccines. We connected through a new service called Zoom, if we had the means.

My mother was one of the massive casualties. She lost her life to COVID-19, one week before her facility was to receive the vaccine. She was ninety-one years old and had advanced dementia, and I experienced a strange combination of feelings: relief, sadness, and anger. And even though it was mandated, I felt some guilt for not seeing her in over a year before she died. My mother's dementia was visible only through the facts and people she couldn't remember. But she had a strong philosophical part of her brain, which still seemed active, and was a pleasure with which to engage. We think we have a significant knowledge of dementia, but do we really know what's happening behind those seemingly vacant eyes: the eyes of a spouse, a mother, a sibling, a friend?

As I read through my notes on how it felt to write through the pandemic, I noticed the change between then and now. Things have improved, and we have some hope; we're out and about, albeit modified. But my notes were dark. It became hard to focus on my

work when in New York and New Jersey there were refrigerated trucks filled with bodies in places that were once used for vibrant activity. My project, regarding mental illness in fiction, minimized; it began to feel trivial. But as time passed, we realized that some mental illnesses were worsening due to fear and isolation. And now, pandemic-wise, we've reached a middle ground of sorts, a place of compromise. We're trying to live, function . . . exist with this invisible thing that we continue to run from. We can't see it, yet it has had a major impact on our world. It is both real and unreal.

Actually, my work is not much different from the pandemic experience. In my fiction, I focus on a thirteen-year-old girl who has obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), an invisible brain disorder. It's a disorder that is widely misunderstood and affects roughly 1-3% of the population, worldwide. OCD causes a great deal of suffering primarily due to relentless, invasive thoughts, but also because of society's lack of awareness and understanding.

My daughter was diagnosed with OCD when she was nineteen years old. College became unbearable for her, and she needed to take a year off while starting treatment. During that time, I had to come to terms with my own anxiety disorder and consider other family members, both from the past and in the present, who've struggled as well. I currently run a large support group for family members of those with OCD, exposing me to a number of narratives.

I remember reading J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* when I was thirteen or fourteen years old. I couldn't believe I was reading a book like that, hearing Holden Caulfield's voice, so loud, so clear and real. I felt a connection when I read it. I felt noticed. My love of this type of fiction continued as I got older: Sylvia Plath, Virginia

Woolf, and of the more contemporary, Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*, and Matthew Quick's *The Silver Linings Playbook*. Early on, I wasn't sure why this was the case. Growing up in my family, there was the notion that people were either crazy or they were sane. And of course, *we* were sane. There was no thought given to the enormous spectrum on which humans reside.

For the fictional portion of my dissertation, I planned to bring my passion for both literature and mental health awareness together through writing. My lofty goal was to have the reader feel the way I did when I read *Catcher* for the first time. I tell the story of a thirteen-year-old. I had not originally intended to write a piece of young adult fiction, but as many children and adolescents are diagnosed with OCD, my work continued organically, from that knowledge.

Thora's story is told in the first person, and in present tense. She was born on a Thursday, during a storm, and is named after Thor, the god of thunder, and according to her mother, although this is lesser known, Thor is also the god of fertility. Each chapter takes place on a Thursday. I initially wanted to focus on the perspectives of other characters in Thora's life, including an interesting new friend called Felty Goosehead. My working title for the fiction was *Felty Goosehead*, but as time went on, Thora needed to tell her own story. Felty became less important. This work looks at how an author attempts to paint characters honestly and show the real pain, the invisible pain, of mental illness. The secondary characters may help to shed light on what's real and what is perceived. I consider the perspectives of these additional characters here, in the critical portion of my dissertation. My goal is to explore what fiction has to offer in regard to the

idea of mental illness: stigma vs. advocacy, and labeling vs. people just trying to live their lives.

This project doesn't look at the role of mental illness in fiction, but the opposite—fiction's role regarding mental illness, possibly considering literary narrative as an occasion for mental health awareness. Often fiction writers see illness solely as a vehicle for character development—to make a character interesting, to move a story forward. One of the things I explore is whether both of these things can be accomplished at the same time. Can we think about novels as doing political work without reducing characters to their disabilities?

So, how do we go about telling another's story, especially the story of someone who isn't part of what may be perceived as mainstream?

Virginia Woolf wonders if we even have the words to accomplish this:

to hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of language . . . the sufferer is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other . . . so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out. Probably it will be something laughable.— (7)

Woolf's words apply not only to physical symptoms but to mental symptoms as well. The latter are invisible. How do we bring tangibility to these? In exploring fiction's role regarding mental illness, I will consider several things, including fiction's possible therapeutics for writer and reader, and the consideration of the sufferer or the "other," *by* others, possibly leading to stigma.

I'd also like to show how fiction can pull us into a narrative, giving readers the space to create their own stories. Danielle M. Roemer says that in personal storytelling,

“the speaking self is necessarily separate from the self that is spoken of. The narrator creates a sense of some other . . . and . . . a distance.” It is with this distance that a creative space is formed—a space where readers can take a step back, with some freedom to then connect with characters on their own terms.

My fictional work *Thirteen Thursdays* tells the story of a seemingly privileged thirteen-year-old girl living with her single father in Greenwich Village, New York City. Her mother, who Thora later realizes had depression, has left her and her father. Thora meets an interesting older friend, who lives in her building. Thora was diagnosed with OCD at eight years old. She knows that she was one of the lucky ones, if the term *lucky* could ever be applied to OCD. Thora continues therapy now, every other week with her therapist, Gloria. She is a good student; has a couple of good friends, Carly and Toby; and is involved in a support group. Except of course for her mother’s absence, Thora appears to have the life of a “normal,” functioning new teenager. But life inside Thora’s head is far from typical. She tells her story over three months, April to June, as she turns fourteen and graduates from middle school. Thora needed to tell her own story, to try, if possible, to reveal her deep pain, as only a middle schooler could narrate.

The other characters introduced in *Thirteen Thursdays* are also necessary to round out Thora’s profile. They don’t speak, but if they did, it might go something like this: Toby, Thora’s friend:

Thora’s definitely one of my best friends, no . . . she is my best friend. Carly’s great and all, but Thora sees me. She gets me. Carly’s more regular, a popular wannabe. But Thora is different, she’s irregular. She’s on the outside, not just on the outside of the popular group looking in, but the outside, and not even trying to

look in. We're both different, Thora and I. I know Thora has OCD. She tried to explain it to Carly and me, but it's hard to understand. It's like, how do you get inside a person's head? I guess it's best to stay outside. I can't even figure out my own mind. Maybe if Thora could get outside herself, she'd see what I see.

Marta, the school cafeteria worker:

Almost every day Thora orders the same thing: a plain turkey sandwich. I think she likes routine. She's a good kid. I only know a handful of the students by name. Most others are clumped together, their heads down, thumbs frantically clicking their phones. Not Thora, I've never seen her phone. I'm not sure she even has one. She always looks at me and orders politely. She makes it easier for me to be at this job, which barely keeps my son and me afloat.

I wear a tag, but Thora is the only one to use my name.

Thora's father:

I never know what to say. I try to make things right with Thora. The problem is, I don't know what's right. Her rights are wrong—not logical—. I don't understand. I try. Her mom "got" Thora. Thora maybe, by rights, shouldn't have been born. God help me for thinking that. Her mother and I had a brief affair, and weren't careful—in our thirties, no less. We should have known better. When Debra left, what choice did I have? She's my kid. I thought of asking my sister to take her. But she lives in Seattle, and we're not very close.

Thora's mother, whom we never meet:

Thora wasn't different—at least not to me. I was different—probably always was, but didn't know it for a long time. And when one finds out, there is the question, Just what is one different from?

I wasn't too young when I had Thora. I was thirty-two, but I felt really young. I don't know what happened to my twenties. I wanted to be a dancer, if you can believe that. I would take various jobs to pay the bills, and all of a sudden I find myself in my thirties and pregnant. The father said he'd marry me, so we did. I remember the first time I held the baby. She was so little and helpless. She had the clichéd ten fingers and ten toes, and she had two blue eyes, two ears, and one nose. Her color was good, and she eventually cried when the nurse tapped the bottom of her foot. The tests all came back “normal,” and then I cried when it was time to take my normal, healthy little girl home to a clueless vacuum. I had no idea what was behind those big, bright, icy blue eyes.

We named her Thora because she was born on a Thursday during a thunderstorm. I thought it was a sign. And of all the mythologies, Norse is my favorite. Some people that write seem to like mythology. I picked that up during the two years I spent in college. I always thought that I should have been a writer.

Thora was what, in my parents' time, was considered a “fussy baby.” She cried for no reason. She ate a little, slept a little, then ate a little more, and so on. . . . I never really knew what she wanted, and in retrospect, neither did she. I remember placing that tiny being on my bed, stepping back, and asking it, “What do you want? What am I doing wrong?”

The infant days seemed to blur together. My husband was rarely home; he worked late and traveled a lot. I kind of figured things out with Thora as I went along. She didn't seem so different from other kids. We lived in the city, so we had to set up play dates to go to the park. Other moms (and sometimes dads) seemed much more enthusiastic about these than Thora and me. But we went along, and Thora, although very shy, seemed to interact well enough. Again, like the ten fingers and toes, she had friends, slept and ate well, did well in school and wasn't a discipline problem. There really were no "medically approved" red flags. I guess looking back now, I could have noticed some peculiar things. One day I took Thora, who was five at the time, to see Pattycake, the gorilla that I grew up visiting. I remember taking Thora to the bathroom before we went into the gorilla section of the zoo. When it was time to wash our hands, Thora refused to turn the tap on. This had never happened before. She was a curious kid, and always wanted to know how things worked. I asked her why she wouldn't turn on the faucet, but she wouldn't tell me, and at that time, she probably didn't know. So, I turned it on for her and forgot about it.

But later, things got worse for both of us . . .

There are two other characters who lack the same type of perspectives as the above. One is Thora's grandmother, and the other is Felty Goosehead. Thora's grandmother has dementia. She lives inside her own mind and remains in the moment. She is not affected by the past or the future, so is unable to pass judgment on Thora. Felty is new in Thora's life. Not a peer of Thora's, she's a carefree spirit, who chooses not to judge. Felty represents that space that Roemer talks about in "The Personal Narrative and

Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*." This space is something of which fiction is made. Felty is there in that fictional space, the creative space between the speaker and the spoken of. She's there for the reader to do with what they will. The minor characters round out a story. Alex Woloch, in *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, says: "The minor character—that roundness squared to a sharp edge, that appearance of a disappearance—is so successful as a narrative type, in precisely this way, as he enfolds the untold tale into the telling" (42). Much of my work, so far, has been influenced by a quote by Cash in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*: "Sometimes I aint so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it" (233).

Cash's remarks follow the news that his brother, Darl, will be taken away as a result of his barn burning. Cash questions, as many do, What is the cause of mental illness in any one person? The study of mental illness has evolved through the ages, beginning in ancient times with fictional descriptions in scripture of people's odd behavior, which can be reflective of today's categorized disorders such as anxiety and depression. In early times, symptoms were thought to be based in the metaphysical, sorcery and witchcraft. Treatments could include charms, prayers, and an attempt at restoring emotional balance of mind and body. By the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, mental illness had begun to be seen as possibly a more physical-based condition. The terms *crazy* and *lunatic* were used. Madness was seen in literary works, such as those by Shakespeare. At this time, there was a rise in the number of madhouses or asylums where

patients were delivered harsh treatment. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought a classification system of mental disorders. The term *psychiatry* was coined during this time, and society began to see the use of psychoanalysis. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, or CBT, was developed in the early twentieth century, becoming popular by the 1950s. This form of therapy, instead of relying on analyzing one's thoughts and past experiences for treatment, attempts to train patients to modify unhealthy behaviors. Thora's treatment for OCD, Exposure and Response Prevention, or ERP, would fall under the CBT umbrella. There is really no cure, but we do have many scientific tools to treat mental illness. While this may be true, society still shows us subjectivity and perspective.

Cash's question goes a bit deeper and broader than just the cause of a person's mental illness. In addition, he asks: What role does society play in whether a person is perceived as mentally ill? Today, disability, which includes both mental and physical disabilities, has become a field of academic study. According to Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, disability study "explores the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the concept of disability and what it means to be disabled" (2). Scholars of disability studies share opposition to the medical model of disability, which sees disability "in terms of individual impairments to be corrected and cured. . . . scholars and activists define disability as a social and environmental phenomenon. . . . one is disabled because of the body's interaction with the social and physical environment rather than because of individual pathology or 'lack.'" (Adams et al. 2). Even when there is evidence of a true malfunction of the brain, such as in Thora's case with OCD, society may still disable a person by the way it views the sufferer, and the obstacles that are put in her way. A good physical example of this is when a wheelchair user encounters a curb

without a cut. When this happens, the person is no longer able. The obstacle disables. Society assumes a state of ability.

Cash may have been ahead of his time in his questioning of society's impact on the status of one's mental state, but doesn't the very nature of modernist work fit with the study of disability, both in dealing with experimentation and the challenging of the traditional? Janet Lyon, in "On the Asylum Road with Woolf and Mew," says that "modern aesthetics, with its emphasis on disproportion, fracture, and incompleteness, shares with disability theory a foundational contestation of the category of 'the normal'" (552). Not unlike Faulkner's use of multiple narrators in *As I Lay Dying*, Adams, Reiss, and Serlin's *Keywords for Disability Studies* features essays each written by a different author, each of whom was encouraged to write broadly from various backgrounds. Adams, Reiss, and Serlin, in stating one of the key assumptions of disability studies, say: "there is no neutral or objective position from which to regard the human body and its differences, just as the 'normal' body is a fantasy belied by the wondrous spectrum of human difference" (4). Doesn't Faulkner assume the same with his characters? He also doesn't give us an objective position, but rather lets the characters tell us their story in their own words, at times using his well-known stream of consciousness technique.

Much has been written and speculated about Darl Bundren's mental health. It's certainly not an easy thing to determine. As with anyone there is a biological component to consider, along with environmental factors ranging from birth order and upbringing to outside trauma such as war, something in which Darl has been involved. It has also been mentioned that Darl may be clairvoyant, seemingly knowing things before they happen, like his mother's death, Dewey Dell's pregnancy, and Jewel's paternity. Charles Palliser

from the University of Scotland in “Fate and Madness: The Determinist Vision of Darl Bundren,” states: “Throughout the novel Darl constantly predicts accurately what is going to happen. But most of these ‘prophecies’ are forecasts of the behavior of other members of his family and are simply based on his knowledge of their past behavior” (623). Darl can also be described as an inert character, more verbose than active, and narrating nineteen of the fifty-five interior monologues in *As I Lay Dying*. Darl does a lot of observing of others, perhaps in an attempt to take on one or all of their identities, possibly in order to fill a vacancy in himself.

His one true action in the novel, however, costs him everything. When Darl tries to burn the corpse in the barn, he attempts to put an end to the madness of the journey his family has undertaken. Darl is declared insane at this point and plans are made for him to be taken away to an asylum. Even Cash, who has questioned whether society has a right to call a man insane, says:

But I don’t reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man’s barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property. That’s how I reckon a man is crazy. That’s how he can’t see eye to eye with other folks. And I reckon they aint nothing else to do with him but what most folks say is right. (234)

Cash is a first-born. He’s a list maker and a rule follower. His emotional insight gives way to societal demands. In the end he doesn’t see that, as Palliser puts it: “Darl’s conduct in firing the barn is no more insane than that of his family in persevering with the journey at the price of sacrificing Jewel’s horse and crippling Cash for life” (632). Darl sees things the way they really are and acts accordingly. He may have been doing what he thought was right for his family in the moment.

Darl not only “predict[s]” the future, but when he does he makes sure that everyone knows. He brings an inevitable situation up front and declares it over and over: “do you know that Addie Bundren is going to die? Addie Bundren is going to die?” (Faulkner 40). Whether or not Jewel is in touch with reality regarding Addie’s death, Darl is, and he feels the need to tell him repeatedly. Casey Whyland, Jessie Brusa, and Tim St. Croix on their website say: “[Darl] accepts every moment in his life and in the lives around him for exactly what it is.” Isn’t this the definition of sanity?

What if we were to compare Darl Bundren with Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*? If Darl might be thought of as sane in accepting “every moment in his life and in the lives around him for exactly what it is,” then conversely wouldn’t that mean that Jay Gatsby is insane? While Darl may be overly involved in his family’s inner lives, to the point of perhaps using this over-involvement for self-fulfillment, Gatsby takes this to a whole new level creating an entirely new persona: “It was James Gatz who had been loafing along the beach that afternoon in a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants, but it was already Jay Gatsby who borrowed a row-boat, pulled out to the *Tuolomee*” (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 104). Gatsby, as opposed to Darl, abandons his family rather than embraces it, if even in an unconventional way: “His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all” (104). He invented his new persona at seventeen and “to this conception he was faithful to the end” (104). James Gatz died on that afternoon, long before Jay Gatsby’s life came to an end. It isn’t always easy for him to keep up the charade. But his imagination runs wild, “his heart in a constant, turbulent riot” (105), and his fantasies provide a “satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world

was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). The words "rock," "securely," and "fairy's wing" couldn't be any more oxymoronic. The earthly James Gatz attempts to replace himself with someone who doesn't exist. He tries to substitute unreal for real. He lives most of his life in delusion.

The psychological makeup of Jay Gatsby has been overlooked over the years, possibly overshadowed by the largeness of Fitzgerald himself. Thi Huong Giang Bui says, in "Jay Gatsby's Trauma and Psychological Loss," that "It is only recently that critics have moved away from studying Fitzgerald's work as that of a merely superficial and historical writer and examined his works in various other perspectives" (42). Bui says that Freudian theory of loss and trauma can be applied to Gatsby, reflective of his life experiences from his lack of moral guidance from his parents, to his loss of Daisy, to war trauma—the influence of war trauma is also applicable to Darl Bundren. But in Gatsby's case, Bui tells us that for the traumatized person, chronology can become mixed up, with past and present events jumping back and forth until the person can't tell reality from fantasy. She quotes Freud: "fantasy and reality may coexist or can even replace each other" (Bui 43). According to Freud, traumatized individuals may become trapped in their fantasies, and in Gatsby's case he uses it as an escape, where he "maintains his loneliness" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 44), keeping fairly anonymous at parties, and staying away from real people and situations where loss and trauma may be revisited. The exception to this is Daisy, whom Gatsby keeps at a safe distance, for a while, anyway. Daisy may be an example of the past jumping into the future, which renders Gatsby confused. Daisy is representative of fantasy and reality colliding for Gatsby, ending up in complete destruction.

So far, we have looked at both Darl Bundren's and Jay Gatsby's state of mind. Darl Bundren is perceived by his society as being insane. We've compared him to Jay Gatsby, who has not historically been studied in the same way as Darl, but nonetheless, evidence can support the idea that he may be in fact less sane than Darl. But let's get back to Cash's original quote: "Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-a-way. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it" (Faulkner 233). Cash questions whether any of us has a right to judge a person's sanity, and furthermore he is asking: Are these said persons insane only *because* they are viewed that way?

So, who is this "majority of folks" that construct rules by which each of us is supposed to live? In the broad definition, it is a society at large with all of its preconceived notions of what normal is, and possibly the unhealthy need to create and control a perfect world. But who makes up the audiences of Darl and Jay Gatsby? They come from two very different worlds. Darl's is a simple, uneducated world filled with poverty and hardship. Gatsby, on the other hand, has created quite the opposite world: one filled with wealth and glamour. Of course, part of both of their worlds were their parents, the two people who have the most influence and pass the most judgment. We don't know much about the Gatzes with the exception that they are "shiftless, unsuccessful farm people" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 104), and that Gatsby's father, Henry, attends his funeral. We know more about the Bundrens, thanks to Faulkner giving them voices in his and her own chapters. Between Anse, desiring new teeth the whole time his wife is dying and then the acquiring a new wife a day after she's buried, and

Addie, with resenting her children and making comments on her former students such as: “I would go down . . . to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them” (Faulkner 169) and “I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them” (170), I think that based on what we know, Darl wins the “worst parents” award. What about the rest of their families? No siblings of Gatsby’s are mentioned, but Darl has many. Cash is surprised when Dewey Dell turns on Darl; he understands how everyone else does, but not her:

I always kind of had a idea that him and Dewey Dell kind of knowed things betwixt them. If I’d a said it was ere one of us she liked better than ere a other, I’d a said it was Darl. . . . [she was] . . . on him before even Jewel could get at him . . . scratching and clawing at him like a wildcat. (237)

Dewey Dell reacts in a moment to Darl with violence, abandoning their closeness in favor of his audience’s popular opinion. Vardaman, the youngest Bundren, reacts with innocence yet possibly more wisdom than any other family member. He thinks: “My brother is Darl. He went to Jackson on the train. He didn’t go on the train to go crazy. He went crazy in our wagon” (251). Vardaman doesn’t think that Darl was crazy in the past and doesn’t think that Darl did anything to cause trouble or want to be crazy; he seems to support his brother’s dealing with the moments of reality, and even the young Vardaman could see the horrors of the absurd journey.

If we now step away from the families and look through a wider lens at the audiences of both Darl and Gatsby, we see two very different worlds. Darl’s is the austere and Gatsby’s the glamorous. One question that we might ask is, Is Darl’s world harder on him than Gatsby’s is on Gatsby? At first glance, one might say of course Darl’s world

was harder on Darl than Gatsby's is on Gatsby. Darl is taken away to an asylum based on his burning of a barn, while Gatsby is involved in all sorts of illegal activities, and no one bothers him. Everyone in and around the Bundren family talks about Darl's sanity, but no one questions Jay Gatsby's. And people keep their distance from Darl, while Gatsby's home is filled with partygoers night after night. In the end, though, they both end up alone.

There are two characters of interest in the audiences of Darl Bundren and Jay Gatsby. One is Cora Tull and the other, Owl Eyes. These two seem to play devil's advocate in the respective audiences of Darl and Gatsby. Cora defends Darl, "the one that folks say is queer, lazy and pottering about the place no better than Anse" (Faulkner 24); she says, "I always said that Darl was different from those others. I always said he was the only one of them that . . . had any natural affection" (21). Cora doesn't follow popular opinion regarding Darl. She sees truth in Darl, especially in his relationship with his mother:

it was between her and Darl that the understanding and the true love was. He just looked at her, not even coming in where she could see him and get upset, knowing Anse was driving him away and he would never see her again . . . his heart too full for words. (24-25).

Darl is in contrast with the rest of the siblings who appear to most to be ambitious, but to Cora Tull they are simply self-serving.

The other character representing this notion of devil's advocacy is Owl Eyes from *The Great Gatsby*. Owl Eyes is featured three times in the novel. We are first introduced to him in the library of Gatsby's home, next in the driveway after the small car accident,

and last when he shows up to Gatsby's funeral. Owl Eyes isn't quite as taken with Gatsby as the rest and won't accept him at face value. He wants to see how phony he really is. He decides to check Gatsby's library: "Absolutely real—have pages and everything. I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard. Matter of fact they're absolutely real. Pages and—Here! Lemme show you" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 50). Owl Eyes isn't quite sure how to take this revelation. He may have expected fake books, but when he finds them to be real, he doesn't know if this is just the extent of how far Jay Gatsby will go to "authenticate" his façade. Or could it be that he may be slightly intrigued with the fact that there may be more to this Gatsby guy? This "somewhat drunk" (49) investigator becomes a kind of a narrator of Gatsby's story himself. He's certainly more colorful than Nick and illuminates things for us that Nick might be missing. He maintains his distance, though; he tells us after the accident: "I know very little about driving—next to nothing. It happened, and that's all I know" (59). It's worth noting that Fitzgerald names this character *Owl Eyes*. Of course, this is Nick's name for him when he sees him in his glasses. But could it be that Owl Eyes represents the author himself? Does he think of himself as the wise overseer and present this Owl Eyes as drunk as he himself often was, in opposition to Gatsby who doesn't drink at his lavish parties? Fitzgerald appears to be blending the real with the unreal.

