

STREAMING CONSCIOUSNESS

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When I was six, I began contemplating what the world would be like if I had never been born.

Sprawled out on the fuzzy, blue carpet next to my bookcase, arms extended, reaching for the walls on either side of me, I stared pensively at the ceiling with pursed lips and a scrunched brow, fantasizing a world—the world—without me in it.

And, for the most part, nothing changed—the sky was still blue, grass still green, and dirt still brown. The only obvious difference was that I wasn't there.

To fill in the mental blanks of this new world, I devoted hours, daily, to visualizing my metaphysical replacement: my mom's new daughter and my teacher's new student. I rationalized that my nonexistence meant someone else's

existence, and in my imagination I eagerly assumed the role of creator and observer. I designed my own absence.

I knew, for a fact, that my replacement would have blonde hair—not brown hair like mine; and her six-year-old teeth would be straight—not crooked like mine. I also knew that she would be able to do a cartwheel, choose her own bedtime, and grow up to become the first female president of the United States of America.

My imagination became a playground, and imagining the world without me in it became my favorite game. But, as I got older, and as I got smarter, the game became less enjoyable. Because as I got older, and as I got smarter, I realized that a world without me in it meant that there actually could be no conceivable world at all: a world without me in it wasn't something that I could consciously know or understand.

I realized that I could imagine a world without me in it, but I couldn't imagine a world where I had never been born. Everything that I knew—blue-sky, green grass, brown dirt—I knew because I had experienced their realities. To create a new reality without me in it was easy, but to create a reality where I was never born was unknowable.

So, stretched out on the fuzzy, blue carpet next to my bookcase, arms growing gradually longer and closer to the walls on either side of me, I stopped imagining the world without me in it and I started focusing on the world where I existed. Arms and legs pressed to the floor, eyebrows scrunched, I thought about thinking and fought off unavoidable concentration migraines. And, gradually, I watched as the blue sky, green grass, and brown dirt disappeared from my imagination, and became replaced with a deep, murky red hue: an ambiguous substitute, reassuring me that my existence,

consciousness, perception, and ability to conceptualize my own reality were my greatest privileges.

I began questioning everything. Rather than imagining straight teeth and cartwheels under the blue sky and in the green grass, I started grasping for intangible answers to outwardly unanswerable questions. Enveloped in my murky-red imagination, I spun myself into youthful existential frenzies, asking: *Am I important? Do I matter? Why am I alive?*

And, after millions of seconds and millions of questioning thoughts, at seventeen-years-old—arms and legs no longer extending, but mind still rapidly expanding—my years of quiet meditations replaced themselves with rampant ruminations. Fully charged with hormonal shifts, I created the answers to my persistently contemplated questions—convincing myself of their validity: I wasn't important, I didn't

matter, and maybe I shouldn't be alive—maybe I wasn't meant to be alive. Maybe, at age six, I was right when I imagined a world without me in it. Maybe that world—the one that highlighted my absence—would be better.

These were just thoughts at first. Thoughts like the ones that I had when I was six-years-old, safe in my bedroom, sprawled out on my carpet, thinking about thinking, the blue sky, green grass, and brown dirt. But then the thoughts transformed into beliefs and beliefs blossomed into checklist objectives.

I didn't realize it.

I didn't realize that the madness was sinking in.

I didn't realize that my thoughts turned beliefs turned objectives weren't safe anymore.

I didn't realize that my imagination wasn't safe anymore.

I didn't realize that I wasn't safe anymore.

And then it was too late.

...

On Saturday, February 16th, 2013, I tried to kill myself.

The sky was gray, I was nineteen, and blood was staining the sleeve of my sweatshirt.

A vermillion tint spread across the cotton fibers of my sleeve...growing, expanding, blossoming...and I remained an observer, unable, unwilling, to stop the red from unfolding.

Saturday, February 16th, 2013, was the day of my first suicide attempt, the day of my first psychotic break, the day that I outwardly exhibited symptoms of a type 2 bipolar

disorder, and the day that I became consciously aware of the fact that my biggest fear was, and continues to be, myself.

...

I imagined hospitals as being quiet. Silent. In my mind, the only noises that traveled down the white, fluorescent hallways—passing through half-opened doors, half-emptied rooms—were the intermittent beeps of monitors, sneakered steps of nurses, and metallic clicks of pulled away curtains.

That's how I saw hospitals on TV, I think. Peaceful, safe: a place where you go when you need help fixing something.

It was a naïve mental picture, but in the nineteen years that I had been alive, I had visited the hospital exactly two times: first, when I was born, and second, at age five, feverish and sick with the flu.

I don't have any memory of being born (which is for the best, because I'm mildly claustrophobic), so I can't speak to what the hospital was like in 1993; but, five years later, I *do* remember sitting on the floor in the Salem Emergency Room, a few feet in front of my mom, somewhat aware of my burning hot forehead, watching *Toy Story* with a group of flu-ridden kids waiting for a doctor. And, by the time that the doctor did see me, I remember that my fever had already broken.

But, on February 16, 2013, curled into a ball on the ER gurney with a bandage wrapped around my wrist, *Toy Story* wasn't playing on the TV, my mom wasn't there, and I didn't have a fever or the flu.

I was sick, but the ER wasn't going to make me better.

...

I couldn't stop crying or shaking or apologizing. The words felt hollow, but they kept pouring out: I'm so sorry, I'm sorry...

From behind the emergency room doors, a nurse called out my name nonchalantly, as though asking a question—asking if I was still there, still waiting: Hayden? Felicia Hayden?

