

FINDING

HUMOR

IN

PLIGHT

A LIFE WORTH LAUGHING ABOUT

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Foreword:

This is a collection of autobiographical short stories from the first thirty years of my life. Domestic abuse, mental disease, drug addiction, psychedelic exploration, and grief processing steer much of the content. These works mainly represent a personal catharsis that I've chosen to share publicly as I've reached a turning point in processing my own grief around certain life experiences. While much of this writing process has been focused on my own healing, I sincerely hope these words can be beneficial to others.

This is dedicated to Aiden, Brune and Dunaway.

The ones who saved me.

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Chapter I: Roots

A piss puddle and rude awaking at 4am in a hot house in suburban Atlanta that her parents had bought her was how my mother started the day I was to be born. Fools and dreamers, my parents had been through bouts of fertility issues and I was essentially a miracle to them in the beginning. Little did they know I was to become one of the greatest rue's.

Thirteen hours, many 'fired' nurses, and a fuck load of ice chips later, I screamed my way into this world. Long red acrylics adorned my mother's fingers as she took hold of my the first time, my father in suspenders, slacks and a button up, it appeared to be the start of a happy family.

Father, Dad, whatever you'd like to call him, was in truth little more than a broken man who hadn't had a pleasant childhood and had found the first woman who's demons within reminded him most of his own mother's.

The Southern Bell, Mom, chose what name you'd like was a whole different monster. Borderline personality disorder, schizo effective, alcoholism, and drug addiction were all well hidden behind the mask of a highly articulate and well educated southern bell who towered over most humans at well over 6ft and 250lbs. Her motto like many borderlines was simple; I hate you, don't leave me.

She'd charm you with her wit, extensive knowledge of meaningless bullshit, use you, abuse you and take anything and everything she could from you until you'd been spent. Then you'd be cast aside and deemed useless. I observed this on many, MANY occasions in my childhood.

The steam rose from the manhole covers on Peachtree blvd in Atlanta as my parents left the hospital and took me home. The humidity hung heavy in the air, leaving one feeling damp when navigating about the city and enraged while sitting in traffic on 285.

The first five years of my existence came and went with little issue. Immune problems arose, behavioral difficulties, but truly at that time there was no signal that I was to become what I am today.

During the dog days of 95' I found myself standing in the downstairs guest bath of our house in Atlanta staring deeply into the mirror. How long I stood staring into that mirror, to this day I still have no clue. What I do remember clearly however were the words I was obsessively repeating over and over and over again while I starred into that mirror.

"Who am I?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why is this happening again?"

"Who am I?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why is this happening again?"

"Who am I?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why is this happening again?"

"Who am I?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why is this happening again?"

Over and over again. Toe beans connected to a cat that loathed my very existence marched towards the guest bath, the sound of him marching my way pulled me from my trance. I walked through our home, colors appearing brighter, the carpet felt softer on my feet, birds outside singing clearer, it was as if I awoke from my trance finally a conscious, aware human being.

Chapter II: Drugs-Part I...of IV

As the age of five turned into six and six into seven my brain began to shift in a direction my family was not keen on seeing it move towards. Homework was irrelevant now, despite it providing an opportunity for much needed approval. Friendships were cumbersome and seemingly useless. Even the stray dog I'd begged my parents to let us bring home held little value to me. Teachers complained I didn't give a shit, and truth was I didn't. I knew even at the age of 6 that I was more intelligent than the average twenty three year old moron who'd graduated from college and only became a teacher because they didn't find a spouse while doing keg stands at Chi Omega rush week. One of my patron saints and the man I wish I'd been able to know in real life before he left us once said "Weird behavior is natural in smart children, like curiosity is to a kitten.-HST" But, we all know, no one likes a smart kid.

It did not take long for my mother to drag me to nearly every shrink and neurologist around Atlanta, and it took even less time for EVERY single one of those physicians to see what the actual problem was. My mother was crazy. I was not. She was embracing the, and note this is a direct fucking quote from her, "better parenting through pharmaceuticals" method of raising her child. A great bit for an open mic routine, sure. It was a decent one liner, you could argue it might even grab a gaggle in the chemo unit at a kids hospital. However, this joke of hers didn't change the fact that nearly every doctor she took me through could see right through and knew there was nothing actually wrong with me. This answer, despite being reality, was completely unacceptable to her.

So, we went doctor shopping until she could find one who would give her the answers she wanted. After months of therapists, neuroimaging, and missed school days my mother finally got what she wanted- a diagnosis of her liking. ADHD.

Rue meet speed. Speed meet Rue.

Sleep

Be happy

Ever stop talking

That concludes the list of things that will NOT HAPPEN when you put your child on a ridiculously high dose of stimulants when they do not need them.

Here is a list of things that WILL HAPPEN:

Your child will:

Hate you

Shit monsoons

Have wildly erratic behavior

Distrust every teacher, parent or authority figure they encounter

Become neurologically dependent on drugs

As you can imagine it did not take long for me to destabilize psychologically and for reality to shift into something it wasn't. Shadows became people that I could interact with. Fractals began appearing within my line of sight anytime I looked to the sky. Stars weren't stars anymore. They were cracks in the universe itself and anytime I would look into the night sky long enough they would connect and the sky itself would fall to earth, revealing nothing but a stark white reality upon the other side. I was always too afraid to stare into the blankness of the universe. I didn't realize as a child that one day that very emptiness, that very blankness, would be the thing to awaken me. Regardless, to put it simply, by this time in my childhood I was losing it.

Pretty fucking impressive if you ask me. Most people don't go crazy until there twenty-five, maybe even twenty-six years old. I'd beat everyone to the finish line by twenty years. While I was living in the insanity I hated it, looking back now I just feel accomplished. Many human beings fear becoming or being atypical. Fear of the

unknowns, the instability, the insanity in life in general is fairly healthy and can keep you alive, keep your feet on the ground, keep you moving forward.

But what fun is a life without a few zig-zags and frac-outs?

What fun is existence without having your brain force you into thumbing through the threads of the various dimensions to find the one where you actually belong?

What fun is being alive without being able to see the cracks in the shattered ceiling of the universe?

What fun is there to be found in being unaware?

None.

Six turned to seven. Seven turned eight. The drugs increased, as did the instability. My grip on reality faded more and more as each year passed and as each drug was on-boarded, off-boarded etc. Imagine, you're a 6 year old child with an absentee father due to the financial demands of the household, a truly crazy mother who's borderline personality shifted hourly sometimes, and like any child born to boomers all you want is acceptance, affection and approval.

No sacrifice to attain those things was too much. No lack of boundaries pushing anything too far. Nothing. You're six years old and only want to be loved by the only parents you have. They hand you pills, you take them. No matter what those pills take from you. However, little did I realize the drugs were about to take reality out from under my very feet.

Chapter III: Fattys

When I was a kid I was fascinated with extreme sports. Dirt bikes, BMX, aggressive inline, all of it. I absolutely savored it. When I was five years old I got my first pair of skates. Pink, purple and completely made of cheap plastic, pretty sure there was a princess or two on them as well, my first set of skates was my prized possession. Not even providing a full boot for your feet to safely rest in, just four wheels, and two straps were meant to hold you together as you bladed across the Hotlanta pavement in the middle summer. As I got older and my feet grew obviously these chunky plastic kids toys no longer sufficed for what had become an obsession.

One afternoon shortly after turning six I came home from school- (this was during the days when you could walk home from the bus stop without your parents being there, this also sparks in my mind we need to discuss my latchkey childhood, but I digress)-I arrived through the door and could hear both of my parents talking which was highly unusual. It was maybe 4pm on a Tuesday, Dad wasn't supposed to be home until 7pm and Mom was supposed to be coming in the door with groceries. Something was off, I could feel it when I walked in the house immediately.

But then, my fears lifted because as I came into sight of the kitchen island I saw a box of brand new K2s.

Now, to you lame ass low and loose fuckers that don't know what I'm talking about you can either read the nonsense I'm about to ramble or you can google it. Either is fine with me.

K2's were the epitome of class in the world of inline skating. Exactly what you'd wear if you wanted to be the coolest kid at the skating rink for Friday Rave nights, where occasionally the DJ would get really wicked and play Skinny Puppy. If you wanted to roll with the goths you needed the Fatty's, black boots, black laces, gray tongue.

Black or plaid jencos, mesh long sleeved tops with torn up Nirvana/Ministry shirts from 93, proudly displaying your wallet chain from Tilt. This was your uniform if you wanted to be a cool goth in 96. See that was all I ever wanted, to be goth, older and jaded. To be grown up and free from what I was living in.

What a fucking ambition for a six year old to have.

K2's were also expensive, even in the 90's. A couple of hundred bucks for some roller blades, and they were inline, weird considering most of us at that age were on traditional block skates. Not a cheap thing to get for your kid, and not something I was in any way expecting to receive from my parents.

All the same, I walked into the kitchen and there they were. A pair of size 7 K2 Black Fattys. What a dream. I could finally be the coolest kid at the skating rink, be rebellious, spin glow sticks with the goths while listening to Tori Amos. I finally could make friends, because after all, the best friendships are built with people who only care about the things you own right? I could finally be a normal person.

"Rue, we have something exciting to tell you."

"YOU GOT ME FATTYS!!!!!" I exclaimed with a smile so big it made my cheeks hurt.

"We did!!! We knew you wanted them so we got them for you. But, we also have something else just as exciting to tell you."

I gazed confused at them because of the look of concern on my father's face and the hesitation in my mother's voice.

"We're moving to Florida."

Fuck.

Two weeks later, You're Making Me High had just finished playing, the DJ flipping it to Let It Flow on the b side, Toni Braxton voice was owning my last night at the skate rink in Atlanta, not Skinny Puppy as I'd wished. The thick faux fog hung heavy across the rink, owning the air with a chalk dust like command. The taste of the chemicals from the glow stick I'd chewed the top off of stung my lips.

As life would have it of course this was my last time at Rave night and the first and only time I got to wear my Fattys in public. I eagerly brought it to the attention of the older goth kids there that I'd come about such a gift. They rolled their eyes. I was an annoying child after all, younger, desperate for attention, desperate for friends and to fit in, to be normal. I hadn't gotten the approval I'd been seeking and it hurt.

The few friends I 'had' (my mother was friends with their mother's) were of little to no interest to me. They were sweet, and well behaved. I was the farthest thing from that. I was a hyena on speed so desperate for approval that I'd behave in any manner that would afford me attention. The goths represented a level of rebellion that would not only garner me the attention I wanted, but would also set me free from all the gender conforming bullshit I'd be raised in.

Even as a child I knew something was kinda queer about myself. My mother loved sewing my clothes, these pink and proper dresses, with bright patterns and capes. Boy oh boy did she love to sew capes and dress me up in them. To her I was a way she could play dress up, a prop that could be shown off proudly to the other women in the neighborhood. It was a status symbol and it gave her a feeling of control. This meant I was to always be clean, proper and dressed to the nine's, but I know now that I wasn't the only one.