In the end, Owl Eyes has sympathy for Gatsby. He shows up at his funeral, perhaps just like he'd come to any of the many parties that Gatsby had. He seems to be surprised that no one came. "Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds" (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 183). He takes off his glasses, maybe humanizing himself and further connecting to Gatsby and says: "That poor son-of-a-bitch" (183). Both Cora

Tull and Owl Eyes force us to think and question, just as Cash does: Just what makes a person sane? What right does society have to judge? And what effect does this judgment have on a person regarding their mental state?

We can't deny that Thora's disorder, in my work, is scientifically based. It stems from a malfunctioning brain. Thoughts get "stuck" in the synapse in which they are carried by neurotransmitters, namely, serotonin, in OCD's case. And how do we know if James Gatz or Darl Bundren didn't have malfunctioning brains? But regardless of where the disorder originates, from a brain that organically doesn't work "correctly," or a psyche that has been emotionally traumatized, society still weighs in, and has an enormous effect on the sufferer. Without others' eyes on us, would we behave differently with or without normally functioning brains? Very possibly. Allen Howard Weg, in *OCD Treatment Through Storytelling*, tells us:

Obsessive-Compulsive disorder is relatively simple and easy to describe in clinical terms, but is extremely difficult to fully understand. Once presented with information about this psychiatric disorder, many are left with the questions, "Okay, I get what happens, but how can that be?" "How does that make sense?" "Why are people thinking and doing those crazy things?" (Weg 4)

Even when patients are asked by their therapists to do "bizarre and outrageous" interventions, they have difficulty understanding why. When Weg says "interventions," he is referring to ERP. ERP is explained this way: "The exposure in ERP refers to exposing yourself to the thoughts, images, objects, and situations that make you anxious and/or start your obsessions. While the Response Prevention of ERP, refers to making a choice not to do a compulsive behavior once the anxiety or obsessions have been

‘triggered’” (International Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Foundation). While other treatments have been used to treat OCD, ERP remains the gold standard.

Thora has mainly obsessive thoughts. Some refer to this as *Pure OCD*, or *Pure O*, obsessions without compulsions. Others argue that there is no such thing, that all who suffer from OCD have some compulsions. The facts currently state that OCD is the medically accepted term, and it includes compulsions. *Pure O* is an unofficial term used to describe someone who seemingly has no compulsions. This may only look to be true in Thora’s case. Her type of OCD may be easier to describe if she only had contamination obsessions. Thought: *My hands are filled with germs, and I could die or kill someone else*. Exposure: Touch a public sink, or in an advanced therapeutic session, a toilet seat. Response prevention: No hand washing for a certain length of time and only for a set number of times until you stop at one, again in an advanced session. All, of course, easier said than done.

Thora she has some contamination obsessions and compulsions, and some counting obsessions and compulsions, that for the most part she has “outgrown.” Her main OCD symptom now is obsessive thoughts. She worries about hurting others. Her central obsession in her story here is that she may have caused, or have helped to cause, the Boston Marathon bombing. This, of course, seems outlandish. But this type of thinking can be quite common among those with this type of OCD. Her treatment? ERP. And in Thora’s case, writing an imaginal story—one that mimics her obsession—a detailed account of her involvement in the bombing. It’s pretty scary stuff for a young person, especially when you can’t speak the word “bomb” in public. And speaking of public, we the people only hear about OCD contamination, or counting and straightening,

because that may be accepted. No, not the other kind, the one with no visibility. Not ever. But we continue to use the acronym OCD as an adjective—*she's so OCD*, when it is clearly a noun—a noun that causes a great deal of suffering.

Thora does have a compulsion attached to her obsession—her trip to Boston. On the surface, that wouldn't seem odd to people looking on—even a young girl on a bus, or in a crowd in Copley Square. And she had an excuse for her friends: that she is searching for her mother. The ensuing imaginal story becomes difficult for Thora, as it becomes tangled with the actual trip—the real vs. the unreal. But this type of treatment is all there is. You can't ask a person to actually bomb a city. The story is, however, designed to cause a great deal of pain. By reading the piece over and over again, the brain habituates to the pain, and it should eventually subside. The truth is, we have treatment, but OCD never really goes away. The sufferer must deal with the idea of uncertainty for the rest of her life—the strangeness and *what-ifs* of this disorder.

Weg, a notable OCD therapist in New Jersey, uses storytelling in addition to ERP for his clients. He feels that something else is needed, something beyond “telling.” He says that explanations are not enough, when sufferers are asked to behave in ways that are “uncomfortable,” “sometimes painful,” and “contradictory to one's goals” (5). He has found that the most effective way to share his perspective on their struggles is not to talk about OCD at all: “Instead, I found myself talking about completely unrelated things, such as events from my personal life or shared experiences from the mass media . . . in order to make a certain point or to get at the concept behind an OCD symptom or a treatment intervention” (5). Weg reminds us that “storytelling” has been around since the beginning of civilization, with philosophers and religious leaders using this type of

instruction. And the arts, whether music, dance, visual art, theater, or poetry and prose, can indirectly communicate emotions or struggles. This can help the audience—observers, listeners, and readers—to better understand.

Fiction writing teaches us empathy in ways that only it can. Azar Nafisi, in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, says: “It is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else’s shoes and understand the other’s different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless. Outside the sphere of literature only one aspect of individuals is revealed” (118). The limitless possibilities of fiction enable us to construct fully developed three-dimensional characters: protagonist, antagonist, and others. These characters can be created to portray an author’s (while not always actually intended) or other’s pain and struggles. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes of Doctor Diver’s mental descent, mimicking his own as he cared for his own wife, Zelda, who struggled with mental health issues. According to a 1934 *New York Times* “Book of the Times,” no two reviews of *Tender Is the Night* were alike: “Some seemed to think that Mr. Fitzgerald was writing about his usual jazz age boys and girls; others that he had a ‘timeless’ problem on his hands. And some seemed to think that Doctor Diver’s collapse was insufficiently documented” (Chamberlain 1). *The Times* disagrees with the last of these options, stating that Fitzgerald accurately depicts the descent, step by step, with just enough documentation. They say: “The wonder to us is that Dick didn’t collapse long before Mr. Fitzgerald causes him to break down” (Chamberlain 1).

Hemingway wrote a letter to Fitzgerald regarding *Tender Is the Night*: He said: Forget your personal tragedy. We are all bitched from the start and you especially have to hurt like hell before you can write seriously. But when you get damned

hurt use it—don't cheat with it. Be as faithful to it as a scientist—but don't think anything is of any importance because it happens to you or anyone belonging to you. (qtd. in Popova)

Hemingway is referring to Fitzgerald's straying from exact facts regarding the people after whom Fitzgerald models his characters. But *Tender* is fiction. However, it may have led, along with Hemingway's letter, to Fitzgerald's 1936 *Crack-Up* essays published in sequence in *Esquire Magazine*. Fitzgerald may have needed to produce this non-fiction to find out for himself what it really means to be lost, to become lost, but on his own terms.

Adam Gopnik quotes Fitzgerald on the novel: "I saw that the novel which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and communal art . . . capable of reflecting only the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion." Gopnik goes on to say that "What was happening to Fitzgerald's nervous system was happening to the novel, too: the crack-up is externalized, and a sure sign that someone really is cracking up." It was apparent that Fitzgerald, in his mind, had no choice but to write the essays: "Fitzgerald had become what he chronicled, a kind of self-invention that lost track of the distinction between art and life, between celebrity and the workaday world, and between the characters and himself" (Meyer 3). Fitzgerald somehow had to regain himself, and himself as a writer. He deliberately became "lost" by going away and being alone, removing himself from society. He says that "there was not an 'I' anymore—" (*Crack-Up* 79). He describes what it was like to think for the first time and realize the impact that others had had on him, using words like *dictate* and *imitate*. He says that Edmund Wilson "had been his intellectual conscience" (79). He explains what it is like to

have no self: “It was strange to have no self—to be like a little boy left alone in a big house, who now he knew he could do anything he wanted to do, but found that there was nothing that he wanted to do” (79). It’s interesting that Fitzgerald uses a young boy in this analogy. He mentions twice in the essays his past regrets. First, in the first essay, he says: “my two juvenile regrets—at not being big enough (or good enough) to play football in college and at not getting overseas during the war” (70) and, then again in the last essay where he claims to have become a writer, and only a writer, not an entire man with ideals and says that dreams have been “relegated to the junk heap of the shoulder pads worn for one day on the Princeton freshmen football field and the overseas cap never worn overseas” (84). These regrets are real to Fitzgerald and stay with him a long time. The tangible items become metaphors and aid him in his quest to become “lost.”

Before the aloneness and loss of self, Fitzgerald says he was “always saving or being saved—in a single morning I would go through the emotions ascribable to Wellington at Waterloo. I lived in a world of inscrutable hostiles and inalienable friends and supporters” (*Crack-Up* 71). He is exhausted from caregiving, particularly of Zelda, and his being scrutinized and critiqued by peers and others. He even critiques himself, saying: “I had only been a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, even of my talent” (71). He knew he had to be alone. And then he cracked: “He cracked like an old plate” (72).

After the essays were published there would be more scrutiny. Scott Donaldson, in “The Crisis of Fitzgerald’s *Crack-Up*,” says there was an “extraordinary response from [*Esquire*’s] readers. ‘I get letters from all over,’ wrote Fitzgerald. . . . These letters came from old friends who wanted to cheer him up, from total strangers who recognized

something in their own plight . . . and most of all from other writers” (171). Dos Passos wrote:

“Christ, man, how do you find time in the middle of the general conflagration to worry about all that stuff? . . . We’re living in one of the damndest tragic moments in history—if you want to go to pieces I think it’s absolutely O.K. but I think you ought to write a first-rate novel about it (and you probably will) instead of spilling little pieces for Arnold Gingrich [*Esquire* editor].” (qtd. in Donaldson 174)

And Hemingway reveals in a letter to Maxwell Perkins, a mutual editor of Fitzgerald’s and Hemingway’s, that Fitzgerald

seems to almost take pride in his shamelessness of defeat. The *Esquire* pieces seem to me to be so miserable. There is another one coming. I always knew he couldn’t think—he never could—but he had a marvelous talent and the thing is to use it—not whine in public. (qtd. in Hampl)

Fitzgerald even back pedaled a bit, claiming that the essays were not an autobiography, but a biography, in which he was once again a character in his own life.

But he had to pull away from this life, and become “lost,” not told he was lost, or how to be found, but to truly take the journey on his own. Fitzgerald tells of a conversation he had with a woman (who he claimed thinks out loud):

Listen! The world only exists in your eyes—your conception of it. You can make it as big or as small as you want to. And you’re trying to be a little puny individual. By God, if I ever cracked, I’d try to make the world crack with me. Listen! The world only exists through your apprehension of it, and so it’s much

better to say that it's not you that's cracked—it's the Grand Canyon. (*Crack-Up* 74)

These words suggest that an individual can judge the world just as the world judges in individual.

Yet, Fitzgerald had to stay cracked, at least for a while. He so accurately describes what the suffering from anxiety and depression really feels like:

Now the standard cure for one who is sunk is to consider those in actual destitution or physical suffering—this is an all weather beatitude for gloom in general and fairly salutary day-time advice for everyone. But at three o'clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence, and the cure doesn't work—and in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day. (*Crack-Up* 75)

But sometimes, “a cracked plate has to be retained in the pantry” (75). We have to keep the “other” with the “others,” and vice versa. There is no real cure for mental illness. We simply have some treatments and coping mechanisms to stay afloat. And of course, the world that views us one way or another.

Thora's world is no different. She has to deal with terrifying uncertainty—not only the uncertainty of a lost mother, but the relentless OCD thoughts which constantly invade her young mind, reminding her that she is fragile and weak, yet capable of creating chaos and hurting, and even destroying others. She tries to control her world—the quest is impossible, never-ending, and exhausting. But carry on, she does. Her journey is clouded, but her narrative is clear.

Arthur Frank, a professor of sociology at the University of Calgary, theorizes that disability novels can be divided into three classifications: “restitution,” “chaos,” and “quest” narratives. Diane Scrofano, in “Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness,” says that while Frank’s research mainly covers physical disability, it can also apply to mental illness in fiction. In her study, mental illness refers to biological brain disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and OCD. Scrofano tells us:

In what Frank calls a “narrative of restitution,” the disability is cured. A “narrative of chaos” focuses on a period of time in which the disabled person’s symptoms cause significant disruption in his or her life. In a “quest narrative,” the disabled person is managing his or her symptoms in a healthy way and living life to his or her fullest potential. (1)

Most young adult novels of mental illness fall into the narrative of chaos category.

Scrofano says while it is helpful for the young person to see that she is not alone in her struggles, it may be more empowering to read more “quest” narratives, where characters live in a recovery of sorts, managing their mental illnesses and lead fulfilling lives.

Scrofano says that in the “quest” narrative, the protagonist can strive for meaning and purpose while serving others, “that protagonist can serve as an inspiring role model for the teen reader who suffers from mental illness” (8). She goes on to emphasize that:

“More YA novels of mental illness should not just suggest at the end that recovery can happen but instead portray in depth, throughout the novel, how recovery is achieved by the characters” (27).

Thora's narrative is probably somewhere between a "chaos" and a "quest" narrative, if I were to classify it. I would hope that she would bring some positivity to those who are at all affected by OCD, both sufferers and family members alike. Even though Thora suffers from a severe case of OCD, she happens to be one of the more fortunate, receiving high-level care. My desire is that all could receive good care and use it to manage symptoms and find peace. And in the meantime, it is important for us to tell our stories, and listen to and read one another's stories. There's something in them for all of us.

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THIRTEEN THURSDAYS

A novel by

Therese Mullaney

“Thursday’s child has far to go . . .”

Felty Goosehead lives on the 4th floor of my building. I know this because I’ve seen her press the #4 button in the elevator—it’s the one right below the #7, which is my floor. The first time I saw her press #4, I couldn’t assume she lived on the 4th floor—she could have just been visiting someone, but I’ve seen her press it twice more. I now can assume she lives on the 4th floor. I know her name is Felty Goosehead because I saw her name on the mailbox. The mailboxes in the lobby, A-F for each floor, are set up just like the apartment building—eight up and six across. 8 times 6 equals 48. There are 48 apartments in my building. That would have been great if we lived here when I was little. Everything had to be in multiples of fours. Even before I learned multiplication in school, I figured it out on my own. I had to. The total had to “feel” right. It had to be right so nothing bad would happen. I still like to stand in front of the mailboxes and count them and read the names to see who might be new. I know most people in the building by now, some I know in person, but all by name. Sometimes I try to match up a person I see with a name on the mailbox, if I haven’t already met her. I say *her*, because I read somewhere that you should pick one, not say *him or her* like they used to. And the *hims* get enough attention.

It usually takes a while to take the old tenant’s name off the box—but not this time. *Felty Goosehead* is now pasted over *Daniel McGurty*. I know that they just covered over because I can see the tape and the *D* from *Daniel* and the *G* from *McGurty* sticking up over the new tiny white cardboard with the name *Felty Goosehead* handwritten on it.

Some of the names on the mailboxes are typed and others are handwritten. I can never figure out why.

I never met Daniel McGurty. I know he lived alone and he had a cat. I'd see him 2-4 times a week at the mailboxes, holding his cat. Neither he, nor his cat, ever looked at me. You're allowed to have a pet in your apartment as long as it weighs 25 pounds or less. I guess the McGurty cat did, most do

Felty Goosehead has two dogs—dachshunds, I think. I wonder if they count combined weight? Those two have to weigh more than 25 pounds together. They're cute though, I guess—they're really low to the ground, barely any space between. I bet you'd have a hard time slipping a paper under one of them. They are a pretty color. It's kind of like one I've never seen before. Maybe no one's ever seen it. It's not really red or orange, but a red with gold highlights—not like the highlights you get in a salon, but *real* gold. I wish my hair was that color.

I'm not sure I like dogs. I never had one, and I don't remember ever wanting one. I doubt my dad would let me have one anyway. He's never around. He's usually working or working on being grumpy. I'm pretty sure he doesn't really like taking care of me, but he kind of has to, because he's a dad, and it's part of the responsibility.

Anyway, I don't really think that Felty Goosehead is a weird name. I've lived in a NYC apartment building my whole life, so I've heard *a lot* of names. Felty Goosehead has bright orange hair and wears a lot of purple. At least each time I've seen her she was wearing purple. And she sings in the elevator. She sings along with the purple iPod that dangles from her. She mostly sings Blake Shelton and Garth Brooks. And once I heard some Dolly Parton. I don't know how old Felty is, but she's not young. I saw wrinkles—

and sometimes you can just tell. No, Felty Goosehead doesn't bother me—not her name or the way she dresses. Maybe she wears her crazy on the outside.

Dad's not home, what else is new? He's working late, so I made an omelet for dinner. I'm playing Vivaldi *Spring* on the stereo, because it's April and iPods suffocate me. The omelet is pretty good—Swiss-style cheese from Upstate and some chives grown in my container on the fire escape. They shot their little green heads up last weekend. I love chives. They give me hope. My friend Carly's mom gave me the cheese. She knows I like to cook. They say a judge of a good cook is how she makes an omelet. I heard that potential chefs are asked to make one before they are hired. I don't know if this one would land me job, but it's good.

I'm also working on an English paper for school. It's a research paper that they've been having eighth graders do for like ever. We had to pick three countries in order of our preference. I picked:

- 1) France—I like it, I take French and I thought I would find lots of information on it.
- 2) Switzerland—I like it, it's near France, and they speak French in some parts.
- 3) Zambia—I thought it would impress the teacher and I never thought it would come to my third choice.

Guess what? It did. Well, we all come from Africa, don't we?

These research papers are so structured and outdated. Why can't they let us think on our own, read more of what we are interested in. . . . And I want to be a geologist. I love rocks and stones, and I'd love to name and keep track of them all. I knew, ever since I went college shopping with Carly and her family to look for a school for her brother (no one thought he'd ever see that day, but he did get his high school diploma with a reasonable GPA and I can now say that he is in his junior year at a respectable SUNY). When I saw those shiny specimens in the science building, I knew that geology was for me. I mean, what's wrong with reading about geology? I've read lots of books about it in the summer and I really liked them. It's not that I mind reading about other things, and I do like Shakespeare, but I just don't want to learn the dusty old way that everyone else did in the past.

Speaking of reading, I read in the *New York Times* (yes, I like reading that) earlier this month that Pattycake died. I've been going to visit Pattycake since I was really little. Pattycake was a gorilla at the Bronx Zoo. She died on April 1st—no joke. She was 40 years old—pretty old for a gorilla, most don't live past 37. Pattycake was 320 pounds and had 10 children. She was actually born in the Central Park Zoo and later moved to the Bronx. I haven't visited Pattycake much recently, but I've been going to see her since I was an infant—that would make Pattycake about 28 then. I remember my mom taking me when I was about 5 (Pattycake 32). It was April, just like now, and it was one of those not really warm, but drizzly and humid days when you don't know what to wear. My mom said it was hot. She said "It's hotter for us, Thora, we're different." And then she would rub my back. My mom had depression. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. I stood there with my mom and watched Pattycake through the glass. She'd tell me stories

of how she would go to the zoo when she was little. She got to see Pattycake as a baby. My mom was too young to remember it, but Pattycake broke her arm when she was just 6 months old. Her dad was trying to grab for her through bars in the zoo, and the mom tried to pull her away. I guess gorillas fight over their kids, too.

My mom told me that the zoo had a contest to choose a name for the new baby gorilla back then (in 1972). I would have picked Rosy for the name. I like that. I think it suits a baby girl gorilla. “Girl gorilla”—that’s hard to say. Pattycake reminds me of Picabo Street. I think that is a ridiculous name. Her parents let her name herself. I’m pretty sure they were hippies. I heard that her brother’s name is Baba. I don’t know what I’d name myself, but it wouldn’t be Thora or Picabo, that’s for sure.

6:57 p.m.

what’s up? working on paper, u? which one? duh, English,gtg Jeopardy

My friends make fun of me for watching Jeopardy. They call me *old lady* or *Rainman*, but I don’t care—I love it. I love the boxes with the categories on top and the dollar amounts listed on each one. I googled old episodes and found that they used to flip up doors over the answers that were printed underneath. Art Fleming was the host back then. I kind of like him, but I’m used to Alex Trebek and the electronic board. I know a lot of the answers for my age. People think I’m smart. I don’t know, I pick things up, I think fast, like sweeping across the categories on Jeopardy. I get dizzy watching them. I’m watching them now on the fat old TV that sits in my “armoire”—that’s a ridiculous name for a piece of furniture. Anyway, I don’t have that many clothes and my dad said we could put the old TV in my bedroom (He finally bought a flatscreen for the living room)—IF I kept my grades up. My grades are good; he doesn’t have to bribe me.

I lie in bed and watch the categories whiz by. I close my eyes in between (when the Jeopardy logo passes) so I don't get dizzy.

Gilda Radner's college town—what is Ann Arbor?

Tiger in a lifeboat—what is Life of Pi?

First-year pro athlete—what is a rookie?

Crooked man, crooked mile, Simon and Schuster, Caesar, Lee Harvey Oswald

7:17 p.m.

Is it over yet? Is it 7:30 yet?

Sometimes Carly just doesn't get it.

There are twenty-seven lockers in my hallway at school, that's ridiculous. There is definitely room for one more. There is a sign on the wall in the spot where the extra locker should be. It reads:

Spring Arts Show

Featuring artwork of GV Middle School Students and their parents

Refreshments will be served

I finish putting my books in my locker, when the PDA couple shows up. Her locker is next to mine. He just shows up every day after third period to "visit." Ew. She's gross and he's grosser. Together they are indescribable. They never act like I'm there. They want me to see them, but they're too cool to acknowledge me. I turn around and almost bump into Carly, whose locker is in the same hallway, but farther down. Carly, #16—me, 8. That's one reason Carly and I are friends.

"Hey, Thor, want to go to the girls' soccer game at the high school after school today?"

Carly knows better than to ask me this. She knows I have a research paper due (so does she, by the way). She knows I never go anywhere when a paper is due within a week. I'm doing better these days, but she remembers last year when I was so paralyzed I couldn't leave the apartment. I pretended to be sick, and my dad probably knew better, but he gave up fighting me. Carly brought me my work home during that time. She knew how hard it was for me to miss school. I think she likes to keep me busy, because she worries about it happening again. I wish I could tell her it won't. Plus, she wants

someone to go to the game with. For some reason she thinks if we start hanging out at the high school before we get there, we'll somehow be magically popular when we do.

"You know I can't go," I say.

"I know, just wanted to ask. Maybe I'll ask Jen."

"Ok, whatev" Carly knows Jen from her ridiculous fencing club. Jen's okay, she's always been nice to me, but I don't think she's opened a book since she's gotten here.

"You going to the art show?" Carly asks me. "You have some of your stuff in it, right?"

"Yeah, a few, but go? Doubt it, my dad won't go."

"Yeah, I know, but you should go. I'll go with you."

"Thanks, Carly, but no."

I like walking home from school. We don't live far and it's pretty safe. Some kids have to take a bus. Some take a subway—ew, worse than the bus, ewwww. The trees that line my path home are beginning to bud—they're white and it looks there's snow on the branches. I like to count the trees along my route. Four blocks, ten trees per block. That's forty trees, which is another multiple of four. One in the block just before mine is in kind of bad shape. They may have to cut it down—then there would only be thirty-nine. I think I'd be okay with that, except for losing a tree. But for now, there are still forty.

