2007

Don't call me crazy

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Don’t call me crazy

by

Valerie Giscard Goodman

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Mary Swander, Major Professor
   Amy Slagell
   Constance Post

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2007

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my daughter, the beautiful Naia Joy, who gives me the inspiration to make every day worthwhile, my mom who is proof that people change for the better, my brother and sister for retelling the stories, the lovely Juliana who saw beauty in me when no one else did, Joe for giving me truthful advice even when it hurts, and to Paul and Perry for always listening. I would also like to thank God for an abundance of grace, Aaron for making my special place that much more special, all my friends past and present who helped to shape the person I am today, and last, but not least, my wonderful committee.
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ABSTRACT

The first 93 pages of this memoir describes the ongoing mental problems of a 19-year-old bi-racial female from a small town in Iowa. The memoir recounts the routines of the mental health unit in the local hospital, friendships formed on the unit, and the doctor-patient relationship. The mindset of the mental patient is shown in detail questioning of the stigma of mental illness and the effectiveness of treatment plans. There is an historical account that provides some speculation on the source of the problem. The resolution of the issues are provided in the synopses at the end.
CHAPTER 1

I am sitting in the dayroom when he comes through the door next to the dining room. Mike is laughing quietly to himself when I turn to look. He is wearing hospital issued pajamas, white with small, blue-checked diamonds and light blue slipper socks. He crosses the dining area connected to the dayroom and sits down next to me in an identical blue vinyl chair. Everything in the hospital is the same. The chairs, the rooms, and the pajamas we are wearing are all the same. We are both patients on the psych ward at Trinity Regional Hospital in Fort Dodge, Iowa.

“You look like you’re under thirty, but I could be crazy,” he says to me still laughing.

I don’t know why he’s laughing. It’s a laugh more like a repressed, hysterical giggle that begins and ends without warning. I’m leery of him. I’ve never seen him here before, but I know you don’t get locked up for no reason. He is a tall, skinny guy with medium length hair that is shaved in the back and very pale skin. I went to high school here and know most of the kids my age, especially the kids that look like him. Fort Dodge isn’t a very big town. I would say maybe 25,000 people live here. I would know this kid or I would definitely know of him if he were from here. I stare at him without making any movement.

“What’s wrong with the people in here? They got no sense of humor,” he tells me sitting down right beside me.

I don’t know what to say to him. It’s true that people here don’t have much of a sense of humor. I half smile and chuckle a bit. He is sitting so close to me it makes me nervous. I think he is cute with his dark hair and lopsided smile. He is probably over six feet tall. He has blue eyes, and when he glimpses me it makes me seize up a bit. There is something about the openness in his eyes that makes me nervous. I feel like he can see the real me so I don’t look
him straight in the eyes. I smooth the front of my pajamas with the palms of my hands. I wish I were more presentable. I wish I had my clothes, but I was just admitted this morning. The policy on 3 East is you have to be locked up for at least three days to get your street clothes.

“So, you haven’t been here very long?” I ask him.

He looks puzzled.

“I’ve been here before,” I tell him, “lots of times.” I don’t tell him this is my thirteenth time being locked up in four years, my tenth time here at 3 East. It didn’t start like this. I want to say that everything before my first hospitalization here in 1993 was fine, but it wasn’t of course. I think I knew even as a kid nothing in my life was going to be normal. That isn’t the best choice of words, because what is normal? Maybe healthy or functional would be a better choice. I am not functional. I’m not sure why.

My family moved to Fort Dodge in 1989 when I was a sophomore at Saint Edmond High School. There’s no polite way to put it, Fort Dodge is a shitty little town. It sits in northwest Iowa about 100 miles from the capital of Des Moines. Fort Dodge boasts the nickname “Little Chicago” because of the number of crimes per capita, which is significantly above the national average. It is the most populous city in a 50-mile radius and luckily draws the criminal element from the neighboring smaller towns. A bunch of kids from the country come looking for excitement. Saying you’re from Fort Dodge in just about any other city in Iowa will place a slight look of disgust on someone’s face.

“Dirt Dodge,” they’ll say and laugh a little bit.

Besides having a bad reputation throughout the state, Fort Dodge is known for its fort. There is an actual fort that sits on the hill not so far from Trinity Regional Hospital. The fort boasts a replica of the “Cardiff Giant,” a famous hoax in which a man from Cardiff, New
York claimed to have found a petrified man. The original fake was mined in the gypsum mill outside of Fort Dodge. Every elementary student within 50 miles has visited the Fort Museum to see the giant.

The fort was actually used to protect settlers from Indian attacks. There aren’t any Indians near Fort Dodge now. I think maybe all the Indians massacred near the fort and around the area lend to the real life cursed feeling I get every time I leave and come back.

I’ve lived in Fort Dodge for five years and have never seen a black person working at any of the stores. Not at the local grocery store, not at any of the convenience stores, not at the bank, not at the mall. Including men women and children, there are about 950 black people that live in Fort Dodge. There was only one black person besides me in my high school, Saint Edmond, and that was my sister. The year after my sister graduated I was “the mixed girl” who went to Saint Edmond. My dad is black and Creek Indian and my mom is white, German exactly. It gave me some sort of sick celebrity status. Since I didn’t go to Fort Dodge Senior High all of the black kids that went there knew me. All of the kids knew all of the kids.

Before we moved to Fort Dodge we lived in Dakota City, Iowa. It is 16 miles straight north of Fort Dodge on Hwy 169 past an egg farm. When you smell the smell of thousands of chickens in a confined space, you will know you are 10 miles from Dakota City. Dakota City is the county seat of Humboldt County and attached to a larger town named Humboldt. One simply had to cross some old railroad tracks to go from one town to the next. The combined population of the two towns is around 5,000 people. When I grew up there were four black people who lived there: me, my brother and sister, and my mom’s boyfriend, Mark, who was later replaced by my stepdad, Kelly.
The Humboldt/Dakota City area is known for three things: Humboldt has extra wide streets, Frank A. Gotch, a famous Iowa wrestler grew up there, and Harry Reasoner from 60 Minutes fame was born and buried there. The original settlers named Humboldt “Springvale” because of an underwater spring and they felt the name fit the beautiful rolling hills to the east and the Des Moines River bordering it to the west. They sell the Humboldt spring water in stores around Iowa. People considered Humboldt a snotty little town, but at least it is clean and a bit less racist.

My family moved to Dakota City in the summer of 1977. We lived there for thirteen years. My brother Charlie was five and my sister Gretchen was four. I just turned three years old. It is still the only place I ever think of as home, even though we’ve lived in Fort Dodge for five years now. I’m not sure if this information has anything to do with me not being functional. I look at Mike. He probably doesn’t care. He’s not from here. I can tell by looking at him even though he’s wearing hospital pajamas.

“I don’t need my clothes,” Mike tells me, “I’m never going to leave. I never want to go back out there.”

He asks me what there is to do on the unit, when a nurse interrupts us. Apparently what she has to say to Mike is more important than what we have to say to each other.

“Did you tell Luke that you saw a UFO?” she asks him.

Mike laughs, “Yeah.”

I want to laugh, but hold it in because the nurse looks pissed. She gives Mike a lecture on teasing people sicker than him. That’s what she says, “sick.” She tells Mike he is restricted from the smoking room for the rest of the afternoon, which sucks. The only luxury
in this place is being able to smoke. For five minutes you can get away from the constant watch of the staff and feel like a real person again.

“Luke’s not sick, he’s crazy,” he tells her, “We’re all just crazy.”

Part of me doesn’t think I’m crazy, but I don’t say anything to Mike. I’m pretty sure guys don’t like disagreeable girls and I want him to like me. It seems stupid to tell him I’m not crazy while I’m locked in a psych ward. The nurse continues to reprimand Mike.

“You just got here you don’t need to make problems. People here are trying to get well. I don’t want to hear you teasing Luke anymore,” she says and walks away.

“I wasn’t teasing Luke,” he says to me, “I did see a UFO.”

I believe him. I tell him about the time I saw a UFO on a family vacation to Laramie, Wyoming when I was in sixth grade. My brother and sister and I were cramped in the back of a Mazda GLC hatchback for days driving across Nebraska. My stepdad wouldn’t go on vacation without his dog, so we had his sixty-pound Doberman, Niki, laying across our legs for most of the trip. We tried for hours to get to Laramie Peak, but for some reason my stepdad couldn’t find the way. We drove around in circles for hours aiming toward the peak; we could see it we just couldn’t get there. We stopped in a small town to ask for directions. I don’t remember what happened next. I was alone with Charlie and Gretchen. My mom and stepdad were nowhere to be found.

We were in a diner and there was a man with a white soda jerk hat standing behind a counter slowly wiping the countertop smiling. I didn’t really see a UFO I guess, but my brother and sister and I could never figure out how we got there. That man in the white hat never said anything. We didn’t eat anything at that diner. It’s possible we were abducted by aliens or that the town was full of aliens or something. My brother and sister are half
convinced and neither of them is crazy. I don’t think Mike finds the story believable. He is staring straight at me with a weird look.

He flips his hair out of his eyes and says, “You’re crazy.”

I don’t like that he tells me I’m crazy. I don’t like the way it makes me feel like maybe it’s true. He doesn’t know me that well, he wouldn’t really know. Most of the people who know about me and about my disease wouldn’t call me crazy to my face, but I know they think it. Some people make fun of me because I’m on disability. I get a check every month from Social Security and SSI. They call it a “crazy check.” It means I can’t work. Well, I don’t work.

I shouldn’t be so sensitive about Mike calling me crazy. He’s locked up in 3 East too. It changes you though, people calling you crazy all the time. It changed me I know, but I haven’t quite figured out how yet. I don’t feel like myself. I don’t feel like much of anything except my disease or disorder or whatever you want to call it. It’s different from people saying you’re an alcoholic or a diabetic. It’s worse because the sickness is from inside your head and not some other part of your body. People think that you can control what goes on in your head. I used to think that too. I can’t think it through without wondering if I’m thinking about it correctly. It’s exhausting so I stop, but I don’t think crazy is the right word for what I am. I’m definitely confused. I’m definitely not functional.

I was locked up here once and a nurse told me, “You are not your illness.”

I had been crying all day walking around the hospital weeping. I truly wanted to die. I wanted to be put out of misery. I was so tired of being miserable. She took both of my hands in hers and forced me to look her in the eye.

“You are not your illness,” she said to me twice.
I nodded in agreement.

I’m not sure exactly what she meant. If I’m not my illness, why do they call me a Manic Depressive? I’ve heard the staff say my diagnosis to people before they’ve said my name. It’s written on all my charts, I’ve seen it. They write it as “Bipolar I/Manic Depression” they’ve educated me on its symptoms. If I’m not my illness, I haven’t figured out what I am yet. I wonder if Mike has any idea who he is. If he did I’m sure he wouldn’t be here.

We hang out for the rest of the afternoon, trying to find decent songs on the radio and talking about music until he could smoke again. Mike likes the same kind of music I like, which is good. I love music and most of my friends are really into music, too or were into music, too. Most of my friends have gone by the wayside. I don’t think it’s easy to be friends with me anymore. I don’t think I’m as worth it as I used to be or as fun to be around. It’s tough because they all went away to college or moved out of town or they work. They’re busy and I don’t do anything it seems except go in and out of the hospital.

I’m trying to get better, to maybe be the person I used to be or someone close to her. I changed so much for the worse, but I still like good music, mostly post-modern and grunge. My all time favorite band used to be Depeche Mode. Now my favorite band is the Counting Crows. I listen to their album “August and Everything After” everyday. I think that lead singer might be Manic Depressive, his lyrics speak to me like nothing I’ve heard before and it gives me hope. I think it’s one thing that’s kept me from killing myself. Music helps me a lot.

I find out Mike is nineteen and he’s from Texas. When I tell him I am twenty-two, Mike jokes about throwing his life away quicker than most. I don’t want to tell him I had
been coming here off and on for over four years, since 1993. I was nineteen. It’s 1997 now. When I started coming here Mike was barely out of junior high. That makes me swallow hard and feel ashamed. I hate that I still come here, that for some reason I haven’t grown out of it. I haven’t gotten better. At first 3 East was a safe place, where I didn’t have to worry about anything, but now it had become like a prison, and all I did was worry.

“It’s not prison,” Mike tells me, “Prison is better. In prison you get porn.”

I can’t argue with Mike. I didn’t break the law. I’ve never hurt anyone except myself, but there were lots of rights we didn’t have as mental patients. I’ve never been to jail and definitely not even close to prison. I got caught drinking in high school and had to go to the jailhouse. We didn’t have to go into a cell or anything. The cop called our parents, and one by one the parents came in yelling and screaming to pick up their daughters. No one answered the phone at my house so the cops just let me go home after a couple of hours.

Once in high school I debated prisoners’ rights. I was sure they got porn and books and phone calls. All things I’d been denied by staff. I don’t know exactly how it worked. I knew that I didn’t have the right to privacy or whatever material I wanted to read. I’ve demanded both a Bible and a phone call at separate times and I’ve been told to go to my room. They called a code green on me because I refused. A code green is kind of like a code blue. If you’re in a hospital and you hear a code blue over the PA, it means that someone needs immediate medical attention or they’ll die. Everyone comes running.

If you hear a code green, well, at Trinity Regional Hospital anyway, it means that someone is freaking out. Orderlies come running from somewhere and they ask you if you are going to comply with the staff request. If you continue to be unreasonable, they will subdue you and take you to your room. Sometimes subduing means an injection and
sometimes they use restraints. Subduing always means taking a patient away from the common area and isolating him or her.

My personal code green occurred because I was using the phone to call lawyers. It was when I was first locked up by order of the court. I told the lawyers I was being held against my will at 3 East and apparently one of the lawyers called the nurse’s station. The staff turned the phone off, and I refused to leave the day room until they turned it back on. They wouldn’t turn the phone back on and I wouldn’t go to my room, so they called a code green and the orderlies came running and dragged me to my room. I couldn’t smoke for the rest of the day.

Trinity Regional Hospital
Admission Notes
October 24, 1993

Valerie Johnson is a 19-year-old mulatto woman.

Reason for referral: Disorganized behavior and suicide threats.

History of Present Illness: The patient herself is a manipulative and unreliable historian. Most of the information was obtained from her mother, Sharon Preshon. The patient had recently undergone hospitalization on Three East, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, mixed type. She was started on Prolixin, Lithium, and Doxepin. She was discharged about a week ago, but she has done poorly at home. The mother states that Valerie, cries, screams, and wails. The mother states that she wants to walk in front of a car. She then goes out in the middle of the night, wanders and the mother is afraid that she might end of throwing herself in front of a car. Prior to her last hospitalization, she had wandered off onto the highway without any clothes on. She was planning to walk to Chicago. A week ago the patient and her family went to Sioux City. She was feeling agitated and said that she felt like hurting herself to other people. She was feeling extremely nervous and had to be taken to the emergency room in Sioux City, where she needed a shot. She fought with the nurse and was on the floor. She was almost admitted to the psychiatric unit in Sioux City a week ago. The mother feels that the patient’s psychosis has not been adequately controlled, and part of the problem is that the patient is manipulative and is minimizing her symptoms. She is extremely ambivalent about getting help for herself. All week long she has told her mother that she thought she might need to come to the hospital; and yet when she arrived on the unit as a voluntary patient yesterday morning, a few hours later she was asking to leave the unit. Her behavior escalated and she started threatening nurses, at which point an emergency order for hospitalization was
obtained. Her status was then changed from Observation Level to Inpatient Status. This occurred yesterday (10/23/93) at around noon. The patient also stopped taking her medication, Prolixin, a couple of days ago. She says it was making her feel too nervous, and she felt that she did not need it. Today the patient does indicate that she is feeling sad much of the time, but she does not want to be in the hospital.

She appears outwardly calm for the interview. I believe that she is probably psychotic but hiding it or guarding it. Her affect is labile. She does admit to depressed mood. She tries to focus the interview on her immediate desires, such as getting a pass or getting out of the hospital. She complains that the medication, Prolixin, is making her nervous, when in point of fact I believe that it is the lack of Prolixin that is making her feel so nervous. She tends to appear manipulative. Her speech is clear and not coherent. There is no evidence of a thought disorder on the surface, but she appears guarded. She will not answer questions regarding suicide. As the interview progresses, she becomes less cooperative and demands to know why she is here and what her legal status is. She wants to know her rights. I explained to her that currently she is under emergency commitment and we will obtain more information from the court tomorrow, on Monday. She is alert and oriented. Memory is grossly intact. Intelligence appears to be in the average range. Judgment and insight are very poor.

Recommendations: The patient is admitted as an inpatient to Three East under court order. We will try to work with this patient’s resistance, hopefully getting her onto some Prolixin Decanate Injections – if she agrees – because of her noncompliance. We will consult with the court and attempt to obtain inpatient commitment so that we can provide longer-term treatment for this patient. The patient will receive individual therapy, group therapy, and we will provide education about the patient’s illness. Estimated length of stay is two weeks.