All of the little kids on Jamie Way were dressed prim and proper to the 9's. This was of course the 90's when not all women necessarily had to work. Double income homes weren't a thing 90% of us were living with then as the economy had not suffered the Boomer Bust yet. Mother's in suburbia didn't have a lot to do other than the occasional BJ for the hubs and live vicariously through their children in hopes of healing their own childhood wounds. Great fucking plan right?

Knowing from a young age I was a prop and everything was not ok, I came to loathe the feminine facade I was forced to put up so we could keep appearances.

Enter from stage left- goth culture and aggressive inline skating.

If I was going to have to move to Florida.

If I was going to HAVE to live in that hell hole.

IF I WAS GOING TO HAVE TOO LEAVE THE GOTHs, THE RINK AND RAVE NIGHT I WAS GONNA DO IT ON MY GOD DAMNED TERMS.

So. I. did.

I started refusing to wear the cute clothes. Borrowing Dad's gators shirts and sweat pants often, I found myself FAR more comfortable just being physically comfortable. Imagine that? A child being more happy in comfy clothes? I made my mother cut my hair. It was the first step in a transition that even now nearing thirty I've yet to complete.

We'd moved, I knew no one, Florida was sticky. There were cotton mouths everywhere- and we will get to why I mention that later. Gators regularly sat perched at the edge of ponds next to Publix. Despite this discomfort, my mother had seemingly lost the battle of keeping me as her prop as she no longer had an audience to entertain, and simply put I was growing so fast she couldn't keep up with all the sewing. Her mental health was also beginning to decline severely at that point as well. No longer having aforementioned audience meant she herself could no longer attain the high of approval from others.

But alas, enter from stage right- private christian school.

Goths, skaters, punks, faggots, queers and anything out of the norm just wouldn't do. Unfortunately for me, I was already an amalgam of several of those things and pining to assimilate into the culture of the others. Oh what fun this was going to be I thought to myself, all the while knowing PTA, sports and theater activities would allow my mother the ability to regain her audience. Oh what fucking joy.

Now, to a degree I have to step up and defend my parents on this one.

Care for students with any sort of disability was and still is absolutely fucked beyond fucked and shitty beyond shitty in the public school system across the western world. Our school system here is shit and anyone who says otherwise is most likely profiting off of the system remaining shitty.

The fact that I took 20MG of adderall daily and had an ADHD diagnosis on my record forced my family to make a choice. They could put in the public school system in Florida where I would be schooled with individuals with developmental disabilities and not be afforded a formal education, or they could put me in private school where as long as they could clear a big enough check I'd be in class with non-developmentally disabled students.

As someone who has taught developmentally disabled individuals I now know they made the right decision as I would not have survived the public school system from beginning to end.

So there I was, navy skirt, button up, trying to talk to Jesus in fucking Florida.

But hey, at least I had my Fattys.

Chapter IV: God

It is 1997. It is Florida.

Sorry that's a super depressing way to start a chapter, but it's important we get through the meat of the darkness so we can start laughing soon.

I am enrolled in the first of nine schools that I will attend before moving out of the state of Florida. This one I think was called something to the effect of

"The Academy of Indoctrination Into Ignorance" something like that.

It was a Christian school, like all that I attended while living in Florida, and it was not a pleasant place for a child like myself.

My relationship with God had been complicated up to that point to say the least. I came from a mixed background with one self hating Jewish parent and the other was a once rebellious Baptist preacher's boy. Neither of them enjoyed any sort of theological services during the 90s and now that my life had evolved to the point where I was going to school with cheerleaders for Christ it was clear this was uncomfortable for my entire family. We were faking it so we could make it.

Every morning we'd begin our days with reading scripture and praying. Our pastor Dr. Dipshitticus would require us to play bible verse games where he'd shout out a verse and whoever found it first won. What did you win? Praise, approval and acceptance.

Guess who never won?

Yup. Apparently even then, my needs for approval and adoration could not be satiated by people who I could clearly see were arrogant. Rarely would I even attempt to find the verses.

It was futile.

By then I'd come to understand the most important thing about reality. No one fucking knows who, what, when, where, how God is. No one knows whether there is or isn't a God. No one knows what we're really doing here. No. One. Knows.

To be informed by wealthy white people in suburban Florida that THEY KNEW the way, the light, and path to salvation- congratulations you've just lost my trust completely and now gained my rebellion. By the age of seven I'd become aware that if someone told you they knew something with certainty about a matter that no one could know about with certainty they were lying and therefore a threat that could not be trusted. It was a dangerous survivalism skill to adopt at such a young age, but came to serve me well in later years.

My lack of enthusiasm obviously caught the attention of the authoritative figures at the school. Their thinly veiled concerns for my salvation were over shadowed by the gossip I heard from fellow students. I was a Judas in a school of people striving to be Jesus. It didn't take long as you can imagine for my mother to exacerbate the situation by reminding them poignantly at each parent-teacher conference that we were Jews and we were not here to be saved, we were here for a good education.

Many people who claim to be Christians aren't actually people who behave like Christians. Since my mother had made my bed for me in this situation, I was forced to lie in it. Not long after her informing them that the matter of salvation was irrelevant to us, the educators there began handing down egregious disciplinary actions towards me. If I was late because of a doctors appointment, or simply late because of traffic, I wasn't allowed to just come into school and go into the class I was scheduled too, I was forced to sit in the cafeteria alone and write a bible verse 50 times in a row and then write a paragraph about what it meant to me. This delayed my days significantly which led to me coming home with more homework than usual, which as you can imagine snowballed.

My mother had little interest in dealing with me after school. She wanted to be home in time to see Oprah and have a glass of wine. She had no desire to assist me in my schooling.

So again, now at home, I would sit alone at a table doing school work.

My pace slowed as my soul gave up. Each day this as Oprah wrapped up she would come into the kitchen and demand to know why I hadn't finished homework yet.

Despite my best attempts, providing her with the honest answer was as futile as trying to find bible verses.

"You're just slow because you're fucking stupid. I should have let the public school have you so you could be with the retards where you belong."

I was stuck. I knew it, but I also knew there was nothing I could do. This continued on for a while until one of my educators noticed that my mental health was collapsing. Taking pity on me as she was aware I was just a kid caught in the middle she began to offer me help, staying after school to tutor me, finally teaching me how magical a thing like reading could be, building me up. She was a devout Christian, and behaved like one. She helped a needy child, as any Christian should do.

Feeling confident and empowered after a few weeks of her attention and support, a morning came where I was late and ordered to write verses. I pushed back, saying I shouldn't be punished for the actions of my mother.

The act of pushing back led to me being dragged into the principals office and my mother being called in. Dad was somewhere on the other side of the country or the globe at that point as he usually was for most of the 90's and 00's, so he could not come to my aid.

A confrontation ensued. Mom called them peasants and fools. I started a new school the following week.

Chapter V: I Hate Snakes

Stop. Take a breath.

Establish yourself in a present moment.

Now.

Think back to when you were eleven years old.

What were you doing right now?

Perhaps playing with legos, DND, skating. So many things you could have found yourself doing when you were at the precipice of becoming a pubescent creature. The majority of them seemingly innocent.

I on the other hand, was stealing my parents weed and killin' cotton mouths.

The first part of that sentence will be explained later, but the second part is best explained now.

As you well know, when I was a youngster, I fancied myself a hopeful aggressive athlete in the inline skating arena. Much of my childhood was spent outside on humid days below the mason/dixon roller blading around outside until a broken elbow around twelve dashed those dreams.

Another something that is worth noting about living below the mason/dixon is that the ecosystems there are for the most part filled with snakes.

Now, I have nothing against reptiles. In fact, I find many reptilian creatures to be downright cool, with one exception. Water Moccasins aka Cotton Mouths.

Mean.

Aggressive.

Ruthless.

If Satan had hemorrhoids, they would be Water Moccasins.

To their credit, and I say this without Googling it but having lived enough life to know this, they don't actually bite people that often.

HOW-THE-FUCK-EVER, like demons, they thrive off of scaring people.

They will gladly stand their ground and even chase you down when feeling threatened by you.

On the property surrounding our home in Florida lived a rather large Cotton Mouth we'd see often slithering through the yard. It kept away from us, we kept away from it, and I knew not to go out skating on days when I'd seen that snake scurrying about the grass.

Arriving home one afternoon from my fAvOrItE pLaCe eVeR, Christian school, I put my skates on, grabbed my CD player that had Chocolate Starfish and The Hot Dog Flavored Water inside and started to play around in the driveway.

'IIIIIIFFFFF ONLY WE COULD FLYYYYYYYY!!!!'

I screamed the lyrics aloud and proud, all the while actualizing the most realistic living stereotype of a millennial growing up in Florida at the turn of the century. Proving no matter how much wealth you had, if you spent any part of your childhood in Florida, you were essentially white trash.

What's more embarrassing is I still know the lyrics to much of the album.

"Don't give a fuckk.....who get's the bla....."

I stopped short at the sight of something in my right periphery moving in the front yard. Gazing into the healthy sea of green, I'd lost sight now that I was directly focusing on trying to see the movement again. Turning back towards my basketball hoop and the other end of the driveway I returned to my music. Spiraling around figure 8's, grinding off the railing that held my hoop upright, I navigated towards the sidewalk to do a speed loop of the cul-de-sac.

Taking off as quickly as I could towards a friend's house I pushed myself to get to top speed and didn't notice the snake change direction and cut through the cul-de-sac.

Rounding the corner, getting closer and closer to safety, I realized the little fuck had changed course and was literally heading towards me to god damn cut me off.

No.

Fuck you you god damn aggressive bastard.

I will roll the fuck over you again.

And then...just like that...I did.

The snake's body snapped at another point that it had previously. Its movement slowed dramatically and then stopped all together.

I was safe and that mean little fucker was dead.

Hooray, I won right. And, Mom didn't know yet so I was safe from a scolding for a least a few more minutes so I could compose myself.

As I skated away, shaken to my core I felt the tears fall down my face. Big, fat heavy drops. One's we don't cry anymore now that we're all grown up.

The unstoppable ones, that lead to a least one deep, shaking breath.

It was all my fault. It suffered. How could I let that happen? What am I that I let that happen?

I was engulfed with guilt. This creature was dead because of an accident and my knee jerk reaction to its fear for its very life. This was so unbearably wrong.

I caused death.

I know now that the thought I had that day was wrong, but in that moment I began to believe I was this broken, unbearable, monster of a child my mother had conditioned me into believing I was.

I believed I was a monster. Now I had proven to myself and caused a death.

Even mean, ruthless, aggressive creatures, like Cotton Mouths, have a life valuable enough to mourn over, a life worth treating as equal, this guilt I carried taught me.

What a double edged sword that would become.

Chapter VI: Drugs Part II of IV

Rue meet erm, cigarettes, but actually weed, so, Rue meet Weed, Weed meet Rue.

Cigarettes are fucking cool by the way.

Or at least that's what I was absolutely convinced of my entire childhood because I saw cool boomers smoking them. If the boomers did it, it was cool right?

Hardy har.

As someone who's been a daily smoker for well over a decade, I can verify just as all of you reading this already know, smoking sucks.

But children can be easily entertained, and even though I was far from your average child, the idea of being cool entertained me.

This particular event transpired at some point between the age of eleven or twelve. I remember it distinctly because it was that odd era when getting hot dogs at Sam's club was somehow a cool thing, which happened around that age for me.

