

Take With Water

Author's Note:

The following is a true story presented as a work of fiction, or a story of imaginary events. The following is a truthful account of mental illness presented as a work of fiction, which is to say it will be read as an imaginary event. The following is one version of the truth to which there are many. The truth is a fictional text.

You will remember some of the trial runs. Others you will forget. I rack my brain but it is mind- numbing. The emptiness that precedes self. How do you learn lessons about who you are from past lives you cannot remember? Consult the medical records. They all say you were fine. Not their fault. All yours. Baseline. It gets you out the door quicker. Gets them to the bank. They laugh the whole way.

Check the medicine cabinet. It comes back to you only in generics. Everything was generic. Lack of substance. Petty tumblr girl romanticizes her own death. Fetishises real razors. Brings one home three years later. Wants so badly to fall back in love with the way she bleeds. The lust is gone. She and the razor will have to go to therapy to work this out now. She wanted it to work out. Therapist says *okay*. Gets them to the bank.

Zoloft (Sertraline). Lexapro (Escitalopram). Effexor (Venlafaxine). Wellbutrin (Bupropion). Lamictal (Lamotrigine). Neurontin (Gabapentin). Abilify (Aripiprazole). Buspar (Buspirone). Ativan (Lorazepam).

Neurontin's WebMD says nothing about any mental illness treatment. Only seizures. Lamictal is also a seizure drug.

Sometimes seizures can present as panic attacks. There is still so little known about both. We use other brains to find out why some brains don't work how they should. Brains learning about brains is like trying to see yourself without a mirror. Like trying to remember a past self with a different brain. Chemicals change the structure. Wipe it clean.

Start from the beginning. I remember the first time I wanted to kill myself. How selfish mental illness can make you. How selfish I still am. I wanted to jump in front of a car. Some suicides are selfish. Others are not. Just depends how you leave the body for cleanup. Nobody likes the sight of roadkill.

The brain comes to learn its own imbalance. The first drug I ever took was legal. When parents preach sobriety, it usually includes mind-altering substances. The doctors say these ones are okay. The parents believe it. The patient believes it. They laugh the whole way to the bank.

The first time I cut myself was with scissors. This is learned behavior. I still don't know where I was taught to bloodlet the pain. Everything is an experimental drug the first time you try it. Euphoria uninterrupted. My baby brother asks what happened. Have you ever been high until a sobering conversation?

Tell me more about your family. Can you blame someone who wants to love you but has not learned love? I remember my mother driving me to the psych ward telling me about how she went to the psych ward. A family tradition you do not display on the mantle. My parents say if I could only stop yelling and their request echoes through the house. Everything is so big, and empty.

The first drug did not make me feel much better. Everyone else said the anger was gone. Turned internal. It's like trying to tell someone how their brain looks without a mirror. Or an MRI. We probably can't study panic attacks because they would have to happen inside an MRI. It would be cruel to watch someone suffer in the name of science. On the other hand...this means we should probably know more about panic attacks by now, what with all the suffering in the name of science.

You will find release from your brain. Or you won't.

You cannot overdose on Zoloft. But when you try they will change the drug. The lexapro was anxiety-inducing. The buspar was meant to help. The abilify did, for a while.

You brain will learn to be other. Take a backseat to the drug trials. Ask it to sign a waiver. What is the payout for this experiment? *There is no cash value to sanity.* Laugh all the way to the bank. Nervous laughter. *You will identify your mania in hundreds of dollars of credit card bills.* Tell the therapist I went impulse shopping last week. *Okay.* You run into each other at the bank.

We call it our memory bank. Word bank. Emotional bank. They are all overdrawn. Do not keep cash on site. The real bank wants your money for the mania. *There is no cash value to sanity.*

The mania is easily distractible. Gets it all done though. Always get it done. Makes up for the days spent in bed. Brain tries to work doubles for longer vacation time. Many call that dedication. I call it deprivation. *You can sleep when you're dead. You can be dead soon if you just want to sleep. Up to you to decide.* Rhetorical question. With enough lost sleep you can look alive and at the same time not be living.

It's not always the flashpoints. But they could be all you remember. Sometimes the smaller moments slip through the cracks. "Don't go," in pencil in a chem lab notebook. You will think people do not care until they show you they care too much. Show up at your house and foil your plans. Push them away. When you lose the friends it will be your fault. They cared too much. Or you didn't care enough. Mental illness can make you so selfish.

Some people will not understand. Many people will not understand. Laugh at the cuts. Call them disgusting. You will not understand. This is what happens when you romanticize wearing your blood on your sleeve.

Sometimes I wish the scars weren't there. Flashpoints. Topic of conversation. Heart permanently on sleeve. Sometimes I wish there were more. Sometimes I think I am one scar. I am body ripped open into new being. Cocoons never sew themselves back together the way skin does. You can live inside the same shell your whole life.

Mental illness can make you feel selfish when you are not.

My best friend calls me on the vacant payphone that lives in the dimly lit hallways of the ghost town I occupy for seventy-two hours. This is the loudest place and yet so still and eerily quiet. *How dare I miss her bat mitzvah to go hang out at the psych hospital.* I wonder if she could feel how cold it is here, how my bones want to crack at freezing like they are filled with water waiting to expand. If she would know how sorry I felt. I do not say any of this. Instead, a nurse tells me it is time for night meds. I hang up.

Self care is not selfishness, it is the act of survival.