Disoriented with welling tears, I staggered toward the voice with blurry eyes, tripping over my own feet, searching to find the right words with which to answer the nurse's question; but instead the words replayed like a skipping record: I'm so sorry, I'm sorry. Hand forcing my sweatshirt further and further against my left arm—trying to control, stop, undo what couldn't be undone—I followed the nurse's call.

The doors opened into a long, white, fluorescently lit hallway, featuring voices joined together in various languages:

speaking, yelling, and whispering quickly to one another.

Running feet slapped against the speckled white, tiled floor, leaving behind the noise of a spat, spat, spat. Shoulders brushed against me, pushed past me, moved away from me, making room for more spat, spat, spat.

At the far end of the hall, I was placed in room 17—directly across from the nurse's station, directly across from a police officer. My arm was cleaned and wrapped, and my eyes burned from the scent of antiseptic traveling through the air. The familiar clicking of the curtain sounded as Melissa, my nurse, pulled it shut, handing me a gown, pants, and socks, telling me that I needed to change, telling me that she couldn't leave me alone. Crying, shaking, apologizing, I put on my new clothes and crawled onto the gurney. Crying, shaking, apologizing, I sat as she pulled open the curtain, drew my blood, took my vitals, and walked away. Crying, shaking,

apologizing, I sat and listened to the languages of the hallway and the spat, spat, spat across the tiled floor.

Exhausted, my body relaxed—admitting defeat, surrendering to circumstance. Silently, I prompted myself, Breathe in: 1, 2, 3, Breathe out: 1, 2, 3. And then I fell asleep.

A woman, no older than thirty, woke me up. She was small, with blue eyes and blonde hair, and she was very pregnant. She carried a pen and a clipboard and asked me if I could answer some questions for her. I said yes.

I'm not sure if I was fully aware of the fact that she was doing a psychological safety assessment. At least, I'm not sure if I knew this consciously; but unconsciously, something internal encouraged me, whether out of denial or fear of unknown consequences, to lie to her. To lie, in some twisted sense, as a means to protecting myself.

Q: What happened to your arm today? Why are you here?

A: I think that I accidentally cut it, but I'm okay now. I'm really sorry about all of this. It was just an accident.

Q: Are you thinking about hurting yourself? Are you feeling safe?

A: No, I'm definitely safe. I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to scare anyone; I just didn't know where else to go. I knew that I needed help, but I'm okay. I'm so sorry.

After more questions, and more apologies, the doctor said that she'd be back to check on me in an hour, smiled, and left. I reminded myself, Breathe in: 1, 2, 3, Breathe out: 1, 2, 3. And, for the next hour, breathing,

I listened to the bathroom door opening,

I listened to the bathroom door closing.

I listened to the nurse talking to me,

I listened to the nurse talking at me.

I listened to the doctor talking to me,

I listened to the doctor talking at me.

And then I went home.

...

There's an American proverb that cautions, "Don't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes." The gist of the adage is to be careful when speaking negatively of another person, because it's difficult to know what that person may be enduring—mentally, emotionally, or even physically. But, when I was little, I was convinced that all I needed to do in order to understand others was to walk around in men's shoes.

I first tested my theory on my grandfather. When I was five, after hearing the shoe-walking proverb on an episode of *Rugrats*, I went to the front door and slid my tiny feet into my

grandfather's large, brown, leather loafers. Feet pushed to the front of the shoes, I squeaked across the spotted-red kitchen tile, trudged against the green-floral dining room carpet, and shuffled my way toward the pink living room couch where my grandparents were watching the news. Smiling and confused, they asked me what I was doing. Smiling and confident, I responded, "I'm walking a mile in Grampy's shoes so I can know him because he's quiet like a little, itty mouse!"

After a few silent seconds, Nana, with a weak smile on her face, looked to Grampy for a reaction. Straight-faced, he said, "Okay, Peanut. Time to put the shoes away." and turned his attention back to the news. Nana nodded and I made my trek to the door. I wasn't in trouble, but slogging away in oversized, men's shoes, I felt that I had done something wrong. I felt defeated.

When I returned to the living room, no one was angry or upset. The news was still on, Nana and Grampy kept watching, and I sat quietly, watching them. I didn't test my shoe-walking theory out on anyone else; but, that day, I did begin to understand people, and I began to understand that there are some events in life that make us quiet.

...

When I was a toddler, my mother's best friend committed suicide. Her best friend was my uncle. I don't know the details and no one in my family, especially my grandfather, really talks about it.

Some events in life make us quiet.

...

When I was younger, I was introduced to Sigmund Freud as a result of cartoons, TV shows, and eavesdropping on adult conversations. I knew that he was a famous psychologist, I knew that he had been dead for a long time, I knew that the phrase, "How does that make you feel?" was asked as a joke on his behalf, and I knew—and loved—eavesdropping long enough to hear the "Freudian slip" jokes: When you say one thing, but you mean your mother! I mean...another. (I also knew that Freud had a lot of issues with maternal figures.)

Freud was funny. And laughing at Freud was funny. And I confidently maintained this humorous opinion of Freud. Until senior year of high school. When I realized that Freud wasn't *actually* funny. Freud was just an asshole.

According to psychologists Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2008), Freud believed that girls are essentially "defective

boys” and “female psychosexual maturity requires... abandoning the idea of a substitute penis.” Because, apparently, every little girl actually wants a penis for, not a pony.

I’ve never wanted a penis. I say this with complete assurance, because it’s a thought that has crossed my mind on more than one occasion. I think that it’s even fair to argue that this is a thought that has crossed every woman’s mind at one point or another, if for no other reason than out of blatant curiosity.

