

Writer's Note:

I am interested in broken things. They fascinate me.

I am studying mental illnesses, and in particular, schizophrenia. I am interested in looking into people's minds that are haunted by this illness.

I want to know the places the mind can take you.

I want to know about people who do not live their life normally...people who can see something I can't. I am interested in the stories they hold.

I have compiled my research into a creative short story that follows. In learning about highly successful people who suffer from schizophrenia—such as Elyn Sacks (a Professor in law and psychology) and Daniel Johnston (an artist and musician)—I am inspired to learn more. Even though the mind can be fragile and confining, there is still a way to overcome and celebrate it. Their illness adds beauty to their life's work.

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On. Off. Turn to the left. Look to the right. Fall forward. Run backward. Switch. Eyes watching. Sleeping. Screwing. Leaching. Eyes. People. Faces. Laces. Traces. Stop touching. Crouching. Stitches unraveling. Pavement. Cracking. Stretching. Sobbing. Flowers bobbing. Children robbing. On. Off. On, then off again. Unraveling unraveling.

This is what it is like to be in my mind.

I once met a man who only saw in the color blue. How blue a life would be all in blue. You would look across seas of blue to the horizon bleeding through shades of topaz. Trapped forever in an underwater throne. I personally would drown.

The doctor's office is too crowded. Filled with the typical patients who float around, unaware and light. The frail and wandering people sit with their heads up and eyes wide. Hands lifeless by their side. Always crowded. There is no place for quiet anymore. Not in this world. Not in the world in my mind.

A lady sitting across from me wears a yellow bow pitched perfectly atop her disheveled curls. Her lips are dry and slanted. Her yellow dress twitches as she shakes her knobby foot. Up and down and up and down. Her eyes so still. Unwavering. A man to my left keeps rambling on and on about the flowers that grow in his bed. The lady sitting next to him looks upset. She seems the most sane. Probably the most doped up. But who knows. I would rather have to deal with flowers springing through my sheets than a life of false clarity brought upon by little red pills.

Curious people I meet here. Very curious.

I have been coming here for 16 years now, ever since the day I turned 18. Every month the same thing happens. If my condition gets worse or I have some kind of psychotic episode I

come back. Those nights when the voices take over and insomnia is inevitable are always the worst. That's when they keep us inside this building and I don't know when I will be able to get out. Otherwise, they just try me on new medication. The people in here all are the same. Not many of us are truly loved. I will never have a wife.

A man walks into the room who looks like no patient that belongs here. He looks normal. This man holds his head high, and back straight and upright. His face wears a businesslike expression. Yet, the corner of his mouth is curled upward in some kind of smirk. The man walks elegantly to the counter, whispers to the lady at the front desk, and sits at the edge of a chair next to me. He has an air about him that is indescribable, and he smells like bourbon and lavender.

"Have you heard of Novazine?"

Perplexed by his deep voice, and my own lack of knowledge, I just shake my head, "No."

"Well, I woke up this morning and went along with my normal morning ritual: pour coffee, draw the blinds. And I thought about the day, not wanting it to be the same thing as the last twenty. Ever since I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, life has been harder than ever. No sleep, headaches, hallucinations. So I slid my hand in my pocket and reached for a new bottle of drugs I picked up yesterday."

I must be wrong about this man. He's just another patient who goes on and on about something in this crazy place. There comes a certain point when it's pointless listening to other people's experiences. It's meaningless to talk about their relationships with their families, fantasies that will never be true. Drugs that have put them under the moon. Life is too complicated to listen to everyone's problems. My mind is crazy. (But not as crazy as yours.)

Turn left. Stop. Fall. Crawl. Down. Sliding through puddles. Pudding. Voices. Colliding. Mixing. Meshing foreword. Backward. Wrong. Back out. Fall up. Never come down. Evil will fall in love with you. Push. Rush. Crush. Meandering through demons. On. Off. Walk. Talk. Stop.

"... this one night when I was searching through her memories." The man with the smirk was still speaking, but he finally caught my attention, "She was walking through the forest with her friend. They were holding hands and laughing. It made me remember something about myself. Something my mother told me when I was a child. She would look at me and say 'You will always be a happy person, because your smile can light anyone's day. Your smile will never leave the world my child, because it is in our hearts.'" He smiled to himself, fidgeted with his hand, and then looked at me straight in the eyes.

"It's called Novazine. It will take you into a world of memories. Not yours but others. It will show you memories of happier people. People better off than you and I. Like little movies projecting in your head. It reminds me of the days when I was happier. When I was loved by my parents and my best friend and I would run through the arroyos playing games in the rocks." He got up and left the office. Before closing the door, I could still see the little smirk in the corner of his mouth. I wanted one on my mouth too.

The pharmacy was open late. A good thing too. The snow was coming down too fast for the bus driver to see through the windshield and we were stuck for about an hour before we could begin moving again. I hate the damn snow. The yellow light in the CVS always makes me anxious because it's too bright to be realistic and gives me a false hope of a sickly sweet sense of warmth. My leg is shaking. Quivering my whole body. I remember the girl with the yellow bow in the office. I am anxious. I am not sure why. I feel strange taking other peoples' memories. It

seems disturbing to me. Getting new drugs has never been a big ordeal before. You get a sense of hope that maybe this time you will get better. Yet, they all turn out the same. In a couple of days the hope begins to fade and symptoms overrun the body and begin to weaken the bones and the motivation to live. Voices come back, along with paranoia and hallucinations. The world in my head spins into a counter reality. All humans are zombies who walk around with the daily task and do nothing to care. Yet, the birds are worse. They sit silently and watch, judge, and frighten. If I stop taking the drugs I feel so terrible that I end back up in the doctor's office ready to try something else. The cycle begins all over again. "John" The pharmacist called my name. The pills were ready.