I get to my apartment building and climb the steep old stairs to the door. My key works on the first try, yay. I walk into the foyer and almost feel guilty, as the whole building seems to creak and echo its old age pain. I stop to pick up the mail. The small 7F door opens easily. I reach in and take the envelopes and flyers out of the box. I check to see if there have been any name changes and quickly count the boxes. I shove the mail into my backpack and climb the wide blue stairs with the happy yellow walls hugging them. I sometimes like to take the stairs. I like the wide stairwell because people can pass on the other side and there is lots of personal space. I like personal space.

I set my backpack in front of 7F. I'm breathless as I open the series of locks. I never like coming home to an empty apartment, but what choice do I have? Now I'm inside and I'm exhausted. Middle school and maintaining the thoughts in my head take a lot of energy. I check to see if my key is still in my jacket pocket and fall into my dad's chair. I sit in it whenever he's not home. My mom gave it to him one year for Father's Day. It's velvety soft and bright red. My mother wanted everything to be happy.

I reach down and pull the mail out of my backpack. I look through it quickly and see two envelopes addressed to Felty Goosehead. They look like they might be important, not junky ads, but stuff from real people.

One day, a couple of years ago, about a year after my mom left, I was looking for a book on the shelf in my closet. I slid my hand across the board and felt a small leather case. I pulled it down and saw that it was red with gold initials, D.L. on the front.

Deborah Lentz—that was . . . *is* my mother’s name. It sounds so strange and far away now. I take the key out of its holder and turn it over in my hand. It’s an elegant-looking key, very ornate, but not ridiculous at all. It’s not quite silver, but not gold either. It kind of reminds me of the color of Felty Goosehead’s dogs, the lady who lives in 4F. I turn the key over again and imagine it opening a door to a secret place—a calm place.

I’ve carried the key with me everywhere since the day I found it. I never told my dad about it. He wouldn’t care anyway. He wouldn’t understand why it was so important to me. He’d say it was just another one of my obsessions.

Sometimes I take the key by itself and other times I take it in the red case. I’m terrified of losing it. I don’t have anything left other than the note she left for me, which is just a picture of us at the Bronx Zoo that beneath says, *Mom and Thora 2008*. And on the back it says: “It’s hotter for us, Thora.”

I get off the elevator and I think 4B must be to the right. We are 7F and we are to the left. I ring the buzzer. I’m nervous to meet someone new—not a life crushing nervous, but a regular, normal nervous. My very own special anxiety is at a 7, not horrible, but not great. Felty, or Miss Goosehead, asks who it is and I tell her through the door that it’s a neighbor with mail that was delivered to me by mistake. I hear dogs barking. Felty trustingly opens the door. She smiles a wide, shiny, orange-lipped smile and takes the letters from my outstretched hands.

“Thanks, Doll—you want to come in?”

I hesitate, but something pulls me through the threshold. The dogs are barking—kind of low, raspy, good-for-an apartment type of barks.

“Sit down,” says Felty in a semi-Southern accent. “Can I get you anything?”

I’m now starting to think this is getting really random. Felty then ushers me into her dining area and removes some papers from the table. I cautiously sit down, realizing that this may be going from random to ridiculous. I remember that she asked me something.

“No thanks, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? How about a Coke?”

“Okay, sure, that would be fine, thanks.” I make sure that she takes a new soda can and I watch her pop the top and pour it in a glass. She sets it down in front of me then pours one for herself.

“I didn’t ask your name, you obviously know mine, and I bet you’ll never forget it!” Felty throws back her wild orange head and laughs a huge laugh. I don’t want to laugh, but think I should and kind of smile instead.

“I’m Thora.”

“Hi, Thora, nice to meet you.” We shake hands. Felty’s hand is warm and kind of wet. “Nice name.”

“Really? I hate it. I was born on a Thursday—I’m named after Thor, the god of thunder, but I’m a girl.”

“I like it. Mine, on the other hand, is ridiculous.” *Okay . . . , go on*, I think.

“Felty is a family surname. I think on my mother’s side. I never knew my parents. I was pretty much an orphan, raised by an aunt—a wonderful aunt, but not my parent.

And according to the urban dictionary *Goosehead* is someone who is “super sweet, looks good in orange and is ridiculously precious and outdoorsy.” I don’t know about all of that. For one thing, I *am* orange and prefer to wear purple, whether I look good in it or not!” I don’t know why, but I try to hold back a huge smile.

“You must be about thirteen, right?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I have a really good friend whose daughter is thirteen. She’s in eighth grade.”

“Me too.”

“You like it?”

“It’s okay, don’t really like the kids so much.”

“Yeah, they can be tough, can’t they? I never liked school much myself. Wasn’t very good at it.”

“Where are you from?” I ask timidly.

“You picking up on the accent? Virginia. Lived there my whole life ’til I moved up here to New York to stay and help out with my aunt who was failing. She died last year.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Was she the one that raised you?”

“Yes, yes, she was. She moved up to New York about thirty years ago. The last few, though, she was very sick. I can’t seem to get up the desire to go back south now; this has become my home.”

“What do you do?”

Felty laughs. “Well, I’d like to call myself a painter, but I have to earn a living, don’t I? I do some payroll work for a small company here in the Village. They do some

work with the smaller museums—art distribution and such. I work part time and paint the rest. My aunt left me a small bit, so I get by. Don't need much." The dogs look up at Felty as if they know what she's saying. "I think these little guys have to go out—would you like to come with us?"

"Sure, I can't go for long, though; my dad's ordering take-out."

"Sure thing, Girl—it's going to get dark soon anyway." Felty's purple top balloons around her large frame when she stands up to grab the leashes from the kitchen counter. *-Ew.* She takes a look in the mirror that hangs in the hall next to her front door and wipes a smudge of mascara from beneath her left eye. She runs her hand through her big orange hair.

"It's not going to get better than this."

Outside the dogs are spinning and tangling themselves and Felty in their leashes. Felty says that the dogs are "happier than a bird with a French fry." I think how ridiculous this all is, but I smile.

"Here, you want to take one?" Felty asks me when she finally gets the leashes untangled.

"Uh, okay, I guess."

"You don't know dogs, do you sweetie? Don't worry, they'll let you know how it's done. Here," Felty hands me one of the leashes. "Put the back of your hand out and let him take a sniff—then you can pet him on the back." I do as Felty says. The dog seems to like me. His back is soft.

"They're really cute. What are their names?"

“This one is Hot Dog and yours is Mustard. Hot Dog is redder and Mustard has more gold in his coat. If you look close you can see it.” I leaned over to look, even though I’ve seen it before. I didn’t want her to think I was stalking her dogs.

“Oh, yeah, I see it. I like the names.”

“I think it suits them. They love to eat. But then again, who doesn’t?” We walk a few more blocks to Hot Dog and Mustard’s favorite “spot.” They “relieve themselves” as Felty says and she has to pick up the “waste” with her “poopie” bag-*Ew* . . . Felty and I talk and laugh all way back to our building. Felty asks me if I’d like to walk the dogs again tomorrow and I say sure, that would be great.

It's Toby's turn to clean up, so I think I'll have something extra messy. I used to have problems touching leftovers. I'm better now, but I still eat "neat" food when it's my turn. We take turns—Carly, Toby, and I. I don't know how it started, but I like it. Those guys are nice to me when they choose their food on my cleanup day. I think they feel sorry for me, I'm not sure. They know about the OCD, but do they *know* about the OCD? And they could just let me off the hook and tell me I didn't have to clean up, but they don't, which is good. For a minute I picture myself in college with a roommate—I panic—what would she be like? Would she put up with me? Oh my god, I'm not in high school yet.

I love Marta, the cafeteria lady. She talks *to* me, not over or around me. Marta smiles when I point to the spaghetti and turkey meatballs. "So, how's your day been so far, Thora?"

I say, "fair to middlin'," I use old expressions like that.

"Well, let's hope it goes up to great by day's end."

"Thanks," I say, and end with a side smile. "How's your son?" I'm conscious that I am now holding up the line.

"He's my sunshine, my heart, but lately he's been getting in trouble at school. I don't know—that boy!"

"He'll be fine," I say hopefully. Marta places one hand over her heart, and the other one on my hand. She gives me a Spanish blessing then helps the kid behind me. I slide my tray down and grab a cup. I press the button for ice and of course it comes out

too fast and crashes into the red plastic container like it's an enemy. Some cubes fall on the floor. I try to pick them up, but there are kids everywhere. I feel guilty. I always feel guilty. I push the lever for seltzer, because apparently diet soda is the new poison. I look back at the kids eating and drinking whatever they want.

Carly and Toby are already seated at "our table." It's a smaller version of the other longer tables. We were lucky to find it. And it's next to the windows, which I love—I feel protected and free at the same time. After exchanging the usual "heys," I settle into my seat. Coughs and sneezes pepper the already polluted air. *Ridiculous*, I think. Carly says, "God, Toby, do you have enough food?" Toby smiles as he peers over his mounded plate filled with at least three types of cuisine. "Seriously, for someone so thin, you can certainly eat. If I ate like that, they'd have to widen the doorways in here."

"I work out," says Toby proudly.

"Like non-stop?"

"Girl, you wish you looked like me."

Toby hasn't come out yet, but he's getting there. I look down at my plate and think maybe I shouldn't have taken the sloppy pasta. The red drippy sauce reminds me of blood, and I think of the bombing, and think and think. When I was younger I attached certain foods to bad thoughts. I would be sure that something bad would happen to someone I know if I ate that particular food. My mind switches right back—why *couldn't* I have been in Boston that day. I could have been a part of that horrible act. I could have at least stopped it. *Trust your own mind, Thora*. But yet, I have to tell myself that I could have been responsible. OCD sucks.

“Look over there,” says Toby pointing at a table two away from us. It’s a table of boys all dressed alike in long shorts and tee shirts with various sports teams’ names or bands they like. There are six of them. One of them is in a wheelchair. I’ve seen him before. I think he has spina bifida. I stare for a minute and the thoughts pour in—*you deserve this—you’re not good looking*. Ugh, have to tell Gloria about this.

Carly says, “They are sucking pieces of hot dog through a straw. Who does that?”

In between bites, Toby says, “How does it even work?” We know it works due to the howls of laughter. “Now look, they’re pouring water down each other’s backs.”

“Are you sure it’s water? I heard some kids have been filling water bottles with vodka and bringing them to school.”

I say, “I’m sure they wouldn’t waste it.”

“Or want to get caught if any teacher bothered to even come into this hell,” Toby says, putting down his final forkful.

I look over at the boy in the wheelchair, one more time.

Carly starts to pick up our trays and says, “Thank god tomorrow is Friday.”

“Please, it can’t get here fast enough,” Toby says.

“You guys going to that high school orientation thing next week?”

“I signed up, I hope my dad remembers—you guys?” Toby says something about his mom having to help his brother and sister. “We had one of these in school already, why do we need two?”

Carly and Toby grumble.

I watch as my two best friends clean up our table, including my messy plate. Toby grabs mine and his tray and we head to the bussing area. We exchange “See ya later,”

then go our separate ways to our respective classes—they, each alone and me with my intrusive thoughts. I'm never really alone.

It's starting to rain as I open my building's front door; *now* it starts. I wore my slicker because I heard on the radio that it was supposed to rain—not a good look for middle school. I stop to pick up the mail. I open the door to 7F and take envelopes and flyers out of the small square box. I look to see if there have been any name changes and quickly count the boxes. I shove the mail into my backpack and climb the wide blue stairs.

Inside my apartment, the first thing I do is grab a granola bar from the kitchen drawer and open up my backpack. I take out my English folder and get my laptop. It's not new, but it works pretty well—a Mac, they last long. Carly has a PC and it caught fire.

I should continue to work on my research paper, but instead I turn on the new flatscreen TV. It's set to Channel 7—same as Jeopardy. There is a Special Report on—I don't like those—scary—(my heart starts to pound)—more news on the bombings at Boston Marathon—three explosions—three dead, many more injured. I watch for a few seconds—all the running and smoke—people crying and screaming—blood—My head swirls with the violence. I turn off the TV quickly. My heart pounds and I go to the refrigerator and grab a bottle of water. I take the cap off and drink some fast. It's really cold and I get a brain freeze, but I'm glad. Back in the living room, my books and papers

are scattered around my backpack. I scoop them up and bring them to my room. At my desk I try to work on my research paper—

Zambia—covers 752,614 sq. km. of land, slightly larger than Texas

Safaris, home to Victoria Falls—biggest tourist attraction

Religion—Christian, 50-75%; Muslim and Hindu, 24-49%

I can't get the images out of my head. I try to push back the thoughts. I hope they don't get worse. I think—what if I was there? I could have taken the train up there. What if somehow I was involved?—only a thought, just a thought—distract. I look over at my dresser—the dust on top sits lazily and mocks me. Dad has Helen come in once in a while to clean. I don't like her touching our things. I know her name, but I barely know her. I feel guilty for not cleaning myself.

The rain is coming down even harder now. The wind has picked up too. I look out the window and see white blossoms dart back and forth like snow flurries, like the thoughts in my mind, but snow flurries are soft and gentle—the thoughts are harsh and violent—the bombings—what if I am to blame?

Gloria motions me in from her office. It's always the same way. I stay in the waiting room with the other "crazies," while Gloria ushers the poor victim from the appointment before me, down the "back way." Then she comes to get me. They have this escape hatch for patients (which is really just a stairway) so no one sees them leave if they are crying or hysterical or something. And here's the waiting room trying to be all

“normal,” with its chairs, lamps, and regular magazines. It’s painted green, a color that’s supposed to be calming—yeah sure, like lavender, deep breathing, and silly putty.

I walk into Gloria’s office and drop my backpack next to the sofa. I sit at the end, near the armrest. They really do have sofas in these therapists’ offices. It’s not just on TV. But there they lie down. Who would really do that? I read somewhere that the sofas are there so you can lie down and you don’t have to look at the therapist and they don’t have to look at you. . . . Meanwhile, Gloria sits in her hard-back chair, looking all in control. I guess no one really is, but they can sure look that way. I mimic Gloria’s posture and sit up straighter, trying to look less crazy. I’m not sure why, but I always dress a little better when I have an appointment with Gloria. I put on some makeup (after Dad leaves in the morning), my nicest sweater, and boots, not sneakers. I don’t get it—shouldn’t I want Gloria to see me as crazy as possible? I mean, she’s supposed to fix me, right?

It’s not hard to outdo Gloria in the fashion department. She always looks neat and clean, but it’s like she has a uniform or something—a plain white button-down shirt with black, gray, or brown pants. She wears shoes that match the pants, little boots in the fall and winter. She wears her hair in a straight bob. It’s neat and perfect. She’s not, though—perfect, I mean. She always starts with the same question: “So how’s it been going?” The “it” just hangs there suspended in the air between us. It’s the thing that we both know exists, that we wish we could get rid of, but understand that we can’t.

I answer the question: “It’s been okay, I guess.” (I lie—it’s been really sucky lately.) I’m not sure why, but I always want to make Gloria think I’m doing well. I mean, why am I here then? It’s like I want to impress her or something, give her a pat on the back—I’m doing so well—what a great job old Gloria’s doing! (She’s not really old, I get

that from Holden Caulfield.) I used to see Gloria twice a week for a long time after I was diagnosed at age eight. Then I went down to once a week, now every other. Sometimes I think I should see her more often, like every day—then other times I never want to see her again. We found Gloria because Dad asked people at work. My dad is very orderly. He needs a manual for everything. I don't think there's a *How To Fix Your Crazy Daughter* manual, but if there were, my dad would own it.

Gloria stares at me (I hate that) after I answer her question. After what feels like two days, she says "What's been happening?" She can see through me sometimes. Of course it didn't help that I added "I guess" to my answer to Gloria's original question: "How's it been going?" She asks another question quickly after the first: "What have you been doing?" I love this, I go to school every day. What does she think? It's like therapists want you to fit an African safari into your schedule. They're always pushing you to do more, when just getting up in the morning is an adventure in itself. Another question: "Anything new?"

I struggle as to whether or not I should tell Gloria about the new obsession: the one that makes me gag into the sink each morning, the one that makes me cancel plans with friends so I can curl up on my bed and obsess—the bombing—was I involved? Could I have stopped it somehow? I've learned enough about OCD treatment to know how absurd my thoughts sound, and that it's not really me, it's my thoughts getting stuck—I'm supposed to separate myself—blah, blah. Easy to say—not easy when there's a war going on inside your head. I do a quick pro/con: On one hand I'm here so Gloria can treat me so that I feel better. And in order for her to do that she needs to know everything. On the other hand, if I tell her I have to deal with it. Ugh, who knows what

she'd come up with—probably some imaginal thing that I'd have to write, about me and the marathon. I panic just thinking of it. The con wins for now.

Gloria continues to look intensely, willing words out of me. I blurt out: "I have a new friend."

"Oh, that's great." (Gloria's always trying to socialize me.)

"She just moved into our building."

"Is she your age? Does she go to your school?"

"Um, no she's old, I mean not really old, but no, she's not a kid. (Felty could be Gloria's age, so I don't want to call her old, unless I'm doing the Holden Caulfield thing.) She lives on the floor below us, and she has two dogs."

"What type of dogs?" Gloria asks as she writes something down on her pad.

I wonder what that was? Therapists usually stop writing about you when they've been seeing you for years. It's like they know everything or they get bored or something. "Dachsunds," I say authoritatively.

"What are their names?"

"Hot Dog and Mustard."

"That's cute. You've never had a dog, how are you around them?"

"They're great. I think they like me. My friend, Felty (weird to call her my friend) lets me hold their leashes."

"How did you and Felty meet? Felty—that's an unusual name."

(She thinks that's weird, wait 'til she hears her last name.) "I took some mail down to her apartment that got delivered to mine by mistake."

“Were you afraid to go to a stranger’s apartment?” (Gloria should know by now that that’s the least of my problems.)

“Not really, I had seen her in the elevator a few times. She looked eccentric, but not dangerous. And my dad, in his way, said I’d probably run into more ridiculous people than Felty Goosehead in middle school.”

“Felty Goosehead, now that *is* an unusual name.”

“Maybe, I don’t really think so.” I cross and uncross my legs. The thought grabs me and crushes—you’re a terrible person—why couldn’t you have been at the marathon? (Tell her). I check to make sure that my mother’s key is in my pocket and I look down at my feet and turn them inwards and outwards.

“Thora?”

“Oh, the name, yeah, she told me what it means . . . I forget . . . wait, something like: oranges, and then sweet and outdoorsy. It fits her.”

“I’m glad you have this friendship. It’s good to have friends of all ages.”

“You know me, I’m an old soul,” I say as I feel like I’m trying to breathe through a straw. Gloria knows I’m struggling, but she keeps up the small talk.

“You keeping busy with your school friends?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“You need to keep busy. Not just with school work.”

Gloria continues with her usual closing pep talk and I kind of drift. I think back to when I first met Gloria. I was eight. I guess I had started doing all this weird stuff all the time. I was counting and doing the “fours” thing, I wouldn’t go to sleep until all my

rituals were completed, and I was convinced I cheated on tests at school. I would leave long confessional notes for my parents. So, my mom took me to my first visit.

I wasn't scared, I guess I was too young, plus I was scared all the time about A LOT of things, so there was probably no space for Gloria. I used to feel lucky. Most young kids with OCD are not diagnosed correctly. They say that the earlier you find it, the better chance you have to recover. HA! Yeah, right. There *is* no recovery. The therapists act like there is and you'll be fine if you do your exposures. WRONG! I'll have this torturous worm in my brain for the rest of my life, unless some genius comes up with a cure, quickly. NEVER HAPPEN. There's not enough research money for physical illnesses let alone mental.

My mom and I stepped into Gloria's office waiting area that first day, which by the way, hasn't changed much. It still has its plaid chairs and green walls holding Georgia O'Keeffe prints. Again, if flowers = happy—then why are we here?!? Gloria shares office space, so the place was pretty full—Mom and I got the last two seats. It's ridiculous how many crazies are out there. I looked around for some kids my age, but there were none, probably because of school. I was taken out like I was a mental emergency or something. There were only adults in all genders and shapes and sizes, and I'm sure they had all different kinds of stuff. One guy was twitching, another fumbling with his jacket like he was George Costanza. Others were passing themselves off as regular.

Gloria finally came to the waiting room and quietly called us into her office. She had a huge smile on her face, even bigger than the one she wears now. I remember that she kept using my name: "Hi, Thora! So nice to meet you, Thora, Have a seat, Thora."

It's like do you have to keep reminding crazy people that they have a name? She asked my mom and me some questions and then got down on the floor with a box she took from her desk and started playing this weird car board game with me.

I finally come out of my nostalgic fog. Gloria stops rambling and I focus on her nose. It's not horrible, but maybe because she's so fair and small, it really stands out. I mean it's not ridiculous, but it's pointy and it's there. All this distraction has briefly taken me away from my latest obsession. I decide I won't tell Gloria about the marathon thoughts. I know it's wrong not to tell. It's a waste of time and money—both of which my dad cares for deeply. I know Gloria would have me write a stupid story about how my dad and I took a train up to Boston on that day to watch the marathon, and maybe I saw a package and didn't say anything, or worse. . . . Yada, yada—imaginal exposures. They kind of work. I mean, that's all therapists can do. You can't have someone actually go and really do something violent, just so old Gloria can say “Good job done!” I know the exposures are supposed to condition the brain so it's no longer afraid, but some are easier than others—it's much easier to count in threes rather than fours.

Gloria ends with: “Keep up the good work, Thora. Keep doing your exposures when a thought comes. Next time let's talk a bit about Mom, we haven't done that in a while.” That's it, Old Gloria, wrap everything up in a neat little package and hand it to me.

I get to my schoolwork right away—even do some more work on the research paper. Felty says that 4:30 would be a good time to come. She opens the door quickly when I get there. The dogs seem happy to see me. I think they remember me. “Hello, Thora! Nice to see you again. Follow me, I’m just finishing something.” I follow her into what would be my bedroom in my apartment, but Felty calls hers a “studio.” She is working on a painting of Hot Dog and Mustard in Washington Square Park.

“How did you get them to pose?”

“I had a friend hold the leashes, then I painted what I could by bribing them to ‘wait’ for a treat; and I’ve been filling in the rest...”

“It’s beautiful with the arch and all in the background.”

“Thank you, Dear, it’s one of my favorites.”

“Nice day, too.”

“Yes, but right when we finished, there was a huge storm—I have a little dark cloud up in the corner. Can you see it?”

“Oh yeah, there it is. It’s really tiny, but I can see it.”

“I keep it there to remind me that there is always a bit of dark, but the light is much stronger. It always wins. You said that you were named for the god of thunder. Was it?”

“Was it *what?*” I should’ve been thinking that this conversation is ridiculous, but I wasn’t.

“Thundering, on the Thursday that you were born?”

“Yes, that’s what I was told. Then the sun came out and there was a rainbow . . .

“Just sayin.’ Would you mind washing these?”

“Sure,” I say, taking the brushes and carefully counting out four at a time at the sink. Felty comes and stands behind me. She asks why I lined the brushes in groups of four. She says she notices that the groups don’t touch one another.

“I have OCD.”

“OCD? What’s that?”

“Obsessive-compulsive Disorder. You’ve really never heard of it?”

“You mean that thing people say when they’re referring to their quirky behavior—‘I’m so OCD?’ You can’t mean that, can you?”

“Um, why not?”

“Because when you told me, you were too serious. Let’s put these to soak and get the dogs and we’ll talk some more.” Hot Dog and Mustard are extra excited to go for their walk but settle down once we get to the street. It’s as if they know we are talking about something important.

I'm in Mr. Munzo's first-period algebra class. It's the only one of my classes that Carly's in. I like algebra because it's linear. It's like it's going somewhere. The x 's and y 's are unknown, but there's a way to find out what they are, their value—a solution to the problem.