However, being forced to take gym class helped reassure me that I was, in fact, more than happy with not possessing male genitalia. This became increasingly obvious during games of dodge ball, or basketball, or really anything involving balls—pun intended. Because it was during these

“games” that I witnessed the unfathomable pain of my... endowed...classmates.

In third grade, I remember my gym teacher thinking that it was a good idea to play dodge ball with kick balls. Unsurprisingly—the tiny, un-athletic magnet that I am—I was pegged in the face by the fierce throw of inflated red plastic within moments of the game’s start. I immediately felt my body propelled backwards into the floor and wound up in the nurse’s office, sobbing, with a cold compress against the back of my head and a hatch-marked pattern printed across my face. Since then, I have distrusted sports.

High school gym class was worse

By tenth grade, I had embraced the fact that I wasn’t meant to be an athlete. Instead, I channeled my competitive nature into my academics and focused my attentions on typical teenage activities: doing homework, hanging out with friends,

being uncomfortable with the way that my body was developing, poetry club, resenting my parents. I was average. And, as a result, I had every intention of being average during gym class.

One day, in tenth grade, Mr. Trusseau informed us that we would be playing dodge ball. Fortunately, over the years, the game became less archaic and we evolved to playing with foam balls, rather than the injurious, traumatic, kick balls of my childhood. Fortunately again, I had evolved—as a result of many years of mandatory gym class dodge ball games—to being a very skilled “dodger,” surviving the game unscathed long enough for my team to win or for the opposing team to take pity on me as last person standing.

But, during the game in Mr. Trusseau’s class, I was instantly hit in the leg with a ball and declared “out.” The impact was painless and I eagerly made my way over to the

side of the gym, away from the combat zone. And it was there, on the sideline, that I witnessed my friend Jason Douglas meet a similar fate to my third-grade self.

The game was in full play with tensions mounting on either side of the dividing line between the teams. The balls were evenly dispersed, and Jason had the look of instinct in his eye. He was ready to fight. He was ready to win. With a ball in his hand, he focused on his target—Danny Williams—and drew his arm back for the kill shot. But, what Jason didn’t see was Samantha McAdams, my friend and his opponent, winding her arm back concurrently: focused on taking out Jason. As Jason’s arm snapped forward, sending the ball swiftly through the stuffy gym air, a foam ball lodged itself with impossible speed into his testicles and penis.

Bending over from the sudden impact, Jason released a guttural howl into the echoing space of the gym. He collapsed

to the floor, curling himself into fetal position, and while the girls looked on with horror, the boys doubled over into fits of laughter.

There have been multiple occasions when I have thought of what it might be like to have a penis. I have even thought of the societal benefits associated with having a penis: the absence of a glass ceiling, higher pay, greater respect and privilege. For these reasons, and how men are valued in our society when compared to women, I imagine this is partly why Freud believed that girls are “defective boys.”

But, as depressing as that thought is—the idea of girls somehow being defective—I wonder what the implications are of the pedestal that Freud places his concept of “boys” on. Because, when I think of what it might be like to have a penis, I also think about how much more susceptible I would be to pain. I think about Jason getting hit with the dodge ball and I

think about how boys are told to be strong and to stop crying, rather than to be vulnerable and open with how they are truly feeling. I think of the pain that they feel and the pain that they learn to hide so that their friends don’t double-over and laugh at them. I think of my uncle and of how he successfully committed suicide. I think of how he probably also had bipolar disorder because it’s genetic. I think of how he was depressed and of how he wasn’t able to talk about it, because he was trained not to. I think of how he wasn’t able to get help.

And I think of how I am, according to Freud, a “defective boy,” and I think of how—despite his theory, despite my status as defective, despite my existence as female—I’m still alive and my uncle isn’t.

...

The American proverb cautions, “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” But, at this point in my life—reflecting upon my past with the proverb—I’ve decided that it should *actually* say: “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes...but not literally...it’s just a metaphor. Seriously, please stop. You’re not funny. Felicia, seriously.”

I am extremely judgmental of Sigmund Freud. But, it’s fine—acceptable, even—because I have had the opportunity to walk not one, not two, but many miles in Freud’s shoes.

Sort of.

These miles were actually walked within the confines of my house.

For Christmas a few years ago, my best friend presented me with the gift of Freudian slippers. They’re actually everything that I could ask for from a pair of slippers: they feature a black, plush, cushioned sole, which allows me to feel like I’m stepping on air, and the entirety of psychological theory and thought, when I walk, my feet are covered and kept warm by Freud’s face—including his ears, beard, nose, his signature black-rimmed glasses, and, my favorite part, his mouth. And, when I put these slippers on, my toes slide right into a piece of loosened, semi-detached red fabric, so that when I walk Freud’s tongue moves, and it looks like he’s talking.

But he’s not talking.

And that’s the way that it should be.

Because, even after walking miles in Freudian slippers, and taking many more years of higher education psychology courses, I still believe, with more than enough conviction, that—were I alive in the mid-1800s to the early 1900s—Sigmund Freud and I wouldn't have gotten along.

Reason one being that he was annoying. And had a particularly odd view of children. Which he was also very open about expressing.

In great detail.

Which is weird.

For example, “Freud approached sexuality from the point of view of the boy—a male child. His perspective was not only male, it was also that of the child. For Freud, psychological life was best understood from the viewpoint of the child; postadolescent development was essentially nonexistent” (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2008).

Freud's sole perspective with which he viewed life was from the viewpoint of a little boy. I like kids well enough, even little boys. They're funny, and sometimes adorable, and they usually mean well; but they're also exhausting, and immature, and—at times—insensitive, but it's okay because they're little boys and they don't know any better—not yet, anyway.