Despite their genuinely impressive parenting effort to not smoke in front of me often, I still knew they did and I knew they hid their smokes in two places. One, in the console of Mom's car, and the other place in a cigar box that sat on a plate under their bathroom sink.....

Stop and let that last part resonate.....

Ok.....

Now...who else reading this at one point or another kept their weed in an old cigar box from dad on top of the breakup tray?

Yeah...so.....

One Saturday afternoon Mom went to do some good old fashioned bulk shopping and said that if I stayed home she'd bring me some hot dogs.

Fuck yeah, I can roller blade in the house I thought to myself. We had new hardwoods. I always had to wait for them to leave to be able to skate inside.

Fucking parents right?

Toxicity blared on the speakers in the living room as I skated around the house.

Unable to get over how incredibly rebellious and cool I thought I was at the time, I decided I wanted to be even cooler.

How about I go grab one of Dad's smokes from that cigar box under the sink?

Yeah, why not, I said aloud to the dogs.

'Cigarette' acquired, I went out to the pool and lit it with the book of matches I'd taken from the box. My first inhale wasn't much of anything, but the second did the trick.

My consciousness lifted from me in such a way I could feel it leaving my very toes. Taking another hit, the effects of the 'cigarette' crashed into me like a rogue wave hither a tanker in the Mid-Atlantic.

Whoa, this is why my parents smoke these things.

Feeling as if I could un-clench every muscle in my body that had seemingly been taught since birth I sat by the pool for a long time.

The 3pm Florida sun cast light that fractured the water into millions of boxes that danced across the bottom of the pool. The wind blew the vining plants surrounding the lanai everywhere, as if the wind was reaching out to hug me with leaves and branches

The feeling was glorious.

The fire going out before I could take a third hit, a noise from behind me stirred me back into this world and my moment of zen in nature disappeared.

The garage door.

Fuck.

I started thinking, if I just tell her I stole a cigarette and offer to bring in all the groceries maybe I can still have a hot dog.

Then I realized I probably wasn't going to get to eat a hot dog. She always got cheese on them, and I was a portly little fuck.

Getting angsty, I just decided to go in holding what was left of what I thought was one of Dad's cigarettes. Mom greeted me while dragging stuff in, shooing the dogs away,

"Rue, can you help me bring in the groceries.....wait Rue what is THAT?"

Busted. Fuck, I'm not gonna get a damn hot dog.

So, I did what I've always done best, I started crying.

I let it all out, how I'd roller bladed in the house, how I'd taken Dad's cigarette because I wanted to be cool, I even told her about staying up on Thursday nights to watch HBO after dark.

She looked overwhelmed. I expected the worst. She dropped the 486 roll package of paper towels and walked over and hugged me.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm worried I'm not gonna get any hot dogs because I stole one of Dad's cigarettes."

"Rue, that wasn't a cigarette, that was a joint." She explained laughing as I cried into her bosom.

Those were the best hot dogs I'd ever eaten in my life.

Chapter VII: The Prairie

Roots.

Something you don't realize you've longed for until you see someone with them firmly planted, running deep.

Moving schools frequently throughout my childhood, I was always the new kid, and never anyone's best friend. Hindsight is 20/20 and being the new kid is in part the reason my strong sense of humor developed and I've grown comfortable being alone. So like most odd things from my childhood, I now recognize it as a blessing instead of a curse.

The added struggles of usually being the only Jewish kid in any given school, and having such an outspoken mother typically meant that the majority of my 'friends' were only around long enough to see one of my mother's iconic outbursts, beyond that, they often wouldn't be allowed over again. On rare occasion, if a peer found me intriguing enough to keep coming around even after seeing the insanity I was living with as soon as my mom would find something she disliked about them, they were gone.

"Well, her mother is a republican, and I just don't want you around those kinds of people." She would say.

"They live in a trailer for goodness sake and eat off of food stamps. No, they cannot come over." Her utterances then seemed so normal as this was her disposition. Her lack of empathy for others, innate.

We had wealth, we belonged only with others who had exactly the same and dotted every single i and crossed every single t meeting her most delusional expectations of what the wealthy should live like.

As I was shifting from schools year to year I was consistently going to private schools with theological influences always, and despite often steep tuition costs, most of the schools I attended thanks to scholarship opportunities had a population that consisted of students from just about every income bracket. I was fortunate enough to get glimpses of the real world and started to realize that I wasn't actually living a normal childhood.

These factors made building friendships, as well as developing my personality nearly impossible. Awkward, obnoxious, attention seeking. Guhhh, I was a mess of a child, and to be honest, it really wasn't much of a childhood at all. Discovering at a young age that those obnoxious and attention seeking behaviors I engaged in often entertained adults and made them laugh I believed I'd found my niche.

I could just, act like an adult.

Tell jokes like an adult.

Try to have the comedic timing of an adult.

Fuck it, my Mom is crazy, my teachers are sick of me and I have no friends, why not?

One day, while one of my parents were out buying hot dogs and seven hundred thousand rolls of toilet paper, I stole a joint, as had become the usual when either of them ran errands, and I sat down on the lanai, feet in the pool, thinking about life.

What if, I contemplated...what if, the next time mom gets mad about the color of shirt my teacher is wearing at PTA and sees it as a micro-aggression and moves me to another school....what if, instead of trying to fit in...what if I try to take charge? What if I just go ahead and grow up?

I was twelve. I'd hit puberty. I looked like a grown up. Why not? Being a child isn't getting me anywhere.

Not long after that smoke sess, Mom picked me up from school and when we arrived home Dad was waiting in the kitchen.

It was the middle of the week. He should have been on an airplane on the other side of the globe.

Deja Vu.

"Alright, what school are you moving me to now and what God do I need to pretend to pray to this time?" I asked presuming I knew the events that were about to befall me.

The both smiled at each other realizing I didn't know what was about to happen.

"Well, you're going to public school, so no more pretending about God." Dad explained.

Confused as all fucking get out, I stammered to form words to ask questions before my Dad could offer another response.

"We're moving to St. Louis. I move tomorrow, you and your mother move in six weeks once we've closed on this house and the new house there."

The air of Deja Vu faded and this time I wasn't angry. This time, I had a plan. I would go in and take charge. I would command every room I entered with my humor and intellect. I started to smile.

"...And we're going to stay there so you'll remain enrolled in the same district until you go to college, then you'll be able to decide where in this country you would like to live." My Mom added.

For years I'd watched my peers interact with each other in healthy symbiotic friendships they'd held with one another since kindergarten. Too much time had passed in my childhood and I would never have those types of bonds, but that didn't mean that I didn't have a chance. I could finally have friends and feel something similar to what I'd seen my peers feel.

Finally, I could put down roots, and in of all places, the prairie.

Chapter VIII: Legs

For those who are unaware, I am a large person. Now, when I say I am a large person what I actually mean that I am the product of a Neanderthal sized Sugarbaker and a brick shit house of a Bronco. Obese or underweight, since the age of ten I have been large enough to command any room with my stature alone.

Coincidentally, I am in fact shaped like a full sized female red kangaroo. Long powerful legs that lead to an ass strong enough to launch me over the moon, belly that hangs low like a pouch, and an upper body that while pales in comparison to the strength of my lower body, could still fuck up any dingo, dumb ass or dickhead. Fortunately, the only major physical injury I'd had in life prior to moving to the prairie land was a broken elbow, and my body despite being large was in fact pretty sturdy.

I had accomplished my goals thus far since planting my roots firmly into the dampen earth of Missouri. Started high school strong, even had a birthday party in between ninth and tenth grade where people actually showed up and no one cried. It was a fucking miracle.

While my, take command, be a grown up approach to socialization was extremely off putting to some, it fascinated peers and teachers around me. Most could see it was a facade and something dark and damaged lurked underneath. Regardless, friendships and mentor-ships began to form my first year of high school. The seeds of the bonds that inevitably would save me from myself were planted.

Monday morning, 7:15am, start of the second week of sophomore year. Scrambling to get from the regular hangout spot by the drama and choir rooms to my first hour located at the back of the campus, I took the cut through that would lead students through the cafeteria. Coming down the final flight of stairs before entering the cafe corridor, my left ankle rolled out from under me, my large marsupial like bottom trapping my ankle to the ground, I slid down the stairs to the bottom and let out a loud yelp as all air escaped from my lungs.

Quickly and in a panic I jerked my left ankle out from under my own bottom, literally compromising my ankle in such a way it would never recover. Big, fat, 'I need a hug from my momma' tears started rolling down my face.

An assistant principal got to me, putting her arm around me to console me she then called for another staff member who could physically help left me off the stairs and to the nurse's office.

I was after all the size of a kangaroo. The tallest and sturdiest of the principal's arrived and aided me to my mother, who'd already been called and was already waiting at the front of the main school entrance to help get me to the car.

My biggest fear was that something was broken, and it consumed me into a downward spiral of anxiety. We arrived at the emergency room, were promptly seen and my leg immediately x-rayed.

They'd given me a benzo, which one I'm not 100% certain. However, xanax has always made me severely itchy, worse than opioids, and I remember being itchy, so presumably xanax. I'd calmed down and if my foot was broken, fuck it. The doctor came in and said un-enthusiastically it's not broken, but all three of my ligaments in my ankle had been torn through almost completely. My tendons and knee remained mainly intact, but my foot was, how do I put this, sort of just a dangling piece of human hanging from me. He suggested a specialist immediately, in the 24 ideally as I would likely need surgery.

24 hours later I found myself sitting with a surgeon with a far more pleasant bedside manner. I was after all the size of a kangaroo, perhaps I'd heal just as well as one. Resoundingly, my body did heal, all the while leaving me some collateral damage that would thankfully be dealt with by the end of high school. Six months in a boot, and twelve months of physical therapy later, I was half way through high school, had established great friendships, a social status through participating in clubs and events, a serious opioid addiction*(we'll discuss soon), and I could walk. How fucking cool.

Then I fell off a bus.

Now! Now! Before you go,

"GASP"

It was really fucking funny.

HERE'S WHY BEFORE YOU TRY TO CANCEL ME.

I was really fat. And it wasn't a good or cute fat. Now, I'm kinda ok decent fat and trying to be less fat. Then I was just lumpy. I didn't wear bras, and usually only wore velure pants. It was not a good, or juicy look.

If you've even seen a fat bitch fall down, you understand why it's hilarious. And, I didn't just fall down, I fell off of a bus and onto my ankle then into a hole in the ground, I HAD BEEN WARNED WAS THERE.

Do you realize how that is the absolute funniest shit ever?

THEN!

I started crying aloud and screaming to the sky

"WHY GOD MY ANKLE JUST HEALED, WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?"

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF FUNNIER SHIT THAN THAT?

A LUMPY JEWISH CHICK FALLING OFF A BUS INTO A KNOWN HOLE AND BLAMING GOD?

I say that now because I didn't understand then why ALL of my friends started laughing at me after I fell. Why would they do that? The insecurities due to my lack of childhood friendships crept in, were these people really my friends?

OF COURSE THEY WERE AND MANY OF THEM STILL ARE NOW.