Mr. Munzo is up at the board. He's covered in chalk. He's always covered in chalk. I can't imagine what he must look like by eighth period. He must love his job. He's up there alone with the numbers, as if we're not even here. Kids are fidgeting in their seats, some are whispering, others are doodling or illegally checking their phones. I'm probably the only one actually paying attention to Old Mr. Munzo with his numbers and variables. They come fast on the board from the chalk, but not as fast as my bad thoughts. I continue to think about the bombing. I try to remember that Monday morning. I can't. I should have been here. Wait, the bombing took place at 2:49 p.m. How long does a train from NYC to Boston take? The numbers and variables start to jumble together as my thoughts keep spinning. I'm sitting in the back of the classroom. I like when everyone is in front of me so I can watch them. No one is behind me doing something I don't know about. I'm not sure if that's crazy, but I've never told Old Gloria.

I do better than Carly in this class. Carly doesn't want to find out what the values of x and y are. She doesn't care. She's content to let them remain unknown. That's the reason that I do better—because I care. On the other hand, take Toby, I would not do better than he (I found out that yes, the subjective pronoun, is proper grammar). He's not even in this class, but if he were, he would be miles ahead of me. He's already taking

geometry. Toby's like a math savant (SAT word). He'll be one of those eggheads who will have finished calculus by his sophomore year in high school, and they'll have to scramble around to try to find something for him to do because they'll have run out of math classes for him to take. They'll probably shove him into some ridiculous program at NYU for high school students. The thing is, Toby can do math, but thinks he isn't good in English—that right side, left side of brain thing. He just doesn't have confidence. I've read some of his writing; he doesn't turn in the good stuff.

Old Mr. Munzo sneezes and snaps me back to the numbers. He should be sneezing constantly with all the chalk. It's ridiculous. My mind is going in a million directions, but for some reason, whatever Old Mr. Munzo says (or in his case writes in chalk) gets through, because I always do well on his tests. That kind of surprises me. I guess it shouldn't, with my love of fours and geology rocks. My real love is of writing though, I guess—poetry. Making order out of disorder. It's more challenging than algebra, where there is always a formula to solve for x .

The bell rings and Old Mr. Munzo, in a cloud of dust, sets his tiny piece of chalk on the ledge. I check for my mother's key in my pencil case and pack up my things.

Today is Thursday after school and I'm on the B7 bus to Brooklyn—my as often as I can trip to see my grandma, my mother's mother. I've been doing it for two years now. My dad came with me for the first year and a half. He would mostly sit in the lobby

with his laptop and wait for me. Now he trusts me to make the trip myself. I think maybe it's my way of staying close to my mother.

My grandma has dementia. She's eighty-one now, but the dementia started about six years ago, when she was seventy-four. She'd forget how to start the car or lock the door. And she'd write long lists with red pen highlighting anything she thought was important to remember. My mother would find these lists all over my grandma's apartment, and finally moved her into a senior facility, not the one she's in now, but a nicer one, where you think everything is normal—whatever that is. But grandma got worse pretty fast and had to be moved to the one I'm on my way to now.

I hate the bus. The smell is bad; I'm too close to other people; and the seats' uneven, diagonal pattern of swirls and lines makes me dizzy. But I force myself because it's my grandma. I think we must be a lot alike. I mean, we both clearly have messed up brains.

The bus squeaks to a reasonable halt and I shuffle off with the rest of the early commuters, checking my pocket for the key. The thoughts are swirling and my stomach drops. Was I on a bus to Boston on Monday? My grandma's place is six blocks from the bus stop. It's a nice day so I don't mind the walk. The sky is blue with white puffy clouds—just the right amount. I sometimes don't like when there's no cloud cover, just blue. I feel unprotected. I think about what Felty said about leaving a dark cloud in her painting.

The building looks large and hard when I arrive. I push open the heavy door with the side of my hand. I deliberately don't use the automatic door opener. I hate when able-bodied people do that. That's just lazy and insensitive.

The lobby looks like any lobby in a budget hotel—plain fake leather sofas and chairs and some tables with attached lamps. A few plants are scattered around. Other than those, it's all kind of beige and lifeless. The sign-in book is open on a small table near the elevators. Next to it is a cup filled with pens that have daisies on their tops. I guess that's supposed to make you feel happy and forget what a horrible place you've come to.

The elevator smells like the bus. I press #2, that's the dementia floor. They keep them all together, I guess it's easier that way; they try to escape—a lot. My grandma talks about leaving but has never tried to escape.

I take some hand sanitizer from the giant dispenser on the wall. Old Gloria wouldn't approve, even though I don't have that kind of OCD. She says I should be exposing myself to even little scary things. I love the word “scary” used with OCD. It's so much more than that. I don't think there is a word that would capture that kind of fear. Oh well, I use the Purell anyway, justifying it by thinking that I'm keeping germs off my grandma and others. And anything to try and stop the thoughts. I press the big green button with one clean hand and push the door with the other. You can get in this way, but you can't get out.

It's 3:30, so the residents are in the community room. The TV is on, and Elvis is singing one of his ridiculous songs. There are toys, greeting cards, and laundry scattered on the long tables. Most of the people are in wheelchairs. My grandmother doesn't really need to be. She walks pretty well with help. I spot her across the room. She's wearing something I don't recognize. It's a purple sweatshirt with orange birds flying all over the front. My grandmother would never wear anything “tacky” (her term, not mine) like that.

The sweatshirt is probably someone else's—ew. . . . They mix up clothes a lot here, and they shouldn't because most of them are labeled.

Grandma doesn't see me, and she might not recognize me even if she did. The last few visits she sometimes knew me, and others she didn't. I try to remind her who I am, but she just gets frustrated. She's crimping her hair now, just like I remember her doing when I was little. Her hair was brown then (I think she dyed it), but now it's white, the complete absence of color—I learned that in school.

I stand for a while in the doorway of this blank room—cold white walls—the hallways the same, no paintings, just more white, echoing the sad cries. I walk slowly over to Grandma, she's sitting in a wheelchair, under the windows. She's held to the chair by a cord that is attached to an alarm that goes off if she tries to get up. On my way over, I get yelled at, grabbed, propositioned, and pleaded with—that's a popular one—they all want to go home. I'm used to it by now.

I kiss Grandma on the cheek and then look at her with a cheerful "Hi, Gram!" I sometimes bring candy, but not today. She looks hard at me. I say, "It's Thora, Gram."

"How did you get here?" (no idea if she knows me)

"On the bus," I say.

"Oh, the bus. By yourself?" (good, at least she can tell my age)

"Yep!"

"I used to ride the bus. Where do you live now? Are you working?" (okay, maybe she doesn't know my age)

"I'm in Manhattan—where you used to live. And I still go to school," I hear my voice getting louder.

“Oh, you teach school?” Grandma asks.

“Yes, I teach school.” (I read where you should go along with them. That’s hard for me with my black-and-white brain, but it really is better.)

Grandma seems satisfied with that exchange. I never talk about my mother, her daughter. I don’t want to know if Grandma remembers her.

A seat opens up next to Grandma, and I take it. A man had been sitting there, asleep. When he woke, he got up and started his wandering. He does that a lot. Once when my dad came with me, the guy followed my dad everywhere he went. It was like the guy knew he was a guy, too, and should be doing normal guy things, again whatever normal is. But like when my dad stopped to watch part of a game that they had on one of the TVs, there was the guy right next to my dad with the same folded arms. I felt bad. Anyway, I took his seat next to Grandma.

Grandma has no friends here. She knows it, too. She doesn’t feel the connection she used to have with people—she isn’t able. They don’t remember in an afternoon each other, or a conversation they had that morning. She used to have tons of friends, from high school, college, and work—she was a guidance counselor. She just gets annoyed with people now. She thinks they can control their screaming or wandering into her room. I try to tell her they can’t, but then I remember to just let it go.

There is a huge fish tank in a smaller extra dining room that Grandma and I like to look at. I ask one of the aides if it’s okay to walk her there. I don’t even know if I’m supposed to be in here, hauling around old people, me being still a kid—and I HATE breaking rules. But, no one has ever said anything, and to tell you the truth, they probably like the help—especially from a normal (haha me, right?) person from the outside.

The aide unhooks my grandma from the alarm and I help her out of her wheelchair. She's wobbly at first, but then it's like her legs remember how to walk. I look back at the wheelchair: *She doesn't need you.*

The fish tank is bigger than Grandma and me put together. There are tons of fish in it and a huge mural is painted on the wall behind it. This is a ridiculous place for a fish tank, because it must confuse the fish . . . and the people watching them. The fish stare at us with eyes magnified by the glass. They seem to know who we are. I feel bad because I don't know who they are. I mean their types. I only know the goldfish. I count five of them. The number upsets me more than it should. Grandma continues to stare back at the fish; she doesn't see or sense me rocking back and forth from left to right foot, palms sweating.

"That one keeps hiding behind that box," Grandma says, pointing to a large yellow fish with black stripes. I look for him/her in the crowd. I find Grandma's fish. He seems to be doing laps, stopping each time around behind one of those treasure chests they put in fish tanks, like we, and the fish, are supposed to think that it's a real sunken treasure.

The fish look so colorful and free, floating by in crystal clear water, like thoughts should be, unattached and weightless. Not stuck in mud like mine. Grandma continues to watch the activity in the tank. I watch Grandma . . .

I don't really have a lot of time to spend with Felty today. Dad and I have high school orientation tonight. I was relieved when Felty said she would be happy to do the art show with me. I was nervous to ask her. We're walking the dogs back home now. Hot Dog and Mustard get very excited to get to Felty's door. Felty opens the door with the key hanging from the giant orange lanyard she wears around her neck. I check for my key and turn it in my pocket. They know they get treats once we get them inside.

I tell Felty I have time for a quick soda. I wait for her in the living room. There are so many things in here to look at, so many colors. I think it must be what my mind looks like if you could see in there, yet there is something calming about this room. In the corner is a tall lamp behind a purple velvet chair. The lamp has an orange shade with fringe. The sofa, which is very different from a therapist's, is kind of in between a lavender and purple. It has a pattern, but you can't really see it because it's the same color as the sofa, but the pillows make up for it, all kinds of shapes and sizes, colors and patterns. There are Picassos on the walls and scented potpourri on the tables. It makes our apartment look ridiculously austere (SAT word) by comparison. I look down and see Felty's latest painting resting against the wall.

Dad and I walk into the high school auditorium—it seems so much bigger than the middle school's, although it probably isn't. I nudge my dad to try to get him to sit in the back. I like people to be in front of me. Just like in class, I don't like them behind where I don't know what they're doing. Plus, it helps if I have to leave fast. A big screen

hangs from the top of the stage, which is showing happy pictures of kids of all colors, shapes and sizes doing all kinds of fun things in high school—eating lunch, playing every sport imaginable including quidditch, marching band, choir, orchestra, painting . . . They want to make the place look fun, like you’ll never have to pick up a book. Really loud music is playing over all of this, but not loud enough to override my thoughts. There are people running around setting up, people who would probably rather be anywhere but here, like home watching *Grey’s Anatomy*.

I look down at my program. The principal will speak first. He taps the mic a few times and of course there is the horrible feedback, which for most is just annoying, but for me it’s as if we’re under attack. The principal, who I think is wearing a toupee, isn’t much taller than the podium. He pulls the mic down closer to him and introduces himself as Mr. Speckerman. I can’t even get a female principal. A man—even has man in his name—Speckerman—a speck of a man. The thoughts keep coming—*where was I that day? Why can’t I remember? I can’t go here, it’s all too much, too much change. I may not have to, I might be caught by then.* My head is spinning, and I feel nauseated. Then these teachers start to get up one by one and brag about all these ridiculous electives that you can take. I’m there to go to school—I mean, it’s not like I’m on a cruise.

I watch my dad—he has a blank legal pad in front of him, and a face to match. I never know what he might be thinking. Maybe he’s as bored as I am. It’s funny how you can be bored and terrified at the same time. Okay, I mean seriously, how can you fit all this stuff in your schedule. Have they heard of Latin? I look down at my sweaty hands and wonder if they have a geology class. And they’re already talking about college. More pressure. I mean we’re only in eighth grade. Leave us alone. It’s bad enough they made

us take a fake practice SAT. Now they are saying that if you want to be a doctor you better double up on math courses. Really? Don't you have to dissect a frog or something before you decide that? I picture a flat frog pinned down on a table in front of me. Ew . . . This whole thing is ridiculous.

Dad and I don't talk much on the way home—news flash. I lie in bed and think about all the horrors that await me in high school and then the ones here and now become more real. *Where were you that day?*

“ . . . maybe I’m born right out of my time / throw me tomorrow . . . ”

“Thursday’s Child”

-David Bowie

1999

I hear my phone alarm, but it’s in the distance. I must be just half conscious. If only I could stay this way. I shudder awake, hoping to see nothing but darkness, but instead I see light, lots of it—sunrays bouncing off of the fire escape. Ugh, it’s morning already. The night goes so fast. When did I start to love sleep? Most kids fight bedtime. I don’t think I ever did. Even as a little kid, sleep was an escape. I dread the light. People can’t talk enough about light. Time changes: “We’re losing an hour, we’re gaining an hour.” And they rejoice on the first day of winter, because each day forward will be lighter, longer. And of course they do this, all the while complaining about winter itself. If they ever once woke to a stark smack in the face from a stream of light and pulled out of a dreamy, fantasy state—forced to face another day—never once would they want to sing “Oh what a beautiful morning...” (*Oklahoma*).

I reluctantly place both feet on my fluffy white carpet. I feel my feet sink in and just want to turn around and crawl back into bed. Instead, I drag myself and my thoughts into the bathroom for the morning gagfest. Afterward I head to the closet and quickly throw on a bra, slightly worn flannel shirt, and a crumpled pair of jeans from the floor. My backpack feels extra heavy this morning, so I drag it like a defiant toddler. You would think by now, the last marking period of eighth grade, I’d lighten up, but no. I follow the sounds of Dad in the kitchen. We have breakfast together on the rare days he

goes into the office a little later—later, it's 7:20. I set my physical burden down on the floor, by my seat next to Dad—never across from him, that's where Mom sat.

“Hey,” Dad says.

“Hey,” I respond as I take whole grain flakes and granola out of the cabinet, and pour a mixture into a bowl that I washed the night before—not usually enough for a dishwasher load. I glance at the front page of the *Times* before opening the refrigerator. Another story about the bombing. Like I need something to remind me. I pour orange juice into my grandma's tiny glass, and soy milk in my bowl of cereal—both are repulsive. I either want to eat nothing, or EVERYTHING. I set both at my place and sit down. Before I take a nauseating spoonful, I say, “Hey, Dad, do you remember where you were two weeks ago this past Monday?”

“Two weeks ago Monday?” he says as he sets the paper down and then takes a sip of his coffee. “What date?”

“The fifteenth,” I stutter.

“The fifteenth—of April—tax day.” *Of course he'd think of that first.*

“Also, the Boston Marathon.”

“Oh, right, yes, yes. What did you ask? What was I doing? I don't know, I was at work, I assume.”

“Were you and I together?”

“On a Monday in April?—I'm pretty sure, no.”

“Can you check?”

“Check what? My calendar?”

“Yeah, that would be good.”

“Thora, if this is an OCD thing . . .”

“Please don’t use it as an adjective.”

“Adjective?”

“Yes, you said ‘OCD thing’.”

“You know what I mean. I’m sorry, I don’t know all the rules.”

That’s the thing, Dad. There are no rules. You can’t have rules. And that’s the problem.

Dad’s look is a cross between pity and exasperation. I check for my key in the outside pocket of my backpack and head out the door.

Carly lives pretty far from me. Her family used to live here, but they moved when we were in third grade. Now she takes the bus, or sometimes her dad drives her, which I think is ridiculous. But today we’re walking together, because Carly’s staying with her grandma who lives four blocks (of course) from here. I’m closer to the school, so she’s stopping to pick me up.

“Hey, girl,” Carly says while adjusting the strap of her Kate Spade bag on her shoulder. Carly’s too cool for a backpack. She’s been in high school in her mind for months, already planning where we’ll sit for lunch, etcetera, etcetera (*The King and I*). Carly really needs to find a new best friend, because I’m certainly not going to help her further her agenda. I don’t know why she’s stayed friends with me. I mean, I don’t think it’s ridiculous or anything, I love Carly, and we’ve known each other since pre-school,

but we're so different. She's taller than I, has straight blond hair, and wears the most up-to-date jeans. I, on the other hand, have boring brown curls and wear any flannel I can find in my closet.

"Hi," I say as I turn and lock the door. I turn back around and head down the stairs to the sidewalk where Carly stands with her headphone cords hanging on both shoulders. She doesn't even have much of a playlist, she just wants to look like all the other kids. And as Toby would say: "Carly's a popular person wannabe." Like I said, she should start by losing me. Here we are walking along. Does she have any idea what's going on in my head? Imagine if I told her that I thought I might be responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing. Who would believe that? I wouldn't either if someone else told me that. But I won't believe that I didn't cause the bombing. I mean, someone I barely know could walk up to me and tell me they thought they were involved, and I would be, "No way, how? C'mon."—and really mean it. But when it comes to me? I'm checking bus and train schedules from New York to Boston on April 15th. My stomach flips. I think about how I'll have to begin to normalize the distractive day that lies ahead.

I get to Old Gloria's office with one minute to spare. I HATE being late for ANYTHING. Old Gloria knows this and sometimes tells me to come late, or makes me wait, which she's doing right now. At exactly 3:07 Old Gloria comes out to the waiting room to fetch me.

"Hi, Thora, how's it going?" There's the *it* I told you about.

“Okay,” I answer. I grab my backpack from the floor and follow Old Gloria into her office. I take my usual seat at the end of the sofa. I quickly check for the key in the front pocket before setting my bag on the floor.

Old Gloria’s desk sits in front of a window. I don’t know why. Is she blocking it so no one jumps out? I stare at the same building across the street that I have for the last five years. It’s directly in front of me and to the right of Old Gloria. I wonder if it, or anyone inside it, ever looks back at me. Not that anyone could see past Old Gloria’s big head. I guess it’s not really big, just in relationship to her body. I notice that she’s not that tall either. Probably not much more than I. I used to think she was a Barbie in her day with her straight blond hair, but not at that height.

I realize that Old Gloria has probably asked me the same question like three times. My nagging thought brings my heart to my throat and my stomach to the floor.

“What was that?” I ask.

“I said, how were the last couple of weeks?”

“Not too bad,” I lie.

Old Gloria tries to go deeper, but I won’t let her. She does this weird set of push-ups with her eyebrows when she’s extra concerned. She must suspect something, but I’m, I almost went to say *sticking to my guns*, but I’ve decided to take all gun-related references out of my vocabulary, so I’m remaining firm. I do feel kind of guilty—I mean my dad is paying for therapy, and I shouldn’t waste Old Gloria’s time. But this obsession is really big, and as many strange things as Old Gloria has probably heard over the years, this one is particularly ridiculous. Even the thought of an imaginal exposure terrifies me.

Old Gloria switches gears (car reference okay). “We said we’d talk about your mom this time, Mother’s Day is coming up, I know that’s hard for you.”

I watch Old Gloria speak. I sometimes feel sorry for her, dealing with all these crazies EVERY DAY, ALL DAY.

“Do you think about Mom more now?”

Three years now, same question. “I think about her all the time, but yes, more now, of course more now.” I desperately want to pull the key out of my backpack, but I don’t want Old Gloria to see. She’ll think it’s a compulsion, and I don’t want to go down that road. I get a sick feeling in the spot where my stomach used to be. I need my key.

“Do you and your dad talk more about it around this time?”

“We never talk about it.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Compared to what usually bothers me, no, but I guess, a bit.”

“That’s understandable.”

I rub my hands on my jeans.

I slip on a white sheet of paper as I enter my apartment. My shoe leaves a print. I think of my foot as a magnet, and all of New York City’s grime is attached. Now it’s visible on this paper, which I pick up by a clean corner and carefully turn over. It’s a note from Felty. It’s her way of texting, I guess. I mean she has a cell phone but rarely uses it. The note says she wants to walk the dogs earlier, because it might rain later. I forgot to

tell her that I had my therapy appointment today. It's already 4:30. It's not raining yet, so I hope she doesn't mind. I take the paper over to the garbage can, open the lid and toss the risk in, fast. Then I go to the sink and wash my hands, just twice.

I was afraid to ask Felty if she would help me with my art show. I was so relieved when she said yes right away. I mean I basically asked a stranger to fill in for a parent. Talk about taking "stranger danger" to a new level.

I can't believe Felty finished the picture so fast. I mean it's probably not finished yet. You probably do a lot of editing like you do in writing. Maybe it's called touching up, or whatever. I haven't wanted to talk about the painting with Felty yet. I didn't want her to see at me looking at it. I didn't want to see her amalgamated (SAT word) look of pride and concern. The painting is still against the wall in a corner of Felty's living room. I definitely don't want my dad to see it. I love that it's there, but I hate that it has to be there. I wish my mother were here, instead of stuck in swirls of paint on the floor. I wish she were the one coming with me to the art show, and not Felty. It's not that I'm not grateful. I'm so grateful to Felty. And I'd still have my stupid thoughts. But maybe because my mom understood me, they wouldn't be as bad. But knowing what I know now, they would be. It's hard to know whether I really miss her now, or just miss *having* a mom.

I'm eight years old / two fours / She takes my hand / and squeezes / we're weightless now

After a quick bathroom trip, I grab both keys, one from the countertop and one from my backpack, and race out the door and down the steps to Felty's. Felty opens her door before I have a chance to ring the bell. She sometimes seems to have an unusual awareness about her.

I'm standing in the lunch line thinking that Marta should be my mother. Marta loves her son so much. She talks about him all the time. He's her whole world. She works so hard for him. Isn't that how it should be? Shouldn't your kids be your whole world? Marta's son is the same age as I was when my mother left. I can't imagine Marta ever leaving him.

Marta smiles a huge smile at me and asks me what I'll have today. My thoughts are swirling: *I could have been there, could have done it . . . I'm a monster and should be caught. . . .*

I remember that I threw up this morning. The gagging got a promotion. My dad was gone, thank god. I'd never want him to hear me. He hates to be physically reminded of my "mental condition." I guess he never really hears me. I snap back to Marta's question. The buzz of the kids' voices envelops (not SAT, but it's a good word) me.

"You okay, sweetie?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, sorry. How are you, Marta?"

"I'm doing okay, thanks for asking, but I'm worried about you. You look vacant."

Wow, that's it, Marta nailed it.

I really can't think about food. Why do we have to eat anyway? I mean, I know why, but every day, and more than once? My dad's aunt (my great aunt), who we used to visit, would tell us stories of the days when she was raising her kids. When it came to mealtime, she'd ask: "Why can't they just take a pill?!" I want to take that pill now.

Marta says, "Stop by to see me later, if you get a chance."

“Sure,” I respond, as I greet my sorry-looking turkey sandwich (my turn to clean up). Toby and Carly are already at our table when I get there.

“Hey, Thor, Thor,” my friends acknowledge me.

“Hey,” taking a seat next to Carly.

“What took you so long?” Toby asks.

“Yeah, you’re usually the first one here,” Toby says before taking an enormous bite of his burger.

“I don’t know,” I lie, knowing I’ve been dragging myself through the day so far. I wish I were able to pop a lid on the top of my head, so all the overactive, thought-producing electrical circuits could be seen. But unless everyone else could do the same with theirs, they wouldn’t have anything to compare it to, I guess.

The common area seems louder today. The noise is closing in on me. I can still hear Carly and Toby, but their voices seem far away. I usually stay and fight it inside, and pretend that nothing’s wrong, but today I can’t. I pick up my tray with the untouched sandwich, and hear myself say, “I don’t feel well,” and almost run to get rid of the tray in case I throw up again, which is not a good idea during middle school lunch. I toss the sandwich in the first container I come to, and the tray on the conveyor belt. I stick to the floor as my infinite thoughts get stuck in my synapse.