Sigmund Freud was a grown man who played pretend as a little boy. Because he was a grown man, and not a miniature person in his early stages of development, he wasn't adorable. He was creepy. And he usually didn't mean well. And he was exhausting and immature and insensitive, and he was old enough to, one would hope, know better. Little boys grow up, Sigmund Freud didn't.

I can't help but to imagine that Freud was an immediately exhausting person to interact with, converse with, or even associate with, but one merit that Freud did have, in my

opinion, is a love for literature. Like me, Freud was an avid reader. Unlike me, Freud did cocaine. No, really. How else did he come up with the “Oedipus complex”?

“Freud viewed Oedipus’ dilemma as that of every man. He said, ‘His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our fathers’ (S. Freud, 1900, p. 262)” (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2008, p. 6).

Sober, I’m nearly positive that I couldn’t deal with Freud. Coked up and high out of his mind? Talking about how our first sexual impulse is to our mothers and our first impulses of murder to our fathers? I’m a largely nonviolent person, but there’s a really decent chance that I would harm him as a

means to shutting him up. The idea of engaging with a cocaine-snorting, psychobabble-spewing, energy-riddled Sigmund Freud far exceeds the limits of my patience and my energy. And dealing with him talking about children and his distorted psychosexual theories on top of that?

Pass.

...

In addition to my Freudian Slippers, I have also amassed quite the Freudian collection as a result of the efforts of my advisors and parents. Amongst my Freudian collection, I have “Dr. Freud’s Therapy Ball,” which is essentially a Magic Eight Ball with far more ambiguous responses. With fervent desire, I made it my mission, nay—my sole purpose—to utilize Dr. Freud’s Therapy Ball as a means to discovering ways to overcome my Freudian judgments and further develop as a

person. The following is the real-life transcript of the encounter:

Me: Dr. Freud, how can I learn to judge you less harshly? I find myself torn—confused, even—by the extent to which I dislike you, given the fact that I do not, and have never, known you. I don't dislike all of your theories, because I'm not so proud as to suggest that you made no contribution to the development of psychological study—because, in my opinion, you do have some good things to say about consciousness—but you as a person. I really dislike you, as a person.

Freud: Less guilt, more smiles.

Me: So...should I continue to hold you in high position as one of the most annoying people, well, ever?

Freud: Hmmmmmm...

Me: Do you care to elaborate? Now is hardly the time to be speaking in fluent onomatopoeia. What are you thinking? What advice can you give me?

Freud: Free your inner child.

Me: What? Do you mean to say that I should be more blunt and upfront about my judgment of you? Or should I simply disregard you altogether and run away when I see you? Is avoidance a more appropriate method?

Freud: Baby steps.

Me: So, what? You're calling me a baby now? Are you saying that I should just keep my mouth shut since babies can't speak? Do you want me to just cry when I think of you, rather than engage in a verbal resolution of my feelings toward you?

Freud: Let's channel that anger.

Me: So...should I, like—wait...what? Anger? I'm not angry.

Well, now I'm angry. You're making me angry.

Answer my questions.

Freud: Who am I talking to now?

Me: ME. You're still talking to ME. This conversation is making me judge you more. Are you going to keep this conversation confidential? Because I've read that you never kept your conversations confidential, despite ethical code. That's messed up. Do you realize how messed up that is—it's you taking advantage of your patients. You're supposed to be helping them, not disclosing their most personal information.

Freud: I don't date patients.

Me: I didn't even ASK if you...ew...NO. Oh, dear God, no.

Ew. What are you even talking about? Why would you say that? That's such an uncomfortable comment to

make. How inflated is your ego—I'm trying to tell you that I dislike you, why would you think that I was asking you to date me? And you're old? And creepy?

Ew. No. Definitely no.

Freud: How did that make you feel?

Me: I'm so uncomfortable right now. That made me feel really uncomfortable. There was some really unpleasant imagery happening there. And that was a really inappropriate thing for you to say. So gross.

Freud: Break-through!

Me: I mean, well, okay...I don't know that me disliking you both intellectually as well as romantically is really news, but...

Freud: You're in denial.

Me: I would swear at you right now, in writing, but my editors wouldn't like that very much. Are you high right now?

Denial? Wait...why the...okay, this is weird. I'm an adult, and I'm currently talking to the world's most provoking and obnoxious magic eight ball. I'm currently talking to an inanimate object. This is an eye opening experiencing. And I'm still talking. I'm an adult, what am I even doing?

Freud: Let's go with that.

Me: YEAH, LET'S. LET'S GO WITH THAT. YOU'RE RIGHT, SIGMUND. YOU'RE RIGHT. CAN YOU HEAR ME YELLING IN THIS TEXT? DO YOU SEE MY CAPS LOCKED ANGER? CAN YOU TELL HOW I'M FEELING RIGHT NOW, SIGMUND? CAN YOU?

*Note 1: Conversation with inanimate object posing, as dead psychologist, Sigmund Freud, yielded no conflict resolution.

*Note 2: Conversation with inanimate object posing, as dead psychologist, Sigmund Freud, has caused an existential crisis in the advice-seeking, question-asker.

...

Familial relationships are complicated. And, as I can imagine, familial relationships are only made that much more complicated when your dad is your therapist.

From a young age, Anna Freud served as a primary target of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic therapy, and this lasted years into her adulthood. For much of Anna's life, her father served as experimenter and she as experiment.

