

Wonderland

At the age of ten I went insane. My brain had difficulty regulating my body's sweat production and urine filtration. I experienced extreme, irrational, and debilitating anxiety brought on by every day events. This exacerbated the overproduction of sweat and added frequent vomiting to my gradual loss of mind. Soon my hearing became inconsistent and illusory and I was asking my mother if she could see the clusters of lights crawling along the ceiling, behind the furniture, and among the dinnerware. She couldn't. No one could.

I was suffering from mercury poisoning. Mercury is a highly toxic metal used in thermometers, batteries, neon signs, etc. Once a common implement of haberdashery, its use is responsible for the mental deterioration and eventual death of countless hat makers. It is the source of the phrase "mad hatter." My poisoned state emanated from recently implanted dental filings. Their mercury amalgam was releasing steady doses of toxicity into my bloodstream via my saliva and would continue to do so for the next six to seven months. No one could figure out what was wrong with me. No one could pinpoint a cause that could transform a normal, exuberant little boy into a weak and quivering hysteric. I was the tea party Dormouse depicted in *Alice in Wonderland*; someone had said "cat" but no one could find the jam.

To remedy the physical symptoms there were doctors and spurts of hospital stays. They pricked me for tests and confined me overnight for observation, threading needles

through my hands and forearms and wires through my scalp. Doctors flipped through charts as they told my mother the test results were negative for this and for that. Blood, urine, hair follicle, brain scan. “All normal,” they told her as I vomited in their offices, sweating with fever, terrified by the living lights writhing in the corners of the room, twisting on the doctor’s skin.

For the delusions there were psychiatrists. They had larger offices than the doctors at the hospitals. Their offices smelled like shampoo and cigarettes, with row after row of diplomas lining the walls behind their desks. They talked for ten minutes, asking questions so banal I can’t remember them, before presenting me with several sheets of paper and a box of crayons. “David,” they said, “I’d like for you to draw me a picture of a little boy and then a picture of a little girl.” I drew and colored these the same: green shirt, purple pants, round brown shoes, happy red smile. Flat as hieroglyphics. Androgynous as myth. The only difference was that I drew girls with longer hair than boys. The psychiatrists looked over my work; they were always disappointed. They responded by asking that I draw a man followed by a woman. These I rendered in the same way as the boy and girl: happy, flat, and androgynous. The drawings of men and women did, however, account for differences in height; after all, I knew most adults are taller than children. The psychiatrists considered these drawings, sometimes curling a corner of their mouths into a knot, sometimes rubbing their chins. “Very good, David,” they said, “very good.”

The mornings of my sessions and appointments I began to run away. I woke before the sun and dressed quietly for the snow outside; sometimes I packed a lunch. I crouched over my shoes, being sure to tie the laces extra tight in case I had to run from

the police or a family member. Then I slipped out the front door. Some days I spent hiding among neighborhood shrubs eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and slices of apple as the cold gnawed my hands to look like red gloves. Some days I walked with the creek that ran behind my parent's house, following its curves deep into the woods. Often I stayed in cemeteries.

These excursions were not enjoyable. I spent the time hyperventilating, anxious of all things seen and unseen, fearful of the voices calling from within the trees and behind the tombstones I rested against. These voices knew my name. "Come here," they whispered. "Hey, David. Come here." One night while lying in my dark bedroom a voice instructed me to go home. "I am home," I answered. There was no reply.

My family began waking early to intercept my escapes. When caught I vomited from the anxiety of more doctors, more pricks, and more tests. I sweated until I was chilled and shivering. I was taken out of school for days at a time. Some mornings I woke to find my grandmother or my Uncle Leo waiting for me. If it were Grandma, I spent the day at her house eating cookies and watching *The Jerry Springer Show*. If it were Uncle Leo, I was headed to the bar to watch action films and play pinball and electronic poker. I preferred the bar. The patrons were loud and it smelled like smoke, but the lights of the pinball machines chased away the lights in my head.

I began running away every morning and disappearing for longer periods of time. I was terrified of school, of particular classmates, though they had never harmed me in any way. If I couldn't run before the bus got to my stop, I ran when it arrived at my school. Soon I was being chauffeured to class by family members or privately by the principal. Each time I screamed and I fought. I threw up my breakfast on their center

consoles and on their leather seats. And I still ran. If my personal escorts weren't careful, I was gone the moment their car doors opened. Once I even leapt from a moving car. I can remember the way the street looked beneath me while I was airborne, the blurred bits of stone passing at twenty-five miles per hour.