Old Gloria suggested I try a support group, so I acquiesced (SAT word). This is my third meeting. At first I was afraid that I would get worse or something if I met other

kids who have this god awful disorder—ones that might be worse than I, who could trigger me. Or maybe some who had other things in addition to her OCD. But it actually turned out to be the opposite. I realized how lucky I was to have had treatment when I was younger. As bad as my OCD is, it could be worse—hard to imagine. I remember staying home from school, doubled over with the pain of it all, Carly bringing me my homework—no amount of painkiller could fix that.

I scan the room and see the look on some of the faces—blank. Like there's a face, but no one behind it. The face does what it has to, but no more. I must look like that. Unless you really knew me, you wouldn't know that there was a battle going on behind my static face. Take this one kid sitting across from me. He's wearing a long-sleeved gray tee shirt and these bright, tie-dyed suspenders. He looks like Mork from Ork (I watch old sitcoms). He uses the happy suspenders to fake happy, when really all he's doing is holding up his pants. I think about how his day started—waking up to the alarm on his phone, after finally falling asleep at 3 a.m. The alarm is blaring, even though he uses the ringtone that sounds like music accompanying a carefree dude strolling on the street. The alarm screams at Mork, informing him that his day is about to begin—a day filled with uncertainty and doubt. His mind begins to race. He waits until the last possible minute, then drags himself to the bathroom. I gaze over at him. He's actually kind of cute with his dark waves and blue eyes. Don't worry, I'm not going all *Fault in Our Stars* or anything.

On Mork's left sits the "typical" OCD victim. She has a copy of *The Odyssey* in her hand—like she's really going to work here—right. Her curly red hair is pulled back in a ponytail that ends up smack in the middle of the back of her head. She's wearing jeans

that are out of style and don't fit her right, and over them is a stained Penn State sweatshirt. I'm disgusted by her, and then suddenly I feel like my heart is expanding and I'm left with enormous empathy for this girl who could be me.

Next to Nerdy Girl sits Sporty Guy. He's a bro. His parents are getting him the best care that New York City has to offer, and they bribe him with a new car for his sixteenth birthday, if he'll agree to join the group. Sporty Guy keeps moving his blond hair from the middle of his forehead to the side. He's frantically on his phone, probably texting his fellow bros, googling himself, and checking in on the number of his followers.

Morgan, the group leader, walks in—there is a loud bang as the door shuts behind her, and the sound echoes in this dreary old basement. Myself and my fellow “crazies” jump, as if on command. Well, when you think of it, it is a command. I picture our collective OCD sitting up there on the small stage, taking up too much space and looking like the mucus guy on the commercials. He's a big green blob. He's mean and he won't go away. Morgan takes the empty chair next to Sporty Guy. She begins the meeting with her usual greeting—so how's everyone doing? *We'd be better if we didn't have to come here.* Sighs and mumbles go around the small circle. Now Morgan starts telling us this boring story about her cat, Freud. Apparently, Freud got into her house plant and tracked dirt all over her white carpet.

Morgan is a therapist who specializes in OCD. Maybe she attended a weekend workshop. I don't know how good of a therapist she really is, like how many hard-core crazies has she treated? I think one or two from the group are hers. I think she might have it herself—her hands are noticeably redder than they should be, and I swear she takes the same number of steps to her seat each week. Unless her work has rubbed off on her—oh

my god, can you imagine if this thing was contagious? God, ew, ew. Morgan is right in the middle of her ridiculous cat story, when the door opens and in glides, Barbie. Yeah, Barbie got her nickname about five seconds after I “met” her. She has super straight long blond hair, she uses way too much make up, and today she’s wearing a cropped white shirt over a black sports bra with skinny jeans. I swear I think she actually has the doll body measurements that they say if a real person had they would fall over. This Barbie defies all logic, comes into our circle, and takes a seat next to me. She only had three choices—next to either Mork or me, or by herself in the middle—I win. As Morgan finishes up her story—yeah, the cat lived and the carpets got cleaned—I think about what goes on inside Barbie. Does she wonder how, in all her popular perfectness, can she have this torturous and embarrassing disorder? I feel for the key in my pocket and turn, turn, turn.

Felty and I don’t walk the dogs today; the weather’s too bad. Felty has her “emergency” potty, which is fake grass on her balcony. Now we’re sitting in her funky living room, watching the hard rain beat against the dusty windows. I still go to Felty’s even when we can’t walk the dogs. I think she likes when I come. Old Felty’s pretty cool for her age, whatever that is. We just sit together today. We’ve only known each other a few weeks, but I feel comfortable with her. Hot Dog and Mustard lie on the floor, side by side, never to be separated. I wonder what that must feel like, to have someone never want to leave you.

I start to drift . . . Felty's voice startles me. I guess I had one of those quick dreams. I'm fully awake, but for a second don't know where I am. I'm convinced that my mother is there, in another room, but I know she's not. It's not the first time I've woken up from a nap and felt this way. It's the strangest feeling. And I have STRANGE feelings.

Felty's voice is distant. I don't respond to her question. She asks me again if I'd like a soda. I say yes, please, as I try to fully regain consciousness. Felty comes back with a bowl full of Cheez-Its and a bubbling cola in one of her signature aluminum cups. I thank her and sit up straighter on the sprawling sofa.

We sit and crunch and swallow for what seems like a long time. I finally say, "I like the painting," nodding toward the muted rectangle sitting on the floor, against the wall.

"I was hoping you would," Felty says turning her head toward her work.

Felty borrowed the picture of my mom and me at the zoo to work from.

"I tried pastels for this." As you know, I generally work in watercolor, but this felt right.

"I really like it. Thank you so much for doing this for me."

"Oh, honey, no need to thank me, my pleasure!"

"I wish you would let me do something for you, other than drag you to the stupid art show."

"I told you, I don't mind goin' at all."

"You can bring some of your paintings, too, if you'd like."

"I just might do that. You know your mother was a looker."

“A what?” For a second I thought she said hooker, and I’m like *whoa*...

“Ha ha, a looker, a good-looking person.”

“Yes, she is.”

“Oh, my gosh, I’m so sorry honey. I thought from, well you know . . . I thought she passed.”

“No, that’s okay. Most people make that mistake. This is terrible, but sometimes I think it would be easier if she were, you know . . . dead. But no, she’s just gone, out there somewhere, without me.”

“Don’t ever feel guilty for the way you feel, girl. You have a right to feel anything you have to. You’re grieving, and you’re right, it is harder that she’s out there and you don’t know. The not knowing is that much harder.”

She left right after Mother’s Day three years ago. I used to think it was because of Mother’s Day, maybe she thought she wasn’t good enough. My dad was never really into it. That last Mother’s Day, I remember I made her a card in school. We still did that even in the fifth grade. I gave it to her at breakfast. I had made her scrambled eggs, toast, and some pretty bad coffee. *She* looked so pretty sitting at the table, even in the morning. She was always pretty. I don’t think she thought I was pretty, at least not pretty like her. She had long very dark hair. Her teeth were perfectly straight and white. My hair is mousy brown and frizzy. I have freckles and short legs and now wear braces. My mother’s ballerina body danced around mine and then danced right out of my life.

It takes some kind of person to leave their family. It's a special kind of selfish. I know now that she had depression. Gloria helped me understand that. It may be understood, but not accepted. It's a reason, not an excuse. We didn't have a big family, but it was a family. It was all we had, and she broke it. How? Why? What was she wearing? Was it the black leggings and red tunic top—silver flats than I saw her in that morning? She left on a Thursday, four days after Mother's Day. Did she remember I was born on a Thursday?

My dad told me when I came home from school that day. He handed me an envelope. He didn't cry. He wasn't mad. It was just like any other day.

Toby and I are sitting out on the fire escape tonight, pulling the old-timey quilts that I brought out tightly around us. My mother liked old, meaningful stuff. I think an old aunt made these. Toby's fine with wearing the ridiculous-looking thing; he kinda likes old, meaningful things too. Oh, and by the way, it's May. And everyone thinks that it should be warm, like that ridiculous song from *Camelot*, "The Lusty Month of May." My mother listened to ANYTHING Broadway. I guess I sort of like the song, it's just that it's so optimistic. I mean, maybe people don't feel like dressing up, chasing each other, and dancing around a May pole. Sometimes it's just still too cold.

Toby comes up on the fire escape any chance he gets. He lives a few blocks away. Sometimes we talk, and sometimes we just sit and think. My dad threw a fit the first time

he caught me out here. Now he doesn't bother, I guess he gave up. I can't tell whether he likes my friends or not. He just tolerates them. Does he even *have* friends?

"I'm freezing, do you want to go inside?"

"No, let's stay here, your dad doesn't like me."

"He doesn't like anyone."

"No, it's different with me. I annoy him or something."

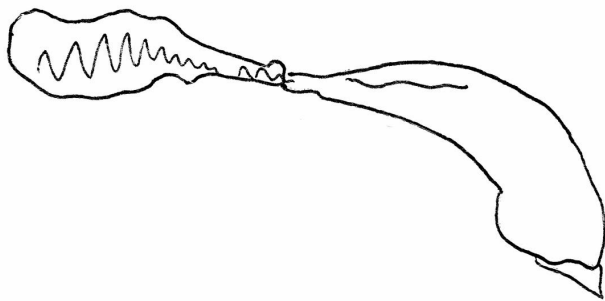
"Okay, let's stay out here and freeze." I reach into my pocket and turn the key over and over again. I never take it out on the fire escape, in case I drop it. I can imagine it clanging down all seven flights, and then Toby and I running down with our cell phone flashlights guiding our way. I sit back and wonder how many lives are saved by a fire escape. We never had to use ours, thank god.

People use fire escapes to escape more than just fires. Toby and I are using it right now—to escape, what? Our lives? And my mother, did she use it? Did she leave this way? Did she sneak out while I was in school? Or did she go out the front door, all confident and proud. I sometimes feel bad for my dad—left with this "crazy" kid he doesn't understand. No wonder he's grumpy. It's just that he's all I have.

I look over at Toby, who's looking up at the sky, which is hard to do in the city. He has his arms around his legs and he's staring up to the same place. I try to see what he sees without asking. I see the stars, flashing, but calm and controlled. Toby's mind is peaceful, at least what I perceive as peaceful. What do others think of my mind, or do they even consider it? There's a party going on in there, but I fixate on just one event, and won't let it go. I feel my stomach pulled through one of the small holes in the stair. Why can't I be distracted by all the "stars"?

The bell rings and I feel my body shudder. How many times have I heard that stupid bell? And every time I jump. I look at the other kids, who, believe me, heard it because they're all packing up their books, and our next class is phys ed, which they love and I HATE. Ugh, my most dreaded time of day—as if it's possible to rank the “dreaded times” of my day. But phys ed is like open season (gun reference must be removed) for my mind. At least in regular classes I get distracted with actual important academic stuff, as I'm contained at a neat little desk. But not in phys ed—you're all out in the wide-open gym, exposed to anything and everything middle school has to offer. And we're combined with another class too, it's not just your own—some kids who may be horrible, but at least you're used to them.

I walk into the gym and the noises are deafening—every voice and door slam is magnified. The lights above are too bright and sneakers squeak on the glassy floor. Make sure your gym floor is perfect while the rest of the school is disgusting. I mean, there's a spot on one of the stairwells—ew, ew, ew. It's been there since I started here in the sixth grade—three years . . . THREE YEARS. I have no idea what it's made of, and don't want to know. It looks like this:



kind of like a dinosaur foot or the state of Florida . . . ew . . .

Our class divides as we head toward the locker rooms—the girls to the right, boys to the left—must know your gender. Everyone pushes and shoves her way to the lockers, and I barely get to mine alive. My combination turns the lock and drops it open. I take a tiny space on the bench and pull off my “street shoes,” which are really lace-less sneakers. The key easily slides out of my backpack and I carefully place it in my left shoe, which I set down next to the right on the floor of the locker. I pull off my jeans and flannel shirt and stand in my socks and underwear, painfully aware of my trembling body. The other girls around me laugh and share pictures on their phones. I know some of them, a few are even friendly enough, but I’m so caught up in my thoughts, I just don’t care. I don’t have time for all the fake. And Carly’s not in this class either. Carly might be a wannabe, but at least she’s real. Maybe that’s why she remains a wannabe.

That stupid bell sounds as I quickly dress in my crusty tee shirt and stiff shorts that I vow that to bring home and wash this time. Ew. . . After quickly tying my sneakers, I drag myself to the gym floor. We stand across from the boys, looking like the Jets and the Sharks (*West Side Story*). Mr. Pansy (yes, that’s his name) takes attendance, and thank god it takes longer with more kids. He wants to mix us up today, so we count off by ones and twos. Ones get volleyball first and the twos will do workout circuits (I hate both). There are thirty ones altogether. We divide again in half. My half goes first. Six on each side, three to rotate in. The non-four bothers me, but the least of my worries these days. I’m in the first round, line-up, whatever you call it. I look across the net and see Mork from the support group. This is the first time I notice him, but I guess it’s hard to pick him out of a crowd without his suspenders.

Oh great, I'm the libero. It's a thing they made up not too long ago—a defensive specialist position. Like I could be a defensive specialist in anything sports related. It's ridiculous. It looks like Mork is the libero too. You know why us? We're short and they want us in the back. It makes no sense, as we have to rotate anyway. I need my key. Mr. Pansy is talking now: "Short game—15 points"—yada yada (*Seinfeld*).

The ball goes into play and goes back and forth, back and forth, their side, our side, zipping across the net—sometimes high above, sometimes barely skimming, but it gets across. I wish my thoughts were like that, instead of getting their heads stuck in the mesh.

I basically watch. The ball comes near me a few times. I miss it altogether once, and the other times I hit it with the inside of my forearm. This is not so productive, and the kids make fun of your red arms the rest of the day.

The other team replaces us, then our side goes across the floor to do circuits; finally, this madness is over. Mork and I make eye contact on the way to the lockers—both of us hiding our red arms behind our backs.

Old Gloria looks tired today. She yawns and I think she's kind of embarrassed. You're really not supposed to yawn in front of your "crazies." Maybe it's just the muggy weather, or maybe her crazies are out of control today, calling, texting and emailing her all the time. I'd hate her job. I already have her job inside my head. I'm stuck in that job, day after day after day.

The thoughts are stronger today. I'm afraid Old Gloria can see them. I'm especially fidgety too, I can't stop picking at my face. I think maybe it's time to tell Old Gloria my latest obsession. Maybe not, I don't know.

"Let's continue with Mom," Old Gloria blurts out. "How was Mother's Day?" Old Gloria is really into these Hallmark holidays. Her kids are older now, but she still brings any little thing they give her into the office, like the mug on her desk that says "Dr. Mom." And I'm sure her Facebook page is loaded with family pictures—everyone all smiling and happy.

I get back to Old Gloria's question.

"A usual Sunday," I say looking past Old Gloria, out at the building, through the window behind her. The afternoon sun rises off her bobbed head like a halo.

"No word from her?"

"Nope." Not since that one time. Dad and Old Gloria aren't so sure, but I know it was her. She called on the landline, and no one ever does. It was a year after she left. I was closest to the phone, so I answered it. I could hear breathing, then the start of a voice, then just breath . . . then dial tone (yes, I know that term).

Old Gloria just kind of looks at me, with her sad, therapist eyes.

"You said you were okay when you came in, but I'm not so sure." That's the problem with Old Gloria, she has to be sure about everything." *Isn't the point of this not to be sure?*

"Yeah, well," I say, scratching the side of my face . . . hard. It hurts, and Old Gloria knows it. Okay, here I go: "I've been having these new thoughts . . ."

Old Gloria interrupts me with "About your mom?"

“NO!” I almost shout. I sometimes get a little snappy with Old Gloria. I take my OCD out on her; I think she should know what I’m going to say before I say it, and then FIX me. I kind of feel bad, but not really.

“So, what? What then, Thora?” I hate when she uses my name when I’m the only one in the room. And now I feel like a fish that just forgets to swim. I begin to descend. I can’t breathe from now on, I give up . . .

“Okay, so I think I may have been in Boston on the day of the marathon b . . . b . . . bombing,” I quickly stutter.

Old Gloria raises an eyebrow and leans forward. “Why is that?” She knows it’s OCD or she wouldn’t be looking at me the way that she is.

“I think I was involved. I checked the train and bus schedules. I could have taken one of them. And I haven’t checked with the school. They make mistakes all the time with attendance. And you can’t ask a kid. They don’t know which day is which. Ask them and they’ll tell you anything you want, just to get rid of you.”

Old Gloria wrinkles up her face and takes in a deep breath. She slowly lets it out and says, “Okay, so we know it’s just a thought,” ignoring my dismissal of the logical. “It’s a tough one, but we have to let it happen.”

That’s the part I HATE.

“How are you coping?”

“Oh, you know, gagging, thinking I’m going to die every five seconds . . . that kind of thing.”

Old Gloria ignores this and gets down to business. “I want you to write a story about your trip to Boston—every detail. We did this sort of thing when you were younger, do you remember?”

I remember, alright. In the third grade I’d write how I deliberately tripped Kelsey Peters and she had to go to the hospital, and I got kicked out of school and never could go to college or get a job and then I would die. I’d write this over and over again, and in second grade it took a long time.

“Yeah, but things were a lot simpler then. This one’s ridiculous.”

“I know it seems so, Thora, but it’s all the same theme. Your OCD is telling you that you hurt someone, or *will* hurt someone. Back in second grade it was just, what was that girl’s name again?”

“Kelsey Peters.”

“Right, Kelsey Peters. Back then it was just Kelsey Peters. Now it’s an entire city. Your OCD is unfortunately growing up with you.”

Wow, Old Gloria can be blunt sometimes. She hits you right in the head.

We go over an outline of how my story might go, and I shove it in my backpack. I thank Old Gloria and tell her I’ll see her in two weeks, and promise I’ll call her before that if I need her.

The dogs are running in circles around me so much I get dizzy. The swirling takes me outside of my head, and for a few seconds I feel free. I help a struggling Felty put on

Hot Dog and Mustard's leashes. Both dogs finally settle a bit. Felty takes Hot Dog and I take Mustard. We take the stairs with the dogs leading the way. Floor three, two, one and we're out the door in a flash, dogs desperate for their walk. Felty is doing a pretty good job keeping up today. I make sure my key is in my pocket and we head for the park. After we're walking for a few minutes, I blurt out, "Did you ever go to therapy? Like when you were young? Er, I mean . . ."

Felty throws her head back and pats me on the back, "No worries, Girl! Actually back in my day that kind of stuff wasn't talked about as much as it is now. If you ask me, people still have problems with it, they just hide it better. Goin' back, you were just thought of as normal, or else you belonged in an asylum. But to answer your question, I never had therapy when I was younger, but when I got *really* old, haha, I did speak to a counselor a few times.

"Did you trust her?" Felty knows about my choice of pronouns, and recently I've started to use *they/them*.

"I suppose I did, you know it's hard not to trust someone you just poured your life out to."

"Right?!" I shout over the din of the crowded street.

"So, you think you don't trust your therapist?"

"No, not really. She's okay, I guess. She's just doing her job. But it's hard to do what she says and not feel better right away, or sometimes, ever."

"It's hard to accept what is, isn't it, Sweetie?"

The dogs refuse to accept what is, and continue on to their grassy spot, so they can feel better, like I want to do so desperately.

I'm brushing my teeth before bed, even though there's not much going on in there. I haven't eaten much all day, except pretzels washed down with Gatorade. I examine my face.

They tell me I look like her...

I don't see it.

I only see me.

Me staring at me

From her mirror . . .

I see a young face, but inside I feel at least eighty. I stare at the ordinary blue eyes, straight through to the darkness. My uniform tee shirt and shorts I wear to bed each night seem to get larger as I get smaller these days. I try to run a brush through my hair, but it's useless, and I'm too tired to fight it. I think of my mother and her long, silky mane. How easy that was for her.

Back in my bedroom, my nightstand drawer sticks and as I tug, I almost fall backward. The lamp, not as lucky, teeters a bit then dives to the floor. I hear my dad yell, "What's going on in there?"

I yell back, "Just the lamp, Dad, I got it." Gravity can so be a "heartless bitch" (Sheldon Cooper). I pick up the lamp and set it back on the nightstand. I take the orange bottle and open the childproof cap. I peer into the bottom and notice I only have five pills left. I should have barely enough until the new ones arrive next Wednesday. And it's not like Old Gloria could help me. I'd have to call my psychiatrist, who has the personality of

the Luvox bottle. I shake out one of the oval yellow pills into my hand. I remember that I forgot water, and quickly turn toward the bathroom, dropping the pill, god knows where. I'm now crawling on the floor . . . ew . . . to look for the stupid thing and find it in a heap of dust under the bed, ew, ew, ew. . . . I can't afford to throw it away, so I wipe it with a tissue, and try to forget about it (ha!). In the bathroom I place the pill far back on my tongue, gulp some tap water, and hope for the best. I think about the "food pill," something my great aunt talked about—something that didn't exist then, and still doesn't—a magic pill, just like I want this Luvox to be. I picture it breaking up into little warriors as it enters my esophagus. The warriors then go on to my liver and into my bloodstream, then back to my brain—tiny warriors attacking my thoughts, fighting them back with swords and shields. The trouble is, is that the warriors never win a battle. They help cut down on the casualties, but that's all.

My backpack sits dutifully beside my bedroom wall. I take the key out of its front pocket and grab my phone and a notebook, and hop up on my bed. I rub the key over and over again. The glitter on the pink notebook sparkles under the recuperating lamp. This notebook is reserved for journaling. It's mostly empty, which Old Gloria wouldn't like. I try, but with schoolwork and torturing thoughts, I'm always too tired. I sit there with my bent legs holding the notebook, glitter falling on the bedspread like snow. I try hard to focus on the story Old Gloria wants me to write. I'm desperate to feel better, to relieve myself of these horrid thoughts.

I step on to the train car from the platform...

I squirm on my bed, trying to get comfortable. I put down the pen and pick up my phone.

"Hey Tobe, listen, I have an idea . . ."

Toby and I sit and stare at each other at lunch today. I can't tell whether he's mad or intrigued by my idea to skip school and go to Boston. I thought he was okay with it last week, but now that it's the day before, he looks concerned.

"I don't know about this, Thor, why are we going again?"

"I told you, we're looking for my mother. I think she used to live there," I swallow hard at this point and say, "and she may have even run in the marathon, how could you forget this?"

"I remembered, just not all the details."

Good liars add details.

"So, we're doing this, right? C'mon Toby, I've never done this before, and . . ."

"Oh, wow, you mean skip school and go to Boston with your black, almost gay friend, where if the police don't beat him up, someone else will."

"Toby, you live in New York City."

"Yeah, but that's different. I know my hood, plus wasn't that bombing just last month? It would be creepy to be there now, don't you think?"

My mind now starts to spin with all the bad thoughts. They are especially heavy today as they beat against my skull, maybe trying to get out and warn me from the outside, maybe to tell me face-to-face what a horrible person I am. Toby says something, but I don't really hear what it is. Carly didn't sit with us today. She's eating with a couple of her "not so weird" friends. She doesn't want to be tangled up in all of this. She already is. Her older brother, Jack, bought us the bus tickets. Carly def doesn't want to talk about

that at school. I shake off my fog as best I can, and look over at Toby, who is so tall and awkward, and yet comes off as sure of himself, with his imitation suede vest and brown leather cap. But I know that under that cap lies (a lot of) fear.

Toby says, “Thor, are you listening?”

“Yes, so, we good?” I whisper across the greasy table (my turn to clean up).

“Let’s talk tonight,” Toby says while looking down at his phone.

“Okay, but we’re doing this.”