Sigmund Freud didn't develop the Pygmalion Effect, but he may as well have, because he developed the Antigone Complex. Also known as the self-fulfilling prophecy, the Pygmalion Effect is the phenomenon that explains better performances by people when greater expectations are put on them (Bruns et al., 2000). The Antigone Complex, based off of Sigmund Freud's obsession with literature (and with his daughter), refers to "The heroic character of Antigone and her self-abnegating devotion to her father..." (Willner, 1982).

Freud developed the Antigone Complex as a result of his blurred relationship as father and psychoanalyst to Anna. And, maybe as a result of the Pygmalion Effect, and Freud's glorification of the Antigone character, Anna grew to become completely devoted to her father—choosing him over marriage, motherhood, or a life of her own.

As an adult, "Anna Freud's intellectual achievements were more subtly influenced by her picture of herself as the protector of her father and his work. Many of Anna Freud's most important contributions involved rejection of her father's ideas...It was she, not her father, who showed the power of the concept of ego analysis and the primary role of defense analysis, as opposed to analysis of the drives, which has remained a dominant theme in psychoanalytic technique for 70 years (A. Freud, 1966). In opposition to her father's depreciation of the value of direct child observation (A. Freud,

1922), she was among the first and most successful advocates of direct child observation in psychoanalysis (A. Freud, 1973); she demonstrated how flawed was Freud's idea of integrated developmental lines (Abraham, 1924) and showed that, in fact, much psychology and pathology was better explained by the idea of interacting developmental lines (A. Freud, 1965). Yet, throughout her writings, she never described herself as proceeding contrary to her father, but always as his absolutely loyal intellectual disciple" (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2008).

I'm grateful for Anna's contributions to the field of psychology, but I wonder most as to whether or not she was happy being Antigone. I wonder if she was happy being Sigmund Freud's daughter, if she was happy studying psychology, if she was happy with her life, or if she did all that she did as a means to completing her self-fulfilling prophecy.

After her father's death, Anna focused on developing Sigmund Freud's concepts of defense mechanisms—learned behaviors that arise out of the unconscious in response to particular events, as a way to further self-preservation. Undeniably, this information is crucial to the study of psychology and human behavior; I just wonder whether or not Anna's fixation with working on her father's theories was, in and of itself, her own version of a defense mechanism. A defense used to not let her father down, a defense used to live up to expectations she had for herself, and a defense used to keep herself safe, in a state of comfort, rather than to take professional risks and do something amazing away from her father's shadow.

...

Freud believed that, “The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water.”

He wasn’t the first to present the idea, or even the first to establish a theory, but Sigmund Freud was, and is, the man responsible for popularizing the concept of consciousness.

He believed that there are three levels of consciousness within each of our minds, and only about 10% of the mind—the very tip of the iceberg—composes our conscious, or the

part of our mind that’s able to perceive the present moment and gather awareness. The second part of our consciousness is known as the pre-conscious and whereas it stores memories and knowledge that can readily be brought into the present awareness, like the name of a friend whom you bump into on the street, or the different errands that you have to run on Friday, it only composes between 10% and 15% of our overall consciousness. The real importance, according to Freud, rests in our unconscious, a massive beast possessing and dominating 75% to 80% of our minds—and I don’t know that I disagree with him.

When I think of icebergs, my first thought—my first thought that is pulled from my pre-conscious into my conscious—is of the Titanic. Of course, being a twenty-two-year-old female, rather than think solely of the major historical disaster, the wreckage of the infamous passenger ship, the

Titanic, on April 10, 1912, I think of the movie based off of the event starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

In the movie, which is what must have happened in real life, the captain of the ship neglected to see the tip of the iceberg sticking out of the water before it made contact with the ship. But, the tip of the iceberg—Freud’s conscious—and even the piece of the iceberg floating a few more feet under the visible tip—Freud’s pre-conscious—wasn’t what destroyed the ship. Had the iceberg only been a few feet deep, there may have been minor damage made to the ship, but more likely, the weight of the ship would have likely glided right over the iceberg.

What destroyed the ship was the other 75% to 80% of the iceberg that was invisible to the captain. The other 75% or 80% mass that maintained the stability and structure of the entire 100% once the uppermost part of the iceberg impacted

and collided with the ship: ripping into the bow and tearing off its exterior, filling the interior with freezing water, and forcing the 882 foot long ship to sink to the bottom of the ocean, killing thousands of people in the process.

The unconscious part of our mind—that’s the part that’s dangerous. The unconscious part of our mind—that’s the part that contains, according to Freud’s theory, our fears, violence, immorality, and shame. The unconscious part of our mind is the part that we should be afraid of.

...

At night, sprawled across my bed, under layers and layers of covers, I like to imagine—just as I’m about to fall asleep, during the moments that trickle softly and slowly from consciousness into unconsciousness—I’m already dreaming. I imagine that the life around me: the moments of the day, the month, the year, and the decades that have filled my mind with memories, have all been pieces and parts of a lingering daydream. I imagine that, when I wake up in the morning, I will be somewhere else—someone else. I imagine that, when I wake up, things will be different. Things will be better.

And when I wake up in the morning, back in my bed... tangled and twisted in layers of covers that have been kicked and pushed throughout the night...

I am reminded,
By the incessant,
Ear piercing,

Screeching,
Pitch
Of
My
Alarm
Clock...
That my life is not a dream.
My life is a nightmare.

...

My arms and legs were dyed a shade of red that reminded me of the Duncan Butterfly Yo-Yo that I used to play with as a kid. I taught myself tricks like “around the world”

and “walking the dog” as I laughed into the warm summer air, feet dancing across the soft, green grass with each throw and spin of the yo-yo.