I. FELL. THE. FUCK. OFF. A BUS.

THAT. IS. FUNNY.

Chapter IX: Victor/Victoria

High school was fun.....

SEE there is humor in this book.

Genuinely, high school was fun. I'd never had friends, or clubs, or a life I was allowed to participate in without my mother hovering over my shoulder. It was a crash course in personality development, all the while still keeping the allure of me remaining that transplanted new kid for much of my time there as I still had only just arrived to the mid-west to start ninth grade.

Located in rural breadbasket land, near a radioactive waste dump, and a former military facility, this school presented me with every bell and whistle of a 'normal' childhood one could want in the post WWII western world. So, as I often do I steered into the skid. While my extra curricular activities were limited to only one or two during my first two years in school, allowing me to recover from my leg injury, the second half of high school was crammed packed with as much good ole' fashioned American high school fun I could have. That even included, football.

I imagine at this point whether you know me or not, you can probably put it together that I'm not the biggest fan of sports or football. While, I have few peaceful memories from childhood, many were spent watching Gators game's with my parents, and I cherish that. The opportunity to have a feeling of community, to have a feeling of belonging, I craved it deeply, dearly.

Always going overboard and following my protocol and commanding all rooms, situations, struggles I faced, upon what was at first a suggestion made as a joke by a teacher, I took up a grand gender bending challenge, I became the mascot. But the name Victor The Viking just wouldn't work. After all, I was a nearly six foot tall, large breasted, leggy teenager. Being the fagulous creature I am however, I quickly provided the cheer coach with a fantastic alternative that showed my truest colors of my soul at a young age; I would be Victor/Victoria.

A legend was born....

Not really, but I digress.

Victor/Victoria became the vehicle that navigated me through the shedding of the first layer of awkwardness as a being. All of us are awkward as teens.

Maybe Ninja's aren't, but I can say I was in fact a lumpy, awkward teen.

Victor/Victoria was not lumpy or awkward.

Victor/Victoria was strong, unfuckwithable, a juggernaut.

My stature allowed me to walk across the cheerleader laden track during games with such a stride I could command the strongest and drunkest of Midwestern alpha dads to their feet cheering even if we'd only gained a single yard. Victor the Viking was a beacon of light in the dark history of a school that had endured much at the hands of the military and federal government during WWII.

And now, I had modernized him.

It was a feat I reflect upon now even as impressive. How I managed to pull it off then, I still don't recall.

Which brings us to why I regard my feat in such a way.

Being Victor/Victoria was not easy. The costume was heavy, hairy and to be honest, was not designed to fit a woman. It wasn't really even designed to fit anyone over 5'8. In truth, it was meant for a cheerleader. I definitely wasn't that, however turns out, not ALL cheerleaders are bitches. Maybe the ones you went to high school with, but not ALL of the ones I did. Turns out the non-bitchy cheerleaders and pommers actually gave a shit that I gave a shit. I had friends and was socially accepted, but I was still definitely a nerd, and to see a nerd like me giving a shit about school spirit but a little giddy up in their step.

Lacking a gymnastics background, but holding onto the same determination that allowed me to land mid-life crisis jokes at the age of twelve, I performed as much of their routines as could be performed with the costume. Ran the flags out to bring the boys onto the field, across the track for wins. I was a prime specimen of a mascot if I do say so myself, giving my absolute all to every game. I was also however by this time, a kangaroo that had once compromised their leg.

The comical incident of me falling off a bus into a hole I was warned about in New York City my junior year had further compromised my left leg and ankle, making surgery inevitable but not an immediate need.

These series of incidents also led to a need to manage the pain. It was too severe for me to be able to steal enough of my parents pot to manage, and the pain pills got me too high to really function. By the end of my first year as the mascot my pain was unmanageable.

Thankfully, this was the 2000's, and doctor's thought nothing of writing out bottles of sixty count Oxy's to teenagers. Literally.

My first truly glorious year of school, of being popular, of Mom not having a strangle hold over me had reached it's end. My senior year was right around the corner and I was going to head the yearbook and remain as Victor/Victoria. All the while, day by day I was eating larger and larger sums of pills to adjust my tolerance so I could function while still tolerating the incredible amount of pain I was living with. The world didn't know yet. I still had it all managed. The pain, my social life, it was all under control.

I finally had a life that didn't entirely make me want to kill myself, and all I had to do was keep everything under control. That was all it would take.

What foolish things we speak to ourselves as we bring chaos crashing in our own lives. What foolish things.

Chapter X: Drugs-Part III of IV

My brain hyper-vigilantly made lists of everything that was to be accomplished in my remaining time in high school.

Top of that list was the most important thing-

Hold. It. Together.

My body hurt so much with each step I took, regardless of whether it be one up stairs or walking across a flat surface. Skin broken across my body by pubescent driven cysts. Knees and legs that simply wouldn't stop growing despite injury. I felt like I was bursting at the seams, and that was simply my body.

Within the walls of my skull another set of problems existed.

"Move.

Move.

MOVE.

YOU MUST KEEPING MOVING.

DON'T STOP.

YOU CAN ACCOMPLISH IT ALL.

KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN, KEEP MOVING AND IT WILL ALL BE OK!"

My internal dialog raging in mania nearly at all times, a situation I now understand directly relates to my introduction to and consumption of stimulants for my alleged 'ADHD' at such a young age, kept me moving.

"Rue.... You finally have what you wanted and no one can tell how bad it really is."

I did my damndest to convince myself that everything was ok but it wasn't.

Throwing Accutane and Oxycontin into the mix only exacerbated the situation dramatically.

Of course, we all know that mania often doesn't come alone, and each day as I my responsibilities were met and I was allowed to retreat into my crab shell the pendulum swung back.

"There is no purpose to any of this. No one really knows who you are. No one knows how much you are hurting. You don't even know who you are."

These were words that hung so heavy in my mind for so many years.

But what was I to do?

Go to my mother, tell her I was dying inside? Tell her that I was abusing pills?

I couldn't. The consequences would be so severe.

But I had to just try.

So one afternoon I dipped my toes into the waters to see if I could tell her.

Having endured a particularly difficult day at school, I arrived home to find her only slightly buzzed, but deeply moved by a story on television of a woman surviving postpartum depression.

Was the cosmos providing me with a coupon? Was this the opening of the door to discussing the depression question?

Without even having a moment to compose what I was going to say, she opened her mouth...

"I had postpartum depression after you were born. I was so weak to have felt those things. So yella spined. Depression is who weeds out the weak. It's a good thing."

She turned back to the television and I felt as though a door that had just been opened before me had slammed in my face. I could hear the evil of her own mother bleeding through in her words. Cutting me down the same way she'd be struck down when displaying any signs of weakness in her own childhood.

Message received loud and clear. These things I was feeling were weakness, of no value and should be moved on from as quickly as possible. However, I was a child.

A clearly neurologically compromised child, desperate for healthy attention, symbiotic relationships, and I had not developed appropriate coping mechanisms, leading me to compartmentalize these feelings entirely. A task that in the beginning of my downfall with opioids seemed it could not be accomplished. In time though, as my emotional survival hinged upon it, I became a master of avoidance.

I am alone I thought to myself. No one is coming to save me.

Well, fuck it. Steer into the skid since the only way out is through. Perhaps I'll figure out how to save myself.

Daily Schedule:

-get up

-half of max dose of Accutane, six tabs of Oxy, energy drink

- fast food breakfast

-school

-lunch- menthol in parking lot, three more tabs of Oxy, another energy drink

-school

-after school, three more tabs of Oxy, energy drink, hot dogs

-mascoting/yearbook photography/extra curriculars

-homework

-other half of max Accutane dose, six more tabs, menthol in backyard, sneak shots of vodka in the laundry room, pass out.

Anyone with any experience with addiction realizes reading this that I was careening towards a complete fucking breakdown. But it didn't matter. I only descended farther into the chaos. In the chaos there was no pain.

When my tolerance went beyond the pills I had at my disposal I stole my fathers.

When the pills were no longer enough, I did my best to get my hands on veterinary grade opioids. Once that failed and the money had begun to run out I had no choice and heroin itself became my escape.

That chaos that I was spiraling downward in was in truth absolutely beautiful. For those who have never consumed opioids let me give you a moment of insight.

Imagine in your mind a parking lot filled to the brim, and each car represents an aspect of your very existence. Now, imagine the alarms begin going off, just a few at first and then....all of them.

“ERRRR ERRRR ERRRR ERRR ERRRR”

-Those feelings from that time you got yelled at for losing a soccer game when you were six and didn't give a fuck to begin with-

“ERRRRR ERRRRR ERRRR ERRR ERRRR”

-Profound feelings of abandonment surrounding the lack of presence from your Dad in your childhood-

“ERRR ERRRRR ERRRRR ERRRR ERRR ERRR”

-The notion that you won't always be able to hold it all together like this and you need to face the fact you're an addict and can't control everything!_

“ERRRRRRR ERRRRRRR ERRRRR ERRRR ERRRR!!!!”

It is too much. You cannot handle all of it transpiring at once. They are all going off, there is trouble everywhere, everything within your mind is falling apart, what do you fix first?

Can you even fix it all?

Of course you can't.

What do you do when you can fix it all, you can't stop the noise, you can't stop the pain?

You find solace in the void.

All hit different. The pills hit lightest, the ketamine holding court representing the goldie locks zone, but heroin itself, the best high.

Never able to hold myself in the void space for long, it was a destination I longed for daily. In the void created by the high of the opioids the alarms were silenced. There were no yella spines. There was no cowardice. There was only emptiness.

Air lifted by the high into this space at light speed, I was safe from my life.

Emptiness for many seems like the exact opposite thing you'd want to experience, but to me, it was the only thing I craved.

Half way through my senior year of high school, it was clear I wasn't going to become all that my parents wanted of me.

I tested very poorly on entrance exams, truly gave no fucks about mathematics, science or anything functional that might yield me future financial independence. Law school was simply not going to happen, and to my parents this was the greatest disappointment that could have encountered. They sunk thousands of dollars into tutoring in a desperate attempt to get my entrance exam scores higher, all in a futile effort as my brain was fried.

I didn't care. All I wanted was to be high so life didn't hurt anymore.

My parent's weren't going to do anything to try to understand me, support me, or help me live a life I wanted. They were, in my warped teen-aged, drugged up and abused mind functionally speaking, my enemies.

The behaviors began. I became more brazen with my mother, no longer having the fucks left to give when it came to being afraid of her.

Nah, my fear of her faded quickly as I became more consumed by the drugs and fell deeper into a pattern of dangerous and impulsive behavior.

If she threatened me with physical violence, I matched her energy. We were at that time of the same stature and I knew that I wasn't going to survive much longer anyway.

Who cared if she shot me in the night?

Who cared?

No one was coming to save me, and I wasn't strong enough to save myself.

At least then I wouldn't have to survive by hiding in the void.

If I died I wouldn't have to keep up appearances, pretend life is ok, become a lawyer, win all the awards, do all the things, gain all the accolades. All that bullshit.

If I was dead, I could finally be free.

Several times during that final year of high school the cops were called to the house to break up fights between us. Our violence was escalating dramatically.