P. Schultz, M.D.

I feel like a prisoner every time I come here. I wonder why I still come here? Lots of times I check myself in when the world gets to be too much for me. I can’t handle the monotony or the hopelessness or the idea that I am completely unfamiliar in a place I used to feel so familiar. Usually it’s because I want to kill myself, usually I want to kill myself because of all those aforementioned things. 3 East is similar to a prison in some ways. They order you around a lot. They tell you when to get up and when to go to bed, when and what you can watch on television and when you can smoke. If you don’t obey the rules they take privileges away. Mike is right; it does seem that prisoners have it a bit better. We mental
patients don’t even get to go outside on a daily basis unless we are on a field trip with the staff.

The days at 3 East are routine and a dull routine at that. Almost every day is the same. I am woken up too early and still tired to a nurse standing over me, telling me loudly to take my meds and that breakfast will be ready in fifteen minutes. I take my meds off the tray, stumble to the bathroom and then to the dining area to eat in my pajamas. Eating breakfast is optional. Getting up and getting to the table on time for breakfast is mandatory.

At first when I came to 3 East I was the most depressed I’d ever been in my life. I slept 17 to 18 hours a day and they locked me out of my room. I begged and pleaded the staff to let me into my room so I could sleep. They would never let me back in my room even though I would sit outside the locked door of my hospital room crying. I hated going to the breakfast table because I knew someone was locking me out of my room and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

Breakfast is still the most depressing meal of the day. Everyone eats in silence. I’m always sad to wake up and find out the whole thing isn’t a bad dream. I sit and think about the long dreary day ahead of me and drink the orange juice that gives me heartburn. The nurse walks among us passing the meds that need to be taken with food to patients. I eat the tasteless powdered eggs and two small triangle pieces of white toast that aren’t quite toasted enough smeared with grape jelly. Occasionally there are rubbery hospital pancakes or greasy, half-cold strips of bacon or sausage links.

After breakfast it is bath time. There aren’t showers in any of the individual rooms; instead there are two shower rooms at each side of the ward. The techs have a chart they follow to make sure everyone gets their turn. They sit outside the rooms and wait, telling
some people not to take too much time and others to make sure they wash thoroughly. One of the signs of depression is not wanting to bathe. A tech told me keeping an eye on your hygiene is a good way to keep an eye on your mental health. I never want to take a shower in here if I’m depressed or not.

The shower rooms are claustrophobic like a little closet and decorated in a light cream color that closes in on you. Each patient is responsible for cleaning out the shower room when he or she is finished before another patient takes a shower. I never think the shower room is very clean and I can’t stand the idea of a psych tech sitting outside the shower, but I have no choice. If you don’t shower when it’s your turn, you can lose privileges. Things that are considered privileges are watching television, listening to the radio and playing in the game room. The biggest privilege is smoking. I didn’t really become a regular smoker until I started coming to 3 East. Smoking gives you something to do, it breaks up the day a little bit more and gives you time with other patients away from the staff. There are only certain times when the staff is not busy that patients can have cigarettes. The second shift comes in at 3pm, and when the nurses are done with their staffing they give me and Mike one cigarette each and let us into the cigarette room.

“I love smoking, it makes me feel alive,” Mike says, “You know, you forget your heart beats, you don’t feel it. You forget that you breathe air unless you can taste it. Cigarettes help me remember I’m alive.”

I stare at the tar-stained yellow walls. I know what he means. The medicine I’m on makes me feel nothing except uncomfortable in my own skin. My skin feels stretched too tight over my muscles. I always feel stiff and slow and not quick enough to understand everything that’s going on around me. I haven’t been able to read more than a couple of
sentences in the past couple of years. I can listen to what people say and I can follow a
conversation. I can’t read though, the words fall out of my head before I get to the end of the
paragraph. Some parts of me are so slow I feel only half alive.

“They got you on a lot of medicine?” I ask him.

He nods at me, “Of course, they have me all doped up,” he blows smoke at the
camera hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the tiny room, “or they’d have to let me go
and I would find the nearest bridge to kill myself.”

I’m not surprised he’s talking about throwing himself off a bridge. Almost everyone
comes here for suicide, depression or psychosis and there is the occasional eating disorder.
Suicide is an easy call for him; he doesn’t act like he has any of the other major disorders like
bipolar or schizophrenia. After awhile it gets easy to tell. I don’t tell him why I’m here this
time. I was admitted last night. I was losing control.
CHAPTER 2

“I am so angry,” I tell the nurse in the ER, “I am so angry, I can’t see straight.”

“Can you explain more who are you angry at?”

It is the middle of the night and I’m at Trinity Regional Hospital. I feel like I am losing control. I don’t want to be here, but I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know how to control myself. I am afraid of what I might do.

“I’m angry at everyone,” I tell her.

I am angry at everyone who did this to me, everyone who sold me out and gave up on me. I want to go into a tirade of every person who turned their back on me, who didn’t help me. I want to scream about the people who called me crazy.

“Like who?”

“I hate my mom. I’m so fucking angry at her, at my brother, my stepdad. I’m angry at Dr. Schultz, all the doctors who screwed me over. I feel like killing someone. I’m so angry I could kill someone.”

I feel like I have red blood flashing, red light in my eyes, I squint and grimace. The lights in the emergency room are florescent. They hurt my eyes, creeping pink around the edges even when I close them I see the blood red flashing. I blink. Blink, but the red light and the anger don’t go away.

“I could just kill them,” I am crying now, the red blurs.

I am really sad, but when I am sad I get angry. I don’t understand why my friends won’t talk to me or why they don’t care about me. I am different, but part of me is just the same. I feel thrown away and abandoned.

“Do you really feel like you could kill someone?” the nurse asks.
“That’s why I’m here. Why do you think I’m here?”

I stare at her, but don’t like what I see. I know that she is afraid of me because I’m afraid of myself. She gathers the metal chart and the papers, stands holding the metal chart in front of her. I don’t want her to be afraid of me. I have been afraid so many times in my life. I’ve been made to feel afraid and I don’t want to make her feel this way. I want to smile at her, but when I try the red flashing in my eyes and I grimace. I look at the papers she is holding instead.

“Sign here,” she says pointing to the bottom of the duplicate form.

She walks a bit sideways out of the room when she leaves, “The doctor will be here soon, we’ll get you admitted.”

She pulls the door shut and I can hear her speak to someone in an alarmed tone, she’s scared I think and it makes me feel bad. I see shadows through the white mini-blinds on the examination window. She made a good choice not turning her back to me, I am scared of me too. I feel less than human. I feel like pure rage.

I want to smash every metal thing in this room, jump off the table rip the white paper, crash the little containers of cotton balls and tongue depressors onto the floor, kick the metal garbage can, rip the oxygen hookups out of the wall. I want to destroy. I want to scream. Scream until they have to make me stop. Scream until they come running and force me to the floor, until someone calls for an injection, until everyone in this fucking hospital knows what they have done to me. I want to kill whoever has done this to me.

Instead I press my lips together and grimace. I get up to look at my reflection in the paper towel dispenser. I see my own hollow eyes set in my fat brown face surrounded by curly hair tangled and frizzy. There is nothing but hatred looking at me. I know the only
person I wouldn’t kill tonight is me. I’ve finally decided I’ve been hurt enough. I turn my
head away from that look I’ve seen in pairs of eyes, dozens of sets of desperate eyes on the
psycho ward. I am all done now, all done now no more. No more. I put my hands over my
face to block out the fluorescent lighting and lie back on examination table and wait for the
doctor.

This is one of the first steps to the admission process in the psychiatric ward at Trinity
Regional Hospital. By the time you get to the emergency room it is pretty much the same
each time. I shouldn’t say that, that’s not true. It always depends on the situation. It depends
on if it was voluntary or involuntary. In the last four years it has always depended on the
situation. If you are depressed and suicidal it’s the same. If you are psychotic, it’s different if
I remember correctly. I have never been homicidal, this is the first time I have been
homicidal, maybe there will be something different they do.

I have been to the hospital, this hospital Trinity Regional Hospital in Fort Dodge,
The very first time I was at The University of Iowa Hospital and Clinics in 1993. I have been
admitted to the Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis twice in 1995, and a
hospital outside of Lafayette, Louisiana once in 1995. Thirteen times, but this is the ninth
time I’ve been here and the first time I’ve been homicidal.

I can feel that hard round roughness filling up my stomach and my chest, flashing red
blood red, and I press my hands to my eyes tighter. It doesn’t help the pain really, but keeps
me on the table. I put my hands so deep into my eyes that it hurts, and I see white for a while
instead of red. I try to inhale, inhale but my breath is short and quick and heavy.
This is the ninth time I’ve been to the hospital in four years, and somehow tears squeeze out past the force of my hand. The ninth time, my chest drops. I will not cry, I will not sob, I will not sob, still I feel the air rising in my lungs and the moan in my throat. I will not cry and the tears squeeze out of my wounded eyes, aiming for the rolls of my neck and my arms are tired of the rigid position the hand in my eyes. I am tired and take my hands from my eyes, turn over to my side and rest my hands under my head. Four years, nine times here. I close my eyes.

When I open my eyes I hear footsteps in the hallway, shuffled papers and a hand at the doorknob. I should sit up now. I’m sorry now for having been so angry to the nurse. Both of the shadows are men, one is a security guard, or maybe he is a cop. Do I look less dangerous if I sit up? Should I stay lying down? I look crazier if I’m lying down. Sit up, dry your eyes, quick dry your eyes.

The doctor walks in, “We’ll be admitting you to 3 East. Do you have any medical complaints?”

I tell him no, seeing the other shadow through the half closed door is a security guard.

He sticks the metal file chart in my hand, “Sign here if you agree to voluntarily admit yourself.”

I am looking over the chart.

“Sign at the bottom,” he says and nudges the pen at me.

I scratch my name with stiff hands on a small line; my signature spills over the edge, “Val Johnson.” It looks crazy reaching over the edge, barely recognizable as my handwriting like someone else scrawled my name there, “Val Johnson.” The security guard takes me down the blue carpeted hall, past patients and visitors and staff who stare at me to the back of
the hospital to the white doors of the East elevators. I will be admitted onto the unit, and I
will have to shower in. I remember when I first used to come here.

I wonder how this is going to help me get to sleep? I wonder as I stare at the small
yellow shower tile the hot water is hitting my face. I can’t see very well without my glasses
so I tried to ignore Mrs. Wall who is staring at me.

“Make sure you get your back,” she says.

I slowly turn around and let the hot water hit my back. I can’t believe that I am here
again. I hate the fact that Mrs. Wall is watching me take a shower. I try to pretend that she’s
not there and concentrate on the smell of hospital soap, but I keep wondering what she thinks
of my body. I know that I look good. Two small meals a day, one of which I throw up as well
as my four mile midnight jogs have kept me in the best shape of my life for the last six
months. No one knows that I throw up my food. This time I’m checked in to 3 East due to
my inability to sleep.

I haven’t sleep for two and three quarter days. I can’t get to sleep. It may be the
steady diet of prescription pills that Dr. Schultz gave me during my last stint here or the
recurring bouts of insomnia that began last June. At any rate I am standing in front of Mrs.
Wall showering in, the second step in the psychiatric admission process that will hopefully
end with me finding rest.

“Ok, you’re done,” Mrs. Wall says and hands me a white towel to dry myself.

She is not a terrible nurse by any means. She doesn’t stare or tell you to use more
soap like some of the other nurses, but I would prefer Mrs. Rogers who busies herself on the
other side of the wall while I take my shower in peace. Mrs. Rogers only works the day shift
and she isn’t here because it is almost four in the morning. Mrs. Wall is an older nurse all
dressed in white with graying hair that is pulled back in a bun. Her face is covered with wrinkles probably caused by stress, but she has kind, tired eyes. I don’t know how she stays up night after night.

When I finish drying myself, Mrs. Wall hands me the regulation patient materials: two hospital gowns, one to wear, one to cover, a pair of blue hospital booties with rubber on the bottom, one toothbrush, mini-toothpaste and small stick of deodorant.

My street clothes have all been confiscated and labeled “Val Johnson” in huge capital letters and tucked into a locker in the shower room. I am not that concerned about my clothes that have been violated with Mrs. Wall’s Sharpie, when I return to the outside world I can just pretend I was at summer camp. If I would have been thinking I would have worn clothes that were already marked, but I reason the inconvenience of another pair of stigmatized clothes is worth a good night of rest. I sit on a green plastic bench outside the shower room while Mrs. Wall locks the door.

“The doctor will be up to see you in a minute,” she tells me

I know the drill. I hate checking in on off hours. It’s the luck of the draw. The on-call psych doctor is one of three, none of whom were probably at the top of their class in medical school. Mrs. Wall has gone into the nurses’ station behind me. I stare at the narrow glass windows sandwiched in between two huge locked doors. I can see the sky blue doors of the elevators through the windows, and I am beginning to wish that I had stayed home tonight. I turn my head to the right and see the A-side of the wing. The A-side of the wing contains the group therapy room and has cheap, gray carpeting. The A-side is for patients with at least level three privileges and has its own lounge area with a television and a radio.
I know that I will be on the left side of the wing, the B-side, starting with no privileges. The B-side has no carpeting but instead a cold, polished, cement floor. There is no private lounge. Next to the nurses’ station are the reception area and the kitchen area, both of which are dark except for the light that shines through the small door window in the kitchen area that leads to the recreation area and the smoking room. I start to get up to see if Mrs. Wall will let me have a cigarette, but I see Dr. Schultz enter the kitchen area from the back door.

“Shit,” I say and my heart sinks.

Now I know that I will be in here for at least a week. Dr. Schultz is my regular psychiatrist and is always harder on me than any of the on-call doctors. He looks at me and doesn’t speak but instead walks directly into the nurses’ station behind me. I sit back down this time on one of the blue plastic chairs in the reception area.

I can see Dr. Schultz speak to Mrs. Wall through the thick glass of the nurses’ station. She seems to have snapped to attention in his presence. She picks up some paperwork and heads out the door.

“Val, we need to do the regular intake,” she tells me and walks to the intake room connected to the reception area.

As she is unlocking the door, I look into the empty patient room next to the intake room. This patient room is isolated from all the others. It is really more like a cell with padding. The door is solid metal complete with a small open slot to slide a tray through, very medieval prison. I am glad to see some poor bastard isn’t locked up in there tonight, except he or she would probably be sleeping right now which is what I would like more than anything.
Mrs. Wall takes my blood pressure, temperature and pulse. She asks me the routine intake questions: What medication are you taking and how much? When is the last time you had a bowel movement? Do you know where you are? What is the date? Who is the president of the United States? Explain this statement: People with glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. Do you feel like harming yourself? Tell me why you are here.

I tell her that I want to get some sleep. I am exhausted and agitated. Her questions are pissing me off. She leaves the room and I stare at the white walls trying to avoid the distasteful print of a duck-hunting dog. Dr. Schultz enters the room about five minutes later and silently walks past me to the large, cherry-colored wooden desk, sits down and says

“I hear that you tried to harm yourself tonight,” I stare at him.

I can’t believe that he is going to turn my insomnia into a bullshit suicide attempt. It is now close to 5 am in the morning. He looks the same as he always does. He is wearing a sweater vest over a long-sleeve dress shirt with dress pants. If I saw him walking down the street I would call him a Sigmund Freud wannabe. I survey his beady eyes, little wire rim glasses and goatee speckled with gray hairs.

I am speechless.

“I wanted to get some rest,” I tell him “I haven’t slept in close to three days.”

“You have taken a significant amount of sleeping pills, too many to be justified as trying to sleep, Val.”

I hate the way he says my name, “Val,” it’s like he sneezes it out his nose with his overbearing East Coast accent. I realize that I can’t really say anything to justify my actions, at least not to him. I continue to stare at him hoping that he will have sympathy on me, hoping that he will be able to save me from this conscious hell. I have been awake so long
that the whole conversation seems like a dream, the words floating from both our mouths. I
don’t say anything, but he still finds some incriminating evidence to scratch down on his
legal pad.

“I am working the four o’clock shift. Why don’t you try to get some rest and I will
talk to you later on this afternoon,” he whines. “You may go now.”

I am so happy. I will finally be able to rest. I walk out of the intake room as he
continues to shuffle papers and scratch notes.

I knock on the nurses’ station door and tell Mrs. Wall, “Dr. Schultz said that I could
go to sleep now.”

She attaches a green and white hospital band to my wrist and leads me down the
disinfect ed, uncarpeted B-side of the wing to my room in silence. I climb under the crisp,
clean sheets of the hospital bed and Mrs. Wall snaps off the light and begins to leave.

“Can I have something to help me rest?” I ask her when she is barely outside the
doorway.