But, sitting on the edge of my bed, feet balancing on the bed frame, a razor blade resting next to my pillow, I felt my eyes watering and my body convulsing into sobs. I concentrated on the slight stream of red that fell across my body, landing at my toes, dripping slowly onto the floor—staining my fuzzy, blue carpet.

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Denial

“Denial is the refusal to accept reality or fact, acting as if a painful event, thought or feeling did not exist” (Grohol, J. 2015).

When I was twelve or thirteen, I stopped feeling pain. Or, rather, I stopped acknowledging the fact that I was experiencing pain.

One morning before school, rushing around the house to collect my things, I stubbed my toe against the living room coffee table and fell face-first into the floor. Except, rather than cry, and rather than yell, I silently told myself, “No.”

Standing up, I brushed off my clothes, fixed my hair, and continued gathering my things for school: unfazed and uninterested in dealing with the incident.

A few weeks before my toe-stubbing incident, I had a school assignment where I had to research the etymology of my name. Derived from Latin, I learned that “Felicia” means “happiness.” In some twisted way, I think that the assignment led me to believe that I was only allowed to be “happy,” and

that all other emotions were in some way wrong—not meant to be experienced: the Pygmalion Effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I stopped noticing the toe stubs and the scrapes and bruises first—I decided that, rather than reasons for tears, physical ailments and maladies were inconveniences. And as I got older, and arguably less clumsy, I began to stop feeling my emotions, too. I smiled, and I laughed, but at some point it became a habit instead of a reaction.

My brain developed a list of shortcuts and cues. When I received a compliment—a teacher praising me for an A on an essay or an acquaintance admiring my outfit—I smiled, I said “Thank you!” enthusiastically (making sure that my eyes shone a little brighter, my body language confident) and I pretended, as much as possible, to believe in the compliments that I was being given. But it didn’t work. My body felt blank, so, in

certain situations I commanded myself to smile, in others to frown, but in most cases, especially once college started, I commanded myself to not react at all—it seemed easier that way. Rather than feel too much, my brain decided to feel nothing at all. A defense mechanism.

I don’t think that I knew I was depressed before I tried to kill myself, or maybe I did—some part of me must have known. Thinking back, I remember all of the days and nights I spent crying, sometimes sobbing, for no identifiable reasons—lying on my fuzzy, blue carpet next to my bookcase, pretending, wishing, that I was someone else. It shouldn’t have, but, at the time, this seemed normal. I convinced myself that it was normal—I was normal. There was nothing inherently wrong with my life. I didn’t know why I was crying, and since I couldn’t find a reason, I pretended that it wasn’t happening.

My imagination has never been calm, and so, when I started to think, day by day, gradually more and more, about death and dying, those thoughts seemed normal, too. When I used to drive, and hope for an accident, or for the breaks to fail; when I used to look down the staircase on the fifth floor of Meier Hall (a classroom building on my college campus), and think about falling down the stairless opening between the windows and the railings; when I used to look at the knives in my kitchen and think about what would happen if I touched a blade to my skin—I didn't take the thoughts seriously. I should have, but I didn't.

Because my name was Felicia, Felicia means happiness, and I was happy. There was no other option.

...

Sublimation

“Sublimation is simply the channeling of unacceptable impulses, thoughts and emotions to more acceptable ones”
(Grohol, J. 2015).

At the time, taking eight college courses, being the President of the Women's Center, the treasurer for the Philosophy Club, and working as a waitress, a barista, and a nanny seemed like a good idea. Or, rather, it seemed like a good way of placing myself in a routine so distracting, organized, and controllable that I had no choice but to ignore and channel my constantly depressive, and frequently suicidal,

thoughts. With a busy schedule, there wasn't enough time to kill myself.

I was able to convince myself that nothing was wrong, and, in turn, I was more than able to convince everyone else around me that I was the epitome of perfection, happiness, and achievement. The only problem was that, despite my chaotic business, I felt no sense of accomplishment. It was hard to actually feel much of anything.

That was, of course, until I discovered the miracle drug—not cocaine, like Freud would suggest I try—but, instead, alcohol.

In high school, we used to joke about drugs. My friends and I, I mean. It was probably the privilege talking, because growing up in a middle-class suburb outside of Boston, the most we heard about actual drugs was from episodes of *Law & Order* or *The Wire*. Weed and alcohol didn't count, as much as

health classes tried to convince us that they did, and prescription pills like Adderall, were in the murky gray area. We knew that serious drugs like heroin and crack and meth existed, but in our worlds they didn't, so we joked—not to be mean, or to take the problem lightly, but we did it in order to preserve that small part of our innocence that allowed us to believe that we were safe. Drugs meant danger, and we were safe.

The first time that I drank, I was a freshman in college. I wasn't twenty-one, and I was terrified. Underage drinking is obviously illegal, and I wasn't—and I'm still not—much of a rule breaker. But, according to every college-themed TV show or movie, that's what I was supposed to be doing, so I did.

It was the weekend of Columbus Day, and my friends from high school all came home for the long weekend. Since Emily's parents were away in Maine, her house was empty,

and the twelve of us met there—fully supplied with handles of rum, vodka, bottles of soda and juice, Solo cups, and some snacks. We laughed as we mixed drinks, trying to act and feel older than we were.

I was too paranoid to enjoy myself, and with each sip of cheap, raspberry flavored vodka that I took, I became that much more convinced that the police would show up. And then I went to sleep, and then I woke up the next morning, and then everything was exactly the same as it was the day before: drinking was okay, it didn't change anything, drinking was part of what it meant to be a college student, I was supposed to drink.