Dad made a point to be gone from the house as much as possible, ensuring there was no buffering our black out rage.

We were going to kill each other.

There were simply too many alpha's in the situation for all of us to make it out alive and unscathed.

Holiday break had arrived in my senior year and on the final day of classes I was pulled aside by an educator who'd been able to see through my facade and knew I was in dire straits.

"You're not in trouble in the means you believe you are. But I know you're in trouble. What can be done to help you?"

I scoffed. Like you fucking care I thought. How dare you try to help me. No one can help me. I puffed my chest up like the little rebellious, emotionally unstable shit I was and responded,

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, but don't bother."

They were not backing down.

"If you're being abused, there are measures that can be taken to ensure your safety and security."

What the fuck was I supposed to say, 'yeah mom tried to beat the shit out of me the other day while she was drunk because I interrupted her TV show, but when she swung at me the third time I defended myself and grabbed her wrist so she couldn't keep hitting me. Also, by the way I'm doing heroin in the bathrooms of the C building because I want to die and my legs haven't stopped hurting in three years'

Fuck nah, steer into the skid. No one is coming to save you.

Able to see I was not going to back down from my own stance, firm and forceful words were spoken.

"Fine, dig your own grave. Understand, you've done a lot in your high school career and the fact that you're willing to throw it all away for your pride is sad. If you're caught consuming any illegal substances while on school grounds you will face disciplinary consequences and as you are almost legally an adult the local police will be notified. Take Christmas break and figure things out."

I was shook.

My facade was not as full proof as I believed it to be.

Who else knew? Could the whole world see? Did the world know I was this sad little child desperately seeking love, approval and peace? Did the world know I was falling apart?

Fuck. Those damn establishment assholes in charge knew I was a druggie.

The economy was collapsing at this point, my family having made poor investment decisions, my source of liquidity that kept me high was running bare.

Coincidentally, with the little bit I had saved, had stolen and what drugs I had stashed, I had just enough to make it through the holiday break high.

Rebellious as ever though, the words of the educator that had been attempting to help me hung heavy in my head.

“Fine, dig your own grave.”

FUCK.

THAT.

NO.

NO.

I did not make it this far to die at my own hand. If I'm gonna die, it's going to be in a blaze of glory. Not in a puddle of my own vomit choking to death. No. I'm going to get out of this.

I dug myself this grave, time to dig myself out it.

Four days.

Day one, twitches, itches, shits and chills. Unpleasant, but manageable.

On day two my skin yellowed and the migraines set in. I couldn't see or sit up straight.

Day three, the pain was insurmountable. It felt as if my kidneys were failing. My urine was darker than it'd ever been. I began to think this was really it, I was not going to survive digging myself out of this hole.

Fuck what have I done.

Day four, I awoke early and stumbled into my own bathroom. After I finished peeing, I stared into my reflection for quite some time.

“Who am I?”

“Why am I here?”

“Why is this happening again?”

I'd lost so much of myself to the violence of my childhood, the self centeredness of my rebellion, and the void of my addiction. I'd steered too far into the skid and begun to embrace the darkest parts of me.

Having completely forgotten the feelings surrounding the pivotal shift of my consciousness awakening I found myself gazing into my own eyes.

“Is this who I really want to be?”

“Of course not” a piece of my inner dialogue told me.

A piece of me that I hadn't heard from in a long time. It was hope.

This wasn't how I was going to go out, like some drug statistic, abused child statistic, no. Fuck. That.

January 3rd, 2008. The day that hope filled the void.

Chapter XI: Flash

Because there wasn't enough going on in my life at the start of my last year of high school, joining the journalism crew and adding one more thing to my completely full and very broken plate seemed like a good idea.

Now, even as an adult I've always been one to keep as many irons on the fire as possible in an effort to pursue every avenue of potential success.....or so I enable myself to believe.

In truth, it's an unhealthy coping mechanism based in emotional avoidance and compartmentalization. When you're a child who's grown up in a violent environment where your safety is not assured, you learn to somewhat ignore the bad feelings that result from violent interactions with your abuser. So many of the building blocks of the hierarchy of needs are not being satiated, meaning the concept of balanced processing of painful emotions is completely written off as non-essential. Additionally, due to the lack of compassion I received in the home my entire childhood had conditioned me to believe that the processing of emotions was not only non-essential, but also a sign of weakness.

The more responsibilities I had, the less time I had to sit around and think about how absolutely miserable I was. Even after years in therapy, it is still a behavior I have to remain highly aware as it can disrupt my forward momentum.

Something surprising happened as I loaded my plate up fuller however, I actually found my life's passion. My journalism teacher in high school was without question a saving grace and somehow saw something in me that I wasn't even able to see in myself. Timing is a bitch and while she saw this talent when I was still in the depths of the heroin days, she kept me anchored enough in reality that once my final semester of high school began the fire ignited within me would never be extinguished.

Photography had always piqued my interest, but I came of age in a time of great turmoil in the art world. We were shifting from analog to digital, the internet was beginning to take over the world, and people found themselves taking sides in what appeared to be the rise of the technocracy.

Emotionally investing in photography as a child just seemed like too much work. A summer or two here and there I would get enrolled in an arts based day camp program as a child, but I distinctly remember never being able to successfully develop a roll of film as a child and the discouragement that resulted. Even all things considered, I was always a deeply sensitive kid that could never handle failure or criticism well.

The first time I held a DSLR it was fall of 2007 and I was seventeen years old.

“You have to be very careful. Treat it like it’s your baby.” My journalism teacher told me as she tasked me with the responsibility of photographing a JV softball game.

At first, I relied on full auto features, because quite frankly while she was explaining how cameras worked, and while every human being prior had tried to explain to me how cameras worked, I didn’t pay attention.....perhaps that ADHD diagnosis wasn’t bullshit after all?

No, I wasn’t paying attention to what I was being told. I was paying attention to what I was feeling when I held a camera.

Electrified.

Awakened.

Curious.

Eager.

Hopeful.

With pictures, you can tell any story you want. You can tell the story of your final year of high school, your favorite band’s tour, or even your childhood. You can tell whatever story you want and however you want it told. Capturing the energy you want with your images allows you to sit with your emotions surrounding them as you are ready.

The first few sets of assignments I turned in were in truth, poorly exposed, framed and noisy. This led to something magical I’d never experienced before though. My journalism teacher pulled me aside one day and quizzed me on how I would expose a shot in the room we were standing in.

I failed.

I deflated.

“You weren’t listening that day in class and I realize that. You’ve got a lot going on, and that’s ok. Let’s go over what we can do to bring your shots up to par. You’ll enjoy this more if you do.”

No berating. No belittling. No abuse.

She coached me that day on how to use my camera so that it didn’t work against me, and the fire within me exploded. Not only was this something I was passionate about, I received approval and validation from an alpha female in a position of authority.

Sometimes, it’s the 7,000 piece of iron you throw on the fire that does the trick.

Every single assignment I could take on I did, and despite most aspects of my life beginning to deteriorate as my addiction issues hit their climax, my passion for photography grew with every shot I captured.

As I returned from my holiday detox horror show, it was apparent that something had shifted dramatically in me. Falling to hysteria at the drop of hat, snapping at members of the journalism staff for bullshit reasons, and constantly bringing everyone down with deeply disturbing and poorly timed attempts at jokes.

Without the drugs, I was just a wild, rebellious teen with mommy and daddy issues. Regardless, something inside me craved to continue to feel that electricity that seemingly ran through me when I held a camera. I was going to have to figure out some means of stabilizing emotionally and I was going to have to figure out how to make photography the priority of my adult life.

Slowly as the final semester of high school crawled forward, my body began to heal from the withdrawal and things seemed to take some sort of semblance of normalcy.

Or what I imagine the closest thing to normalcy the average 17 year old was experiencing at that time.

Spring came, final photography and page assignments were handed down, and I’d made the decision that having been lucky enough to have gone to prom twice already I was going to skip out on the last one. My journalism teacher understood, agreed, and we planned for other staff to document the event. It was settled.

Until that is the teacher who was organizing prom that year showed up to the journalism lab on the Monday before the dance with a piece of paper in her hands.

"Prom Queen. You got nominated. Wanna do it?" She held up the piece of paper that had the tally's for our names.

I'd never really been popular, even though I had many friends and some social status. I also considered myself this weird kid on the outside even at the end of high school. My time there had been gifted with ample social development, but prom court?

Suka la minka & get tha fuck outta here.

But, there was a part of me that imagined what it would be like if I actually was the queen. Would my mom finally be happy with me?

She'd always told me since I couldn't be pretty, I could be smart. Well, then it turned out I wasn't actually that 'smart' and she'd all but given up. Prom queens were pretty. They were popular. They got to be the star. Perhaps me being nominated would make her happy.

Gleefully, I told the other teacher I wanted to do it and asked my journalism teacher if it was ok.

"Stop asking for approval for things like that. You need to have fun."

She was firm, but compassionate all at once.

I called my mother from the Mac lab to tell her what I thought was genuinely exciting news.

"What? You don't even have a date. You can't go. You already did the stupid go with friends thing last year, you can't go if you don't have a date. This is just so embarrassing. What are people going to think of us?"

Completely defeated I just broke down weeping.

My journalism teacher came into the room.

"Ok, I don't know what's going on but you're really freaking me out."

I explained everything that my mother had just said, how all I wanted was to make her happy, for her to just be happy with me and with herself. All I wanted was for everyone and everything to be ok.

"It's not your job to do all of that and your happiness does not need to be based on the happiness or lack thereof in another human being. Your happiness is supposed to come from within and nowhere else"

I stammered out a few 'I'm sorrys' as I caught my breath and slowed my crying.

"And as far as a date goes, we'll get one of the boys on staff to take you."

Date acquired, prom, graduation and the final week of drop deadlines for yearbook came and went by in a flash. Before I even realized, this woman who was my refuge was not in my daily life anymore. Regardless, her impact remained.

I was meant to be the source of my own happiness, and at that age all I knew was that photography made me happy, so I best chase after it.

Despite throwing every penny they could spare through tutoring at the problem of my poor test taking abilities, I had graduated high school with a semi-decent GPA and plans to move onto community college like every other kid that fucked up on the ACT.

College life was anti-climactic and I found myself more interested in going to raves and high. Just because the opioids were gone didn't mean I wasn't still an addict. All the same, while party hopping through old paint factories I captured many a decent image of the STL underground EDM scene and the praise of my peers.

It was becoming clear to all around me that photography was not only a passion, but something that with time I was becoming increasingly good at. So, I'm this kid born to boomers and I'm supposed to go to college, get my Mrs., have a career, have a baby and be happy by twenty-five right? But growing up to be the next Annie Leibovitz doesn't exactly fit in with that picture meaning I would have to forge my own path.

Wearing them down for months and months, I finally convinced my parents to take me to an open house at an art school in Chicago. They quickly gave us their Kool aid, used ample double speak skirting around tuition costs, and had us hook, line and sinker the first day. They would get a child that would attend a respectable college institution and I would get to do college on my terms. Eager to keep chasing this passion and even more eager to get away from my family, with some help I'd finished and submitted my application before we even returned to STL.