Flowers. Towers. Crumbling. Slipping. Crippling. Orange trees. Branching. Reaching. Teaching. Look up. What do you see? Blondes bubbling. Prudes bumbling? Persistence pondering.

The pack of pills. It looks the same as all the others. I take it and keep it deep inside of my pocket like I am keeping some kind of world in there; some small inkling of wonderment. Hold memories in my pocket. Memories that are not mine. It gives me an uncomfortable fascination. I see the birds are following me again on my way home. I think about covering my snowy footprints to hide from them. My pockets are warm. I run inside and lock the doors. I want to keep those birds out for good. Maybe this medication will get rid of them.

My house smells old, as if someone lives there who never opens the windows, never puts flowers in jars, and never bakes a batch of cookies. Just a ghost. No one cleans up the dust behind the bed. The couch groans as I slump into it. My leg is shaking again and I can't wait. The anxiety has already possessed me. Little blue circles slide into my hands. I pop them into my mouth; no need for water as I have perfected how to take pills in any circumstance.

The screen is dark. Blackness paints over my eyes as a canvas. A painter begins to gesso the canvas. Her hair is pulled up in a bun. I don't know who this woman is. Her brush washes the canvas with greens and blues. To watch her paint, it is mesmerizing. *Flash.* Shrieking voices run through the doorway as the scent of pumpkin pie fills the room. The youngest trails in behind the other young boys. He slides along the wood floors and collides into his mother, who folds over and pulls him up to her bosom. She sits him down and plays "the airplane game" with spoonfuls of freshly baked warm pumpkin pie. *Flash.* A young woman waits breathlessly at a train station. The air is cool and her breath smokes out of her mouth in an endless rhythm. A train whistles sound in the distance, growing nearer and nearer. As it pulls into the station it brakes, creaks, and grumbles on the steel racks as the woman looks up. Soon, a rush of people sweep through the metal doors. Her eyes race through the crowds, trying to see over tall hats and lengthy men. Her eyes stop. She relaxes. And her mouth draws up into a gleeful smile as she sees the man she loves. *Flash. Flash. Flash.*

The days go by so fast now. I am opened up to a new world full of colors and smiling faces. I see whirlpools of laughter and begin sinking into the memories. Once the two-hour pill finishes its play of memories I pop another blue pill to relay a new slideshow. Everything has begun to mesh together. A friend came to visit one day. He tells me that I look great. And I am. I feel amazing.

I am confused, however. We were having a conversation. I was talking about how I used to go out and ski through the Alps in Switzerland and how the air made me so cold I had to run inside to get some hot chocolate to warm up. I told him about the snow and how it covered the

trees so all you could see was small traces of green and how it never snowed like that in Baltimore anymore.

“But you hate the snow. You always stay inside, away from it all, until it all melts away.”

I think that was a strange remark.

He leaves. I decide it is time to take another pill.

Life is great. I am finally living the life I always have wanted. My memories are colorful and vibrant. I see a boy running through a warm meadow. He sings to himself. Skips and laughs. Everything is going well. The birds still follow me on my way home, but they don't bother me anymore. I can stay inside my home all day, sit down on my couch, and play the memories inside my head. The memories are mine. All of them.

I look at my pill bottle today and see that there are only two more pills left.

The doctor's office is full with the same people. They're all crazy. What a pity.

The bus shakes and squeals as the brakes collide against the icy streets. My legs twitch and shake my whole body. It still reminds me of the girl with the yellow bow. But I can't control it anymore. I am always anxious. I better go home and take another pill before it gets out of control. I look around the bus to see if there is anyone interesting. The normal people look out the windows with blank expressions, probably pondering some issue they are dealing with. The homeless drunk man at the back of the bus is sleeping and taking over a whole row of chairs. There is someone wearing all black clothing. He sits on the edge of his seat with his knees to chest. I recognize him, but I can't remember from where. He curls up and starts rocking back and forth, his eyes staring at a point in space. He frightens me. He murmurs something under his breath, “They're coming. They're coming.”

As I walk back home I check behind my shoulder to see if the birds are following me again. Nothing is there. I guess this drug really is working. All symptoms have left me. Even the birds are gone. I am normal again. I am sane. But, I can't shake the feeling of the thought that I know that man on the bus. I walk up the stairs of snow back in to my house. As I turn to shut the door behind me I see a bird sitting in the tree.

I pull the pills out of my coat and set them aside to my keys on the table and go to the bathroom. As I wash my hands, I let the hot water run over them to let them defrost from the cold air outside. I look up and see my face staring back at me in the mirror. My face is pale as usual. My eyebrows droop low over my eyelids causing my brown eyes to look sad. Permanent wrinkles lie deep in my forehead; they have been there so long I can't recognize my face without them. I pull the towel from behind me and dry my hands. But something catches my eye. As I look up and stare at my pale face I see my mouth curl up at the corner in a little smirk.

That was it. The man I saw on the bus is the person who told me about Novazine. I did not recognize him because I couldn't see him smirking. It was gone. His mouth is tortured. Something is wrong with him. Did his birds come back? Birds are haunting. They creep up on me.

Tap Tap Tap. I look to my left. The blue pills were gone. *Tap Tap Tap.* At the window, the tree outside is filled with blue birds. They came closer. *Tap tap tap.* Yellow beaks against the window sill are slowly cracking the glass. Perfect blue birds. *Tap tap tap.*

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