Because all tests were inconclusive, my family, the school, doctors, my friends in the police department, everyone was convinced I was lying. There were no lights. There were no voices. They charged I had taught myself to vomit on command. The ordeal was frustrating, for all of us. One evening, after my mother had caught me packing my things to run away, I lay in bed panicking over the following day at school. My father came home then. I could hear my mother crying in the kitchen as she told him what had happened. He came upstairs. "You hear your mother?" He was shouting. "You hear her?" He lifted me into the air above his head. "You're a liar. You're doing this shit on purpose! You hear your mother?" He put me down then and punched a hole through my closet door. What could I do but cry?

My parents insisted that I attend school regularly and permanently. Those around me had become better at corralling me into classrooms, so I didn't have too much of a choice. I sat in social studies classes, wavering in my chair. When I looked at the clock the living lights squirming on its face were too thick to make out the time. I can still feel my classmates' stares on my cheeks, the palpable pressure of their gazes as they watched my bloodshot eyes flicker with each drop of sweat that dripped from my nose to my chin to my sweater. I can remember trying to focus my vision on them and the way it would nauseate me until I vomited. "Can I go to the nurse now?" I would ask. I was crying.

“No. Children, someone please bring David a garbage can. I’ll call maintenance.” My mess would be cleaned and I would be forced to remain in class.

I was a strain on my teachers, my family, the township, and myself. My classmates began to infer either that the school administrators were cruel or the rumors were true, I was psychotic. Following a few more weeks of chilled sweats, disruptional vomiting, and commentary only I could hear, my parents removed me from the fourth grade.

The end to this story is vague for me. I wish I had a better memory of the events. Mostly, all I have is an overall sense of nausea, anxiety, and fear. Even the moments I’ve described here remain cloudy for me, as if, although I can recall them, they are memories that belong to someone else. My mother became suspicious of mercury through casual conversation with a distant family friend; following a dentist’s appointment where she received dental filings, the friend’s sister had experienced nausea and excessive sweating. My mother researched at the local library the symptoms of exposure. Finding correlations, she chose to have my filings removed. No tests were conducted to verify my exposure. The move was predominately a whim, but one carried out in haste. My mother feared for my safety should she delay, for she had tried everything else, even prayer. The change was nearly immediate. No more living lights crawling in the corners, no more sweating, no more vomiting, and no more voices. My mother compared the change to flipping a light switch: *Click*. Different kid.

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As privileged as I feel to have regained my mind, I believe I am more blessed to have lost it. Becoming intimately acquainted with fantasy has afforded me a finer tuning toward reality. I examine my world, perceive it through odd lenses: I notice the way smoke from a burning cigar whips and coils about a room like the tail of a friendly cat; in the breathing of a sleeping lover I hear the rush of waves dying on a beach; I feel the blood from my lacerated thumb irrigate along fingerprints and the creases of my hand before feeding a red lake in my palm; I interpret the words that go unspoken when we leave one another, when we whisper *I'll miss you*, *I love you*, and *goodbye*.

After my toxic filings were removed they were replaced with ceramic composites—these were the conciliatory jam spread beneath my little Dormouse nose. At the time, ceramic composites were experimental, expensive, and rare. My mother had to drive me an hour and twenty minutes through Pennsylvania to reach a dentist who worked with these materials. For years, this would be the only dentist my mother could trust enough to visit. Today, ceramic composites are the norm. While the dangers of mercury are better known, the decline of its use in dentistry is due more to the opaque, natural look that ceramic composites can provide. The health issues are simply a perk.

Through testing it has been discovered that my family has a high sensitivity to certain metals (mercury, lead, nickel, etc), most of which are poisonous to begin with. There are still people who believe I lied throughout the ordeal. My father is one. He has no sensitivity and chooses not to believe in its existence. What he believes is that I was simply being a kid. We don't discuss the events. Nor do I discuss the events with my

mother, though she believes my account. We exist happily this way. The only people outside of family who know this story are those who have read it here.

No legal actions were posed against the doctors and dentists involved. My family was satisfied to be wholly restored. Though the filings were removed, it took months for the mercury to fully exit my system. I suffered occasional relapses where I experienced a momentary resurgence of symptoms, but these I stifled quietly, determined to prove my sanity to myself. I believe my efforts were successful.

While I never hallucinated visions of smiling Cheshire cats or punctuality driving white rabbits, I did, ironically enough, become best friends with those classmates I had irrationally feared. I even managed to pass the fourth grade. (I must say, however, that I am skeptical of this. Based on the number of absences and the education that I now know I missed, I believe I was a problem they chose to push through the system.) I am pleased that the ordeal spared my siblings the stress of a similar experience, but I wouldn't trade away what happened to me for this or any other wonderland. I'm glad to have gone mad. I consider it a gift.

Happy unbirthday to me.