It was the Monday before the 2008 presidential election and I'd been campaigning for Obama and obsessed with everything Chicago. Planning to get in the durango and make a quick road trip up north, I was preparing to see the man who I believed would usher us into revolution in Millennium Park.

Getting sent home early from work, I came in through the garage door to my mom smiling ear to ear. My acceptance letter had arrived. She was happy.

Finally.

Happy tears streamed down both of our faces, she praised me for my efforts and told me she always knew I'd become something great. Hard to believe considering her actions over the eighteen years prior, but hey, I'd take what approval and validation I could get.

Dancing on cloud nine, I shared some wine with her that afternoon and felt like everything was going to be ok. I survived the pain killers, I survived my ego, I survived puberty. Maybe everything was so terrible in my childhood because that's just life.

It's not fair you know, and maybe this whole time I'd just been a little too sensitive to all the things going on around me. But everything was going to be ok now.

I'd work until the following fall, build a savings, continue to take pictures at raves, hang with my friends and while I'd be starting later than everyone, I was going to go to college and be normal. Everything was going to be fine.

5:23pm Monday, November 3rd 2008.

My flip phone rang. It was a co-worker and classmate from high school.

"She's gone Sarah. Jana is just gone."

Cloud nine evaporated into rain sending me descending into darkness. Collapsing into tears I retreated to my room where I hid until morning.

We were all just together a few months ago. How could this be happening?

How could she be gone?

It was the day Obama was to be elected. A day that would have meant so very much to Jana and she wasn't there to see it happen.

By sunrise I'd become aware of the nature of her passing and found myself far more lost than I'd ever been. She'd killed herself.

How could this be?

How could someone who was so much stronger than me, so much smarter, funnier and overall just a better person than me and really any of us fall to the darkness?

At eighteen, seemingly overnight, the idea that sorrow could take even the strongest of us became something I was forced to grapple with head on.

In a flash, reality came crashing down.

Everything is not going to be ok.

Chapter XII: 525 South State

Reeling from a death I was not emotionally mature enough to process, I dug my heels in the dirt, put my nose to the grind and counted down the days until I was finally to be going off to college.

Even as a child, the value of hard work was not lost on me. I'd observed for 18 years at that point that if my father went to work for eighty hours a week, we'd have a life filled with many things and comforts. A nice home, with pleasant decor, up to date wardrobe and makeup, it appeared from the looks of it, that if you just worked hard you could have the material things that make life a little less miserable.

Life was meant to be miserable no matter what I believed at that time, so why not have nice things?

So I worked, and worked, and worked. It kept me out of sight and out of mind for my mother, which was a double edged sword. It meant I was far less likely to take any abuse since I was often not home but it also meant since I wasn't at home I didn't always know when her moods shifted signaling a storm was coming. Much of her insanity in those final months before art school blindsided me, almost as if she was destabilizing further, regardless I pushed on. There was a light at the end of the tunnel and if I could just get to it maybe I could take a breath and process all that I'd been through.

Summer came and went. I left the jobs I'd been holding onto, packed up my shit and moved to Chicago to start art school. Slowly I began to relax. I was in a dorm, with a roommate, in a building with a cafeteria. I had a schedule of classes to attend, labs to complete. It was as if I was finally living the life of a normal kid who'd gone off to college. But I couldn't settle.

My poor roommate had to endure everything from my complete lack of boundaries, to my insane fear of doors, and my unrelenting desire to please others and attain approval. I was nothing short of obnoxious. One upping every line, doing what I could to be the center attention and claim the last laugh. Cringe worthy doesn't really encompass how embarrassing my behavior was.

While scary drugs and violence were now absent, so were the mentor-ships that had kept me grounded and focused. Not really understanding how to handle such a ham in the classroom, I alienated most of my professors quickly. Can't say I blame them.

I'd be doing a song and dance to make sure everyone and everything thought I was ok for nearly twenty years. There wasn't a need for the facade anymore, and yet I kept it up.

Exhausting.

For.

Everyone.

Many could tell I hadn't a drop of my own personality and I was always behaving in the way I thought would garner me the most positive attention. When positive attention wasn't available, any attention would do. Surprisingly, I did make some friends who could tell quickly I was a lost puppy and did their damndest to help me come out of my shell. An aspect of coming out of my shell was that I began talking to my mother less and less. Each phone call she took as opportunities to take her frustrations out on me, and honestly at that point, I knew I didn't have to take it anymore. I could just hang up.

There was a freedom in that so foreign it at first left me confused.

Trying new foods, and wearing different styles of clothes, I began to try and figure out what I liked, what made me happy. I knew photography did and I knew getting high did, but only half of that was worth actually being happy for.

This exploration delighted me. Flexing out my curiosity felt good.

One day after researching heavily across the interwebs, I discovered a famed bookstore in Humboldt Park that I wanted to venture too. A skittish and sensitive little shit, I gathered my backpack, navigated my way throughout the subway system and found the bookstore. I purchased there one of my most prized books of all time that I still keep in my library to this day, a first edition print of *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Having not spoken in a few days, after I returned to my dorm I called home to tell mom and dad of my recent discoveries. I ranted and raved about a few local restaurants, and then proudly told them of my discovery at the bookstore.

Neither of them found anything I had to say interesting, and in fact, were outright upset I'd be traveling to what they believed to be a rough part of Chicago. My parents had a penchant for hating on the impoverished or anyone of a color darker than them, so their reaction to the news of my adventures was not really a shock.

To be honest, a lot of their views were repugnant, only furthering my desire to distance myself from them. I'd grown to find their perspective on things rather disgusting and knew I would just be perpetuating their toxicity forward by allowing them to have the reaction if I didn't respond to it swiftly. Informing them that I was grown and independent, I could do with my life as I please and they could kindly fuck off.

You understand by now that the archetypal 'Karen' was based off of my mother and her pattern of behavior.

To her, my seemingly pestilent behavior was loosen her grip over my life and that simply wouldn't do. Our conversation ending in screaming and I went downstairs to binge food and hide from my emotions.

I swiped my card.

Declined.

What?

There's 2k in my checking account, I know there is.

Swipe.

Declined.

My face began to get red and the woman ringing me out let me have my things and go. I promised I would pay them back tearfully and moved as quickly as I could back to my room to check my bank balance.

All of my money was gone.

Not Dad's money.

Not Mom's money.

My money, that I had earned working, it was all gone.

She'd drained my bank account, leaving me stranded at art school with little more than 40\$ in cash and a couple of grams of weed I ended up selling.

Enraged that she believed she could behave in such a way I vented furiously to my roommate who suggested reasonable, we smoke a bowl, I calm down and in a few days I talk to her.

Three days later she issued me an ultimatum, only dress, travel to, eat things and in general behave in the way she wanted or she would leave me cut off and force me to find my own way. I obliged at first, but I was far too rebellious, and had tasted far too much freedom to allow her to maintain this control.

I debated heavily, what would I do.

I had no roots in Chicago, only friends, but we were all kids. No one could take me on while I was such a lost puppy of a person and I knew it. Not strong enough or confident enough at that point to remain in Chicago and fight for my own way of life, I dropped out of art school and the abuse resumed.

Chapter XIII: The Night The Sky Shattered

At nineteen as an art school drop out living at home, my life was nothing short of pathetic. Community college, real college, I'd done them both and I still couldn't seem to get this whole adult thing right. At least not right enough so I could finally be left alone to grow up in peace.

To no surprise, things at home were deteriorating quickly. My tastes of freedom had left me feeling like a silver back ready for war, and as she aged and their world collapsed around them, my Mother was ready to wage it.

Poor investment decisions left the majority of parents to those my age bankrupt. It was simply a matter of bubble economics. Now, poverty isn't pleasant, but it's much less pleasant when you're a bitch about it. Boy oh boy, was my Mother a bitch about it.

Her aggressive behaviors shifted towards my father, who'd been all but absent 75% of my childhood because he had been tasked with being the breadwinner, as he could no longer provide in the capacity he once had. The economy was shifting dramatically, no one could provide in the means they once had. Regardless, this was unacceptable and he began to see the side of her I'd been pinned under for twenty fucking years.

Many times throughout my childhood I'd explained to my dad that I didn't need the things we had, or the experiences. I wanted a family that was happy, I didn't want things. But I wasn't the one ruling the roost and what I felt always went to the waist side. Mom and I would fight, I'd leave and go crash on a couch somewhere for a few days until it was safe to come home. This pattern of homelessness is something I'm not grateful for.

For someone to know that you are a rather obnoxious person, coming from an unstable environment and for them to allow you into their home.....well people like that are saints. For those same people to then share their food, hot water and comforts with you, that is a level of kindness that is innate and godly.

Every comfy pillow I got to sleep on was a blessing, even if it was on the floor.

Each meal that was eaten in peace, a catharsis.

Every hot shower, a gift.

Having a nice house, filled with books and clothes and bullshit is lovely for some, but if the cost of being in that house is violence, hatred and resentment, trust me, it's not worth it.

Drum circles, music festivals, raves, the music scene, became my solitude. I could photograph events for spending money making it so my parents believed I was always working and build my portfolio at the same time. It was a peasants' life, but one that was slowly starting to take shape. The networking that took place while I did this was beneficial and over time led me to get better opportunities for higher caliber photography work.

College adjourned for the summer and I found myself fortunately enough with a full schedule of music events to photograph. One was set to be particularly awesome, as it was super remote, on a llama farm and hours away!

I was going to get a whole weekend away from my life in St. Louis and get to be a 'photojournalist' by documenting the event. Checking off the crucial boxes of;

Will I be able to get high and it won't matter? CHECK

Will I be able to get away from my family? CHECK

Will I get my ego stroked? CHECK CHECK CHECK!

Packing up the Navigator, I left the humidity of the city for the humidity of the country driving towards bum fuck no where and what I now know was going to be the most insane birthday I've ever had.

Llama's smell and are not the nicest animals I've ever met...I much rather prefer the company of marsupials. I arrived earlier than most to the festival and assisted in getting the event setup along with the producers. Shortly before dinner time and after an afternoon of what was truly light drinking, I said fuck it, jumped off the wagon, and did a rail of ketamine.

Proudly, I can say that is the one and only relapse I've ever had as an opioid addict.

Sadly, I can also say that is the one and only relapse I've ever had as an opioid addict.

Alcohol and ketamine are not friends and to say that I fell into a k hole like an elephant falling from a tight rope into the grand canyon would be an understatement.

Literally, I fell backwards.

Great fucking start right?

Well, after about what seemed like an entire metabolic cycle of me thinking that and feeling like I was going to die, I emerged from my k hole and vowed to;

NEVER DO DRUGS AGAIN FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE!

.....can you see it?

.....

...can you see it coming?

Because I sure as shit couldn't.

I ate a giant cheeseburger, downed a couple of bottles of water, and passed out.

Only of course to be awakened by my angry liver about four hours later.

It was sunrise and I decided to start the day by keeping my promise. Ridding myself of most of my stash, I meandered down to the river shortly after sunrise. A deep orange hue filled the sky with warmth as I sank into the water. It was just cold enough to trigger goosebumps and remind you that you're alive.

Allowing the current to run across me, I laid there, starrng into the sky, heavily contemplating my poor decision of the night prior.