Toby mumbles as he moves away from the table. I ignore him, stack our stuff on our trays, and head to rid myself of them as quickly as possible.

Getting to Grandma’s is taking forever today. We’re stopping at EVERY corner. The school day seemed to stop at every corner as well. Each class seemed twice as long; it was excruciating (SAT). FINALLY, the day was over. I packed up my stuff at my locker and made sure the key was in my pocket. I then dashed to the bus stop, hoping to speed up the day. Now here I sit on this gross bus, alone with my thoughts, wishing it were “Toby time” on the fire escape. He seemed so stressed this morning, like he doubted my plan. He doesn’t know what stressed is. How would he like to have to *make* a plan.

We arrive at my stop and I wait, not so patiently, behind all the people. *C’mon, people.* The four blocks to Grandma’s building are a blur as I hurry past them. The trees that line the walkway glimmer and sway as I enter the front door. The woman at the

lobby desk tells me they've lost power. She says they're on a generator and the elevator works, but the lighting is low. I take the stairs, just in case.

I find Grandma in the auxiliary (SAT) room. She's in front of the fish tank, just like I left her, except she's stuck in that damn wheelchair. They keep them in them so they won't fall—makes their job easier. It's like they're waiting for them to die. If I were in charge here, I'd run it so differently. I think of all the lost minds in here and how mine is so overactive that I could give some of it to each one of them and still have enough left over to have OCD. I wouldn't give that to anyone. I look around, and with lighting at half capacity, everything seems even more depressing. Grandma seems startled at first when I give her a hug, but then she smiles and asks who I am again. I feel bad that I'm her only visitor. I doubt my mother would visit her and not me, but maybe she would. But I never see her name on the sign in sheet. Her bills are paid, though; my dad and the state make sure of that. I lean in closer to Grandma, her eyes are bright and blue.

"It's Thora, Gram."

"Oh, Thora! How are you? Who are you here to see?"

"You, Gram!" I say as I rub her back.

"Me? Well, how did you get here?"

"The bus, I always take the bus."

"From where?"

"Manhattan, Gram, you remember? You used to live there."

"Oh," Grandma says, looking pensive (SAT). "Who are you here to see again?"

And off we go, round and round in the circle. These circles are maddening. They happen every time I see Gram now. They might have a different subject of the day, but they're

really all the same—round and round and back to the identical place we began. I know she can't help it with the dementia, but it's hard to go along with her. We just keep repeating and repeating. Teenagers are supposed to roll their eyes at this type of thing, but not me, I can't be a regular teenager. I have to deal with my own special crap. If Gram were in her right mind, I'd want her to be patient with me. It's kind of nice having someone see you for just who you are right now, right in front of them, not judging, or worrying about the past or future.

“You want to take a ride, Gram?”

“Sure,” she says.

I unlock the wheels on the chair and roll Gram out of the room, careful not to hit anyone on the way out. We stroll down the hall between white walls, which are endless, and semi-lit, same as my head today. The thoughts are a bit dimmer with Gram as a distraction, but most of all, my plans with Toby to go to Boston, TOMORROW! I've never, ever skipped school, ever. But I justify this by continually telling myself this is good for me. I'll face my fear—I'll be in the exact location of the bombing.

I'm really tired today and had to get some homework done (of course I don't know why—not going to be in school tomorrow). And I'm supposed to meet Toby tonight for final plans, so I called Felty and asked her if, instead of walking the dogs, I could bring dinner.

I finish my last math problem, leave a note for Dad, and head down to the Thai restaurant next door. There is a line for takeout. Waiting is definitely not good for me—field day for my thoughts, which are thrilled to have found a crack in my day. I try to distract myself by looking around at the photos of Thailand. I remember a girl in my first-grade class. The teacher said she just moved here from Thailand. I thought, *she looks like me*. Then the thoughts flood back, you *were* there, you'll see, you'll know what you've done. Not realizing, I must have kept moving with the line. I seem to remember ordering, oh yeah, a vegetable omelet (Kai jeow moo sab) for me, and Pad Thai for the unadventurous Felty. Unadventurous, maybe, but she knows how to enjoy herself—never concerns herself with healthier options. Eddie carefully packs up my order, and thoughts are beating against my skull. I hear Eddie's voice: "Thora, you with me?"

"Oh, hi, Eddie, sure, yeah, sorry."

"You okay, young one?"

"Yeah, I just have a lot going on."

"Too young for all that stress."

"I know."

I take the elevator on the way back because I'm tired and I realize I'm actually hungry as the smell of Thai food penetrates my nose, a mere temporary distraction. I get to Felty's and her door is already opened. I whirl past the dogs with the food, who are both ecstatic about my presence, due to the package I'm carrying, and the fact that I'm usually there to walk them. Unfortunately, neither is true for them today. Felty pulls the large treat tin out of her cabinet and takes out two bone shaped biscuits. Hot Dog and

Mustard sit on command. Felty gives them each a biscuit, which they gobble and then go to lie on their respective beds. I wish I could be mindlessly trained like that.

I clumsily unpack the food and think about my day tomorrow, will it ever come?

Felty and I sit down at her table where she has rainbow placemats and napkins to match. I think paper would do for takeout, but Felty says life is too short. She also has put out forks, “just in case,” she says. Actually, I read where chopsticks aren’t as popular in Thailand, at least not for rice dishes. But, Felty ordered Pad Thai (with noodles), so is trying with me coaching her. And I don’t have much patience today, the longest day of my life. I want it to be tomorrow. I picture Toby and me on the Megabus, speeding up to Boston. Then I’ll feel better, thoughts flying through the bus windows, even before we get there. I watch Felty across the table—noodles and sauce slipping from the narrow sticks. I look down at my plate and realize that I guess I wasn’t as hungry as I thought. Globbs of Kai jeow moo sab still sit. I continue to watch Felty. She’s a swirl of color in her purple and orange top, with the occasional dab to the mouth with her rainbow napkin. I think of tomorrow. If I could just go now and get it over with, I’d know what happened. Also, I have to remember to ask Felty to give me the photo back. The one of my mom and me. The only one I had to give for the painting. I have to bring it so Toby doesn’t think I’ve lost my mind—I wish. And who knows? Maybe my mother did run in the marathon. No one ever told me that, but with her long legs and all—she danced. I wonder if the Rockettes ever ran?

Felty has become a live painting to me now as I continue to stare at her from across the table. I start to drift. I love the rare moments when I feel relaxed, like right before I go to sleep. My peace is interrupted by Mustard’s bark. It’s loud and pierces the

close air in Felty's apartment. I read where Dachsunds can be barkers, but not these guys, they're usually pretty quiet. Hot Dog is especially. She never barks. But every once in a while, Mustard has something to say, so she does, and it's LOUD—and remember things can be louder for me.

I heed the canine alarm clock. My mind is going full speed. I have to get a few more things done for school, and I still have to meet Toby on the fire escape to finalize plans. I jump up with my too-heavy paper plate and toss it in Felty's garbage can under the sink.

"Can I take yours?" I ask Felty?

"Not yet, thanks, I'm still workin'—where's the fire, Girl? And you hardly touched your dinner."

"Not really hungry, I guess."

"Lot of that lately I see."

I'm not sure why, but at this point I go over and give Felty a big hug.

"Oh!" says Felty. I have to give you your photo back." Felty rises as best she can and scurries into her bedroom. I didn't even ask her for it yet. *That's weird.*

Felty hurries back into the kitchen and hands me the envelope with my photo tucked inside. I haven't seen it for a while, so I pull it out to look. I've seen it like five thousand times, and I still get the chills.

"I can't walk the dogs tomorrow, Felty. I'm sorry, but I'm meeting a friend after school and we're studying for a big test. I'm probably going to sleep over at her house tomorrow night."

“Wow, you girls are conscientious. It’s the start of a holiday weekend! Well, I guess the sleepover will be fun.”

“Yeah, maybe, as I wave and say, “I’ll see you Saturday,” to both dogs and Felty. With both the photo and the key, I try to head confidently out the door.

Toby’s late. He’s usually on time, but of course, on the longest day EVER, he’s late. It’s pretty warm tonight, so no blankets needed. I look down at my flaky white legs and wish I could look forward to summer. I sit here and think, and think, and then think some more. Then I think about my thoughts and then me thinking about my thoughts—MADDENING.

Dad’s out tonight, and will be gone early tomorrow, so my plan should work. I look up at the sky to see some stars, but there are too many clouds. Sometimes the clouds protect me and other times they don’t. I think this is one of those times. I look back down onto the lights in the apartment buildings. I imagine all the people living their lives. Just living. Not fixed on each thought that passes—not even aware sometimes.

Finally, finally I hear Toby on the stairs. Clang, clang. He’s so tall he makes it up seven flights in about five seconds.

“What took you so long?”

“My mom needed me to help with the other kids; Becky was screaming, and Sasha needed help with her homework. She’s by herself; I feel bad.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I have an absent parent, too.”

“White, one kid—more money—not the same.”

“I know, I know,” I said, straining to look up to those deep, dark eyes. “But we have lots to go over; we’ll save the racial inequalities for next time.”

“That’ll work,” says Toby sarcastically.

“Okay, so Carly’s brother got us the tickets.”

“He did? I thought we bothered him.”

“We do, but whatever, I guess he thought of it as a challenge.”

“Who needs a challenge these days?”

“Carly’s family,” I say impatiently.

“Really?”

“They’re perfect. Believe me, I know.”

“No one is perfect.”

“They’re close, and why are you getting all philosophical?”

“That’s philosophical?”

“You know what I mean,” I say, now wishing I had a blanket.

“Okay, go on, Carly’s brother bought us the tickets,” now impatient Toby says.

“Yes, \$20 apiece, round trip. I’ll pay for yours”

“Of course, you can pay.”

“Look, I have some money saved, not a lot.”

Toby sighs. “And how do we explain how long we’re gone, after school, to our parents?”

“We’re sleeping at Carly’s.”

“Wait, me too?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Is that part of their perfectness, to have a thirteen-year-old black, not quite gay boy sleep at their house with their daughter?”

“It is kinda. That’s their hip, inclusive side.” I finally made Toby smile tonight.

“How does Carly explain us getting there hours after school closed?”

“She’s telling her family, of course not her brother, that you and I were at school working on the newspaper—which we do. It’s the start of the holiday weekend, and she wanted to have us over.”

“Don’t you go with them to the Hamptons?”

“Yeah, but they aren’t leaving until Saturday afternoon, and go with this, we’re all just stupid teenagers.”

“Won’t the school get suspicious—both of us out of school?”

“They don’t care, it’s almost the end of the year. And might I remind you again, that we’re living in NYC!”

“Again, what does that have to do with it?”

I’m getting tired now, and annoyed with Toby. “There’s more to worry about than just us skipping school!”

“And you really believe that, you, about us both And what, you’re going to go around Boston with a pic of you mom? Asking in shops if anyone has seen her?”

“I just need to go, okay?”

“Okay, okay, what time?”

“Bus leaves at 6:45 a.m. Can you meet me here at 6:00?”

“I guess; your dad leaves that early?”

“God yes, tomorrow, at least that early.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow.”

I go to high five Toby, but he’s already bounding down the steps, leather cap reflecting the outside lights.

It's Thursday after Memorial Day. I guess they're cracking down on absences, because they gave out like a million detentions. They've staggered the kids before and after school. My a.m. started on Tuesday. At 6 a.m. It sucks. I'm so tired. And I slept all weekend. I usually go to the Hamptons with Carly for the Memorial Day weekend, but Dad totally punished me. I've never seen him so mad. He looked like the angry orange emoji.

After Boston, I was plunged into an even darker place than before, if you can believe that. And the way I understand it, you don't punish the kid for something the OCD has done. I know it's hard to tell the difference sometimes. I can't always. When I was younger, I never could. I mean it's all inside my own head. I mean your thoughts are YOUR thoughts. But no, they tell you that there is this giant green blob trying to take control of you. I wish I could take you inside. It's like constant fear, not like in the horror films where there is a nice, happy setting in the opening scenes. And there are no friends around to share popcorn with or huddle together under a blanket. It's just deep down, dark, solitary fear.

I try to twist the key in my pocket, but I can't easily reach it, and I don't want to draw attention to myself. They only let you bring a couple of books, a notebook, and a pen. No phone, no Jac the backpack. Those and everything else must be left in your locker. It's like surgery, or prison The big round clock on the wall ticks away. The beats go round and round to the next hour, the next day . . . —this all while the thoughts in my head continue to beat against my skull. I wish it would stop—all of it—the keeping

of time, the constant motion in my head—my nauseated stomach. And I'm getting punished for, what? Skipping school? None of them have any idea what I've really done; if they did, detention certainly wouldn't fit the crime. Yet here I sit in GV's version of detention. Here's how I got here . . .

First off, Toby flaked, he never showed up. I had to make a game-day decision. Should I still go without Toby? The answer wasn't hard. Do I back out and live with the unbearable pain? Or do I go by myself and get real relief? No brainer. I took the 7 train and got to 34th and 11th, just on time, commuters whirling past me. I set Jac down on a bench and pulled out my phone. I scrolled through my messages for the text from Carly with the reservation numbers. Following instructions, I boarded the bus, and while holding my breath, showed my number to the driver. "Thank you," he said, and not another word. Whew. I headed for the back, passing a wide variety of people. I tripped on someone's foot and practically fell into one of the last open seats. The bus smelled awful—a combination of old smoke, perfume, and urine—if you can imagine that.

I was sure there was no way I could sit for four and a half hours with my thoughts. *We stop once*, I thought, not enough. I pictured myself going up to the bus driver to ask him to please stop, just so I could be distracted. Yeah, that didn't happen. All that about stopping and we hadn't even started yet. Just then, the motor started, and we began the slow ease out of the parking space. I reached into my pocket and turned the key. I thought about Felty. She and Dad think I'm spending the night at Carly's. I suddenly felt guilty. The art show is coming, and we need to go over some things.

The Megabus was way more gross than the bus I take to Grandma's. And then there's the people—like this guy across from me was eating a tuna sandwich on his

stomach, ew, ew. He was wearing a suit coat like my dad wears. He didn't even care. He got stuff all over it. And why was he eating a tuna sandwich that early in the morning? Ew.

It was one of those gray days, sprinkling on and off. *Make up your mind.* Ha, mind. What a weird saying: "Make up your mind." It's not even accurate. As if someone could make up a mind. I wonder what kind of mind I would "make up"? First, I would make a logical section, ALL logic and no room for "OCD sense." Then, there would be a huge sense of humor compartment—very sophisticated humor—lots of fun and laughter, no room for hurt, shame and pounding misery. Build-A-Brain, like "Build-A-Bear—" I wish

I noticed a lady a few seats up. She was knitting. On this bouncy bus I would be afraid I would stab myself to death. She kept looking around every five seconds, like someone was going to steal her pattern or something. She was wearing a rainbow gay pride type knit hat that she probably made herself. I pictured her marching in the parade.

I turned the key in my pocket and checked my phone—7:20—that's all? *I'm in hell.* I turned the key once more and breathed, just in case, this time it might work. I tried to sleep, but as I started to doze, someone would cough or sneeze—ewwww—and then the thoughts would take over, new and fresh: *of course you were there, everyone will know you were involved, why bother going there now?—well it's always good to check, isn't it?* I pulled the photo of my mom and me out of Jac Jr.'s front pocket. I brought it anyway, even though I didn't need it, as Toby didn't show. It still looked new. My hair was frizzing and going off in all directions. And I was smiling like an idiot, not a clue as

to what the future held. I looked at my mom and wondered how someone could let go of that little hand—for good someday.

I finished some of my boring homework. Hopefully, we won't get much for the long weekend. *How will I get it?* My stomach sunk farther down than it already was. *I skipped school—me.* I wanted to follow my stomach to the bottom of the gross bus and die. I never really thought about suicide. There are times, like now, when I don't want to live anymore, but I can't see me doing anything about it. I just don't want to be anymore.

I took out the book I'm reading: *The Planet of Junior Brown*. I'm only halfway through, but it's about these shelters—planets, they call them—for homeless kids. At first, I thought the book might be science fiction—I hate science fiction—but it's not, it's fiction fiction. I read for a while, thinking I might be better off on one of these planets, homeless, where maybe all I'd worry about is when my next meal might come.

The bus rumbled northward, and I finally began to get drowsy for real this time, that great feeling that most take for granted and sometimes despise. Except it's over fast, and when it's over, it's over. I half dreamt and half listened to bus noises. When I gained full consciousness, I looked around. All kinds of unpleasant sights and scents peppered my face: sweaty bald heads, hats sliding from greasy hair, little kids' heads bobbing up and down, leftover smoke, perfume, and tuna—ew, ew.

We finally got to Boston. It took forever to disembark (should be SAT word). I was all the way in the back watching this fiasco—people getting all their stuff together, me waiting impatiently, Purelling my hands. After what seemed like a lifetime, I got off the bus. I checked my phone: 11:55, okay, not bad. Okay, so it's a seven-minute walk to the subway, a five-minute subway ride, then a three-minute walk to Copley Square.

That's fifteen minutes. I just had to find Boylston St. Fortunately, I've taken my fair share of subways in NYC, so I wasn't afraid. Apparently, I'm afraid of everything else, just not subways. I plugged the subway station address in my phone and started to walk. At least it wasn't raining then. The views on both sides of me blurred as I sped along. I got to the station. It was typical, maybe a little cleaner than NYC, ew, ew. I needed the Orange line. And just like my phone said, it wasn't crowded then. And by 12:30 I was in Copley Square. I was actually there. I stopped and sat down on a bench. I couldn't believe that I did it. My heart was racing, but despite that, for a moment, "One, brief, shining moment" (*Camelot*), I felt normal. But then I remembered why I was there—The Marathon—. Was I there? I absolutely could have been. Nausea defied gravity and seemed to crawl up into my throat. I twisted the key in my pocket one more time, picked myself and Jac Jr. off the bench, and headed toward Boylston St. On the way everyone was hurrying. I thought I saw Felty and the dogs, and then Toby and Carly, and then Old Gloria, then finally my dad. I got to Boylston St. and the finishing line of the marathon. I finally made it. I looked around to see what seemed familiar. Everything started spinning. It's hard to remember the whole thing now, but I knew I had to have been there. I must have. Why would everything look so real? I sat down but had to turn to throw up in the trash can next to the bench I was on. It wasn't much; I hadn't eaten anything that morning. I lifted my head and picked up Jac Jr., pulling a tissue out of the front pocket. I wiped the slime from my mouth.

I started to walk back toward the subway. I realized then that I didn't know what time it was, and I forgot to text Toby. I sat down on another bench and reached into Jac Jr. for my phone. I wasn't where I normally kept it. Omg, I could feel the color leave my

face—a real-life, non-OCD crisis. I checked Jac Jr. all over. I checked my pockets, just the key. NO PHONE. I was then in a total and complete panic. People use that word all the time—they have no idea what they’re talking about.

I had no idea where I could have lost my phone. I thought I would have known if I dropped it. Maybe I thought I put it back in Jac Jr. on the first bench, and it might still be there. I retraced my steps, which I was doing anyway. The sky darkened and I started to drizzle—of course. Omg, I remembered that the bus ticket was on MY PHONE! I began to run, which was stupid, because I was supposed to be looking, at every inch of space, one of which could be holding my phone. I got back to the first bench and almost fell, slipping on the wet pavement. When I didn’t see my phone on the bench, I frantically looked under, convinced that it had slipped through one of the spaces between the slats. NOWHERE.

I sat down and tried to think clearly over the pounding in my head. My palms were sweaty and I couldn’t tell the sweat from the rain. I kept rubbing my palms on my jeans. I rubbed and rubbed until there was blood. *What do I do? What do I do?* I thought over and over. They always tell kids to go tell a police officer—uh no . . . First, I wasn’t lost and second, I thought, *I’m a criminal on a national level*. No, no cops, I just had to figure something else out. I knew I’d have to live with my guilt and these thoughts forever. I got up and continued my walk to the subway. I wish I had known what time it was. It felt like it had to be 6 p.m., but according to the big church clock across the street, it was 1:30. I looked up to the giant steeple. I knew what I had to do. I had to ask a stranger to use their phone, ew, and call my dad, kmn. I stared into the crowd. All I saw were gothic teenagers (school anyone? I should talk), angry corporate suits, and she-

devils in Prada. Then I saw her—a tall, dark-haired woman sitting on a bench. She looked like a dancer. She had on a leotard with a white wrap sweater, and next to her was a large pink duffel bag. She looked like my mother. I wanted her to be my mom. I *needed* her to be my mom. I got a large lump in my throat, which doesn't happen to me often. Anxiety is overwhelming; it usually overpowers anything else.

I knew I had to ask her. I was freaking out. It was still drizzling, and I could feel my scalp tingle, as my hair began to frizz. *Ok, so should I sit down next to her? Or just walk right up and ask her?* I chose the latter. With sweaty hands, chattering teeth, and frizzing hair, I walked up to the beautiful lady, and tried to clear my throat. I realized I hadn't spoken at all since Toby's early morning call. I tried again to clear the poison from my soul that had lodged in my throat. An "excuse me" pushed its way up through the phlegm. The dancer looked up at me with Mom's eyes, and said "Yes?" Her voice was soft and kind.

"I lost my phone, and I was wondering if I could use yours to call my dad?" I stammered.

"Oh sure, sure," she said as she reached into her pink bag and pulled out her pink phone. She handed it up to me.

"Thanks so much," I said as I accepted her phone with my trembling hand. And then, right in front of this nice lady, I had to call my dad. Thankfully I had memorized his number when I was younger. I pressed the buttons quickly, without cleaning them, and turned my back to the bench.

Dad picked up right away. He never does.

"Hi, Dad"

“Thora, where the hell are you?!”

“Boston,” I told him, sheepishly.

“I know, but where in Boston?”

“Wait, you know?”

“Yes, someone called from your phone, the one you lost? You know, emergency contact?”

“Oh, right.”

“Thora, I can’t tell you how mad I am.” I could tell he was at work, otherwise he would have been screaming.

“Okay, the man that called dropped your phone off at the library. Are you still in Copley Square?”

“Yes,” I said as I bowed my head in shame.

“The library’s on Boylston.” Hearing the street name sent a chill down my spine.

“Okay, listen, I’m sending a car for you. After you pick up your phone, go to the lobby of the Copley Square Hotel and wait, you can walk there. The driver’s name is Peter. He’ll be there at 5 p.m. Text me when you get to the lobby and when Peter gets there. Don’t go anywhere in between. We’ll talk when you get home.”

I’d like to say that Dad’s parting words were more chilling than thoughts of the marathon, but they weren’t.

I handed the dancer back her phone and thanked her profusely (SAT).

“No problem at all, what’s your name?” Stranger danger alerts automatically went off in my head, but at this point, I thought: *I used her phone, she looks like my mother—we’re practically family.*

“Thora.”

“That’s pretty.” *Wow, first time anyone’s ever said my name was pretty.*

“I’m Diane,” she said, extending her hand. Even on this drizzly, humid day, her hand felt cool, smooth, and dry.

This is the part of the story where you think: *Oh, what a nice lady. She’s just like Thora’s mom. Throwing stranger danger to the wind, they will have lunch together, exchange phone numbers, and become friends.* Not. I’m not saying that would have happened, but even if it was going that way, Thora’s OCD would surely stop it.

I thanked Diane again and said goodbye.

I had to get to the library to get my phone. I didn’t feel at all secure without it. I didn’t feel secure with it, but whatever. . . . I remember passing the library a couple of blocks back. I wish I could have stayed and talked to the lady all day. I had plenty of time. I checked the church clock: 2:05. I headed to the library, and it’s gigantic. Where’s my phone, I internally shouted at it. I walked up the stairs to what I assumed was the main entrance, all while thoughts pounded inside my head, almost blurring my vision. I opened the very heavy door and saw a long desk, where like a thousand people were working. I know the New York public library is big, but I haven’t been in it since our fifth-grade field trip. I went up to a man at the end of the desk. He had long gray hair and a beard to match. He was looking down at some papers.