We go to the family therapy session. Father is reluctant to talk. I follow suit. Mother fills up the room with a volume she has been letting consume her for too long. Siblings are probably too young to understand why we are here. Maybe they should have tried this marriage counseling without the kids. Father is the patriarch of a house of cards cemented together; shaky foundation for loose walls. I am taught to believe healing will come from the brain that betrays me. Mouth shut. Eyes open.

Scissors evolved. What's better than having to work for your reward? Oranges taste sweeter when one must peel away to taste the drip of their juice. Half of the excitement comes from breaking the 5 blades apart. They are small and thin and pierce the fingers I am trying to keep graceful while battlefield breaks lazy red dawn on other skin.

You are doing this for attention and they may be right. Sometimes. They may take this to mean you are not as sick as you are presenting to be. This assumes negative attention is not a cry for help. You will not speak but they will try to draw a hallelujah from your mouth regardless, right after you swallow the pills. This is the expected offering. *Say thank you we have cured your bad brain. Your bad blood. Your*

bloodline was born with these chemicals coursing through your veins. They tell pregnant women to stop taking medication at the expense of their sanity. Martyr for a cause.

I have never stood on the shore and watched the waves kiss the beach at my feet. Except maybe now. Step too close and you are one more victim of undercurrent. Stand too far and you are in the parking lot. Picnic on the beach and watch how your attempt to call for coast guard seems pathetic next to the appeal of endless buoyancy.

Therapist suggests biting my fingers has always been a subservient form of self harm. How easily I can consume myself without noticing.

I remember sitting in the white waiting room for an interview with my brain. *There's a shark in the water.*

Idealism is like realism except better.

This story will serve as the proof. The meds will serve as the conspiracy. You were never sick just complacent. You never suffered because for a while you were better. You will forget how to sympathize. This story will serve as the precursor to the panic attacks resurfacing.

Black or white. Hot or cold. Love or hate. Happy or sad. Left or right. Up or down. Easy or hard. Good or evil. Nice or mean. Pick a side. Which one is it? Choose an answer. Run back and forth. This exercise is called suicides. Eventually you will become exhausted. Give up.

Here is something you should know: the story has a [happy ending] and a [sad ending]. The story has [recovery] and [relapse]. The story has a [personality] and a [disorder]. The story has [forethought] and [action]. Choose your own adventure at the cost of an outcome.

You have no right to choose the narrative that favors your misery. There are plenty of other people more miserable choosing not to be. There are plenty of miserable things but a surplus of happy people. Don't play a martyr. Don't mark your misery in tick marks down your arms. There are people who fought for their scars smiling. *Why can't you just be happy? Why can't you just be happy? Why can't you just be happy?*

The way memory works like a photo album instead of a machine.

I am a photo album of my medical records but I am writing an erasure poem of my past. In this version, my father is gentle. In this version, my friends stay because they love me and not out of fear. I am not kicked out of summer camp and I am not suspended from middle school and I am not suspended from high school and I am on my best behavior. Or all of this happens but I am forgiven and I forgive. I forgive. I forgive.

Survival is not selfishness, but what do we survive for?

Tell me more about your relationships. We go back to the memory bank. See, everything is malleable, even people— if you know how to do it right. Memories are malleable too and so is the truth which is how pathological liars do it they just believe they have bent the lie so far around it has stretched into the truth. The truth is my first boyfriend stayed because I was going to kill myself. The truth is I have been the abuser too. Some people just bend and bend and do not break. Somehow I always make them snap.

I am being tested on my ability to be sane. I guess these things are designed to catch you even if you think you can manipulate the test which is to say they have accounted for the fact I think I can outsmart the game. I try to bargain with the filled in bubbles but they do not budge. I try to bargain with the walls of the white room but they take no bullshit. I do not know what I am trying to win. I do not know who I am trying to convince. Every time I have taken this test it is different but it is always the same. I get an A+ on my sanity and have gamed the system.

I am surviving to tell the truth. The truth is I want to survive.

Two years later I [relapse] in a manic episode. Seven months later I [relapse] in a manic episode. 43 days later I have a manic episode but also [forethought]. I have a dream where I am covering my scars with a tattoo. In this dream I have decided to bury the evidence or I have decided to choose the [happy ending]. My [personality] is not a [disorder] but it is made of small shards of glass. Fragments of reality and memories. I am made up of small landmarks of things I have learned. I have a panic attack and shake the snow globe. Small flecks of glass puncture my achievement. I am a small glass house in the dead of summer. The snow never melts.

And how do you feel about this diagnosis? Do you think it's true? Patients who fit this description typically have childhood trauma. Do your parents love you? These patients typically do not maintain healthy relationships. Are you sure you weren't the abusive one? Where are your friends? Patients with this disorder often have a hard time distinguishing their identity from others

around them. These patients get angry easily. These patients see things in absolutes. These patients typically self harm. Are you afraid of being abandoned?

In every survey and first appointment there is the question: *does your family have a history of mental illness?* My family has a dirty rag we clean up the spills with. My mother is sopping wet with indecency. My father wrings out the cloth until his hands are blistered and red. My father keeps an abacus above my brother and I's heads. Every minute of therapy I hear the beads click together. Every beep in the emergency room sounds like a wooden ball.

Tell me about yourself. Choose a starting point.

The beginning is subjective. Do not invalidate your past but do not mourn it.

I am trying to finish this version of the truth but there is no ending to mental illness. I am trying to write about relapse in the past tense as if it does not hang like a mobile above my bed every night waiting for me to reach out a small red hand. The ending here is subjective meaning take it how you need it to exist. The ending here is only as close to tomorrow as you are. There is no finish line. There is no end goal. There is morning.