Having given up on college, accepting my co-dependent relationships at home, I was feeling like it was just time to give up completely. Reflecting upon the choice that morning, I understood why I'd had the backslide, but I also understood that I didn't want to feel like that ever again. I wanted the hope to keep that void full instead.

For the time, I simply existed there.

Fingers dancing across the rocks as the water moved around me, and at times what seemed like, through me. Safe, secure, the water was where I was meant to be. Solace, it would seem, was finally upon me.

The sun rose and as dawn grew into morning others began to join me in the river. It was pleasant, with a breeze keeping the humidity manageable. While, I can't recall, and also won't dime out, exactly who it was, around lunch time alcohol began flowing and feeling like I was recovered enough I began to partake.

I was twenty after all.

Now, the addict in me wants to say 'one thing led to another', but no, that's not what I'm going to say. After years in therapy I'm going to tell you the truth.

My body rebounded from the k hole and the water rejuvenated me enough I believed I had a second wind. While I will never speak for others suffering from addiction issues I can explain the thought process I went through.

'Well, my body can handle this, I can probably handle a little more.'

consumes more of whatever substance

'Well, I can surely handle more.'

And down and down and down the spiral I go.

A few drinks turned into ten.

Ten drinks turned into weed.

Weed turned into LSD.

For those in the world who hate anti-drug assholes who use any sort of 'gateway drug' argument, don't worry, you're going to like this ending.

For those anti-drug dickheads, please go jump up your own assholes.

You're not going to like this ending.

Lastly, for the squeamish, jump to the next chapter. This next part gets rough.

Cheeseburgers, margaritas, blunts and L. 80 degree water, live music and a breeze to die for. It was an iconic summer moment in my childhood. The sun began to set behind the trees and the water began to chill. Dispersing from the river, most festival goer's were heading back to camp to eat dinner, nap and prepare for the evening's festivities. Following the crowd, I began to compose my mind so I could head back to base when from behind me I hear a couple of ladies scream as they stood up from the river themselves....

"OH MY GOD, LEECHES!!!! THERE'S LEECHES EVERYWHERE!!!!"

'plop'

'plop'

'plop'

I could hear the leeches falling from their bodies and hitting the shallow water. Filled with fear but knowing sooner or later I would need to stand up and most likely clear the leeches from my own body I gathered my strength.

Tripping my balls off, and standing up with the grace of a new born baby giraffe weighing as much as a new born hippo, I heard a sound that still haunts my dreams....

'plop'

'plop, plop, plop, plop'

'plop, plop'

Surreal as all get out, I looked down towards the water trying to see to the rock bottom and see the leeches that had just fallen from me. The current leaving me unable to see where they had landed, I ran my hands down the backs of my thighs, immediately coming into contact with many, many more leeches.

I.

Was.

Covered.

What do you do when you are tripping on acid and find yourself covered in leeches in a river?

Well, you certainly don't run away.

Why would you do that?

You certainly don't start, **RUNNING** away from the leeches that are **ATTACHED TO YOU**.

Running?

In a rock bottom river?

That certainly sounds disastrous.

You'll fall and bust your chin open.

Can't you hear your mom yelling at you while you were at the pool as a kid now?

"NO RUNNING ON CONCRETE!!!"

I'm sure you're wondering, upon the discovery of my predicament, what I decided to do.

At full speed I took off sprinting in the river in an attempt to run away from the leeches that were stuck to my body.

Luckily, they fell off quickly as my rotund body wiggled about in my sprint.

Unluckily, rock bottom rivers are not known for having the most level surfaces. In fact, the current of a river often moves, smooths and shifts the rocks in it's environment.

Oftentimes creating holes in the bottom on the river.

The fall took me by surprise for the most part, only really realizing what had happened as my chin bounced off a rock and my mouth filled with water. As if my skull had to be physically effected for me to realize what was happening in this reality.

Hunched forward from the fall and dazed from my high, I sat up and realized my left leg was underneath my well over +300lbs body. My right foot was cut and bleeding significantly signaling to me that I was actually injured and this wasn't going to be something I just recovered from in a matter of hours.

Pulling my left leg out from under my bottom, I sat with both of my legs outstretched before me. My left ankle was at a 45 degree angle, but I'd seen it in worse condition than it was.

Alright, fuck this, I thought to myself. I'm a beast, I just survived a k hole, my bad ankle is rolled, my other foot is bleeding and there's god damn leeches in this river. Fuck this. I'm going back to camp.

My attempts to move about were futile, and eventually, in tears, I had to ask others for help back to camp.

I was done.

Completely defeated and it was entirely my own fault.

Thankfully, I was surrounded by deeply compassionate people, and I was quickly assisted into a chair, legged propped up and fed anti-inflammatories. A kind soul dressed the wound of my right foot, another brought me water.

You know who you are. You know what you did, and to this day I am still forever in your debt.

A stranger with a big heart found our base camp whilst I was posted up.

“Whoa, what happened to you?”

I recounted the previous 24 hours, tearfully and ashamed. I told him I was an addict, and I had no control. I couldn't even control myself with actual medicine like psychedelics. I couldn't break the cycle of abuse in my home and I couldn't break free from my pattern of addictive behavior.

Wallowing in self-loathing, this stranger recognizing that I needed a shift in my perspective.

“Wanna make it to the other side?” He asked with a smile on his face.

Confused, I asked him what he meant.

“I'll stay by your side. You need to break through, it's the only way the pain is going to stop.”

He opened his hand where he held a small piece of folded up tinfoil.

God damn it, I thought.

Bitter.

Usually, I thought from my limited life experiences, this meant it was a research chemical. Regardless, I put the ten strip in my mouth and rolled my head back.

My body was never going to be the same after that day I thought to myself, at bare minimum, I'd need major reconstructive surgery on my left ankle, and if I couldn't get to safety at dawn as I'd been promised by others, who knew if my leg would be salvageable to begin with?

Why should my brain be the same?

Why should my perspective be the same?

Starring into sky, unfettered by light pollution, it felt like it was the first time I'd really ever seen the stars before. Our location, so remote, I could almost see the dusty arms of our galaxy. The movement of time, rendered unreal by the state I was in, I began to fixate on the stars as it looked like they were beginning to vibrate.

Well, they are stars after all, and stars are rotating, gaseous, celestial bodies, so trippin or not that's still a pretty accurate assessment.

But, how exactly was I seeing them vibrate? What? My naked eyes couldn't see that. Always one for hyper-vigilance and fixation on irrelevant bullshit, as soon as I wondered why the stars were moving....

'ping.....ping.....ping..ping.ping.ping.ping'

The stars began linking up, as if some sort of cosmic connect the dots was being played on a grand scale. Lines that hadn't existed before bridged stars to stars, and before I knew it, the sky looked like a windshield that had been shattered. A visual I'd seen only once prior as a child.

For a few mere moments, I starred at this cracked sky, wondering if it was going to cave in upon me. The thought of such a thing, had only barely come into existence within my consciousness, but it didn't matter.

Inhaling deeply and realizing I was not breathing reasonably to begin with, I closed my eyes and attempted to find my center.

Shutting my eyelids did not shield me from the cosmos itself as it shattered in a million pieces down upon me. My head rolled forward, I wanted to open my eyes and come back to the reality I knew existed, but there was nothing for me there.

'Keep em shut. Keep it from goin sideways,' my internal dialogue murmured to me.

Darkness surrounded me, similar to the void of the nothingness I'd experienced doing heroin, but this wasn't a void. No, it almost felt like the ground floor of my consciousness. As if, my soul was this giant sky scraper I'd never even gotten into the elevator of, and the glass ceiling had shattered.

Pieces of cosmic glass surrounded me on the floor, still vibrating from their fall. Whilst, I wasn't embodied in the same capacity I am walking around as a sapien with a conscious, I carefully moved around, noticing that what once looked like pieces of the sky, now looked like shattered pieces of a mirror.

Gazing at each one I noticed they weren't displaying a reflection of whatever dimension I was in, each piece was playing a memory from my childhood.

Oh god.

Here it is, all those memories, right here and now, starring me down.

Suddenly, I was running.

Running around the broken pieces of my soul as they played my memories on repeat desperately trying to find a piece that could reflect me here and now, and not show me some painful memory.

No, not right now. I can't.

Nausea ensued reminding me that I was indeed frac'd out and there was a very broken body I'd be needing to get my soul back to shortly.

But I can find the piece.

I can find the piece that truly reflects me.

I will find it, and then everything will be ok.

Stumbling upon what appeared to be a piece that captured my reflection, I snatched up this piece of metaphysical metaphor and screamed to the cosmos,

"I FOUND IT. I FOUND ME!"

Looking back, there was no reflection. There was no memory. It was an empty piece.

The dimension quieted. My jaw un-clenched back in reality.

Struggling to understand, the floor was suddenly bare, and all that remained of my shattered pieces of cosmic consciousness was the single blank piece I held.

Within me, a warmth began to rise, and a calmness consumed me. Those noisy, painful, arduous, jagged cut memories are no more. All that remains is a blank canvas.

A voice within me, a piece of my subconscious that had yet to speak through my internal dialogue to date spoke up.

"Great sacrifice is coming, but with that sacrifice comes reward. Endure and the reflection will be what you want."

Weeping, I opened my eyes and rolled my head back again to thank the stars, but I was beyond the point of being able to compose words.

My new friend put his arm around my shoulders and embraced me,

"You needed to get to the other side. I'm glad you made it back."

Holding true to his words, the following day I received immediate medical attention and safely made it home.

While I did not lose my leg, my body was irreparably damaged, and there was simply no way I would be able to recover from such an injury without living at home and having the assistance of my parents.

Having never been surgically repaired with the two prior significant injuries, this fall did the trick and left some of my bones as dust. The ankle itself was shattered, bones broken everywhere, ligaments and tendons torn through. It was a complete rebuild from top to bottom, complete with hardware and donor tissue.

Surprisingly, I made it through the first days of post op recovery without any opioids and primarily just smoking weed. Mom was taking it easy on me, Dad was helping me move around when I absolutely needed to get up. As I got farther out from the trip itself, I began to reflect on what I'd heard from my own subconscious, endure and your life will be what you want it to be. I couldn't help but think perhaps the ankle was the whole thing. Make it through this recovery peacefully with your family, you'll have a new perspective on them, that was what was meant to be endured. When they'd seen the state I'd returned from the woods in, there was a distinct shift in their energy towards me. The aggression from Mom was sidelined, and my Dad's frustration over what I now know was their impending financial collapse was well masked by his concern for me.

Recovery was going smoothly and a few weeks post op I was seen for a follow up and placed into a cast. That evening my Dad surprised me with a new television for my room, delightful, unexpected, but I wasn't going to complain. I was not in a place to be stirring any shit up. Smoking a shit load of weed, I was floating in and out of consciousness most days, I was in recovery from a major surgery after all. Around eight that night I could hear my parents fighting. Nothing out of the ordinary I thought, until I heard my Mom's roar. Once she got going into one of her blackout rage fits, there was no stopping it, just let the storm rage until it runs out of rain.