She walks back into the room, her heels clicking on the cement floor. She adjusts the
blanket on the top of my bed like she is tucking me in. It makes me feel comforted.

“Val – your heart rate is 47, you can’t have anything to help you sleep or you will
die.” She hesitates, “If you lie there and rest, it will do your body as much good as sleeping.”

I know that she doesn’t believe what she is saying. I know she knows that my mind
needs rest more than my body. She doesn’t say anything else and walks out of the room. I
hear her heels clicking on the cement as she walks away.

It is quiet.
I am wide-awake in the dark room and I know that I won’t get to sleep tonight. It never really helps to come here. I don’t know why I come here. I turn my head and look at the shadow reflecting the light of the street lamp on the wall.
CHAPTER 3

Mike tells me that the cops picked him up because he was sitting on an overpass.

“Why do you want to die?” I ask him, “and why would you jump off a bridge? I would take pills if I had to.”

“It’s poetic. I’m already crushed,” he laughs.

Luke comes in the smoking room. He is an older white guy, late in middle age and he has schizophrenia. I see him almost every time I come here. Everyone knows he lives with his parents on a farm because he is always telling people about his fondness for animals.

“Tell me more about that UFO,” Luke says to Mike.

I tense up. I don’t want Mike to get in any more trouble.

“Can’t do it, Luke,” Mike says and smiles, “They don’t want you to know.”

Luke mumbles to himself as Mike puts out his cigarette and the two of us carry our cigarette butts back to the nurses’ station. Mike knocks on the door and we hand the butts to the psych technician.

“Knew you two would be fast friends,” she grins.

This is not a difficult call. There is no one else on the unit under the age of forty. Ken is the only other friend I’ve ever made on the ward. I’m glad he’s not here and that he’s doing well. I thought about him last night when I was admitted.

Dr. Chin was the doctor on call last night. He used to be Ken’s doctor and he used to be my doctor until he wanted to give me electroshock treatments and my mom said no. I went to high school with his daughter. I see him when I get to the unit and I’m disappointed. It’s easy to recognize his short limbs, starched black designer pants as he walks from the back room into the nurses’ station. I can’t stand him. I’m still seeing small flashes of red,
light red almost pretty like the sunset now. I am calm - almost groggy like I’ve taken some
medicine, but I haven’t.

“Val, come,” he says and walks to the office.

He makes a sweeping hand gesture for me to enter through the door in front of him. I
sit on the patient chair and adjust my pajamas.

“So, you want to kill people?” he says smirking a bit.

I see his light brown face, the deep laugh lines in his forehead. He’s wearing a tan
vest. His English isn’t always perfect, but no matter what he’s still smarter than I am. He
knows more about me than I know about myself.

“This is not like you, this makes no sense. What medications are you taking?”

“I’m not taking any medications,” I tell him. I see his face bunch up and he’s upset.

“You. You always think you know better than doctors. I went to medical school.” He
looks at the chart. “What are you so angry about?”

I am angry about so many things it’s hard to narrow it down. I am so angry.

“I am angry at everything, everyone who got me into this mess, who stole my life
from me.”

“You believe people are acting against you?” he says.

“No,” I tell him, “they weren’t looking out for me; my family gave up on me.”

“Well, I know you mother, Val, and she loves you and wants you to get well. She has
worked hard to help you get well.”

“It’s been four years, I am still sick. I want to get off my medicine.”

Dr. Chin looks at me. He disapproves of what I’m saying. I can tell by the look on his
face and the way he flips sternly through the notes on his clipboard.
“Why won’t you take your medicine? You will only get sicker. It is there to help you.”

I want to laugh out loud. I wish that every doctor who prescribed medicine had to take it just once, to see how it makes him or her feel. They pump you full of medication until you can hardly tell which side is up or down. I took a pill to counter the side effects of another pill they gave me. I’m done taking pills. I’m fucking red flash, blood red flash, flash done taking pills.

“I don’t like the way the medicine makes me feel,” I say.

This isn’t true. The medicine doesn’t make you feel anything. It makes you dead, the walking dead. You have no feelings when you’re on medicine. This is what Ken called “the Thorazine shuffle.” Thorazine is an anti-psychotic. I never had to take it, but I was court committed to take a shot of Prolixin, another anti-psychotic, once a month. This was “imperative” my regular psychiatrist, Dr. Schultz, said to keep my mental health intact. You can’t get too high on anti-psychotics, they drop you to the floor lower than low. They bottom out your humanity or any creative thought. I used to write poetry and now I haven’t read a book in four years. I can’t get past the first couple pages, my brain won’t work correctly. It is not functional.

Ken called the way the anti-psychotics walked so slow, slow and plodding steps feet barely off the ground slow the “Thorazine shuffle,” you couldn’t move faster than that on anti-psychotics. The medicine caused stiffness, it was made to slow your mind but it slowed your body too. It didn’t matter though because no one really cared if they got anywhere fast. If you are taking an anti-psychotic, you probably don’t have anywhere you need to be. Dr.
Chin used to be Ken’s doctor. Last time I saw Ken all he talked about was his lawsuit against Dr. Chin.

Ken wore thick black leather bands around both wrists, I watched him make them with a leather kit in recreational therapy. The bands covered streaking red flash, raised scars still bright red flash. They looked like they could be bloody again very easily, without much work. They weren’t scratches. Ken wasn’t crying for help, I think he figured out what I figured out. It is a losing battle. Dr. Chin wasn’t helping him. The electroshock treatments Dr. Chin ordered didn’t help him. He was suing Dr. Chin.

“Val, we have tried to treat you correctly. If you don’t follow our directions, how do you expect to get better?”

“I just think I should get to try it my way. I don’t want to take the medicine anymore.”

“But, you want to get well.” Dr. Chin clucked and shook his head. “You will not get well without medicine. I will not talk to you any longer tonight. You should go to bed and talk to Dr. Schultz in the morning.”

“I don’t mean to…” I start.

Dammit, I refuse to cry.

“I don’t want to be like this anymore.”

Group therapy is at 4pm every day and all patients on the unit are required to go. I sit next to Mike while Dr. Neal drones on and on about the power of positive self-talk and facing our fears. When he asks what the patients think of it, Mike says he thought we weren’t supposed to talk to ourselves. No one on the unit appreciates his sense of humor except for
me. Dr. Neal gives him a lecture on importance of taking our illnesses seriously and working to improve our lives. We are going around the room addressing our fears.

I’ve heard this speech dozens of times, but somehow taking things seriously has never changed anything for me, thinking about fear never made my life better.

My therapist Mrs. Martin repeats to me each time I see her, “You are not your mental illness.”

This is an optimistic mantra. I am not my mental illness. I am not my mental illness. Lately I don’t think I’m mentally ill at all, but I haven’t found another identity to replace this one. I haven’t felt like myself for so long. I am still sitting in a circle of high-back rocking chairs with people who are and will always be mentally ill pumped full of medication, half of them wearing pajamas and the other half dressed in shabby street clothes. I am staring at my peers who are not their mental illnesses when it’s my turn to share.

“I’m scared I’ll never get better,” I tell the group, “I’m afraid I’ll never be able to get off the medicine.”

Everyone here knows that I am refusing my meds. Dr. Neal nods his head.

“You have to work with your doctors. Mental illness is manageable,” he says, “You just need the right tools.”

Mike whispers to me.

“Yeah, like a bridge.”

I am smitten with Mike.

“We’re soul meets,” Mike says to me after therapy. We are sitting in the radio room again. Most of the rest of the patients have level two privileges and are able to go to the art therapy room on the fifth floor. Mike and I are still in our pajamas so we aren’t allowed to
go. Sometime tomorrow in the morning after breakfast a medical doctor will come and give us a full check-up. Once the doctor charts that we are physically fine and our psychiatrist gives an order the techs will let us in to the shower room to get out clothes.

“Huh?”

“You know, not soul mates, but soul meets, people you meet who touch your soul,” he says.

I’ve never heard of anything like that. Mike is sitting crossed legged on the couch with his back very straight. He is very tall and so skinny. I see his knee bones sticking out and I smile at him. I am a fat girl in pajamas. I have been fat since the summer after third grade. I started gaining weight and I couldn’t stop. I just ate and ate and ate. The year after I graduated from high school I lost seventy pounds and I was a size 10/12, the smallest I’d ever been in my adult life. I worked out almost every day.

The medicine they gave me when I got sick made me gain weight quickly, almost sixty pounds in the first three months. That doesn’t really help to keep depression away. When I first got sick, all I did was sleep and eat and I have been gaining weight ever since. Now I weigh over three hundred pounds. I get angry when I think about it, I know part of it’s the medicine and part of it’s me. I just wish I didn’t look the way I looked. I don’t feel comfortable in my own skin. I feel self-conscious around Mike and pull my pajama robe more tightly around my stomach. He doesn’t seem to notice.

“Soul meets?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s special,” he tells me, “it’s special that we’re here together.”

I am excited about the prospect of being special. I’ve never really felt special. I’ve felt
gawked at or strange. I’ve felt like an oddity and like I never fit in. I’ve never really felt special or needed or wanted by anyone for just being myself.

“Let’s run away when we get out. Let’s go to Canada or something,” I tell him.

It would be nice to go somewhere with Mike. We could run away and find jobs and forget about our mental illness and all the mistakes we’ve made in the past. We could start a new life together where our diseases didn’t matter.

Mike looks at me.

“We can’t run away,” he begins.

I don’t listen. I know what he is going to say. He is going to say we can’t run away because we will never lose ourselves. I don’t listen to him because I don’t want to hear it. I have been to Minnesota and to Texas and to Louisiana. I have moved from apartment to apartment every six months. I don’t want to think about never being able to get away from myself or my problems or my past. Sometimes I feel like I am a big piece of string that is tied full of knots. The knots are bad things. Bad decisions I’ve made, bad things that other people have done to me. I am that piece of string. I am perfect underneath all those knots. I can’t untie those knots, they are too difficult and there are too many. I want to cut my piece of string just to have a little piece of a perfect me. I can’t stand being all knotted up anymore. I don’t know how to tell Mike about the knots.

“Val?”

“Yeah,” I say to him.

I stop staring into space and look back at him. I make the decision not to tell him about the string, not to tell him about the knots. I don’t want to think about it anymore.
“We could stay together, though. I am going to go to Cherokee for at least six months. Dr. Schultz told me this morning. You could come with me.”

Cherokee is one of Iowa’s state mental hospitals. It is in northwest Iowa about two hours from Fort Dodge. It is a long-term facility, not like 3 East that is just for short stays. Some people stay there forever. I think about staying with Mike and never going back home. It doesn’t seem like anyone wants me at home anyway. It doesn’t seem like I have any hope of untying the knots. I am not my mental illness, but I’m not much else. Mike thinks we’re soul meets, he thinks I’m special. I tell Dr. Schultz the next morning I want to go to Cherokee.

“Are you serious about this, Val?” Dr. Schultz asks me.

“Yeah, I’m not getting any better. I come in and out of the hospital all the time. It’s not helping me.”

I want to cry and feel sad about the fact that I’ve given up, but I’m excited to get to go with Mike. I think it will be an adventure. Dr. Schultz tells me that he will make some calls, but I should consider it very carefully.

“You will have to stay there for at least six months.”

I agree to this.

Mike is waiting for me when I come out of the Schultz’s office. He has gotten his street clothes and is wearing blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a leather collar around his neck. I think he looks really cute. He is dressed like all the alternative boys I’m attracted too. I feel even more special when he smiles at me. He is excited to see me.

“I can’t believe they let you have that collar,” I tell him.
We are back in the radio room, sitting next to each other on the couch. I have my street clothes on now too. I’ve been wearing the same sort of outfit for the last four years. I have on sweat pants and a sweatshirt that makes me feel only slightly less self-conscious than I did when I was wearing pajamas. Ever since I started taking medicine my body feels weird. The sensations in my body are all messed up. I couldn’t wear jeans right after my breakdown even though I was pretty thin at the time. Clothes felt strange on my body, too tight like my body couldn’t breathe like I was being suffocated. The waistband is still the worst part of any clothing. It makes me feel like I’m being sawed in half. I’ve had this pair of sweat pants for a while so they’re pretty comfortable. Mike doesn’t mention anything about my clothes. We are still talking about the leather collar around his neck.

“I had to prove to them that I couldn’t hang myself with it. It just snaps shut it would never hold the weight of a human body.”

He reaches up and unsnaps it to show me. It is much lighter than it looks. I hold it to test the snaps, they come open easily. The collar is well worn and feels soft in my hands.

“What did he say? Can you go?” Mike asks me.

I tell him that Dr. Schultz says I can go to the hospital if I want to; he actually thinks it might be a good idea. Mike is smiling. He is pleased and that makes my stomach flip a bit. I can’t believe after spending four years trying not to get sent to Cherokee that I will be going there voluntarily. I start to think that maybe Mike and I are soul meets.

After dinner it is visiting hours and the unit gets busy. Mike and I don’t have visitors so we watch the nurses try to keep Luke away from the other patient’s guest. Luke is a regular to 3 East. He is a tall, stocky, blond guy in his mid-forties with a blank look on his face. He lives on a farm and when he gets his street clothes they are always work jeans or
coveralls. I’ve only seen him psychotic. I don’t think he gets depressed. He is never very
friendly and sticks to himself although he does roam around the halls a lot like he’s doing
now. It makes the staff nervous, you can tell, but they can’t do anything about it. They can’t
force Luke to stay in his room unless they have doctor’s orders or unless he does something
to break the rules. They try to keep Luke occupied because they don’t want Luke to break the
rules. Usually the things that Luke does would involve a code green.

“I can’t believe they think that guy is ever going to get better,” Mike says, “It’s so
ridiculous.”

I agree with Mike, but I don’t say anything. Even when it’s time for them to discharge
Luke he isn’t better. Luke isn’t functional when he leaves. He is calm and subdued and
because of all the times I’ve seen him in here I know it’s only temporary. I want to go back
to the radio room and hang out with Mike. It’s sad to watch other people have visitors. My
friends never really came to visit me on 3 East after the first time I was hospitalized. My
sister only came once at the very beginning and she spent the whole time asking me what I
did all day. She talked nervously about the new boots she bought and how terrible it must be
to have people watching everything you did and telling you want to do.

“I just don’t know how you can stand it in here,” she said.

She told me later the reason she never came was that it made her too sad to see me
like that. She said it wasn’t even like me. It was like I was a completely different person and
not her sister. I wanted to tell Gretchen that I am the same person out of the hospital that I
am inside the hospital; it’s just that you can’t pretend I’m not sick when you come to see me
here.
Every time my brother came to see me he came with my mom. He didn’t want to know about how I was doing, but spent most of the time asking me questions about everyone on the ward. Technically, I’m not supposed to tell anyone what I know about the other patients and why they are here, but he would pester me until I would tell him their diagnosis or other information. I think he found it amusing, but he stopped coming a couple of years ago and would tell my mom to tell me he would see me when I got out.

My mom came to visit me if I stayed in the hospital for three days or more. I would call her in the evenings if she didn’t come to see me, but it wasn’t the same. She would bring me cigarettes and clothes if I needed them. She mostly talked about work and the things I was doing on the unit. My step dad only came with her a couple of times. He used to work at Trinity Regional and was embarrassed of me, I think. He never said anything, but he used to roll his eyes at me and ask when I was going to stop coming here. Kelly always made me feel bad so I’m glad he stopped coming with my mom. I wished my mom were here tonight though. I want to talk to her about going to Cherokee.

“Watch this,” Mike says laughing.

He walks over to the nurse and distracts her from patrolling Luke. I feel sort of alarmed and want to tell him not to do anything to get into trouble. I don’t think he cares about losing smoking privileges. We are both going to be leaving soon.

“I’m not sure if I’m getting enough medication,” I hear him say to her, “none of my pills make me feel small.”

The nurse has an unhappy look on her face and I see her start to say something to Mike about. Luke is unobserved long enough to walk up to a pair of visitors sitting at the dining room table.
“I like to fuck sheep,” he says. “What kind of animals do you like to fuck?”

I feel sorry for the visitors who are shocked by Luke’s behavior. Maybe they feel afraid for their family member that has to stay locked up here or maybe they feel grateful that their family member is not as sick as Luke. Mike plays innocent about the whole thing and doesn’t get into any trouble. We go to the radio room and laugh about it and then go for a smoke. Mike is out of cigarettes so I am loaning him mine. Mike doesn’t get a check so he doesn’t have any money. I’ll need my mom to bring me more soon. She is my payee and takes care of all my money. When I need something, she writes a check for it. I wonder how I will get along in Cherokee without her. I wonder if she’ll come visit me there.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea to go.” I say to Mike.

I’ve been thinking more about being so far away from my family and friends. Even though they don’t come to see me if I really needed them, they would be here for me. I think they would be here for me. He is sitting by the radio slowly turning the knob. I notice the shape of his hands, well-defined fingers and bony knuckles. Mike has beautiful hands. They are very clean.