So, when sophomore year came, and my depression increased with my suicidal thoughts alongside it, and as my chaotic schedule stopped working as an effective distraction, I turned to alcohol. I turned to vodka and rum, red wine and

white, the cheap stuff and the expensive—it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. I was reckless and I was happy in my ignorance—happy with my ability to ignore and my ability to be ignored.

I started going to more parties at school—four, sometimes five, nights a week. The theatre house was always my favorite because, cliché or not, there was always something dramatic happening, and every party was its own individualized soap opera episode. Each night, I distracted myself with new drinks and new guys, flirting and bubbly laughter. Love triangles increased in intensity with each poured drink, different people reenacted different scenes from different plays, and I got to pretend that I was someone else; I got to pretend that I was healthy and safe and not afraid.

I don't know why, but I was always protected at parties. A friend was always watching me, only allowing me to push

myself so far over the edge. Drugs were always kept away from me, and I was never taken advantage of. At the frat house, Julian pulled me to the dance floor, away from the lines coke arranged on the beer-pong table; in the senior housing, James turned my attention toward him, away from the small plastic baggies of recreational powdered meth. Aside from weed, I never saw the drugs, I only learned about them after the fact. For this, I'm grateful.

At first, I only drank and smoked at parties, but gradually it wasn't enough. I started drinking every night, alone, and then I started getting drunk every night, alone. I smoked when I wanted to, uninterested in considering consequences or analyzing my actions. I knew what I was doing, and I knew that it wasn't a good idea, but I chose to do it anyway, because—truthfully—I didn't care. I was reckless, and I didn't care. I couldn't care.

There was something inside of me pulling, gnawing, clenching, and crawling its way out. There was something inside of me demanding to be released. I could feel it sometimes—the pain, the sadness, and the fear; but drinking made everything easier, and smoking weed made it even better. Drinking made everything go away. Vodka made me laugh, wine made me flourish, being drunk made me happy. I wanted to be happy.

...

Rationalization

“Rationalization is putting something into a different light or offering a different explanation for one’s perceptions or behaviors in the face of a changing reality” (Grohol, J. 2015).

I decided that I was sad—not depressed, definitely not depressed because to admit such a thing was, rather than a cause by a chemical imbalance, a conscious choice and a way of expressing a lack of gratitude for my otherwise advantaged life.

When I was a kid, I used to think of depression as some sort of urban legend. I didn’t know of anyone who had “it.” I wasn’t even really sure of what the “it” was, but I imagined a lot of crying and a lot of people deciding to kill themselves for what appeared to be no apparent reason, because that’s how TV explained suicide. Depression and suicide, they made people angry.

When I was an infant, my uncle killed himself. Growing up, I learned pieces of the story—still fragmented—that include a gun and maybe a bridge, but my big takeaway growing up was to believe that he was selfish and dumb for doing something so “selfish” and “dumb.” His suicide had upset my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, and especially my mother, because he was her best friend.

I think part of the reason why I wanted, so badly, to rationalize and believe that I didn’t have depression was

because I didn't want to hurt my mother again. She didn't deserve that. So, it was easier—and it made more sense—to reason that I was sad or just hormonal, because all college freshmen and even some sophomores have a difficult time transitioning into a collegiate atmosphere.

I told myself that being sad was just a necessary component to developing as a student and overcoming barriers and obstacles in the future. All I had to do was to try harder. I just had to get over my feelings, be more appreciative of my life, and suck it up. I needed to stop being selfish.

I didn't want to attend Salem State University. In fact, I didn't even apply. Since I was seventeen when I graduated high school, my parents applied to the school-around-the-corner for me, decided that I would live at home and commute, and, in turn they would pay for my education. I told myself that I should be more appreciative, rather than upset with them for

this. I told myself that I should let myself forget about the private schools that I was accepted into, hours away from home, with \$20,000 grants, and appreciate the fact that, upon graduation, I would be loan-free.

It made sense, and so I rationalized through my bitterness and feelings of betrayal, that this was what was best for me. I rationalized that being sad was understandable, but I needed to get over it. I rationalized that I had a good life, I needed to be more appreciative, and I needed to try harder. I rationalized that my feelings were unimportant.

And, gradually, I began to rationalize that my life was unimportant. I began to rationalize that my actions were unimportant. I began to rationalize that I was unimportant. But, I rationalized that none of this meant that I was “depressed.”

A couple of weeks after I graduated from high school, I had my first panic attack. I curled myself up into a ball on the cement driveway next to my house, and I, well, panicked.

I had just found out that a kid with whom I had graduated high school with had been killed in a car accident. I didn't know him well, but it didn't matter. I felt my head fill and my thoughts spiral.

Gasping for air, head pressed against the siding of my house, I kept whispering, over and over: *I wish it was me. I wish it was me. Make it me. I wish it was me.* In that moment, I felt dangerous. Impulsive. Unsafe. I had always thought about what it might be like to die, but I had never wanted it. The thoughts were a second-nature, a drifting fantasy. I had thought about hurting myself before, but I had never wanted to do it. Not like I did on that day.

...

Repression

“Repression is the unconscious blocking of unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses” (Grohol, J. 2015).

Crying and hyperventilating, I shook violently for more than an hour before my mother found me. When I saw her, I swallowed my words, suffocating myself in silence. Red-faced, snot-nosed, disheveled and feral, I was terrified and I was terrifying. She yelled at first, commanding me to stop shaking, but I couldn't; and the look of fear in her eyes informed me that she knew this.

I couldn't figure out how to make my body uncurl in order to stand up and walk like a normal—a normal and sane—person. I was stuck, glued to myself by tears and muscle tremors, my arms slowly constricting tighter and tighter around my legs. I wanted to be small. Miniscule. Unnoticeable. Invisible. Nonexistent.