“Excuse me.”

Willie Nelson looked up and over his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Yes?”

“Someone dropped off my phone here. White case with purple stripes.”

“Where here?”

“I don’t know, they said they left it at the front desk,” I said as politely as I could.

Willie removed his glasses and said, “I’ll ask someone, give me a minute.” He waded through the long line of desk people and stopped all the way at the other end. He spoke to a lady that looked like she must have worked there for a hundred years. My heavy head began to lighten due to the fact I hadn’t eaten all day. I still wasn’t hungry. I shifted my weight back and forth for a full five minutes (wall clock), until Willie came back with what I hoped was my phone.

“This it?”

“Yes, thank you.” I then reached for it as if it were a lost limb. I went over to a chair, carefully carrying my phone. I took out a sanitary wipe from Jac Jr.’s pocket, and cleaned both sides of the small, but powerful device. Back at the desk I asked Willie for restroom directions. On the way out, looking at all the books, I was briefly able to push aside an OCD thought and replace it with the crushing guilt of skipping school. I wondered where the good thoughts are hidden.

I checked my phone before placing it securely in Jac Jr.’s front pocket. It was only a two-minute walk to the hotel, but I took my time—better to be distracted on the street, than sitting in a hotel lobby. I slowly descended the library steps, each one bringing another thought. The people on the street were blurring by—their day well underway.

It was 3 p.m. when I arrived at the Copley Square Hotel. I had two hours until the driver got there. I tucked myself into a corner, away from the bright lights and marble. I sat on a throne-style chair and dropped Jac Jr. on the floor next to me. I realized that I

hadn't texted Dad when I got to the library. I reached into Jac's pocket for my phone, and thankfully it was there. I had three texts and a missed call from Dad. I texted him:

I'm at the hotel, sorry.

Okay, thanks. Make sure you text when Peter gets there.

Peter, great. He's the rude, ultra conservative, opinionated guy. I know him from some trips to the airport. Five hours of racing thoughts and him.

Dad must have been busy, because he didn't take time to admonish (SAT) me, for not texting from the first location. I settled into my chair that I would occupy for the next two hours. The thoughts were coming one after the other: *You did it, you are responsible, you killed three people, and injured hundreds more. You were here, look how familiar everything looks to you.* They kept coming and coming—pounding against my forehead. I looked around and tried to distract. I swept up my phone and did some research. *The hotel was built in 1891. It is the second oldest, continuously operating hotel in Boston.* My phone began exploding with after school texts:

Carly: *Are you still there?*

Toby: *Where are you?*

Did you find out anything?

I kept forgetting that I told them I was looking for my mom. I mean, honestly, how gullible can they be? What was I going to do, take the photo to every shop keep in Copley Square, and asked if they've seen her? Should I have shown it to Diane, the dancer? At that, I took out the photo of Mom and me. I looked at it while turning the key in my pocket. I was so cute and innocent, no idea what lies ahead. I don't remember who

took the picture. There were no selfies then. I put the photo back in Jac and took out my book to try to read.

Junior's eating dinner, and it's a lot, and it's gross. I try not to think, as usual, and the thoughts continued to defy me: *You did it; you know you did. You can't escape; they will find out.* It's like an annoying gnat flying around your face, except it's big and heavy, and fills you with relentless fear. I thought about the schoolwork I was missing, and the trouble I was in, and then like a tsunami, the bigger OCD thoughts washed right over the smaller ones. I felt like I might throw up again, and I thought I had better eat something. I took a few bites of a granola bar and took a trip to the bathroom. My seat was unoccupied when I returned; I guess there aren't many people in need of a city hotel for the Memorial Day Weekend—they just want to get away. I sat, and thought and thought, until I drifted off, the weight pulling my head to one side. It was exactly 5:00 when Peter called to say he was there. I woke up to the rattly sound of the ringtone. Peter never texts. This guy is horrible. I packed up Jac Jr. once again, carefully placing my phone in her front pocket. I hate this, spoiled kid gets car ride back to Manhattan—wait until Toby hears about this. Peter was outside with his flashers on, and he's frantically waving to me. He runs up and tries to rip Jac Jr. off my back.

"Hi, Peter, no thanks, I need her, I mean it," I said, grabbing Jac Jr. back.

"Okay, suit yourself." See, what did I say? Rude.

I slid into the car, right behind Peter, so it would be harder for him to talk to me. Although he doesn't care, he kind of just talks into the air. He shut my door and got into the driver's seat, like he does a million times a week. We pulled out, and after a few minutes, he started right in, as if you're going to agree with him: "Damn democrats, well

thank god Hillary's out, who would ever think a woman could do that job . . . ” The next thing I remember was waking up in front of our apartment building. It was 9:30 when we arrived. Dad, of course, was waiting for me. He let me go to the bathroom, and then he yelled for about an hour. “Why? Anything could have happened. It's not like you.”—were just a few highlights, and then, he brought up my OCD: “That must have had something to do with it, Thora.” *That's right, Dad, get mad at me, that's the way to handle it.* Then he told me to go to bed and we'd talk tomorrow, not before reminding me that there would be no Carly's Hamptons house for the weekend—last thing on my mind.

So, that's how I ended up here in AM detention. The big clock on the wall says 8:05. The bell rings, and Carly appears soon after, to walk me to first period.

School's out for the day, and it was a long one. I finally caught up with homework from the holiday weekend, but I still have today's, and I have therapy . . .

I decide right away I'm going to tell Old Gloria everything. I'm in such pain, I have to give myself over to her. I'm her problem now. I thought about not telling her, I really did, but she's my last hope—it was either her or the police. She waves me into her office. I slink past her and take my usual place, setting Jac on the floor next to me. Old Gloria looks especially imposing today. Her hair is stiff, hardly moving, and her eyes are narrowed. Books are properly stacked on her desk.

Old Gloria clears her throat and says, “So how are things since last time? How was Memorial Day weekend? I know long weekends can be hard for you.”

“Well, Memorial Day weekend sucked cuz I was grounded.”

“You were grounded. That doesn’t sound like you.”

“I kinda skipped school last Friday.”

Old Gloria seems distracted. “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to process this, so unlike you. Why did you skip school?”

“I went to Boston.”

“No, Thora, on your own?”

“Yeah, Toby was supposed to go with me, but he flaked.”

Old Gloria tries to maintain her professionalism. “How did you get there?”

“Megabus.”

“And I think I know the answer to this, but why did you go?”

“Well, what you think you know, is correct.” I frantically spin the key in my pocket.

Old Gloria’s face droops a bit. “Thora, first, you know that giving in only makes it worse, and second, something could have really happened to you. That’s the thing, you do these things to avoid the bad thoughts and subsequent pain, and these very things can cause you *real* pain. So how do you feel now?”

“Horrible, worse than I did before I left.”

“You know why.”

“Yes, yes, aren’t you even going to ask details?”

“Thora, you know I can’t do that. I would just be feeding the OCD. You’re back safe. I have everything I need to know.” Old Gloria shifts her weight and recrosses her

legs. I feel like I'm on trial. "You know what we have to do now, right?"

"Yes, the imaginal stuff."

"Yes, do you still have the outline we worked on last time?"

"I think so, at home."

"Good, let's see if we can remember some of it and start to flesh it out, and then you can continue it at home. Remember now, in your story, you *are* involved, you *did* do something bad. Then you'll have to read the story over and over to habituate your brain to the thoughts. Okay, so you took the bus that morning to Boston . . . "

Felty and Hot Dog and Mustard seemed tired today. Our walk was shorter than usual, and I, too, was tired. Detention wears a person out. Felty brings out a platter with our snacks on it—bubbly Coke and Cheez-Its. I grab my favorite purple aluminum cup and take a big gulp. "Thanks, Felty."

"My pleasure, Missy." I'm thinking that "missy" is some kind of term of endearment in the South. I hadn't told Felty about the detentions. I sit here on Felty's soft sofa and think about how I have to work on my stupid imaginal story. How do I untangle my "real" story from my other real story? Now *there's* a question for Old Gloria.

Hot Dog and Mustard are piled up on the floor. They look so peaceful. The sun is on them, and they both become a burst of color. They look like a sunset. Speaking of sunset, today is one of the two days a year when the sun perfectly lines up with the skyline. You can see it from Midtown, but also 14th Street. Mom loved these days, when

the weather was good. She would take me with her to watch. I thought it was so great, especially the one in May—to be out on a school night. The sun didn't set until about 8:30, and we'd get an ice cream cone from our favorite shop first. I always got chocolate—Mom, butter pecan. I never liked the nuts back then, now I don't mind the nuts. We watched as the orange ball would slowly descend between the gray buildings. It looked like it was headed right toward us, but at the same time, it looked really far away. I was tired the next day at school, but it was worth it. I look over at Felty, who looks as peaceful as the dogs. I was going to go over the art show stuff with her, but we have plenty of time, it's not for a few weeks. She doesn't really have to do anything, just show up for moral support. She can bring some of her other artwork as well. I know I have a parent, but he's like allergic to the arts sometimes. I'm really scared to do this, I mean nothing like my OCD scared, but . . . I don't think my poems are very good, there are just a few and some illustrations.

Through the window the sun shines warm on my face. The weather is perfect for the sunset. I sigh. I'm just too tired.

“ . . . born, I was Thursday’s child / And I was Thursday’s child . . . ”

“Thursday’s Child”

-David Bowie

1999

My detention is over with, thank god. Carly’s staying at her grandma’s again, and I’m waiting for her to come by for me. I’m outside on the front steps. Speaking of grandma, I have to visit mine today, and then there’s homework, and I’m supposed to meet Toby tonight. Oh, and I almost forgot Felty and the dogs. And then I remember my *story*. I finished it last night, but I’m supposed to read it three times a day. I pull it out of Jac and twist the key in my jacket pocket with my other hand. The story is only three terrifying pages long. I tried to get to the point as soon as I could. I freak out for a second, thinking about someone finding this at school. I read the first page quickly. It reads pretty much the same as a condensed version of my real experience, now that I know about the trip and what the marathon area looks like. I have to ask Old Gloria if that’s okay. The second page is where it gets ugly. I have to read that I had met this guy—a friend of someone I know from school. He was cute and persuasive, and he tells me he needs help with something in Boston. He said he couldn’t tell me what yet, but I would be rewarded. I’m like—really?? I, Thora, always using caution and fearful of everything, am falling for this?!? Then, I’m like, I must have, I know I was there. I was supposed to meet T (that’s what he calls himself) at 12:00 noon on a bench in a remote section of Copley Square Park—I guess the quietest place he could find. At exactly noon he approaches my bench. He sits next to me. He tells me all he wants me to do is look out for the police. I thought, okay, *this can’t be good*. We go over some sketchy details, and then walk to Boylston

Street. I take notice of T's large backpack. When we get to our destination, he disappears into the enormous crowd. I follow my instructions. At close to 3:00, I hear loud blasts. People begin scattering everywhere. . . . As I read, my heart is racing. I can picture myself at this scene.

I look up and I see Carly approaching. I shove the pages into Jac.

"Hey," says Carly, tugging at her earbud.

"Hey."

"You okay? You look, I don't know, kinda pale."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say a bit too harshly. "Let's go."

"Okay," says Carly, shoving the bud back in her ear.

I shiver as we head to school.

I get to Grandma's building with its all-too-familiar sights, sounds and smells—dim lights, aging moans, and lavender-tinged urine. I walk past the masks and the Purell dispenser. I rethink and double back to take some of the Purell, just a little. I can't imagine visiting Gram in a mask; she barely knows me without one. It's so sad here. I'm tired of being sad. When I'm not scared, I'm sad—usually I'm both.

I see Grandma sitting in her stupid chair staring out the window. I wonder what she thinks about as she looks—at what, another building and some sorry tree? Does she think about her little girl? Or when *she* was a little girl? I approach her carefully. "Hey, Gram," I say and kiss her, gently on the head. She looks up with those vacant brown eyes. "Hi, Gram, it's Thora."

“Who are you again?”

“Your granddaughter, Thora.” Thank god she never asks about Mom.

“Oh, yes, yes.” Then comes the endless questions: “How did you get here?, Are you working? When do you graduate? What’s the weather like?” She loves the one about the weather, which is good, because it’s so easy—the great equalizer.

I tell Gram that it’s pretty nice today, seventy-five and mostly sunny. “It’s June now, you know, Gram.”

“Seventy-five.”

“What?”

“Seventy-five, is that my age?”

“You’re eighty-one now, Gram. Remember the party we had for you here, last year?” I hate when I slip and use the word *remember*. It’s such a common thing to say: *Remember that day we . . . ? Remember her? Remember the time he? Remember that haircut?* The word means absolutely nothing to the people here. I sit down next to Gram by the window. The warm sun feels hot in the uncomfortable air.

Gram says, “How do I know you? Did we go to school together?”

“No, Gram, I’m your granddaughter.”

“How’s the weather?” Gram changes the subject because she doesn’t understand, or her mind just shuts down and then picks up on the next easiest thing.

“It’s nice—warm and sunny.” The wandering man comes and stands next to us. He folds his arms and stares up at the TV on the wall. I wonder when he came here; he seems so young. I get a flash of me being jailed for what I’ve done—like the people here, although they’ve done nothing.

Gram again, “How do I know you? Did we go to school together?”

“Yes, we did.” I decide it’s time to just agree with her. She’s declining. And trying to bring her back to reality just makes things worse. Gram’s eyes look grateful, but sad.

“I teach here now, you know.”

“That’s very nice.” I get up to adjust Gram’s collar and rub her back.

Felty’s lagging behind today, with Mustard sniffing everything (and one) in his path. I keep looking back to see if they’re still there. Hot Dog, on the other hand, is very impatient today, I guess so am I. We picked the right dogs. I see Felty and Mustard trudging along. I hope Felty’s okay.

Hot Dog and I get to the park. I put on his extended leash and let him run a bit. Felty catches up just then.

“There you are, you okay?”

“Just a bit tired, Girl, and my friend here was lollygagging again.” Felty bends to pet Mustard behind the ear.

“Not Hot Dog, he couldn’t wait to get here.”

Felty sits down next to me. “Yes, he gets pretty riled up sometimes, that one.” She attaches Mustard’s leash to his collar, and unlike Hot Dog, he just sits. “Yep, you’d never know these two are brothers.”

“I look over at Felty and realize that she’s not wearing her normal neon colors, usually purple and orange. Instead, she has on a black tee shirt with two dachshunds on the front. I guess that counts as the orange.

“The weather’s great!” she says.

I think of Gram’s questions. “Yeah, it is.” Now I think about homework and my story that I have to read again. Just working on it all week was agonizing enough. I twist the key in my pocket. A gust of wind pulls up from the ground, grabs my hair and leaves something in my eye. I hold tightly to Hot Dog’s leash and reel him in. Felty stands up, brushes herself off and says, “Well, Girl, what do you say? It’s getting kinda chilly.”

Back at home, I grab a bag of chips and an apple, and I shuffle to my room to do homework. Dad’s going to be late tonight, so dinner will be whatever. He’s still kinda mad at me. If he knew the pain I’m already in, he couldn’t be mad at all. He’d feel bad for me. That’s if he can feel at all. I finish the last math problem, poem, and final paragraph. It went more quickly than I thought. I wish it had taken longer so I wouldn’t have to read that stupid story. I have one more read through today. Old Gloria says I should listen to a recording of her reading it aloud. I have to give her a copy next week—ugh. And now I have to continue reading it: *I knew then what was in the backpack. Why did I consent to this?* I’m reading the third page now. My anxiety level was at an eight by the end of the second page, but now it’s for sure a ten. My heart pounds and I try to hold the wet paper in my unsteady hands.

I ran as fast as fast as I could past benches and buildings, and people, lots of people—scared people. I kept running until I got to the bus station—every nerve in my body, on fire. On the page, and now. I stop for a second to wonder if I should ask Old

Gloria if this is right, but I guess it's working. *I checked my phone to find out where I'm supposed to be. Next I boarded my bus back to NYC. The bus was crowded and sweaty. I found one of the last seats. I slipped Jac Jr. off of my shoulder and shuddered at what she now represented. For four and a half hours, I just sat there. I didn't read, or listen to music, just thought about what I did. I could hear the sounds over and over in my head. My dad thought I was at Carly's for the night. I had told him we had to work on a project. Lying comes easily to a criminal. I thought Oh my god, I really have to go to Carly's tonight. Maybe that's good. Oh, I don't know, my thinking is all muddled. Why, why did I get involved??* I'm breathless as I read on . . .

Later, at Carly's I tried to remain calm, which is an impossibility for me. Carly asked me what the new guy and I did today? I told her we just hung out in Central Park.

Next, she says: "Oh my god, did you hear what happened in Boston? My uncle works there, and we thought he said he might go to the marathon. We called him and he hadn't been there, thank god."

"Uh uh," I said, as I ran to the bathroom to throw up. I came back to Carly's bedroom to find I had a voicemail from Dad. . . . I hesitantly listened to it, I just wanted to step out of my body (then and now). Dad bellowed out of my phone: Thora, where the hell are you??? The police are looking for you. All the "what ifs" came true.

Toby and I sit on the cold, hard fire escape stairs. It feels good on really hot days—not so much when it's still spring at night. We have on light jackets though, so I

skipped the blankets. I watch Toby as he continues to sit and play with his leather cap in his hand.

“You’re quiet tonight,” I say to him, and the fact that he is being quiet is driving me crazier than I already am, because it gives me too much time to think. I need distraction! I think about my ridiculous story, I guess it’s better than thinking about the real thing. This all gets really confusing.

Toby answers me. I forgot what I said. “I’m thinking about high school. We’re almost there, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I mean it’s hard enough in middle school, that has to be a hundred times worse. And they don’t call it ‘high school’ for nothing.” I give a little chuckle at that. I want to laugh. I miss laughing, especially the fall on the floor, can’t catch my breath, snorting kind. But I can’t. First of all, it wasn’t *that* funny, and second, I forget how.

Toby smiles his big, bright smile. I don’t see it often, but it always gives me hope.

“It’s different for you, Thor.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, twisting the key in my pocket.

“I mean, you’re living here in your fancy ass place. People can just look at you and you mean more than I do.” I couldn’t disagree with him, but sometimes I wish he could see what was inside my head, my true torture. Toby continues, “My mom had to fight to get me into that school.”

“Well, that’s good, right? We’ll be together.”

“You’ve never been shoved up against your locker by a bunch of angry white bros.”

“I know, Tobe, I can’t begin to imagine what that feels like.” *Typical white response.*

Toby and I sit, not saying very much. Toby gets up to leave. He smacks on his leather cap and bounds down the fire escape stairs. He blends into the night, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Back inside, I read the end of my story:

I listened to Dad’s message. “Thora, the police are here. They want to talk to you. (Dad’s voice was like ice). Thora what in the name of god? Get. Home. Now.”

Carly and her dad drove me home, and when we got there, her dad saw the police car in front of my building and said “something’s going on here, but isn’t there always something happening in the city? I think I thanked Carly and her dad as I was getting out of the car. Her dad said, “No problem, I hope everything is okay.”

I threw up in the garbage can next to the elevator. Once on my floor, I walked toward our apartment. I reached the door which was wide open. Two police officers stood in the living room with Dad. Their badges reflected the lamp light. Their blue uniforms, blue—there was so much blue . . .

What if, what if, what if . . .

I just finished another round of the story. My level is high, maybe a seven, but not like it was. Maybe that means it's working, or not. I'll leave that up to Old Gloria. I know that I still have a million thoughts that make me feel like I'm going to die.

Right now, I'm at our table in the common room waiting for Carly and Toby. Common room, it's not a suitable name. We all don't have much in common. We're not in accordance (SAT). I mean, if you could only see those popular people sitting there at the perfect table—near enough to the food line, but far enough away to be cool. And it's kind of in the middle of the room, as to be seen by as many as possible. I wonder if that was planned or did it subconsciously just happen? Anyway, I have nothing in common with them. Maybe I'd understand them better if I did. Take Carly, for instance. She's a good example of a hybrid. She kind of looks like a popular person, at least she tries. But inside she's too deep to be shallow.

Speaking of Carly, she's on her way to our table now. She glances at the popular table as she moves by. She glances, but only glances—she mainly keeps her eyes on me. She even trips a little. Popular people never trip.

As the room fills, the sounds become deafening, competing with the awful sounds in my head. Carly arrives and plops down in the seat next to mine, giving Toby, who is on his way over, the whole other side to spread out.

“Hey Toby,” Carly and I say in unison.

Toby nods, takes off his cap, and lays it on the table. He shakes his head and rubs it for a second. He says, “I'm tired and it's only lunch.”

Carly and I have to agree. One of us says it and the others always agree. I mean, we're almost in high school, where everyone is tired.

We each pick up our sandwiches in unison. Today is sub day. Once a month we have these great subs. I heard that a student's uncle makes them. Ew, where? His basement? I hope it's somewhere safe, because they're so good, and subs are one of the true comfort foods for me. These have like the perfect balance of meat, cheese, tomato, onion, and lettuce. There is some sort of magical flavor from them that I can't describe. I'm also glad it's sub day, because it's my turn to clean up and no one leaves a scrap.

Toby looks up at one point and asks, "What's today's date?"

"Are you serious? We use it in like every class," Carly says.

"I told you I was tired."

"You must have slept through your morning classes. By the way, it's the 13th, of June—2013."

I just observe this inane (SAT) exchange as I enjoy the rest of my sub.

"Thanks," says Toby.

"Speaking of the 13th," says Carly, "soon, Thora, you won't be."

"Won't be what?" I try to say through the shredded lettuce between my teeth.

"Thirteen, your birthday's coming up. Next week, right?"

"That's right," Toby says. "Our girl's gonna be fourteen. The first one of us, high school age."

"You doin' anything, Thora?" Carly asks. "We should do something."

"It's on a Monday. And Father's Day is Sunday. Dad and I will probably combine them like we always do . . . 'What do you want to do, Thora?' I'm like, 'I don't know,

what do you want to do, Dad?’ Then we’ll get a pizza and fall asleep in front of the golf on TV.”

“Oh, ugh. Your arts show is, oh my god, next week already!”

“Yeah, you guys coming?” Through my darkness I see a glimmer of light. Just a bit of hope, thinking of the event. I don’t mention Felty. I always feel awkward enough without adding an eccentric older woman with twin dogs into the mix.

“Sure, right, Tobe? We’ll be there.”

“Yeah, yeah, when is it again?”

“Next Thursday at 7 p.m.”

“Oh my god,” says Carly, and the next Thursday is graduation!”

“We know,” I say, looking over at Toby.

“Right,” Toby agrees, timidly. He places his cap back on his head.

The clouds from the morning sun stepped aside by the time I arrived at Old Gloria’s building. What was left were several white and light gray varieties. What would anyone really know about the weather, being locked in that school prison all day? The thought of the word “prison” set me panicking. But anyway, I could tell it had rained, because there was a half wet, half dry look to everything. It’s like the sun and the breeze take up moisture faster in some places than others.

I ascend the stairs to Old Gloria’s office. It must be a slow day for the crazies, because Old Gloria is outside her office, practically waiting for me. She finishes up her

call and ushers me into the room. I take my usual seat with Jac by my side and the key in my pocket. I twist it once, then quickly pull my hand out. I always leave my jacket on. I don't think Old Gloria is thrilled with that, but she doesn't say anything today.

Old Gloria sits on a chair next to her desk, across from me on the sofa. She looks very springy today in her yellow blazer and matching ballet flats. I think that she sometimes tries to dress in a way that might cheer up her crazies. You know, give them some hope.

"So, how's it going?" Old Gloria asks this like I've never heard it before.