“You don’t have to come with me. You have to do what you want. I will never tell someone what to do with their life,” he says to me.

I want to go with him, but it doesn’t make any sense. I think he might be running in the wrong direction. Maybe the problem is we have no direction. I’m starting to think even without any idea where I need to go I shouldn’t be going to Cherokee. The things I hate about my life, the things I’m so angry about are the things that have been taken away from me. I feel like so much time has been taken away from me. The chance to be happy. My freedom has been taken away from me mentally and physically.
Trinity Regional Hospital
Admission Notes
January 18, 1994

Val Johnson is a 19-year-old African American single woman.

Reason for referral: Disorganized behavior and suicide threats.

History of Present Illness: The patient was having thoughts of overdosing. She states she has spent the entire week prior to hospitalization in bed. The patient has had three previous psychiatric hospitalizations on 3 East since October 1993 for bipolar disorder. She has not stabilized. Her most recent hospitalization from January 4th to January 11th. During that hospitalization she was started on Zoloft. She has also been getting Prolixin 37.5 mg IM once a month, Cogentin 1 mg bid and Ativan 0.5 mg q hs. She had been treated with Lithium and Doxepin a few months ago but this was discontinued secondary to sedation. Val told her mother yesterday that she wanted to overdose on all of her pills. She indicated that she was just tired of living and trying to cope with her mental illness. She said that she mentally ill all the time. The mother was quite concerned, called the police and the police brought Val to the emergency room. Val requested readmission to 3 East and is a voluntary patient at this point, although she is also under outpatient commitment. The patient had been psychotic a few months ago and very disorganized. She was severely psychotic at the time of her first admission to 3 East. Since then her psychosis has stabilized but she has appeared to continue with depressive symptoms. She is trying to cope with the fact that she has a mental illness. In the past she was not compliant, would not always take her medications and refused recommendations for PHP. She continues to have a lost of energy, loss of drive and motivation. She sleeps much of the time. Sits at home with nothing to do, she will not go out of the house, will not socialize and remains isolated and withdrawn. She realizes that this situation is psychologically unhealthy for her, yet she is unable to have energy to go out and get volunteer work or go to the partial hospitalization program. She feels despondent and hopeless. She does not know if she can cope any longer with her mental illness. She has fears of regressing and ending up as a chronic mental patient for the rest of her life, going in and out of hospitals.

The patient lives with her mother and has a 22-year-old brother in college. There are no major medical problems except that there was some anemia found during the last hospitalization. She also had a car accident in September. She is somewhat obese, she appears her stated age, and she is calm and fairly cooperative for today’s interview. Eye contact is better than on previous mental status examinations. Her mood is considerable depressed and her affect is very restricted. She indicates that she feels rather hopeless about her mental condition and that she was having thoughts of taking all her pills yesterday. She is tired of trying. There is no evidence of psychosis at this point although it should be noted that she has hidden her psychotic symptoms very well in the past. There is not evidence of psychotic behavior and she is relating better with the examiner than she has on previous occasions. She is alert and oriented. Recent and remote memory is good. Intelligence is in the
average range. Her judgment and insight are still poor but they are beginning to improve compared to previous hospitalizations.

**Diagnostic Impression Upon Admission:** Bipolar disorder, depressed type, with some passive aggressive personality traits.

**Plan:** This patient will continue on 3 East as an inpatient. She will continue on her current medications. She may need more time on Zoloft 100 mg q am as she has been on this medication for about two weeks. We will involve her in supportive individual therapy, group therapy, recreational therapy and milieu therapy. She may require higher doses of Zoloft. We will evaluate this. We will obtain occupational therapy assessment and give her passes to arrange for some type of volunteer work. She needs to be transitioned back into the community. We will also encourage her to consider once again the possibility of the partial hospitalization program.

P. Schultz M.D.

I’ve never seen how being around people who are mentally ill will help me get better. I don’t see how going to a bigger hospital with more rules and people who are sicker than me can help me regain what I lost. I want to get better. I want to be free from this. I don’t want to be my mental illness.

A psych tech comes and gives us our medication. She is carrying a silver tray full of white nut cups and small clear glasses of water. I always thought it was funny that the staff put the medicine in nut cups. Some people called this place the nut barn and it’s obvious we are the nuts. She hands Mike his medicine making him repeat each pill out loud as he places it on his tongue. This is supposed to help the patients learn about the medicine they are taking and also prevents the patients from getting the wrong pill. It’s awkward to stand there and listen to Mike mimic the tech as he repeats all of his medication. We are taking two of the same pills. He takes a drink of water and then lifts his tongue to show her he swallowed the pills. She records it on her chart.

I refuse my medication when the tech offers it. She gives me a disapproving look and writes a large red “R” in her chart for “refusal.” I can feel Mike watching me. I refused to
take two of the pills he just swallowed. I don’t think he knows we’re on the same medication if I was taking mine.

When she leaves, I ask him, “Don’t you want to try to get off the medicine? Don’t you want to see if you’re better, before you give up?”

I can’t feel anything different yet from not taking the medication. I stopped taking it a week or so before I checked myself into the hospital. The only thing I started to feel on the outside was very angry. I felt out of control. Here on the inside I feel in control, but sort of antsy. I think that anxiety might be creeping up on me. I’m getting nervous. The idea of going to Cherokee of being away from my family in a strange place is making me nervous. Mike is making me nervous.

“No,” Mike says, “I don’t want to feel anything ever again.”

We stare at each other. I don’t understand what is going on inside his head. I’m afraid to ask him.

“Don’t you want to know why?” he asks me.

I’m not sure I want to know why. I can tell by the tone of this voice and the look in his eyes it’s not going to be good.

“Why?” I finally ask.

He touches the collar around his neck, snaps it off and hands it to me. I hold it in my hands and touch the cool silver snap, the edges of the leather. The soft wornness feels familiar and warm from his neck.

“This was hers,” he tells me, “My girlfriend’s, she gave it to me when we broke up. I broke up with her because she was going to college and I didn’t want to have a long distance
relationship. She freaked out, you know. She called me all summer until she was going to leave for school.”

I feel my heart beating faster than I would like. I am a little sweaty, it must be anxiety. I shouldn’t be able to feel my heart beating. I can almost hear it now.

“So you left?” I ask him.

“I told her I never wanted to see her again. I told her to go kill herself,” he says.

Mike looks me. He said it matter-of-factly.

“She killed herself,” he says, “I spit on her grave and then I left.”

My ears feel hot and my heart is beating faster than I would like. Mike is crazy. He is cruel. He is not functional. My heart. It is definitely beating faster than I would like. I think I may be having an anxiety attack. I want to be special. I want to be free. I don’t want to be soul meets with someone who doesn’t care, who is cruel. I am sweating and I feel flushed and I want to tell Mike to take it back to tell me that he made it up. I don’t want him to be crazy. I don’t want him to be his mental illness. He cannot be his mental illness like I’m not his mental illness. I am going to lay down now. I tell Mike I think I’m having an anxiety attack and he raises his eyebrows. I smile at him a little weak smile and walk to my room. I am not his soul meet. Maybe I am his soul meet. Maybe he just saved my soul.

I don’t sleep very well. I toss and turn and sweat, but in the morning I almost feel normal. Mike is leaving for Cherokee today. When I see Dr. Schultz I tell him I changed my mind about going, but not about taking medication. He isn’t happy. Dr. Schultz tells me he thinks going to Cherokee was a good idea for me. He tells me maybe being in a long-term facility would help me get better. He is thinking about forcing me to go anyway. I won’t take my medicine and I won’t go to Cherokee. I will get better and I will get free.
The psych tech writes another big R on my chart for “refusal” after I turn down morning meds for the third time. She tells me that I am only hurting myself. I watch Mike take his medicine for the last time, repeating the name of each pill after the tech. I sit with him next to the front door of the unit waiting for the Sheriff to pick him up. I don’t feel appalled by him anymore. My anxiety has burned out a bit. I stare at his face and wonder what he’s thinking. He hasn’t said much to me all morning. Mike looks like a sad little kid and I want to hug him, but we can’t touch each other. It is against the rules

I can’t hug Mike and I wonder how long it will be until anyone hugs him. The sheriff come through the doors and barely notices us as he makes his way to the nurses’ station to pick up the papers. Mike is stiff and staring straight ahead. I want to touch his well-shaped hand and tell him not to do this. I want to tell him not to throw away years and years of his life. I don’t want him to throw away his life forever.

“You are not your illness,” I would say staring straight into his eyes if he would look at me.

I don’t think he would believe me and maybe he wouldn’t care. The sheriff walks over with his hands full of paperwork and asks Mike if he’s the one and Mike nods.

He puts his hands to his handcuffs and says, “We won’t be needing these today will we, son?”

Mike says no and smiles at me when he lifts his bag from the floor. He says goodbye quietly. I say goodbye quietly and I watch Mike leave through the small double glass windows in the blue metal doors. He turns and smiles at me and then gets on the elevator to leave.
I wonder if he will ever be functional. I hope he will. I hope he will. I am all alone on the unit and I’m worried that I’m making a mistake by not going with him. God, I hope I’m not making a mistake. Dr. Schultz thinks it’s a good idea for me to go to Cherokee. I may end up having to go there anyway. I think about why I’m not going with him.

I don’t know what it is I want. I want to belong, I want to be safe, I want to be normal and functional and live a good life like other people. I want to be free. I can’t go with Mike it seems like I have already given away my life. I don’t want to give up I want me life back. I don’t know how I got this way. I am not functional. Why am I not functional? What went so wrong? I remember things that make me different that make me feel that I will never have it together that I will never be able to untie all these knots.
CHAPTER 4

Mike is gone and I’m still sitting here in the hospital. I wish I was home watching television or sleeping. When you don’t take medicine for days and days your body starts to itch. It’s better if you don’t scratch though, because you’ll never stop. There isn’t anywhere I can go where I can get away from my body, my mind and all this energy pooled in my body, God it is in my stomach and it burns. I think it’s anxiety.

I wish someone would help me. It helps to rock back and forth. I know if I just keep on rocking back and forth and I can make it through the next couple of days. I don’t know why this has to happen to people. I don’t know why some people had to be here, I don’t know why I have to be here, why I can’t cope with life anymore.

After the accident I couldn’t sleep in the hospital bed for days and days, I rocked too hard. I drug my mattress to the floor and lay there rocking myself to sleep. My body had too much energy, it moved too fast for my skin. I thought about the accident because it all started there, it all ended there. This life started and the life I had ended. I threw it all away myself. I thought about the accident, that first night I could sleep my whole brain faded to midnight black, blue black and there were no dreams just darkness. I wasn’t terrified then. I wasn’t scared then lying in that bed, I just wanted it to end, but God wouldn’t let me die. I didn’t know why God wouldn’t let me die because my life was already over. It seemed to be over before it began.

I am five years old, sitting at the dining room table at my house, the house I grew up in Dakota City. It is springtime the sun is shining in that deceptive way where it looks warm but it’s not warm enough for me to want to go outside. I was cold walking home the five blocks from kindergarten at Mease Elementary. My brother and sister aren’t home yet, they
won’t be home for hours and hours. I don’t know where my mom is. I know that he is here. Mark is here.

Mark is my mom’s boyfriend. He has lived with us for as long as we’ve lived in this house. I remember another house in a different town that he used to visit, but not well. Everyday I come home as quietly as I can, opening the front door slowly so it won’t creak, so I won’t wake him up. Mark works nights as a construction worker somewhere. We aren’t supposed to wake him up during the day.

I am peeling an orange when I hear him walk in. My body stiffens and my legs stop dangling off the metal chair. I don’t have to look up to feel his yellow eyes glaring at me. I feel his anger from the other side of the table.

“What are you doing?” he asks me.

Mark is supposed to be sleeping. I go quickly go through a list of everything I’ve done since I’ve gotten home. Nothing too noisy, I don’t think I could’ve woken him up. I was very quiet. I know I was very quiet. My mom is gone. My brother and sister are at school all day in first and second grade. I wish that they were home. It could have been someone else that was making noise, but I am the only one home. It could have only been me who woke him up. I was quiet though. I was quiet.

“I’m hungry,” I tell him not looking up.

I keep looking at the orange.

“I didn’t ask if you were hungry or not, I asked what you were doing.”

His voice is hard. Mark is never happy when he was up during the day. He is never never nice when he is up during the day. I was quiet though. I am just peeling an orange. I
am not making any noise. I didn’t do anything, but there is nothing I can say. I don’t say anything.

“Girl, I asked you a question,” he says louder.

He puts his hand on the table in front of me. I am already looking down. I stare at his dark brown hand with yellowed fingernails. His fingers are dry and chapped from working outside. The knuckles are scabbed. His hands make me sick; they look like the hands of a mean man. I don’t look at him. I look at his mean hands. Mark hits me sometimes when I look at him. He says I roll my eyes at him. I don’t know what that means.

“Answer me,” he says again.

There is no right answer, I can tell by the tone in his voice. It doesn’t matter what I say.

“I’m peeling an orange,” I tell him.

I keep my head down and pull the peel back from the orange slowly. The juice from the orange is dripping on the table and I feel my hands shake as I tear it, chunks of the orange stick to the skin. I feel my eyes getting hot and itchy and I want to cry but I won’t cry.

“What the fuck are you doing? You are wasting that orange,” he tells me.

I feel his shoulder next to mine, his breath over my head and the smell of him. He smells like the sweat of someone who has been sleeping all day. Sour. I am sick to my stomach. I wish that I had gone to my room, but being upstairs usually makes too much noise. It’s better to hide behind the couch like I do most days. I should have hidden behind the couch. I had graham crackers hidden there and I can eat them and be really really quiet. He never wakes up when I stay behind the couch until Charlie and Gretchen get home. My eyes are hot. I blink.
“Give me that orange,” Mark says and holds out his mean hand.

The palm of his hand doesn’t look clean. It looks stained and dirty. I don’t want to eat the orange if he touches it.

I hesitate and he yells, “Give me the orange.”

I give him the orange and tears run down my face. I can’t hold them in any longer. I hate being weak. I hate showing him how much he hurts me. He is peeling the orange and doesn’t notice my tears. Chunks of orange stick to the peel.

“It’s hard to peel,” I say quietly, thinking he’ll forgive me for peeling it wrong.

Mark shoves me so hard I fall off the chair. I lose my breath. I am sobbing when I look up at him.

“Don’t cry now,” he says, “You asked for that. You never know when to shut-up do you? I’m trying to help you. Stop crying.”

I try to stop crying but I can’t. My chest is heaving and I can’t quite catch my breath. I am on the floor and I don’t know what to do. Maybe he’ll push me back down if I get up. I sit there. I don’t know what he wants me to do.

“STAND UP,” he yells, “Quit acting like a baby.”

I get up slowly off the ground. My wrist hurts. I am trying not to look at him. I want to hide in the corner, near the window under the curtains like I did when I was little. I look at him. I look at his dark black skin and red-rimmed yellow eyes. I look at his scabby stained hands. Mark throws the orange at me.

“You make me so damn angry,” he says.

I burst into sobs again. My chest is heaving when I turn to look at the spot on the wall behind me. Juice is dripping down the way. I hear myself crying loudly. When I turn back to
look at Mark I see him holding the metal chair. I see the red lined vinyl seat and the silver legs in the air. I hear a dull thud.

I wake up in the corner near the window. The curtain is not covering me. The chair is pushed under the table and the sticky spot on the wall is gone. There is light filtering through the sheer curtains, little specks of dust floating through the air reflected in the sunlight. It is beautiful.

“Why are you sleeping in here?” my brother Charlie asks me, “Why don’t you go in your room?”

I start crying and put my hand to my head. My head is thick and throbbing with a huge goose egg sticking out of my forehead. I sit up in the corner and Charlie sees it.

“You should just keep your mouth shut,” he says and yells for my sister to come see it.

Gretchen says I should put ice on it. She gets a rag and some ice cubes from the freezer.

“Don’t make him so angry,” she says, “You just have to stay out of his way.”

I try really hard to stay out of his way. I am only five.

Mark stays with us until the summer I turn nine. My mom is around more and he hits us less. Now he sits on the stairs and won’t let me go up unless I let him touch me. Even if I beg or tell him I have to use the bathroom really bad. If he is sitting on the stairs he won’t let me go up unless I let him touch me. Sometimes he sticks his hand down my pants and sometimes he puts his hands up my shirt. His hands make me feel dirty. I go to the bathroom outside in the yard inside of going inside sometimes. He sits on the stairs when it’s time for me to go to bed at night.
“I want you to give me some,” he tells me one afternoon when I am playing on the back porch, “It will be fun. I am going to come to your bedroom tonight.”

He tells me that it’s a secret and I shouldn’t tell anyone. I don’t know what he means or what he wants from me, but I am afraid. I know that it can’t be a good thing. I know by the way he says it, by the way he looks at me.