At some point, my mother must have called my father, because I watched as his red Toyota sped down the slope of our driveway. Car still running, he swung open his door, picked me

up, carried me into the backseat, and twenty minutes later into the hospital. I rested on a gurney, convulsing, seeing through teary-eyes and sobs the looks of fear on my parents' faces.

When the doctor came into the room, he asked me if I ever had thoughts about killing myself. I said no. The doctor asked me if I ever had thoughts about hurting myself. I said no. I said what he, what my parents, wanted to hear, and what I wanted to believe. I said what I knew that I was supposed to say. I lied.

The doctor injected me with Ativan to calm my body down, and I stopped shaking, and I went home.

I called the incident a panic attack. We all did. But, knowing now how it feels, I think that this was my first mental breakdown.

The next morning, when I woke up, I went outside and dragged my pink sleeping bag and a lawn chair to the middle of my

yard. Lying under the sky, I closed my eyes and felt the tears run down the sides of my face, heated by the sunlight. I wasn't upset, I wasn't scared; I was nothing.

My parents and I never talked about what happened. I think that it was too painful, too scary, to mention—the fear that talking about it might make it happen again.

I felt different after that day—numb. Dull, a blunted edge. But, after a while, the dullness, lifelessness, it felt normal. It wasn't long before I forgot about the words that I whispered to myself, or the physical curling and shaking of my body. And it wasn't long before I convinced myself that I was back to normal. I convinced myself that nothing was wrong, that nothing had ever been wrong.

It was easier that way; it was easier to believe in normality than it was to accept abnormality.

...

Reaction Formation

“Reaction Formation is the converting of unwanted or dangerous thoughts, feelings or impulses into their opposites”
(Grohol, J. 2015).

I've never thought of myself as being invincible. When I was a kid, I used to cringe at the thought of dying. A reel of scenes played through my head involving my eight-year-old self being ejected from a car in an accident and dismantled on

the side of the road, being kidnapped, or—and this was my greatest fear—getting trapped in quicksand.

I now know that quicksand is not as hazardous as I once believed, nor is it as common as I once believed. But, my generation was raised to be afraid. The car accident and the kidnapping ideas, those came from elementary school health classes and safety videos. The quicksand came from cartoons.

I had a very overactive imagination when I was a kid, and I still do. I used to think about all of the different scenarios in which I could possibly die. And then I would think about thinking a lot. And then I would think about the fact that I was thinking about thinking...a lot. And when you do that much thinking, you start to realize that you know a lot, but you also know very little.

For example, in high school, I learned a lot of things, but not necessarily the really important things that I needed to

know for life. I never learned how to balance a checkbook, I never learned what a 401K plan was, or why knowing the exact structure and form of a sentence, and being able to label each part, was somehow more important than the meaning of the sentence. I never learned how to apply the quadratic formula to a real-life situation, if the meat served in the cafeteria was from an animal or a human, or how to pay attention to something that you would rather avoid and ignore than confront.

I don't know when the shift happened, but I went from thinking about dying to thinking about how much I wanted to die, and so, I ignored it.

I ignored the moments when I used to tell myself that I make people feel helpless by being alive. Except, by being dead, I would make them feel guilty. By being alive, I felt guilty. I ignored the moments when I discovered that there was no solution.

So, I learned to smile. I learned to be convincing. I talked about the future that I didn't believe that I had. I talked about being glad that I was alive when all I could think about was how easy death would be. I talked about someone other than myself. I talked about the truth that others wanted to hear, but not the truth that I was experiencing.

And so, I smiled.

...

Dissociation

“Dissociation is when a person loses track of time and/or person, and instead finds another representation of their self in order to continue in the moment. A person who dissociates often loses track of time or themselves and their usual thought processes and memories” (Grohol, J. 2015).

When I woke up in the morning, I stood in front of my closet, picked out my clothes, and got dressed. I felt off. The edges of my consciousness, my awareness, they felt duller—more rounded. My closet looked different and my body felt different, but I continued getting dressed.

It was a Saturday morning, and on Saturday mornings I went to the gym. On autopilot, I got into my car, but then I disappeared. My car kept driving, I guess. Well, I kept driving...but it wasn't really me. It was my body, but I—my consciousness, my awareness, and my ability to harness and

gather control—I was somewhere else: Temporarily erased and pushed aside, no longer a necessary entity within my own body.

I found myself sitting inside of my car, positioned in the middle of a vacant parking lot in Shetland Park in Salem—a twenty-minute drive from my house, and a five-minute drive from the hospital.

At first I was confused. Surprised, even, by my arrival in a parking lot and not at the gym. And then, quickly, I realized that my body was moving, but I wasn't the one controlling the movements. Gradually, I regained control of my motions to see that I was bleeding, a line drawn down my arm, its contents spilling onto my shirtsleeve.

When I realized what had happened, what I had somehow done, I began to panic. I started crying, sobbing,

hyperventilating, gasping, and grappling for my sanity, someone's sanity—any semblance of any sanity.

Shaky and confused, I drove myself to the hospital. Dazed, I trudged through the slushy parking lot toward the emergency room entrance, unsteady and unstable. I walked through the automatic doors, and up to the check-in desk.

I couldn't write and I couldn't speak, so when the person at the check-in desk asked me what was wrong, I silently held my arm out. I started crying. I hadn't cried in front of another person in years, but that didn't matter. And standing there, in the center of a room full of people, waiting patiently to be called by a nurse to the place behind the doors, my few tears turned into a few more, and a few more turned into muffled sobs of *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...*

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