"Well, having the same horrible thoughts, thinking I'm going to die, you know . . ."

"Did you finish the story?"

"Yes, all finished."

"Have you been reading it every day?"

"Yep, three times, or close to it."

"Good, how was the experience?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure I did it right."

"How do you mean?" I hate when Old Gloria gets all Victorian—*How do you mean?*

I mean, like I really went to Boston. How do you separate that from the imaginal story? They get all jumbled together.

"That's okay, as long as the anxiety rises."

"Oh, it's risen alright. And I'm confused about how involved I get, you know, in the event."

“It really doesn’t matter, as long as the anxiety level increases,” Old Gloria repeats. “Did you bring a copy?”

“Yeah,” I reach into Jac and pull out the weathered paper and hand it to Old Gloria.

“Good, thanks. I’ll record this, and you can listen, as well as continuing to read it—double punch.” I hate when Old Gloria tries to be cool. She’s just not. And nothing about any of this is funny. “The more you bring up the level, the more your mind gets used to it, and you become less fearful. Keep at it, Thora, you know, it really does work, if *you* work at *it*. Give it a chance. *Work, work. She said work. Work never ends. It just keeps going—hard work.*

“Work,” I repeat.

“Yes, work!” Old Gloria cheerfully says again.

I arise from the subway feeling numb. Therapy has a different effect each time, anywhere from relief and hope to horror and anguish. I guess numb is somewhere in between. I travel the seven blocks to my apartment under bluer skies, “Let the Sunshine In” (*Hair*). The air feels fresh. I think of Felty and the arts show. Maybe we should have prepared better. But really, why? What do we have to do? Just set up and stand there. I just don’t want to be embarrassed. My poems are good, right? I mean, better than my artwork. That’s where Felty comes in. I walk faster, more determined. Thoughts are beginning to push and expand in the back of my mind. I wonder what that looks like. I

picture a room filled with boxes just like the spare bedroom in my grandma's house. She kept all kinds of things in there: an ironing board, games and old dresses. I thought it was great, but she probably thought it was a mess. The mind room is filled with boxes, boxes labeled by thought category: school, home, friends, and then there's OCD which has the biggest box, filled with "you did this," "you are responsible," "you are GUILTYs."

I continue on, thinking, thinking. I guess Felty and I are preparing as best we can. She'll proudly stand beside her portrait of Mom, and I'll have my poems, and my and Felty's illustrations pinned up behind us. I hoist Jac up tighter against my back, and I press forward. When I get to my building, I see Felty running up to the front door with the dogs. I call to her, and she turns around quickly. Hot Dog tries to make a break for it toward me. Felty spins, trying to maintain canine control.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologize.

"No problem, Sweetie, I'm rushing 'cause I got called back to work—big event coming up."

"Oh, ok, see you tomorrow then?"

"Yep, tomorrow . . ."

I'm actually getting a bit excited about the art show—I think. It's hard to tell sometimes. Even positive things can over-stimulate the brain and cause anxiety. Yep, you can't even enjoy the good things.

I'm sitting here, waiting for Carly and Toby, as usual. My class is closer to the Common room, more time for thoughts. I take my "story" out from deep within Jac. I can read it pretty quickly by now, digesting the familiar words more efficiently. Doesn't seem to have the same effect on me as it once did. I guess that's good? It's initially supposed to scare the crap out of you, and later—it's not.

I think about the show later, and my poems. I chose three, that's all that's allowed. I can't sit still, and the din (SAT) is becoming overwhelming, so I stand up, lift Jac, and set her on a chair to guard the table, which is ridiculous, because nobody's going to steal our table. Before I take my walk, or whatever it is I'm about to do, I look out the window across the parking lot—sunlight reflects off of the car metal. I can see the high school of my future. I can't always see myself in that building, but once in a while I see myself over there in my best skinny jeans, highlights in my straightened hair, the head below filled with thoughts of boys, makeup, and parties—too busy to worry about blowing people up.

I turn around to see Carly and Toby approaching.

The final bell rings to end this incredibly long day. Thoughts of the art show squeeze in amongst all the others. And now I have my support group meeting. It feels like I haven't been there in so long. I push through the throng (SAT) of students in the hallway. I always seem to be going in the wrong direction.

I pop out of the building through a side door, and begin walking toward the church, which is only blocks from school. It's like automatic going to this thing. I don't even know if it helps, but Old Gloria is all about support groups. That's the thing about mental stuff—you don't know if you feel better. It's like later, you think *yeah, I guess I was worse back then*. Is that better? It's kind of a vague, negative definition of better, right?

Of course, I'm the first to arrive to the cold basement. It feels good on this sticky June day, when the New York buildings seem to pin you between the two rivers, where steam rises up and suffocates you. I set Jac down and start to unfold the clanky chairs that are stacked against the dirty windows. The sound is ear piercing, as I remove each chair from the stack. I drag two over and unfold them to start the circle. I continue to drag and unfold until I hear the loud door squeak open and then bang shut. I look over to see Nerdy Girl approaching. I know we're in this group to connect to others, but I still feel so alone. The mind is a lonely place.

Nerdy Girl says, "You need any help?"

"No, thanks, I think I got enough."

Nerdy Girl sits in one of my chairs and takes out her copy of *The Odyssey*, and waits . . .

I don't sit next to her but take a seat directly across from her in the circle. When I look at Nerdy Girl again, I see myself. Maybe that's why I still feel alone, because I only just see myself.

Others trickle in. I catch Sporty Guy checking out his reflection in the cloudy mirror on the wall as he walks by. Barbie's right behind him, but not sure it actually is a mirror. So hard to believe these two have OCD. They must have some annoying compulsions that drive their parents crazy. A few other generic people come in, followed by Morgan, the group leader, and Mork, who immediately brightens up the room with his suspenders. I turn the key in my pocket and wait for the meeting to start.

Everyone has sat in their usual place. *Why is that?* I would think that it's an OCD thing, but it seems to happen in other places, like school. I guess we all want the comfort of the known place. Morgan looks around the circle as usual. But instead of asking us generally how we are, she asks each person to introduce themselves, and share anything that's on our minds. *Anything that's on our minds?* If everyone in here did that, we'd be here for a month of Sundays, as my grandmother used to say, before she lost her mind. In fact, if they did a collective brain scan of this group, you would see enough activity to set the place on fire, which I'm surprised hasn't already happened.

The introduction thing is supposed to be used for new members, of which there are none. I wonder what Old Morgan is up to. Most of us just say our name. And I guess that's good for me, because I don't remember any of their names, if you haven't noticed. One of the generics goes further and launches into the typical three-hour shower story. I've heard it before—*I have to stay in the shower for three hours or I don't feel clean*. I shouldn't make fun of the contamination crazies. I mean they suffer just as much, their

messages are just as loud. Matter of fact, Exposure and Response Prevention treatment started because of those crazies. I read that some were hospitalized (I'm sure in the mental ward) at one time when the water coming into the hospital was shut off for some reason. Those crazies must have been jumping out of their skin because they couldn't even wash their hands. Then an amazing thing happened. These same crazies all started to get better. So that's how ERP was developed. Amazing. Yeah, great until these poor idiots got sent out into the world and their OCD came back or morphed into another type.

I'm dying in here. I twist the key faster and faster. I keep thinking about the art show tonight. It's finally here. I hope Felty makes it in time. She's been working late a lot recently. I need her to be on time. My trance is broken by Sporty Guy, who's telling us that he thinks he missed a pitch in this big game, because of his OCD. I know, he suffers too. Then we hear from Mork, I'm thinking, *here we go . . .* Mork brings us back to Thanksgiving of 2010. He's ten then, and he's at the dinner table with his parents, grandparents, and eight-year-old brother. Everyone is seated, except Mork, who has to wipe the chair with a clean rag before sitting, and then sit and stand, every so often during dinner. This went on until the grandmother couldn't take it anymore, and she finally looked directly at Mork and said, "Please sit still." Everyone ignored her and Mork, because they were used to this. Mork rose and sat down again. The grandmother, angry this time said, "I said, please stay seated." OCD, which is much stronger than any grandmother, in another minute or two, gave the command to rise, and Mork did. Now the grandmother was enraged. "I'll come over there with a belt if I have to!" Then she threw her napkin at Mork. Mork's mother asked her mother to stop and said that Mork couldn't help it. It didn't matter. Mork's little brother began to cry. Mork says he still

remembers his little brother's tears. I don't know why Mork decided to tell this story to us today.

I'm dragging my art show stuff, in a gigantic garbage bag, to the school. We can use a tri-fold poster board, and they're supposed to supply the table. Thank god it's not raining. I open the front door to the school, wondering about security. The auditorium/gym is right across from the front. I push open the heavy door. Of course, I am the first one here. I love this time of day now, where the light crisscrosses the room. I don't get to see it much in here.

There are going to be about thirty or forty of us. Some sixth graders, but mostly seventh and eighth. Felty is supposed to meet me here as soon as she can. Here's hoping

The tables are already set up. They have numbers written on masking tape in the corner of each one. Of course, I would be assigned 13. Already, not good. I haul my stuff to table 13 and start to unpack my Hefty bag. I set the poster board up on a stand which Amazon swears will hold it. So far, it seems to be working well. I push frizzy hair strands off my moist face. My mind is racing, mostly about tonight, right now: will I be good enough?, where's Felty?, I wish my mom were here. I pull the key from Jac Jr. and turn it over and over in my sweaty hand. I desperately try to push the emerging thoughts away. I think about my story, but it doesn't help. I hate this.

Kids are piling in now. What, do they send out a text blast? Everyone please arrive at this exact time. The gymnasium gets louder and louder as I continue to set up. My thoughts continue through the sounds. I had no dinner, and I feel a little sick. I set the painting of Mom in front of the poem in the center of the trifold. The painting seems a bit more abstract than I remember it. I hang my pastels first. I painted Grandma's house as I remembered it when I was little. I cheated a little and used a photo to help me. I did these so long ago, I hardly remember. I pin up both paintings of Grandma's homes on either side of the left side of the trifold. *Her old home is empty and silent. / It no longer holds "remember tos and please don't forgets," / yet its dense walls are filled with memories. / Her new home's walls are hollow. / Thoughts slip past one another, and out through cracks in the building, / evaporating quickly into the atmosphere.* In the center of the two, I place my poem.

On the right side of the trifold is my OCD stuff. This is what is causing me the most stress—revealing this to the world, well at least my world. I pin up my big blue marble. *Don't forget me / I'm in here: alone, afraid. / Don't forget me/I'm in here/shouting, trying to stand. / But inside my blue marble, / it's cold and slippery.* And the center one is my mom's. Mostly because Felty's painting was the largest, and I didn't want OCD to take up any more room than it already does. And in the center, behind the photo, surrounded by my interpretation of cotton candy:

Fluffy, forbidden blossom

sticky and sweet

Balances perfectly on a slim, hollow, pedestal.

Cotton Candy—just the right name

And to a child, a sudden burst of joy.

Joy that is elusive

My mother and I walk hand in hand through the park

I can feel that she doesn't want to be there

I stop and look up at the cart filled with bouquets

The round steel gray tub spins endlessly

While a man chases its rhythm with the white cone

My dream grows bigger and bigger until it's snapped up and

Placed carefully in its assigned slot.

I ask my mother if I can have one.

She says no, it's filled with bugs, and it's messy and will get in my hair.

We continue to walk on the hot, black pavement.

I finish my board and step back. *Not bad*, I think. For the first time, in a long time, maybe ever, I'm proud. Separately, these things didn't seem so significant, but all together, like this, they seemed to take on a new importance. The thoughts start to present themselves. I realize they had let me alone while I set up. At least I didn't notice them. Not tonight, OCD, not tonight. As a fundraiser for the school we could have post cards made up. I bought ten, thinking that was more than enough. I took a picture of the three paintings as a collage for the cards, with a few lines from the poems. They came out nice.

I kind of fan them out on the table and wait, for what, I don't know. I check my phone: Carly and Toby are on their way. In the meantime, I look around and watch the other kids set up. *Where's Felty?* I think. I hope I'm not embarrassed by her. *That's terrible, after all she's done for me.*

Ms. Jackson, my English teacher, is the first to stop by.

"Hello, Thora, doesn't this look great. She reads my poems and asks if she may take one of the cards. I tell her, "Of course!"

"I knew you were a talented writer but had no idea about your artwork."

"I've been kind of watching a friend of mine paint, she did the one in the middle."

Ms. Jackson leans in a little further, to get a better look.

"Very nice, very pretty. Who is she?"

This is the part that I dreaded, and without Felty here yet, I was on my own. My whole self, my whole pain, exposed to all.

"It's my mom."

"You look like her, Thora."

I just smile, I didn't know what to say. I mean, you can't exactly thank someone for telling you that you look like a parent, which was no accomplishment on your part. And it's the parent who left you. No one has ever told me I resembled Mom, though. And I always wished I did.

The night went really fast after that. Carly and Toby came and stayed with me awhile. People kept stopping by, a few teachers, and the rest, parents and students. I was asked a couple of questions, but nothing I couldn't handle. I twisted the key only once at the start and finally gave up looking for Felty.

It feels so good to be really proud of something, something more than just getting out of bed in the morning, which, by the way, I know I'm going to have to do tomorrow. It's almost time to take down our displays. I look around one more time and see my dad heading toward me. He stops and stares at my work for a minute or two. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Wow, Thor."

"Wow to you, Dad."

Back at home, I run ahead of Dad when we enter our building and tell him I'll meet him at the apartment. I charge up the stairs to the fourth floor. I get to Felty's and ring the buzzer. There is a note taped to the door with my name on it.

Thora,

So so sorry I missed your show. I was home to let the dogs out, and then quickly had to get back to work. I'm sure you did fine. You got this, Girl! ---F

The sun melts on metal. Toby's meeting me on the fire escape—daytime version. It's the last day of school, and they're letting us go in later. We get to leave early, too. They just have to count it as a day. So, we have to have lunch there—so stupid. The good thing is that we don't have to wear caps and gowns, speaking of stupid. I think it's way cooler to only wear them when you graduate from college. Plus it's cooler, because it's so HOT out today. It's eighty-nine degrees already and it's only 9 a.m. Oh my god, college. I think about college. It's getting closer.

I sit and wonder about Felty. I don't remember when I saw her last. I think last weekend. I think about how she missed the art show and prepare myself for her possible absence from graduation tonight. She says she's coming, but who knows?

I notice that Toby is slower to get up the stairs today. He finally makes it.

"Hey Tobe."

"Hey."

"I was just sitting here thinking about college."

"College!? Girl, you're twisted."

"Exactly."

"Let's get this high school thing over with first. Oh, and I've been wanting to tell you—you nailed it at the art show last week."

"Yeah, I thought it was pretty okay."

"No, Thor, really, I heard people talking about your display. One lady said it was the best out of all of them."

“You’re a good friend, Toby.”

“You’re getting all weird.”

“No, really. I’m lucky to have you.”

“I know I’ll have you. You have to be able to count on something.”

Old Gloria is in a good mood today. She sent me a recording of my horror show, a few days after my last visit. I listened like seven hundred times since. I swear if I hear Old Gloria’s voice one more time She also had me read what I wrote out loud, so not too keen on my voice now either. I think she’s so happy because she’s expecting a lot. The thing is, Old Gloria’s *a lot* and my *a lot* are very disparate (SAT) things. Sometimes mine is just not throwing up and hers is I rule the world. Other times, it’s reversed. Not sure where I stand today.

Anyway, there’s Old Gloria, all proud after her effusive (SAT) greeting of:

“Hello, Thora! It’s graduation day, you must be so proud!”

I must be looking at Old Gloria with a combination of a *whatever* and a *suspicious* look, because she says:

“No, really, you must be. You’ve been through a lot” I like when Old Gloria flat out recognizes my pain. When someone thinks they’re an expert in helping you, sometimes they forget why you came to them in the first place. Old Gloria continues:

“It’s going to be great. Your dad, and friends.”

What about Grandma?, Everyone always forgets Grandma.

“Oh, and your new friend—the older woman in your building . . .”

“Felty?”

“Oh, yes! Will she be there?”

“I don’t like to force anyone to attend one of those tortuously long ceremonies, but yes, she said she’d try. She’s away right now, but should be back in time.”

“That’s very nice.” Either Old Gloria is up to something, or she’s come into a lot of money recently.

“I’m pleased with your progress, Thora. You’re in a good place to start high school.” *If this is a good place, I’d hate to experience a bad one, oh wait, I have.* I must have made a face, because Old Gloria says:

“No, really, Thora. You’re doing remarkably well, considering you have a very significant case of OCD. *That’s an understatement.* Many wouldn’t do as well.”

“Many wouldn’t have access to treatment like I have. I’m lucky.”

“That’s very true, but remember, there is no cure, and you’ve fought very hard, so far, with the tools you were given. And also remember that your suffering is as real as anyone else’s. Having said that, how would you like to help out with others who have limited or no access to treatment? I’ve been working with a few other therapists on developing a linking system, where OCD sufferers who are in a better place are connected with those who are not. How does that sound?”

I think for a minute. *Toby and I are always talking about getting more involved in the mental health community.* “I guess I could try it.”

“Great, and it isn’t just OCD. It’s other mental health disorders as well. I think this is going to be really good for you.” Old Gloria fades to black.

The gym is sweltering. They have fans going, but they're not helping. I thought it was bad during the day when we're running around in here, but this is worse—ridiculous. Everyone looks shiny from all the sweat. I watch as many of them try to stay cool by fanning themselves with their programs. I remember a teacher once saying that fanning yourself makes you hotter. I've tried it. I think she was right. I can't even sit near Carly and Toby, they have us in alphabetical order. We did a half-hearted procession in at 6:00. People were still coming in. They told everyone to get here early, but no one listens. And who wants to sit in this god-awful heat, just to be bored to death even longer? Half of us were on one side, and the other half was on the other, and we marched up and met a partner and the pairs then continued up the aisle and onto these ridiculous risers on the stage.

It's a little past 6:30, according to the giant clock on the wall. I guess that's there so the phys ed teachers know how much longer they get to torture us. I wonder if it will be the same in high school. This thing should have started by now. Dad had better be here. 6:30 can be like a half day for him. I look around at all the already bored stares to see if I can spot him . . . or Felty. I'm thinking Felty would stand out with all her orange and purple. Dad would be less noticeable in his drab gray. And they certainly wouldn't be together. He barely wants to go anywhere with me, and ignores me when I talk, especially about Felty. Speaking of ignoring, like I am the pre-ceremony announcements: emergency exits, only applaud at the end (yeah, right) yada, yada (*Seinfeld*). Now they are just playing really loud music. Okay, finally, they're starting. Feedback on the mic

shoots through the speakers, then through my ears like lightning on metal, adding to the full brass band already performing inside my head.

After they announce every teacher's name, they finally start for real. The principal speaks, the vice principal speaks—one of them mentions the guidance counselors, who by the way should be acknowledged just for dealing with me. I wish I had my key. I have no pockets in my dress, so I had to leave it in Jac Jr. in my homeroom. I sigh into the thick gymnasium air.

Now comes a student/teacher musical act. “Good Riddance”—teacher on the guitar, kid singing. Not bad. I wouldn't go so far as to say “time of my life,” just sayin' I wonder how that kid got picked to do this. I'm sure there are a few other kids in chorus that would be just as good. Speaking of unfair competition, here come the awards. Okay, let me tell you something—people with anxiety, and maybe I'll expand that to any mental disorder, do not get awards in the eighth grade. Some of us may go on to do great things later in life, because, let's face it, there is a lot of talent amongst the crazies. Everyone then is all Ooo's and Ahh's. But eighth grade? Never. It's a sea of normalcy (newer term for normality popularized by Warren G. Harding as part of his campaign slogan). Whatever that is.

It's not enough just to go to school and do well these days. You have to give back, be a leader, while also being a good team player. It wouldn't hurt if you invented something either, etc., etc., etc. Ridiculous. Okay, here we go: the science award goes to: Hannah Hoffman, leadership: Hannah Hoffman, integrity: Hannah Hoffman, music: random kid, social studies: Hannah Hoffman—Joe Horte is in the row behind me and I hear him say: “If there was a Joe Horte award, that Hannah Hoffman would get it.” So

funny, and true. I look at all these people around me. Does anyone know who we really are? We're more than just report cards and plaques. The outside is all put together and plastic, while inside, some of us are ugly, messy, and hardened. But capable, in our own way, we're capable.

Next, after Josh, class president, gives his address, the endless diploma distribution begins: Jacob, Sarah, Matthew, Ryan, Kayla, etc., etc., etc. . . . I, Thora, go up to receive mine.

I meet up with Dad after the ceremony. He says: "Congratulations, it looks like you're a high schooler now."

"At least give me the summer, Dad."

"Not planning on any more trips to Boston, are you?"

I roll my eyes like any good teenager would, and let him joke about something that's not funny, in the least.

"No, not that I know of yet," trying to joke back.

"You and your friends want to go for pizza?"

"Sure, probably, I'll text them."

Wow, Dad's in rare form tonight. I guess this means one more step closer to getting rid of me. At least I have one parent who's doing it according to the rules of society.

Carly and Toby push their way through the crowd, responding to my text in person.

“We’re in,” Carly says. “No, family thing. I’m having something Saturday. You guys can come. Oh, and Toby’s mom wants him home by 11:00.”

“No, problem there,” my dad says.

“Oh, hi, Mr. G.,” Carly says like my dad just dropped from the ceiling.

Toby then sheepishly greets Dad, who he still thinks doesn’t like him.

“We’re just going to drop our stuff off at Toby’s, then we’ll come by.”

“Yeah, what she says,” Toby adds. Toby gets annoyed when Carly speaks for him, but he’s learned to live with it. I watch as my two best friends fade into the pack.

Dad and I stand there for a few seconds looking around.

“Well, you ready to go?” Dad asks.

“Yeah, sure, just give me a minute, be right back.”

I see Mork across the lobby, standing by himself. I walk over to him.

“Hey, Mo . . . ike,” I correct myself, pleased that I remembered his real name.

“Oh, hi,” Mork says in a way that I know he knows where he knows me from, and it’s not phys ed.

I say, “Boring ceremony, right?”

“Right,” Mork says, adjusting his suspenders.

A few beats of silence, then,

“Oh well, I gotta go, my dad is waiting for me. Just wanted to say ‘hi.’”

I start to walk away when Mork says:

“Hey Thora. Thanks, Hope to see you over at the high school.”

“Yeah, the high school.” I turn around and smile for the first time in a long time.
(I’ll take it.)

Dad and I walk back home. It’s still so warm out, I sweat through my dress. We get to our building and step inside. We get on the elevator and I ask Dad if he’d seen Felty at the school.

“Thor, I haven’t met the woman yet. How would I recognize her?”

“Oh, I think you would.” I press the four (which always makes me feel good for at least a moment) and tell dad I’ll meet him upstairs. The air is smothering in the hallway. I get to Felty’s door and ring the buzzer. I hope to see her quickly open the door and say *Congratulations, Kiddo! I saw the whole thing. I don’t know if that makes up for the art show, but I hope, a little.* I press the buzzer again—nothing—. I look for a note, but there is none. No sound from the dogs. I sit down on the floor opposite Felty’s door. I can feel the sweat drip slowly down my back. I continue to sit and think about all the times I’ve been here in the past few months. I’ve waited long enough. It’s time for pizza and friends. I get up and straighten my dress, trying not to think about what it may have picked up from the floor. I reach into Jac Jr. and turn the key. But before I leave, for some reason, I take the key over to Felty’s door and try it in the lock. Surprisingly, it fits. I turn it slowly until the door opens.

VITA

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Educational Institutions:

School	Degree	Date
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Scranton Central High School Scranton, Pennsylvania	High School Diploma	1975
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<u>Graduate:</u>		
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