When it gets dark, Gretchen and I hide under her bed. I am sleeping when he comes into our room. Gretchen nudges me awake. I am giggling because it seems like a game until he grabs my arm and drags me out. Mark is holding my arm roughly. When I try to wiggle loose and can’t I get afraid. I want to cry. He is holding my arm so tightly.

“Go get help,” I beg my sister, “Get mom.”

I am crying now.

Mark tells me, “Your mom can’t help you.”

I hear Gretchen walk down the stairs. She doesn’t come back. My mom doesn’t come up the stairs. I am listening for her, but she never comes up the stairs. Mark makes me take my clothes off in the dark. I am near my bed now and I feel ashamed. He touches me and I feel his rough scabby hands on me. I imagine I can see the stains in the dark. I can feel his yellow eyes staring at me. I don’t say anything. I am too scared to cry anymore. He makes me lay down.

I feel small and light when he gets on top of me and he is heavy and then I don’t remember. It hurts and I just want my mom. I just want it to stop. I just want my mom to come and save me. I am crying when he takes my hand and I don’t remember.

“Get up,” he tells me, “You need to clean yourself.”

My legs hurt. I am hurt.
“I’m ok,” I tell him, “I’m ok, I just want to go to sleep.”

I’m ok. I’m ok. I’m ok. I’m ok. I’m ok. I am crying now, but not sobbing. My chest is not moving, my self is not moving. I’m ok. I’m ok. I’m ok. I try to dress myself, but he won’t give me my clothes. I am on my knees naked feeling around the floor for my pajamas. My pajamas are not on the floor. He has my clothes and he won’t give them to me. My hands are shaking. My legs are shaking and I want my pajamas. I reach my hand out for my pajamas, but he won’t give them to me.

“You need to clean yourself,” Mark says, “You’re dirty.”

He grabs my arm. I feel my bones. My arm is shaking. My body is shaking. I am ok. I am ok. He walks me to the bathroom and turns on the light. It hurts my eyes and I don’t look at him. I look at my legs, but they are naked. I stare at the patches on the carpet. The carpet has dark blue and gold and brown patterns. There are squares and more squares with spirals and squares. Mark has a navy blue washcloth in his scabby hands. I watch him hold it under the faucet of the bathtub.

“Wash yourself,” he says offering me the washcloth.

I don’t want to take it from his hands. I don’t want him to touch me. I stand there shivering.

He washes me, prying my shaking legs apart until I lose my balance and have to hold his arm so I won’t fall. I don’t look. I stare at my hand on his arm and wonder why I can’t feel it. I wonder why it doesn’t feel like my arm. When he is done, he hands me my pajamas. I didn’t realize he was holding my pajamas. I don’t look at him when I dress. He helps me into my pajama bottoms. I am still shivering when he takes my hand and hugs me.
“You are a good girl,” he says to me softly, “Do you want some ice cream?”

I shake my head. I just want to go to sleep. I am cold. I just want to go to sleep.

“No,” I say with my teeth chattering, “I just want to go to sleep. Please.”

“Everything’s fine, girl,” he tells me.

He is getting angry. I know by the sound of his voice.

“Don’t you want some ice cream?” he asks me again.

I nod my head slowly and let my hand go limp in his when he grasps it to take me downstairs. I stand in the middle of the kitchen in my pajamas. My pajama bottoms are wet down there. I am watching the shadows from the light over the sink on the wall. The sink is full of clean dishes drying. I wonder where my mom is. I wonder where my sister is. The florescent light over the sink is humming. The refrigerator is humming. I hear my teeth chattering, but it seems to be coming from far away. I don’t look up when he hands me the vanilla ice cream cone. The vanilla ice cream is heaped onto a small cake cone. It already has drips down the side.

“Aren’t you going to eat it?” Mark says, “I made it extra big for you.”

“Can I eat it in my room?” I ask quietly.

He nods at me.

I take the cone from him. I smell the vanilla spice so strong and feel the ice cream melting down my hand. The cone is crumbling. I hold it lightly as I walk up the stairs. I don’t want the ice cream cone. I want to get rid of it. My sister is in bed when I go into my room. I know she is awake, but she doesn’t say anything to her. I am ashamed of having the ice cream cone. I lie under my covers with the hand holding the ice cream sticking out. I want to
cry. I don’t know what to do with the cone. I sit up and eat it quickly and as quietly as possible so I can fall asleep.

I fall asleep. The next day I don’t say anything to my sister and she doesn’t say anything to me. We never talk about it and Mark leaves later that year in the spring. I figure this thing happens to all little brown girls. It happened to Oprah and I don’t hear anyone else talk about it ever. It is not something people talk about so I don’t talk about it. I don’t tell anyone even when I start to gain weight and my clothes stopped fitting. I am worried that I am pregnant. I am terrified that people will find out. My mom complains about all the food that goes missing from the kitchen, but she never says anything to me about it. I cry a lot at night. I eat a lot.

My mom’s new boyfriend, Kelly, moves in at the end of the summer. He is black. He is also our cousin and he is different than Mark. He doesn’t hit us or scream at us, most of the time he just ignores us and lays in the bedroom with our mom. I never tell anyone what Mark did. He is gone and I just want to forget and because I don’t know how and because I don’t think it’s normal. I don’t want to be different, I just want to be normal like all the other girls and I just want to forget. I just want to fit in. I don’t tell anyone, but I can’t forget and I never just feel normal.
CHAPTER 5

“Don’t you just hate it?” Tessa asks Ann.

Jodi and I glance each other a knowing look. Tessa, Ann, Heather, Jodi and I are walking the four blocks to Humboldt Junior High. It’s late April and a pretty nice day outside. Tessa is talking about her period again. Jodi and I are the only two of our group of friends that haven’t gotten our periods yet. Heather was the first in fifth grade, then Ann the year after. Tessa got hers this summer and it’s like she can’t talk about anything else. Jodi and I are sick of it.

The five of us have been going to school together at St. Mary’s Elementary since first grade. All together there are nineteen of us in the class of 1988. Every day since we started seventh grade we walk to Humboldt Junior High after lunch for our math and science classes, an elective and study hall. The junior high is three times the size of our elementary school and crowded with seventh, eighth and ninth graders.

There are a couple of different groups walking the same stretch of sidewalk as us with gaps between them. I walk with the same four girls. We don’t get to see each other during the afternoon anymore, this quarter we all have different schedules. I am in Art. Tessa and Ann have shop, Jodi has health and Heather has Home Economics.

“God, I hope I don’t have mine for graduation,” Tessa continues talking about her period. It’s April and we will be graduating from St. Mary’s in less than two months. Eighth grade graduation is a big deal with parties and new dresses. I’m nervous because I have been selected by Sister Davis to deliver a speech. I’m the vice-president of student council and I’ve done well in speech contests all three years I competed.
Jodi rolls her eyes at me when Tessa says, “Maybe you two will have yours by then,”

Jodi and I are lagging behind. Jodi is the smallest girl in the class. She has stick legs, bright red hair, two sisters and a brother and her family owns successful business in town. Her parents won’t let her stay at my house ever, even though my mom finally married my step-dad, Kelly, when I was in sixth grade. Kelly moved from Chicago to live with us the summer Mark left. I was excited at first because he was also our cousin. He was my dad’s nephew, but I had never met my dad so it wasn’t that weird. Even so, I didn’t tell people because it wasn’t normal. Kelly worked at Humboldt County Memorial Hospital. He was a nurse and sometimes people teased me about that. We were in junior high, though and everyone got teased about something.

Heather and Tessa constantly teased Joann about wearing the same pants since fifth grade. She hasn’t grown at all and her mom won’t buy her new clothes because the old ones still fit. We have been trying to convince her since seventh grade to ruin the clothes in some way so she can get new ones, but she will never agree. Jodi is kind of a goody-two shoes.

They never tease me about my clothes. They know my family doesn’t have a lot of money and it’s been hard for my mom and step-dad to afford new clothes for me this year. It doesn’t help that I’ve gained weight every summer since third grade. This summer I gained 30 pounds. I don’t have too many clothes that fit me and they definitely aren’t stylish. A lot of my clothes are old. No one really mentions it in an obvious way except once Sister Davis. Once I was standing in the lunch line at school when she told me my shirt was too worn to wear to school. My face felt hot.

“You look raggedy,” she had said.
I am the youngest girl in the class, but the largest. Ann constantly tells me about the diets her older sister uses to lose weight. Ann’s sister was the Humboldt County Fair Queen, the Homecoming Queen and the star of every school play for the last two years. Her dad is the guidance counselor at the high school and her mom teaches second grade at St. Mary’s. All of us get tired of hearing Ann brag so we talk about how annoying she is behind her back. Tessa does a great impression of Ann talking about her precious sister Stacey.

Ann is tall and thin and beautiful. She has long brown hair with a natural wave and lives in a house that was once featured in *Better Homes and Gardens*. Ann is good at sports, she can sing and is destined to be the star of Humboldt High School and everyone else knows it. I think they are jealous that they will have to stand in the background.

I’m not jealous because I don’t have to watch Ann’s life unfold. My mom decided she wanted all of us to graduate from catholic school. I have to go to the catholic high school in Fort Dodge next year. My sister is already a freshman at St. Edmond. This will be my last year in the Humboldt School district. I also knew a secret about Ann, her life wasn’t that perfect. This summer she told me she was afraid her parents were going to get a divorce. She started crying when she said all they do is scream and fight. I hugged her because I understood, that’s all my mom and step-dad had been doing that summer as well.

“We’re going to miss you so much,” Heather said when I told them during lunch last year that I would be going to St. Edmonds instead of Humboldt.

Her mom was a teacher at the high school. Heather was known for her obsession with dancing and had taken tap and ballet for eight years, also it was rumored that her parents used birth control instead of natural family planning. Tessa said no Catholics should have less than four kids if they’re doing it right, and then she counted out all the families with four kids to
prove her point. Heather was a nice girl, though, even though she just had one brother. She barely talked about anyone behind his or her back.

“Is just so unfair to you,” Heather told us, “having to start a new school as a freshman.”

I really thought she was going to cry, which made me feel good. Sometimes I thought people were just friends with me because they felt sorry for me. I didn’t know why they wanted to be friends with me, really. We were poor and I had pretty bad curly frizzy hair that never looked combed. One time James Wager had told me that my hair looked like a rat’s nest. He asked me if my mom even cared how I looked when I went out of the house. His dad owned a blacktop company and they were rich. His mom stayed home and I bet she had a big plate of cookies for him when he got home. I wanted to tell him that my mom worked and she was gone before we even got up to get ready for school, but I didn’t want to make myself anymore different.

“Yeah,” Ann had added, “We were going to have so much fun in high school together.”

They had gotten over feeling sad about it quickly. I realized it was easier for them because they were all going to be together, not just the four of them, but everyone - all eighteen of them. They would be in a class with almost seventy new Humboldt kids, but they still had each other. I was the only one who would be alone next year. I tried to tell myself it wasn’t that bad for me.

Even though my sister and I didn’t get along, she would be at St. Ed’s. Gretchen had already made friends and was staying with her friend’s family in Fort Dodge. She had moved in after Christmas. My brother was way worse off than the two of us; he was a sophomore at
St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary, WI. It was a seven-hour drive one way and he only
got to come home three or four times year. This year he had only gotten to come home twice.

“It’s stupid for your mom to send you to St. Edmond’s,” Tessa told me later, “Even if
it is a Catholic school, it’s still full of Fort Dodge kids.”

Tessa lived on a big farm and her parents were old. They had lived in Humboldt
forever. She already had nieces and nephews, some a couple years older than her nine-year-
old brother. Tessa’s mother worked at the courthouse and knew every piece of gossip that
went through Humboldt County. Tessa was the one who told me my step dad was having an
affair, after I mentioned to her that he hardly ever came home. I was alone a lot that year. No
one could ever say anything that Tessa didn’t already know. She was an expert on all
subjects and if you ever doubted her she would remind you, she was an aunt and somehow
wiser than the rest of us.

“Humboldt schools are so much better,” Tessa said, “Humboldt is better.”

She wasn’t the only one who said it either. Humboldt and Fort Dodge St. Edmond
were in the same division for sports and they were serious rivals. The games between the two
schools were watched closely because there was always a lot of conflict and vandalism. The
St. Ed’s kids were cocky. Half a dozen St. Mary’s kids told me they hated Fort Dodge kids
and they hoped I wouldn’t become one of “them.” They reminded me that Fort Dodge was
dirty and full of crime.

“Besides that they’re racist,” one kid told me.

I wanted to tell them about the brick that someone tossed through our screen door
with the word “nigger” written on it or the noose we found hanging in a tree in our front yard
one morning. I didn’t suppose those were crimes, though.
One kid told me he thought it was a good idea for my mom to send me to a school where there were people of my own kind.

“You know, other Negroes,” he said.

There weren’t any other black people at St. Mary’s or at the junior high. There weren’t any other black families in Humboldt. This year the subject of me leaving to go to St. Edmond’s doesn’t come up as often as Tessa’s period during our noon walks. We mostly talk about boys and complain about our classes. Today we are complaining about our classes.

“You have to sew an entire shirt by yourself,” Heather says.

She is disgusted with Home Economics class.

“That’s nothing,” Tessa says, “We have to build an entire birdhouse for the final in Shop.”

Ann nods, “We have to cut and sand the wood even.”

Jodi just has to take a test for Health. They all tell me they can’t wait until they have Art. There is no final project in Art class.

“I hate it,” I say, “It’s boring.”

I don’t tell them it’s because of Mr. Mann. A couple of weeks ago the class started a discussion about religion while we made collages and everyone was supposed to say what religion they were. They passed me by because someone said, “We know she’s Catholic.”

When they asked Mr. Mann what church he went to, he said, “I go to the nigger church,” and slowly put his hand over his mouth as sort of a fake “oops” while everyone laughed. The entire class looked at me and I felt my face get hot. I stared at the magazine I was holding and kept cutting out pictures.

“Well, Val,” he said chuckling, “Do you know what church that is?”
This made the class laugh harder. I shook my head and opened my eyes wide so I wouldn’t cry and finished my collage. I can’t wait for school to be over.

“How’s your mom?” Ann asks and all the girls look at me.

“She’s doing ok,” I tell them, “I talked to her on the phone a few days ago.”

My mom had surgery to remove a tumor on her liver after Christmas and she developed complications. She has been in and out of the hospital since January. In the middle of March a blood clot developed in her lung. They misdiagnosed it at first as pneumonia and she got sicker and sicker. She was transferred to a larger hospital when they finally figured out how serious it was. She almost died. My mom is at the Mayo Clinic now and she has been there for almost a month. I think she has to have another blood transfusion.

“Will she be home in time for graduation?” Ann asks, “That would be terrible if she missed your speech.”

“I’m pretty sure she’ll be out by then,” I say.

My mom was really never big into stuff I did at school anyway. I’m sure that she’ll be back by then if people are telling me the truth. After Easter break, Sister Davis sent me on an errand to the office and told that class that my mom was very sick and could die. She told everyone to pray for my mom and to be extra nice to me. Heather told me later while Jodi stood next to her and nodded in agreement.

“You’re mom’s not really going to die, right?” Heather asked me.

“Of course not,” I said.

Of course, my mom wasn’t going to die. I wasn’t sure, though. Sister Davis didn’t say anything to me. I didn’t talk to my brother or my sister very much and Kelly wasn’t around. We didn’t have long distance on our phone and I couldn’t call my brother without the calling
card my mom had. If he got enough quarters to call from a pay phone at school and I was around to get his call, I could ask him. Charlie didn’t know as much about how mom was doing because he was so far away. Most of the time when I talked to him he asked me how she was and I really didn’t know. She called home sometimes from the hospital or my aunt called me and told me she had talked to her.

Gretchen moved to Fort Dodge before Christmas so she wouldn’t have to drive to school every day at St. Edmonds. Her friend’s parents had let her live with them. We had never gotten along too well. I barely talked to her. I was alone most of the time.

“It sucks that we don’t even have the same study halls anymore,” I say to them.

I have been pretty lonely lately. We are almost to the junior high. It really sucks. I have study hall the last period of the afternoon. The students have to sit in the media center and Mr. Axtell, the librarian watches us. I always sit by myself. He has a low opinion of St. Mary’s students and let everyone know this the first day.

“The Catholic kids are notoriously rowdy,” Mr. Axtell told us, “I will not put up with bad behavior and disrespect for this school from them.”

He allowed the Humboldt junior high kids to read books off the shelves, but the St. Mary’s kids had to check them out even to read them in the media center. Lately, someone had been stealing my backpack and hiding it when I left the table to check out a book or the use the restroom. I think it’s the boys from my Art class. I never saw them do it, but I’d hear them laughing when I came back and my bag was missing. I missed the bus once and had to walk home three miles because I couldn’t find it in time and the bus was gone when I got outside.

I tried to carry my bag around with me, but Mr. Axtell stopped me.
“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked and then accused me of trying to leave school early even though I told him I rode the bus home.

It wasn’t a big deal really. Whoever took my bag didn’t have very many places to hide it. On the days I found it missing, I quickly checked the few places they put it, usually in the garbage can, outside the boy’s bathroom or a random corner in the hall near the media center and ran to my bus. There was only a little more than a month of school left.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell the girls.

I sit in my classes and take notes. I don’t say much, especially in geometry because it confuses me and I don’t want to look stupid by asking questions. I make it through science and art and I am dreading study hall as usual, but I manage to make it to the bathroom in the ten minutes between classes. I finish my homework in the media center, so I don’t have to leave my table for any reason.

I’m relieved when the final bell rings and I make my way out to the row of buses lining the street east of the school. It’s such a nice afternoon. The sun is shining and I’m almost to my bus.

“Nigger,” one of the two boys yells.

They corner me between the buses.

“You ruined our country,” he says.

“Why don’t you go back to Africa, nigger?” the second boy sneers and laughs together with the first.

He shoves me against the bus and I feel the back of my shoulder sting. I don’t know these boys. They slap each other high fives as they disappear behind another bus. Since late fall of my seventh grade year the five-minute stretch from the time the dismissal bell rings
until I get on the bus seems to be the best opportunity for bullies to harass me. It’s not every day and it’s not the same thing every time. Sometimes they say different things. Sometimes they don’t push me.

It is always well choreographed, I am walking alone and they are blocked by the buses and can’t be seen from either side of the street. I keep my hot flushed face down as I board the bus, I can feel my eyes fill with tears and I curse myself for being such a crybaby. If anyone on the bus ever sees or hears anything, they never say it. I sit near the middle of the bus, slouch behind the tall seats, and stare out the window. When I get home to my empty house, I will check my shoulder for bruises, eat and try to sleep. I sigh and think about going to St. Edmond next year, it can’t be worse than here.

“Those Fort Dodge kids are dangerous,” Tessa had told me, “I heard the police come to the school almost every day, kids are always getting beat up and harassed there.”

I kept quiet about how sometimes kids in Humboldt get harassed too. I never get a chance to tell Tessa or any of my friends, because after that summer I leave. I’m glad to get out of Humboldt after everything that happened.

My mom came back from the hospital and she was different. She was taking all sorts of medication and stayed in her room all day when she was home. Tessa was right; Kelly had been having an affair while my mom was in and out of the hospital. Now that she was home all the time my mom wouldn’t put up with it anymore. I didn’t tell her how lonely I was when she was in the hospital because I knew she couldn’t help it and I knew it wouldn’t make things better. Kelly was supposed to be taking care of me, but he was with Louisa most of the time.
Louisa was Kelly’s girlfriend. She was married and she was white and she worked at the hospital with Kelly. The whole town knew about the affair and Kelly got fired from his job at the hospital. He started driving a semi-truck and told my mom he stopped seeing Louisa even though she still called our house a couple dozen times a day. My mom didn’t notice the calls because she was gone with Kelly most of the summer wherever he went in the truck.

My brother Charlie was home that summer to take care of me. He was sixteen and could drive. He worked at Hardee’s, a fast food restaurant in town, most days and I stayed home. Gretchen was still living in Fort Dodge. We didn’t do much that summer - anything we wanted, but we didn’t have money so that wasn’t much. I mostly lay around and ate and slept. I gained thirty pounds. At the end of the summer my mom found out that Kelly lied. He was still having an affair with Louisa so my mom filed for a divorce. He came to the house drunk one day after my brother had gone back to school and told my mom he didn’t want to get divorced and then he beat her up. I stood on the front porch and watched. My feet wouldn’t move. I knew I should have called the police. A part of me thought she would learn her lesson and she would finally leave him. I watched Kelly drag my mom into his car and she honked the horn over and over until the neighbors came.

Kelly went to jail after he crashed his car in a high-speed chase trying to outrun the Humboldt police. My mom was beat up pretty bad. We stayed at a domestic violence shelter in Fort Dodge after Kelly was bailed out of jail. She had a black eye and a blue jaw and bruises all over her the day I had to register at St. Edmond’s. I didn’t look anyone in the eye and figured maybe since she was white and I wasn’t, no one would know she was my mom.
CHAPTER 6

No one ever mentioned anything about my mom being beat-up during registration to me during the four years I went to St. Edmond. I hated it there at first. My sister moved back home, and we drove to Fort Dodge every day together. I didn’t make many friends. We lived out of town and I couldn’t call or visit anyone. The first month I overheard some girls talking about me when I was in the bathroom stall.

“Oh my God, did you see how fat that mixed girl is?” one girl had said.

“And so weird,” the other girl chimed in and they both laughed.

I told my mom I wanted to go to school with my friends in Humboldt, but they had pretty much stopped talking to me by Christmas. By spring, I was really depressed and I told my mom I wanted to kill myself. My mom took me to see Dr. Hill who said it was a difficult time and probably the result of my menstrual cycle. I told my mom I wanted to kill her. She was back together with Kelly.

Kelly was a drunk and a pervert. He would walk around half-naked during the times he actually came out of his bedroom. Most of the time he and my mom were in their room with the door locked. We kept a butter knife on the bookcase outside of their bedroom door just in case there was an emergency and we had to unlatch the lock to speak to them face to face. I had given up trying to talk my mom into leaving him. Kelly moved back the summer of my sophomore year. My mom had never gone through with the divorce. I went to debate camp that summer in Chicago, my mom told me she spent the money because it was the only thing at school I enjoyed. My mom and my friend, Susan, and my brother drove to Chicago to drop me off. Kelly and my mom came together to pick me up three weeks later. I returned home to find out our family had moved to Fort Dodge.
I got a job working at Target, made more friends and starting drinking on a regular basis by my junior year. By the time I was a senior I was pretty well known and well liked. I was the vice-president of student council, the vice-president of the Spanish club and I was on the debate team. I got along with the kids from school, but my really good friends went to Fort Dodge Senior High. Kelly decided to go back to school to be a surgical technician and he lived in Sioux City, Iowa, a town about two hours away from Fort Dodge. My mom would leave to see him every Friday straight from work and come home on Sunday evenings. Sometimes she would just go straight to work on Monday mornings. I worked thirty-five to forty hours a week at Target and could go almost two weeks without seeing my mom. My brother and sister were both in college in Minnesota. They never came home. I had the house all to myself most of the time. I was lonely most of the time, but it gave me the opportunity to have a lot of parties, which gave me the opportunity to become really popular by my senior year. I was nominated as a prom queen candidate.

“You’re going to prom, right?” Jim asks me.

I see the girls I’m sitting with at the lunch table look at me.

“No, probably not,” I say dead serious.

Jim laughs with the girls sitting around me, “Whatever, Val.”

When he walks away from the table I wonder if he was trying to ask me to prom. I am serious about not going. No one has asked me yet. The girls at the table can’t stop talking about it now. I feel like rolling my eyes, but I’ve learned to control it.

“I heard Julie is having her dress made,” someone says.

She is. She told me all about it in Spanish class. It’s an off-pink color I can’t quite remember and has a string of pearls around the back. When I told her I didn’t know what
dress I would be wearing, she told me I had better figure it out soon so I could get my shoes
dyed to match my dress. Julie is also a Prom Queen candidate.

“I’m mostly worried about my college applications,” I tell people when they ask me
what I’m wearing. They just laugh as if I’m joking. There are seventy-four students
graduating in May from St. Edmond. Most seemed to be more concerned about prom than
college.

“I don’t even have any real friends that go to school there,” I tell Susan later.

Susan and I met my sophomore year at a bowling alley. She goes to Fort Dodge
Senior High, along with the rest of my good friends. The only person I talk to outside of
school from St. Edmond’s is Stephanie, the German foreign exchange student, who I just met
this year.

“Yeah, it’s weird,” she says, “Everyone there just kinda loves you.”

I’m a novelty, I think. I’m popular through no fault of my own. From the first day I
went to St. Edmond’s everyone knew my name, it was uncomfortable to walk down the hall.

My sister graduated last year and now I am the only black person in the school.

“Can I go see you?” Susan asks me.

“Yes,” I tell her, “I think the public can come to the coronation, but then they have
to leave for the dance.”

Susan looks at me sideways, “Did anyone ask you yet?”

“No,” I tell her.

I don’t tell her that I asked two guys and they both said no. There were rumors that
this guy wanted to ask me and then another guy wanted to ask me, but nobody actually did. I
am going to be forced to go to prom alone. Three days before the prom, I borrow a dress
from my friend’s sister. It is black and white and I wear shoes that I already have in my
closet. I stare at it in my closet everyday until Friday.

When Susan and the other guys come to pick me up, I’m not ready.

“What’s going on?” Susan asks.

“I’m not going to go,” I tell her, “I’m going to look like a fool.”

It’s all just a stupid joke. Those people don’t know me; they don’t know anything
about me. I’m just a grinning idiot to them. They don’t have any idea who I really am. It’s
too late for that now. I don’t care if anyone really knows me or if they are really my friends. I
don’t want to look like a fool. If anyone hasn’t figured out I don’t have a date they surely will
tonight.

“C’mon, Val. We’re all here for you,” Susan says.

I get dressed when Susan goes downstairs to get the guys. Ian and Dave come upstairs
dressed in suits, carrying a bottle of vodka. We sit in my room listening to Depeche Mode
and I drink straight out of the bottle until I don’t care what anyone thinks anymore.

“You’re late,” someone says when I finally walk through the front door of St.
Edmond, “We thought you weren’t coming. The court is already lined up in the cafeteria.”

I tell Susan and the guys to go into the gym. I don’t see my mom there. She said she
would be here, but I don’t see her.

“Are you drunk?” Jim asks me when I get into the cafeteria.

“Can you smell me?” I say.

I don’t really care, but I always thought you couldn’t smell vodka on a person. Jim
ods at me and tells me he’s going to find me some gum and then takes off. The cafeteria is
full of people. The prom court is there with parents and dates hovering around them. I see Julie in her off pink dress, her mom pulling at the back of it. Caitlin comes up to me.

“Aren’t you excited?” she says beaming at me.

I’m not that excited. I half cover my mouth and nod. Caitlin is the secretary of student council. I am the vice-president. She doesn’t drink, so it’s better if she doesn’t know how drunk I am. Jim comes back with the gum and whispers in my ear, “We can’t have the prom queen smelling like whiskey.”

I look at him and he grins.

“Yup, I know you got seventy votes. Seventy out of seventy-four. You know everybody loves you, Val.”

My heart sinks. I believe him, but I’m not sure I want to believe him. I don’t know how it makes me feel. If everybody loves me, why don’t I have a date for the prom?

“Act surprised,” he says before he leaves.

All the extra people are ushered out and the prom court lines up. My escort, Jeremy, and I are third in line and when I put my arm through his he leans to me and tells me not to trip.

“Pretty drunk, are ya?” he says and I laugh.

I guess the gum didn’t help. We’re old drinking buddies and I’m glad he’s there when we start to walk towards the center of the gym. People are yelling our names and cheering and clapping for us. It is dark, except for flashbulbs going off. There is a small stage with a painted white background and a lit up with a sign on the front that says “Stairway to Heaven.” The prom court is standing on bleachers on the stage. I can’t see if my mom is there because there is a blinding spotlight in my eyes.
Last year’s prom queen is walking from one guy to another finally settling on one to the cheers of the crowd. She hands him a package of flowers and whispers in his ear. I feel the girls around shift with nervousness as he circles from one girl to the next.

Some in the audience yells “Don’t tease.”

He stops and hands me the bunch of flowers and I hear people screaming and hollering. Some people are shouting my name. I smile and try to act surprised. I wipe a fake tear from my eye when the former queen ties the robe around my neck and places the tiara on my head. I sit down on the throne and the king stands behind me. We smile for pictures and then we dance to “Stairway to Heaven.” I leave right after that. It is my only dance of the night.

Trinity Regional Hospital
Admission Notes
October 5, 1993

Valerie is a 19-year-old single African American who was admitted early in the morning on 10/5/93 for treatment of psychosis and possible depression. She was initially under voluntary status, and then a regular commitment was filed by her mother. Therefore, she is schedule for hearing on 10/7/1993.

Chief Complaint: None.

History of Present Illness: She has had the problem on and off for a number of years, although she has done very well academically, getting selected as a homecoming queen at St. Edmond’s High School, etc. She has always been sort of an isolated and lonely girl. I know this from the history taken by her family and also because she went to school with one of my daughters. She claims that she saw Dr. Hill 5 years ago but there is no record of that. At the time she had rage and was going to act on her parents with a knife. She comes from a very disruptive chaotic background and had difficulty growing up in such an environment. When she graduated from high school she decided to go to the University of Iowa but there she could not adjust. She felt paranoid. She came home, she drifted around Minneapolis, Iowa City, Fort Dodge, working here and there with odd jobs. In August she went to Chicago to stay at a relative’s house for a few days. There she met a man by the name of Paul. She does not want to talk about the details but it appears that something has happened with him or then. She talked about having a mind game with him and others since and again she's psychotic about this and is not making any sense. I will pursue this at a later time. On 9/14/93
she was involved in a car accident. She was at the time nude, having no clothes on her at all. She was treated there for about 10 days. When she got out of Iowa City she didn’t seem to be all that better. Mother suspects that when she got into the car accident it was a suicide equivalent or attempt of suicide. Mother reports that it has been difficult to look after her at home. In fact, it is impossible to do so. Therefore, she doesn’t wish to take her back when she gets out of the hospital. She lives with her mother at home and with her stepfather. Her behavior in the recent weeks is such that mother believes she needs to be institutionalized. She drives a car naked, she runs down the railroad tracks naked. She has frequent mood swings, having high days for weeks, low periods only for hours. She cannot track thoughts. She wants to go away or drive around. She doesn’t sleep. She doesn’t eat. She cries but it has gotten less or better lately. She was hallucinating for a couple of days shortly after the accident. She is delusional in believing that the child her mother takes care of is hers when actually it is a daughter of her sister’s. She admits to having felt suicidal a year ago and having thoughts about death on a few days, actually the day before the hospitalization.

Psychiatric and Medical History: She has a history of substance abuse with caffeine, marijuana, and alcohol. She was seen by Dr. Hill several years ago although there was no history. CKT scan was obtained because of the fear of tumor and complaints of headache last year.

Personal and Social History: It is my understanding that her parents got divorced when she was 1 or even younger than that. Her mother indicates that her biological father was psychotic. Mother remarried and her present stepfather works in Sioux City, Iowa Marion Health Center as a surgical technician. He is a student. Mother had a live in boyfriend and he abused her once or twice. Her mother goes to Humboldt work as a teacher’s aid at Head Start. She says that she was upset and had problems with her stepfather drinking a lot and having affairs years ago. Again she doesn’t know the details or wish to elaborate on that. She has 1 older brother who is known to have a lot of psychiatric problems. She has 1 older sister. She had a boyfriend a couple of years ago by the name of Chris.

Mental Status Examination: As far as mental status is concerned, she is alert but poorly oriented, especially the circumstances of this hospitalization. She speaks with a slow tired, low-key tone of voice. Speech is branching off easily and circumstantial. Affect is bland, withdrawal and depressed. Mood is the same. Thought process is easily fragmented. Thought content, thoughts of neolism, thoughts of worthlessness, thoughts of death the day before this hospitalization. NO systematized delusional ideas expressed at this points. Intellect and cognitive functions could not be evaluated due to her condition. She is an obese, well-developed black woman appearing 5’10” in height, 230 lbs in weight with brown hair and brown eyes. Psychomotor activity: Slightly diminished. Direct eye contact is poor.

5 Axis Diagnoses
1. Bipolar disorder, mixed type, currently depressed
2. Cyclothymic, moody characteristics
3. Obesity
4. Not specified
5. Not specified

Treatment Plan: Is to observe her mental status, interactions, and behaviors and will obtain more specific and objective history from people involved in her life. She will need to start psychiatric medications to stabilize her condition. Milieu, scheduled activities, supportive therapy with emphasis of reorientation will start. A hearing will be held on the unit and scheduled. Estimated length of stay 1 to 2 weeks. Dr. S. Chin, M.D.

I graduate at the end of the month and spend the summer working and hanging out with my friends. We drink and get high and have a good time, everyone is going their separate ways at the end of the summer. I have been accepted to University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa and my mom drops me off at the end of August. I am staying in temporary housing in Slater Hall because I turned my housing application in late. I didn’t read all the information they gave me at registration. As far as I could tell I was the only student there who attended without a parent.

I don’t really like college. The university seems like a much larger high school. I feel like I am doing the same thing here as I did at home only with different people. I don’t like my classes and I don’t get along with the roommate I am finally assigned. I am lonely. I feel lonely when my sister comes to visit in the fall.

Gretchen and I are standing on the pedestrian bridge that crosses the Iowa River. The river is muddy and swollen with months and months of rain. I’m in my first semester of college at the University of Iowa.

“I worked on bridges like this, drilling and stuff. We hang from a harness.”

“Isn’t that dangerous for the baby? It’s tight on your belly, right?” My sister and I had never really gotten along. She came to see me she said, but I knew she was there to see an ex-boyfriend. Her flat stomach is bulging with 5 months of baby. I’d worried about her that summer after she told me she was pregnant, twinges of out of place concern when we
moshed in the pit at Lollapalooza. I asked her about the baby then and she told me it was
under her pelvic bone, barely a bean. She assured me it couldn’t be crushed.

“Well I don’t do that anymore. They figured out I was pregnant and now they make
me carry stuff for them or hammer on the ground. We’re going to get laid off soon anyway.”

It is late September. She is very sad and I can see it in her face. I feel sorry for her
like I never really have. I know that she feels alone because I feel alone. Mom has called me
once in the two months I’d been at University of Iowa.

“Sometimes when I was hanging off that bridge, I thought I could just unbuckle my
harness and fall. I just wanted to fall.”

I looked at Gretchen staring at the river leaning on the rail. Her skin is two shades
lighter than mine, a pretty brown color. She doesn’t have curly ratty hair like mine. Her
pretty straight hair is blowing.

“Don’t do that, Gretchen, that’s stupid,” I tell her.

I drop out of University of Iowa two weeks later even though I don’t have a car. My
mom won’t come to pick me up when I call her.

“You should think more about it, Val. What are you going to do? You’re not going to
live here.”

“She can’t live here,” Kelly shouts in the background, “We just got rid of your kids.”
I could hear him laughing.

“Whatever, Mom. I’ll move to the cities. Charlie said it was ok.”

“What about Gretchen, I can’t believe that Gretchen would want you living there?”

“She was just here last week and we got along great. She wants me to come because I
can help pay rent. I can transfer to Target up there.”
I don’t tell her that Gretchen was snotty to me on the phone and said I’d have to sleep in the living room instead of sharing a room with her. I don’t tell her that she cried in her sleep a little bit in my dorm room when she visited, that I slept on the cold cement floor because I didn’t have carpet, because I only had one blanket and the one friend I made was out of town that weekend. I want to tell her that Gretchen had started smoking because she heard it makes babies smaller, but I don’t.

“Your kids can’t stay here. This is my house now,” Kelly says again only partly joking.

“So, you’re not going to pick me up?” I ask her.

“Val, think about it, you just got there. I’m not coming to get you. Just think about it for a little while.”

The next day I call her at work and tell her if she doesn’t pick me up I am going to kill myself. I have a bottle of sleeping pills and I would walk to a park and take them all.

“I’ll have to leave work early. I’ll be there by 5pm. Have your stuff ready,” she hangs up.

I move to Minneapolis a week later my Chevy Citation filled to the brim with the things I never unpacked while in Iowa City.
CHAPTER 7

Minneapolis is all right. I live in Richfield with Charlie and Gretchen and work at Target in Edina, Minnesota. I make a couple of good friends who aren’t old enough to go to the bars and we hang out a lot on weekends. I usually work nights and spend my days working out or watching television. I’ve lost almost sixty pounds when my brother’s friend, Chris, come to visit Memorial Day weekend.

A couple of months ago I got out of the shower and I saw myself naked in the mirror for the first time. I had looked at my body in parts. I shaved my legs. I shaved my armpits, but I had never seen myself completely naked. I stood and stared at myself in disbelief until my brother knocked on the door and told me to get out. I wondered when I had grown breasts. I wondered when I had grown pubic hair and when I got the stretch marks on my arms and belly. I wonder how my legs and hips had gotten so large. I saw my body in the mirror for the first time and when I looked at my face I had tears in my eyes. I recognized my face, but something in my eyes had changed. My whole world had changed.

“What if Jesus isn’t real, Valerie?” Chris asks me.

He is the only person who calls me Valerie.

“What if he is just an example of a man who lived a good life? What if we are supposed to emulate him, not worship him?”

Chris and I have been talking philosophy, theology for hours. I don’t know what else to say, it must be 4 in the morning. He is too smart for me and I’ve run out of answers for him, although I still have a lot of questions. I have to work tomorrow, but I am wide-awake. The Lemonheads are playing in the background.

“I hadn’t thought much about that,” I say to him.
“You know this conversation is giving me a semi,” He grabs his dick through his pants, “I’m actually getting hard.”

I’m not sure what to say to him. Chris is 21, my older brother Charlie’s best friend from St. Thomas University, the St. John Vianney Seminary. They are both dropouts, dishonored wannabe priests who like to get high and drunk. I won’t be 19 for 3 months and got high for the first time tonight.

I’ve always had a crush on Chris. Chris is strong and smart and wise and I already love him. He is a little taller than me and has a perfect body, black wavy hair and a great nose. I can’t explain how it feels when he looks at me.

“Do you want to mess around, Valerie?”

I don’t say anything. He is the only one that ever calls me Valerie. I stare back at him listening to Evan Dando singing. I am lying on the mattress on the floor of my room. He is five feet away from me near the wall. I simplified my room, it has only a mattress, my stereo, alarm clock and lamp. Lately I feel like I just want to be as detached as possible, to be connected to as little material possessions as possible. The lamp is a small black spotlight that aims a soft glow at the ceiling. I’ve been wondering all night what I would say when he finally asked me.

“Let’s get high first,” he says even though I haven’t answered him.

He gets up to find his bag in the living room and I’m still not sure. I don’t know if I’m still high. I’m sure I was earlier this evening. I got high for the first time tonight. Chris and Charlie cheered me on as I took hits from the tightly rolled joint. I already loved the smell of pot.

“God, look at her she’s a natural,” Chris said about me.
He winked at me.

“Damn, are you going to let it out?” my brother said when he came back from the kitchen with a cranberry and vodka.

I slowly blew out the smoke while Chris stared. Chris came back into my bedroom with a bag full of pot and sits cross-legged against the wall and he reaches over to turn the stereo up.

“I wish I had my bong, you would love it,” he says looking down for a something to use as a tray and ends up grabbing one of the library books on the floor, “Italians improvise. Did I ever tell you about the time my dad made me a splint for my finger with two Popsicle sticks?”

I nod and he laughs. I watch him prepare the joint and listen to the music. We went dancing after dinner. Everyone was drunk and high. We danced together at the club, he stomped his feet when he danced laughing when he moved his hips. When he stuck his leg between mine and I felt him, I never imagined it would feel so good. I can’t look him in the eyes. He laughs at me and he smells incredible.

“Let it go, Valerie. Let it go,” he says rubbing himself on me in rhythm to the music, his hair is sweaty, “Let it go.”

He grabs my hips and my breath is at his ear.

“Chris?”

“Yeah?” he is licking the end of the joint and puts the book down.

“I have to go to work tomorrow.”

He laughs,” I have to go to Chicago tomorrow.”
He looks around his legs for the lighter and scoots closer to me offering me the joint. When I take it, he sits on the bed next to me. He hands me the lighter and his hand burns my knee.

“Slow,” he says, “suck in lightly.”

I fire up the joint.

In the morning he is not in my bed. He is already up and in the living room with his things packed. I hear Charlie making loud breakfast. I am wearing a white nightgown when Chris comes in my room and shuts the door behind him. I look at him straight in his eyes. They flash a bit at my boldness, he smirks and I smile. I want to go with him. I want him to take care of me.

“Chris,” I can feel my eyes get wet.

If he asked me now to go with him, to pack one bag, to leave in my nightgown, I would. I want to leave with him. I don’t want him to leave me. He doesn’t say anything, cups my face in his hands. He stares at me and kisses me on the lips. He leaves. We write letters to each other back and forth throughout the summer. I’m completely in love with him and I fool myself into thinking he is in love with me.

I stay in Minneapolis for a couple more months working at Target. My friend and co-worker, Dawn, and I have decided to go back to school at a community college in Mason City, Iowa. A month before we are set to leave, I change my mind. My car breaks down and I don’t have money to fix it. I decide I should go back to Fort Dodge and live with my mom to save money to get a new car. Dawn won’t speak to me she is so angry, but I don’t care. I’m happy to be back in Fort Dodge with my friends.
We smoke pot almost every day in the summer. I am working back at Target in town. My mom is gone a lot visiting Kelly who still lives and works in Sioux City. I still talk to Chris write him letters and call him. I have been having sex with my friend Ian for a couple of months. When I tell Chris he doesn’t seem to mind. Everyone is moving away, going back to school in a couple of weeks when Susan asks me to drive to Chicago with her to pick up a friend from the airport. We visit Chris and his friend, Martin.

Chris, Martin, Susan and I are sitting in the living room of Chris’s apartment finishing an after dinner joint.

Chris laughs when I fire it up, “I can see you don’t need instructions anymore.”

True, I have been smoking pot all summer with my friends. He gives me that look. A mixture of weed, Marlboro Reds and onions lingers in the air. There are two respectable old couches in the living room, an entertainment stand with a stereo and an unlit fireplace. Chris is playing the Two Rooms CD. Sinead O’Connor is singing Sacrifice, by Elton John. Susan and Martin are comparing notes about dropping acid.

Chris says, “Tell her about the peyote,” then grabs my hand and takes me to the back bedroom.

I sit on the bed facing the window he sits on the right side of me near the wall. I can still hear the music from the living room in low moans. I’m high and staring at the streetlight and turn to notice Chris is lighting two cigarettes. He looks ridiculous and we both laugh as he hands me one.

“I have to talk to you about something.”

“Oh, really,” I smirk.
He doesn’t say anything as we smoke. The room fills quickly with smoke as we sit in silence staring at each other. I realize right then that I love him because of his eyes. It’s like looking in a mirror. Chris is looking around for a place to ash his cigarette and I hold out my open palm.

He lifts his cigarette to ash and then stops, “really?”

I nod at him and then ash in my own hand, we laugh again. He looks down and I stick my cigarette in my mouth to touch his hair with my other hand. I am running my hands through his hair and when I stop to pull my cigarette from my mouth, he looks up. He is crying.

“Lynn is pregnant.”

My heart stops beating.

“Val,” he says.

“Valerie?”

I hear him. I am staring out the window. Lynn is pregnant. His ex-girlfriend is pregnant with his baby.

“When?” I say still staring out the window.

“God, I was so lonely. She said she was on the pill.”

I can only concentrate on smoking my cigarette. We are both still ashing in my hand.

“When?”

He says July and I something inside of me buckles. You sent me a letter in July, Chris saying that you love me. Saying that you would climb mountains and fight wild animals and walk on hot coals, over broken glass through a pit of scorpions for me. You wrote “I AM SO IN LOVE WITH YOU” in capital letters at the top of the four-page letter.
“Valerie. Valerie. Don’t do this.”

He’s still talking, but I don’t have to listen because I don’t think there’s anything left to say. It’s over now. I know that now. I’m over now. I hear Sinead singing my open wound.

“She trapped me. She’s going to have it. We’re going to try to work it out.”

I am dead now, I think, because after this nothing happens, or nothing matters. I am lost now, I am truly lost. I thought that he would be the one that would never leave me that would love me for me that would make me whole. I never had anyone who stayed with me. I can’t believe that he is leaving me too.

I won’t speak to Chris and he is so frustrated he leaves the room. Everyone has decided it would be a good idea to get some air. We all ride in Martin’s car to Navy Pier to look at the lake. I don’t say a word even though Chris tries to speak to me. I don’t say a word until he has dropped us off. When I tell Susan she puts her arms around me and I cry. I feel dead inside when we return to Fort Dodge.
CHAPTER 8

Susan starts school at Grinnell and Ian is going to the University of Iowa. About a week before he leaves he comes over in the afternoon to have sex with me. We are lying in my mother’s bed when he tells me he wants to make sure I know we aren’t together.

“We aren’t boyfriend and girlfriend, you know,” he says, “we won’t do this anymore.”

Ian tells me that I was a summer activity.

“Like golf,” he says laughing.

“Yeah,” I laugh too.

I never tell him that it breaks my heart.

I don’t what day it is a month later, but I am driving and the rain is hitting the windshield hard as the wipers slosh back and forth and I’m listening to this continual thump swish, thump swish. I am afraid. I don’t know what I’m doing. I can hardly see through the rain and the blurriness of my contacts. I have been awake for almost five days. I should have returned this car. I’m not sure where I’m going, I just want to get away from Chris in Champaign. Chris doesn’t love me.

I am driving Susan’s white Beretta, the one we took on the road trip to Chicago. She left it in Fort Dodge when she went to college. I borrowed it because she wanted me to visit her and I still hadn’t made enough money to buy a new car working at Target.

I quit my job at Target. I just walked out the door in the middle of my shift. None of that matters anyway. I hadn’t slept for a couple of days. I knew people there were talking about me. They didn’t get what life was really about, they didn’t understand the universe or what was really important. I had been talking to Chris’s friend, Martin, on the phone since
we visited Chicago. He was teaching me what was really important. What was really important was the truth and I knew that I wasn’t going to find it at Target.

Susan and I went to a dance at Grinnell. I told her about some of the things that Martin had been telling me about the mind and the universe. I talked to her about books I have been reading, about what was really important in life. We smoked a lot of pot. It made me think that all the things that Chris had said about the universe and about God were true. I told Susan we needed her, we needed her to come with us to find the truth. I told her she should quit school. We were all living a lie and it was important to live the truth. It was urgent that I find the truth and live the truth. The world of lies is very painful.

That is why I still have the car. It doesn’t matter who it actually belongs to because I need it for the journey. I think I have a higher purpose. When I got back from the dance at Grinnell with Susan, Martin was in my bed. My brother had driven from Minneapolis to Chicago to get him and when I got to Fort Dodge from Grinnell at 4AM, Martin was in my bed. The streetlight was shining through the lattice windows in my bedroom casting the shadow of three perfect crosses over Martin’s head. I knew that God wanted me to listen to Martin. Martin wanted me to go with him to find the truth. I wasn’t exactly sure what the truth was, but I had faith.

I just want to make God happy. If I make God happy maybe God will make me happy, maybe God will let someone love me. I don’t want to pay for my sins anymore. I want God to forgive me. I don’t want to be in pain anymore. I want Chris to love me. I want someone to love me. I want God to love me, mom to love me. I will be good I will make up for my sins, for failing at my purpose.
Martin tried to tell me what my purpose was. He told me that I could hear the truth. I tried to listen and not speak, but it was very difficult. I think I let him down. He told me I would know what I was supposed to do when I heard it. I tried to listen, but I didn’t hear anything. Martin spent three days in Fort Dodge and then decided that we needed to see Chris.

“Chris is the master of the playhouse,” Martin told me.

I didn’t know what that meant. It scared me. I hadn’t spoken with Chris since I’d seen him in July and he told me Lynn was pregnant. I had not been good. I had been jealous and I had had sex with Ian and I was afraid. I was afraid to see Chris. We drove to Champaign, Illinois in Susan’s car. We stopped on the way in Grinnell, Iowa to get Susan, but she wouldn’t come with us. I was confused. I don’t know if it’s because I didn’t have enough faith. I threw my glasses out the window when I was driving to prove my faith, but Martin told me that was stupid and I got lost. He drove the rest of the way to get Susan. He didn’t say anything to me. He told me there wasn’t anything to say.

I’m on the right road, I’m sure. I-80. I think it’s the right road, but I don’t know. I just want to go home and sleep. I am listening to the radio and a Madonna song comes on the radio, *love is falling like rain* and I tear up because I know God loves me. I hope God loves me, I hope he can forgive me for leaving Chris and Martin in Champaign, for not wanted to find the truth.

I think that Chris is God. He has the power to make me completely and then take me apart. He wanted me to go to Chicago with him, but I was afraid. I didn’t want to go with him.

He doesn’t love me, he doesn’t want me and he never did. I don’t have the courage to find the truth or maybe that is all the truth there is. I just want to go home. I know that
something is wrong. It has been raining the whole journey home. It has been raining the whole summer. I need to find God. I need to find God’s love. I need to know that God is not angry at me that I will not be punished for giving up. I press the seek button on the radio to hear the truth. I hear a man talking about Ramadan, the time for atonement.

“In order to be forgiven for our sins, we must humble ourselves,” he says, “We need to show God we are willing to give it all to stay in His grace.”

I nod my head, I know this is true. I hear that this is the truth. I humble myself first taking off my shoes. I thank God for sending me this message. I take off my shirt and then my pants while driving, easing up on the gas and using my left foot while I ease my jeans off my right leg. I start to cry when I realize I am still holding onto my pride. I am ashamed of my nakedness. I will not be ashamed. I take off my bra and then slip my panties down over my ankles. I cross the Mississippi River into Iowa. I am no longer Valerie. I am Iowa. I am completely humbled, stripped of sin and bared before God when I arrive in Iowa City. It is flooded and I am lost again. I pull into a driveway and ask a man standing there for directions. I am lost, I tell him.

He stares at me and shakes his head, “I can’t help you.”

He looks down at his feet. I don’t understand. It seems more like the man doesn’t want to help me. The man seems disappointed in me. When he turns to walk to his house, I realize that I don’t have enough faith in God. I shouldn’t have asked for help, I should have trusted the Lord. Tears are running down my face when I pull away. I hear a song on the radio. It tells me to have no fear.

I will have no fear. I want God to forgive me. I want God’s forgiveness. I want God’s love. I want the pain to end and I want perfect love and I want no fear. I am lost again in
desperation. I drive through the streets of Coralville, Iowa hoping to find my way when I hear sirens and see red lights flashing in my rearview mirror. I will have no fear, there will be no pain. I failed to find the Truth and yet God is a merciful God. I will be forgiven. I trust God, I will not doubt God again and I let go.

I let go close my eyes and step on the gas. I realize that holding the steering wheel means that I do not trust God, so I let go. I let go of everything and I am spinning, rolling with small jolts and tearing metal. The car slams to a stop and I am a lying sideways in the passenger seat. I can’t put my head up. The roof of the car is smashed down so low I keep my head down to crawl out of the car. The passenger side door won’t open, oh God I want out of the car. I have to get out of this car, I’m afraid it might explode. I crawl to the driver’s side door trying to get the keys out of the ignition, but they won’t come out.

The windshield is smashed, but I can see the river, the bridge support. The whole front end of the car is almost torn off and the back windshield is broken out. I can’t get to the backseat because there is a huge indentation in the roof that almost touches the top of the front seat. I squeeze next to the driver’s door and lean into it as I’m crouching down. It opens and I stumble out into the muddy ditch. I turn towards the road to see a state trooper tripping down the steep edge from the road.

“Don’t move!” he yells at me.

I walk around the front of the car to talk to him, to tell him that it’s over that God forgives me and forgives him. God loves us, that’s why it’s been raining so much. God loves us.

“Don’t move. Stay right there,” he says again and draws his gun.
He is not listening to me. He has a stunned look on his face, a cross between fear and bewilderment. When I see the gun, I lay down in the mud on my side. I curl in the fetal position and close my eyes as he approaches.

“It’s over,” I tell him, “It’s over.”
CHAPTER 9

I wake up naked in an all white room. The sterility is alarming. All white walls, white sheets and a blinding white light filtering through the slits of white shades. I don’t know where I am, and I have to pee. I start to climb from the bed and feel the grit of sand underneath me, my upper thigh aches. As I ease my foot onto the floor I notice an I.V. stuck in my left hand. I’m in a hospital. My head is throbbing, my shoulders are stiff and I see that my feet are crusted with mud. I find a bandage on my forehead. I’m disappointed I’m not dead. God has rejected my sacrifice.

There’s a short, sharp pain as I jerk the IV from my hand and make my way slowly to the bathroom. Sitting on the toilet, I try to focus on my feet. My eyes are blurry. I can't focus. My toes are crusted with sand. I hate the feeling of sand on the bottom of my feet, in between my toes. Blood is trailing down my hand, making a small red puddle on the gray tiled floor.

I press the “call nurse” button and start to cry. A blonde nurse comes in the bathroom while I’m sobbing.

Low moans come from my body when I tell her, “I can’t get off the toilet.”

My legs are shaking too hard to stand. She leaves the room and returns with another older nurse. They are both wearing rubber gloves as they help me to my feet.

“I want to take a shower,” I say.

“Later” the older nurse says as she cleans and bandages the torn skin on my hand.

“Please. I can’t stand the sand on my body. I can’t stand the sand on my feet,” I beg. They exchange looks.

The blonde nurse says, “I’ll do it.”
I am leaning naked against the bathroom wall.

The older nurse cleans the blood from the floor and tells me, “It wasn’t very smart to rip that IV out. It was there to help you.”

I don’t say anything because I know a fucking IV isn’t going to help me get well.

Memories of the night before come to me in pieces. I know the sand on my body the mud is from the riverbank. I know the cuts and bruises are the least of my pain. The blond nurse returns carrying a shower chair, towels and a hospital gown. The older nurse takes her garbage and leaves. I sit in the shower the nurse runs for me and I cry.

I tell her, “I’m sorry” over and over and over again, she helps me wash, “God Bless you,” I tell her, “Thank you” over and over between my sobs.

She smiles at me and says, “It’s my job.”

I am happy to be alive at that moment and I am so sorry. The nurse helps me dry my body. I am too stiff to stretch or reach without pain. She drapes me with the hospital gown. Fully clothed, I feel safe and warm. She helps me hobble back to the hospital bed. The sheets have been changed.

“Get some rest,” she says to me and I lay down.

I tell her thank you again. She smiles and leaves, closing the door behind her. I am alone in the room, bothered by an intense sense of shame. I see a quilt from home, stuffed in a white plastic hospital bag beside the garbage by the door. It peeks at me, covered with dried mud and sand. I roll off the side of the bed to stuff it all the way into the bag. It hurts when I press the bag into the garbage, but I can’t look at it anymore. I sit on the bed and rub my hands together. I rub my hands together until they feel hot, then I pick up the phone to call my mom at work.
“Head Start, Sharon,” she answers with a happy voice and I start to cry.

I haven’t talked to her for four days.

“Val” she is angry, “You know that car was reported stolen – you need to bring it back. You’re in a lot of trouble.”

I interrupt, “I crashed the car mom- I’m in the hospital.” She starts to cry.

“Come and get me mom, please, please, please. I’m in the hospital in Iowa City, please get me and take me home.”

“I’ll come” she tells me, “I have to get things together. It’s gonna take me at least five hours to drive. It will be longer than that, just stay there.”

“Oh, mom,” I don’t tell her anything else and she hangs up without asking. I think about last night and the car accident. I remember the state trooper is standing over me.

“The ambulance is on its way. Don’t move.”

I am lying in a muddy riverbank. I can hear the Gin Blossoms music blaring from the broken window in the car, the male vocalist singing on top of a pop beat, “What the hell did you expect to find?”

I know I am in an ambulance, even though I haven’t opened my eyes. I closed my eyes when I pressed my foot on the gas pedal. The paramedics try to pry them open and shine a light in there, but I squeeze them shut.

“Cooperate please, miss,” a male voice says, “we’re trying to help you.”

They ease me onto a stretcher placing a collar around my neck. I am holding my breath. I keep taking deep gasps of air every time I run out. I do not want to breathe anymore.

“Why are you doing that?” the same male voice asks me.
He places an oxygen mask over my face and when I try to remove it he holds my
hands down. I struggle to pull it up.

“Lie still, you might have a broken neck,” he says to me.

I know that my neck is not broken. My body feels fine except that it aches. My head
hurts too. I wonder if I will die, maybe I’m already dead. I think I might be dead when they
roll me into the hospital. My body is covered with a white sheet. I open my eyes when I feel
someone holding my hand. It is a girl with curly blond hair and glasses dressed in white. She
seems to float with the stretcher.

“I’m so scared,” I tell her grabbing her hand betraying God.

“It will be ok,” she says to me.

She smiles at me with her mouth and her eyes. I start to cry.

“Crying won’t help you,” she says, “Lie still, trust me, it will be ok.”

I believe her and hate myself for having such little faith.

There are people rushing all around me and they want to X-ray my neck. The nurse
places a lead apron around my stomach and wheels me to a machine. I don’t want to go into
the machine and try to convince her I’m fine.

“My neck is not broken,” I say to her.

I raise my arms up to tear the neck brace off. She tries to stop me but can’t and runs
out of the room. Three people come into the room, and I sit up bare-chested holding the brace
in the air. I turn my neck to the left and to the right as they stare at me.

“My neck is not broken,” I tell them.

“That was a really stupid thing to do,” the technician says to me and leaves the room.
They don’t give me an X-ray but instead wheel me into a private room where the doctor determines I have no internal bleeding. I am reading his mind when he talks to me.

“What’s your name?” he asks me.

I can’t remember my name. I tell the doctor my name is Iowa.

He leaves and a nurse comes in. When I refuse to allow her to take my blood she comes back with a male orderly and an older black woman. The black woman is carrying wristbands. The man holds my arms down as the black woman tethers my arms to the sides of the bed. She sits on a chair near the bed and holds a long string attached to the bands to adjust the tightness. The man leaves and the nurse takes my blood. The black woman stays behind. I try to talk to her, but she just clicks her tongue at me.

“I don’t have time for your foolishness,” she says to me.

The doctor comes back with a chart and a nurse and flips through the papers.

“Isn’t your name Val Johnson?” he asks.

I nod at him and he closes the folder and looks at me.

He tells the nurse, “We’re done with her, she is fine physically. Call psych down and give her something to calm her.”

The nurse comes back with a needle. The black woman gives me a knowing look, tightens the wristbands and seconds after I feel the stick in my arm, the whole world goes black and I am alone without any dreams.

I don’t want to think about it anymore. I want to watch television, but I don’t have my glasses. I stare at the wall, squint at the clock, wonder when my mom will be here. I don’t remember now what time I called her. I wake up after awhile and find a doctor with three
students surrounding my bed. Someone had placed a paper on the table in front of me. There is also a pen. The doctor has a German accent, he seems jolly, nice.

He tells me, “You have a little accident, huh?”

“We suspect you are suffering from a mental illness. A psychotic episode you might have had. We want to look at you – help you get well.”

I’m not surprised, but insulted for some reason.

“I just stayed awake too long,” I say to him, “about five days.”

I don’t want to talk about the drugs. I try to convince him that I just need to go home and if I’m released I’ll get some help there.

He shakes his head and tells me, “I can’t let you go home.” He makes a grocery list of my psychosis to his students.

University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics
B-1c Clinical Notes
Date of Admission: 9/15/93

Identification: This is a 19-year-old unemployed single black female from Ft. Dodge, Iowa.

History of Present Illness: The patient is here for her first psychiatric admission ever and was admitted originally through the UIHC ER on 9/14 after a motor vehicle accident in Coralville in which she rolled a friend’s car, jumped out naked, exhibited frank psychotic symptoms. She was seen on Psych consult by Dr. Highland that night, who noted grandiosity, hyper talkativeness, loud singing, and noted also that she was stating her name “Iowa.” She also claimed to be able to communicate telepathically and was tangential at times. She was observed in the burn unit overnight. Haldol and Ativan were made available, but none were needed and a head CT was unremarkable. She was transferred to the UIHC Psych Department on 1JPW I the late afternoon of 9/15. She did not require anti-psychotic medications that night. Today, she reports fragmented memories of the events leading up to the MVA. In the last two week, she has been, by her own report and by her mother’s report, hyperactive with jogging nightly 5-6 miles. She has had a decreased need for sleep with an average of less than five hours per night of sleep. She has never had an experience like this before. She reports having garbled, racing thoughts, and she believes she can communicate telepathically. She had a referential idea of the radio telling her “Coralville Strip.” She and a friend last week burned all of her identification and diaries. She explained all of this behavior in relation to playing a game she called “It,” which apparently is some kind of mind game
that she played with some high school friends on a frequent basis, usually associated with the abuse of marijuana or alcohol. The game consisted of people attempting to read each other’s thoughts somehow and discover some physical or mental vulnerability. They then would send subtle verbal and non-verbal cues to each other indicating that they had discovered vulnerability. Her friends thought that she had gone too far with the game and today she agrees. Her parents report that she threw away a $200 pair of glasses, abruptly quit her job, shaved her head, sold her stereo, and gave away her CD’s in the last couple of weeks, leading them to fear she was involved in a suicide pact. She denies any intention of that, however. Today, she reports that the accident “exorcised” the demons and that she is ready to leave the hospital. She thought before the accident she was privy to the ultimate truth, but now knows that is not the case.

Past Psychiatric History: At age fifteen, she threatened suicide trying to get her mother’s attention. She was seen once by a psychiatrist, Dr. Hill, which she did not feel was helpful.

Past Medical History: Non-contributory. Her only mediation is oral contraceptives. She does have lactose intolerance.

Family History: Alcohol abuse in two maternal great-uncles, a maternal uncle and a cousin. Her maternal grandmother takes Valium for “nerves.” She describes her brother as a “motor mouth” and as hyperactive. She has a sister who is doing well.

Social History: Reveals that she is a high school graduate and that she was on the national honor roll. She was also prom queen and rated third across a three-state debating competition. She received a full scholarship to the UI last year. However, she only attended for two months, majoring in political science, and dropped out because of inability to handle the pressure. She has been living in Fort Dodge since 7/93 with her mother and working at Target store until a couple of weeks ago, when she abruptly quit the job. Before that, she lived for approximately eight months in Minneapolis with her brother. She reports occasional marijuana use. She has, by her own report, not used alcohol since high school, but her mother reports that she used alcohol heavily in high school, sometimes drinking up to fifteen beers at a time. She denied the use of other drugs. She has no current romantic relationships.

Physical Exams: Remarkable only for superficial scattered abrasions and contusions.

Mental Status Exam: She is an alert, cooperative, pleasant woman. She has good eye contact. Her psychomotor activity is within normal limits. Her speech has a regular rate and rhythm and is without pressure. Her mood is euthymic and almost ebullient. Her affect is full. Her thought process is clear, logical and goal directed, and there is no evidence for delusions, hallucinations, suicidal or homicidal ideations. She scored 30/30 on MMSE. Her judgment and insight appear to be intact at this time.

Impression:
Axis I: Psychosis NOS. Differential diagnosis should be broad at this time including manic episode, schizophreniform disorder, psychosis secondary to drug abuse.
Axis II: Deferred
Axis III: Status post motor vehicle accident with superficial lacerations and contusions.
Axis IV: One
Axis V: 70

Plan: We will observe her on the ward for any evidence of manic or psychotic symptoms. We will withhold all psychotropics for now in order to clarify the situation unless, of course, she requires it to control agitation or psychotic behavior. A urine drug screen is pending.

“You will stay,” he tells me, “you will sign this paper or I will keep you as long as I like, court committed, 30 days no less.”

“I want to go home, my mom is coming, can’t I do it at home?” I beg.

“NO” he tells me, obviously annoyed at being challenged, “you are a very sick girl” I still refuse to sign the paper.

The doctor’s face is turning beet red.

He raises his voice and tells me with disgust, “YOU WILL SIGN!”

His students look uncomfortable. He pushes the pen in my hand and I sign very shaky my name and I put “under duress” after my signature.

The doctor is satisfied until he looks at the paper.

He shouts loudly, “UNACCEPTABLE, girl you don’t know what’s good for you. I am trying to help you, foolish girl.”

His accent is heavy as he tears the paper in half and hands it to me, “Go to jail then!”

I am crying as he gets close to the door to leave.

I say desperately, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’ll sign the paper, I’ll sign it.”

The German doctor is smug in front of his students and tells someone to bring him another paper for me to sign.
He tells me I have made a good decision, “We will get you well,” he says with confidence.

He walks out the door and his students follow. A nurse brings another sheet for me to sign. I sign it. I sign my whole life away and agree to a completely new one.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER 10

I describe the first hospitalization and stay on the mental health unit in Iowa City and the awkwardness of returning home to Fort Dodge after the accident. There are changes in the relationships with my family and friends and another hospitalization that leads to the diagnosis of Bipolar I. I try to figure out what happened that lead me to get into the situation and at the same time deal with the medication I’m prescribed. The difficulties I experience with insomnia, side effects of medication, weight gain, and emotional issues of alienation and the stigma of mental illness are expanded. There is the court hearing about the car accident and an interview with the Social Security Administrator who approves my disability “officially.” I attempt to find peace in religion and visit a priest at the Catholic Church who turns me away, urging me to continue to take my medication.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER 11

There are subsequent hospitalizations which chronicle my effort to run away from my illness the four years I spend in and out of the hospital. I move around a lot and live in Minnesota, Texas and Louisiana and become very lost to myself, almost unrecognizable. The things that I’ve lost because of the illness become very real, I am no longer able to drive or manage my money. The state has court committed me to take my medication and follow a treatment plan. My friends drift away one by one and the relationship with my family is strained. At one point I end up in a homeless shelter in Minneapolis when sister is tired of taking care of me and my mother has refused to allow me to come home again. I am at the lowest point of the four years of hospitalizations.
SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTER 12

I experience a transformation of self through faith when I see a psych tech from the hospital at a church revival in Fort Dodge. The woman at the revival lays on me and tells me that I will be healed from my condition. I remember this as I’m in the hospital for the last time making the attempt to get off my medication. My psychiatrist tries to have me committed to the state hospital and there is a hearing in which my mom supports me. The judge grants me a trial period when I am closely monitored. The challenges of quitting the medication are difficult and I rely on faith to make it through. I take my second chance and walk away from the hospital and the medication for the last time to lead a functional life.