From what I could decipher they were arguing over something that she believed had been stolen from her. He was doing his best to reassure her that everything was fine, that she was drunk and she just needed to go to bed.

Piece of life advice, don't tell a drunk person they're drunk.

Here's where I need to bring in a small disturbing fact about the household I grew up, as it is relevant to this story.

Our home was filled with loaded guns. Loaded rifles, sawed off shotguns, pistols everywhere. Great combination right?

An abusive alcoholic in a household with loaded firearms.

Nothing bad is gonna happen right?

Struggling to even get myself out of a prone position, I managed to hop out of my bed and down the hall towards the stairs. They were going at it, and I was just stoned and just confident enough in our recent interactions that perhaps I could play peace keeper.

Scooting down the stairs on my bottom, my Mom pushed past me and stammered up the stairs. I figured she was doing her normal- fuck you I'm gonna storm out of the room- thing that she did. Dad helped me to my feet and I meandered over to the pantry when I heard my Mom come back to the top of the stairs and scream something to the effect of

"Don't you ever think you can do that again."

BANG!

BANG!

Having lived in the St. Louis metro area for long enough at that point, instincts took hold and I dropped to the kitchen floor and crawled my way to the garage knowing there was a 9mm in the glove box of the Navigator I could get to. Retrieving the pistol and cambering a round I turned back towards the house in hopes of being able to stop her from killing us.

Inching back towards the door of the house, I could hear her screaming and I knew this the moment I had to make a choice. I lifted my hand towards the door knob and realized that if I just reached a little further I could hit the garage door opener. I could scream, I could try to get away from the house, get help.

There was no time, she'd only fired two rounds, there were seven more she could unload into Dad and then into me if I didn't move quick enough. We were going to die if she wasn't stopped.

Get up Rue.

Get up.

Hobbling into the laundry room that connected the kitchen to the garage, I could see that she was on the stairs and he stood in the kitchen, both with guns pointed at one another.

They saw me, Dad screamed to me to put the gun down and get out. As she began to point her gun towards me, he yelled at her to go back upstairs or he'd kill her where she stood. He began to advance, she backed down and went back upstairs.

"Go get in the car, I'll be right there."

I hobbled out of the house and climbed into the Navigator. Silence fell.

Waiting for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was all of about four minutes, he emerged from the house with our dogs, and a handful of necessities. We left.

Dad found us a hotel where we posted up until morning. I called a few friends that night to ask if I could crash, but in my weakened post op state, no one could take me on. Morning came and Dad returned to the house, armed and prepared to do whatever needed to be done. He found her more out of it than usual, and disgusted by her own state she agreed to be seen by a doctor.

The dogs and I returned to the home while Dad took Mom to be evaluated. Needless to say, she was seen rather quickly. While they were away I asked a friend to come over, explaining I was in desperate need of help. Making my way upstairs to see the damage myself at first I noticed that the bullets she'd fired had been fired into my bedroom. In fact, they were not only fired into my room, they came through the wall about ten inches from where my head would normally rest at night.

She had been trying to kill me.

I hid weapons around my room, not knowing at what point she would be returning and what the next escalation would be. Knowing that I had the gumption to be prepared to shoot her, I wasn't as consumed by fear anymore. This woman who'd taken my entire childhood from me, manipulated me like a puppet, drugged me, and then blamed me for everything that had gone wrong for twenty years was not going to take my life.

No.

This is my life, and it's not ending in this house.

My friend arrived and quickly was overwhelmed by the danger I was clearly in. Between the bullet holes near my pillows in the wall, the knives I'd hidden everywhere, and my inability to walk like a normal person, he knew this situation had reached critical mass. Something had to give or we were going to end up on the news.

"Rue, you know, you could always like go, go back to school. Like, get a dorm on campus in old town. It would suck and I'm sure cost a lot, but why couldn't you live on campus?"

A suggestion that came from the purest place in his heart, only being articulated to offer help and support, and yet I was so defeated I shot the idea down initially.

"I've already fucked up at the college thing twice and gotten so much shit for it, I just can't go through all of that again just so one day the rug will get pulled out." I told him.

We wept and hugged. At that moment in my life I was completely convinced I was going to have to fight and shoot my way out of this family.

"Have you found the bullets?" He asked.

"One, not the other. Dad's cheap, it was wad cutter, probably broken up around this room or still broken in pieces in the wall. Dunno." I responded.

Looking around the room, he let out a little chuckle.

"Welp, there's one impact." He said pointing to the bottom of an old mirror in my room that had once been a part of a buffet. Distressed and far older than even I was, not all of the mirror provided a clear reflection. The bottom of the mirror had clearly been hit by something as it was shattered in the corner. Pulling one of the pieces from the frame I tried to see my own reflection, however I was unsuccessful.

Dad called with an update on Mom's condition, only to reveal a piece of information I'd long suspected to be true, but could never prove.

"She's been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and they believe paranoid schizophrenia too. She's very angry but is coming home."

"Did she say why she did it?" I asked

"Yes, she said she was angry you stole the television remote and she was going to kill you so know understood not to do that again."

My jaw dropped as did my friend's.

This. Is. Insanity.

We argued back and forth over her coming home, stressing that she needed a stay in the ward, but being met with the reality that at the time there were not enough beds for someone like her who without police intervention wasn't going to be deemed a real threat. Our conversation deteriorated into an argument where it was revealed he'd begun to agree with her that to them this whole thing really was my fault after all, and even if it wasn't, she needed more help than I did.

To put it simply, I was never safe or welcome in that home beyond that. Helping me pack what could be packed, and what I could manage as I still couldn't walk my friend assisted me out of the house. I took one last painful look at that shattered mirror before I left.

The lesson was clear. The universe had spoken.

The days of sacrifice and endurance had arrived and if I could make it through, one day I'd be able to see something in that reflection worth looking at.

Chapter XIV: Not One Dry Towel

Alright. Let's run down the list so we're all on the same page.

-The psych ward won't take Mom

-I still can't walk and now I have no safe place to call home and no one to aid in my recovery

-I am poor

Shit was not looking good.

I crashed friends for the weekend and on Monday began the process of emergency residential admission into college. Citing the testimonials of three friends, six police reports and the cast on my very leg, I was granted rights to a dorm and given a move in date. Not having much longer I'd be displaced part of me wanted to feel a reprieve coming, but other parts of me had been conditioned to know better.

Another shoe was always bound to drop.

Someone I'd been casually seeing offered a spot on his couch for me, I knew however it came with the stipulation I'd have to fuck him.

Who cared?

I didn't. This was about survival, not dignity, grace or any of that bullshit. This was about making it, sacrificing whatever it took to get out from under my family, and enduring as much as I had to so I could be someone or something whole someday.

Like many who have come before me, I did what I had to do to further my chances of survival and I do not regret that.

Sunrise came after the first night, I awoke with some feelings of shame and I desire to shower the stress off me.

"Sure, just FYI, I can't afford my gas bill right now, so it's shut off. But hey, cold shower will wake you right up." He explained.

I'd run out of fucks to give at that point. Cold shower it was.

I wrapped my cast in a trash bag and duck taped it shut as best as possible, sat on the edge of the tub and took my whore's bath. When finished I began searching around the bathroom for a dry towel.

Giant pile of dirty clothes- CHECK

Litter box that hadn't been cleaned in ages- CHECK

Damp toilet paper rolls- CHECK

Dry towel? NOPE

Not.

One.

Dry.

Towel.

Here I am, I thought to myself as I gazed into the mirror.

Broken down. Soaking wet. Completely alone.

"What am I?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why is this happening again?"

The questions that always loomed over my inner dialogue when looking into my own reflection returned.

"I am nothing."

Chapter XV: Eighteen Again

Granted emergency financial emancipation, residential status, and placed with a job on campus, the blow of discovering shortly after I moved my Mom had made a genuine suicide attempt leaving her institutionalized did not hit as hard as I'd imagined it would. I knew at that point her behavior was simply an attempt at manipulation, and that she'd finally crossed the line into acting upon actual violent tendencies. A stipulation of my emergency placement on campus was that I was promptly report to crisis counseling and continue to report there daily until things in my life had stabilized.

Finally, therapy.

67 degrees. My favorite temperature, I recall thinking to myself.

It was 67 degrees in the teal colored waiting room in an old chapel on campus. Arriving early as I often did to appointments, I began heavily rehearsing what I wanted to say to this woman. Thinking it was best to address the most immediate things that had transpired first, and then my brain jumping to wanting to address my own brain.....guh, I couldn't even help but spin myself into panic thinking about what I wanted to say.

Emotionally puking all over my counselor, I told her everything that I couldn't keep avoiding anymore. How I felt like my brain hadn't stopped running a mile a minute since I was five and put on stimulants. How I'd spent years maintaining a facade that not only did I not construct, I didn't even give a fuck about. I let it all out. Walking on pins and needles for twenty years had left me dangerously, and brazenly honest.

Once I'd finished puking up all of my emotions on the floor, I cried. Heavily. And for a long time.

The fucks most people hold onto until forty had run dry before I could even legally drink. There was no more room inside me to compress feelings down and hide from them. Nope, those days were over.

You're safe now, I told myself every time I hobbled to my therapist's office.

Knowing a lot of big words, reading a lot of big books often and growing up around crazy people led me to self-psychoanalyze and self-diagnose my problems. As I was already someone with what we now know were SEVERAL inaccurate diagnoses feeding into the concept that I was crazier than I actually was simply proved to be counter productive.

A few weeks into therapy I finally worked up the courage to ask. This woman had been polite, calm and compassionate towards me. I was a lost puppy that had been getting kicked in the face for years, I didn't even really know how to communicate with people. With certainty, I had no understanding of healthy interpersonal communication and relationships. I made an effort to make sure when I did speak during my sessions with this woman, I was measured, polite and did my best to match her calming energy.

"What's actually wrong with me?" I uttered with hesitation.

"I'm only basing this off of my interactions with you and what you have told me. You present as someone with post traumatic stress disorder with your most disruptive symptoms being anxiety and insomnia."

A diagnosis of such nature didn't seem correct. Mom was so pervasively mentally diseased, and now she was institutionalized. There was no arguing anymore that she was crazy and that I fact came from her.

Surely, all those diagnoses from my childhood must of held some validity. To me, it seemed simply too good to be true. How could I have escaped from that family with only PTSD?

Another shoe always drops...it does....but you don't always have to let it hit the ground.

"Your brain development is not complete, meaning all that could present itself hasn't come to light yet and won't for a few more years. This is to your advantage as you can stabilize emotionally so if you face further mental health issues later in life you'll have a strong foundation of coping mechanisms to fall back on."

Hope.

"But, what do I do now?" I asked genuinely confused as to what the next step in my life should be.

“You go to college! You enjoy yourself! You’re a young adult and you have the chance to start over in school and be whoever you want to be in life. Go do it.”

“Should I ever talk to them again?” I inquired.

“Not until it’s safe.” She told me.

Leaving that session, I felt a powerful calm come over me. I was safe. There were armed guards every where on campus, my friends now knew where I was at all times, my counselor and adviser kept close watch. No one could get to me and I could finally start over and be eighteen again.

Sneaking the occasional beer, boy or bud into my dorm, waking up late to my shifts at the bakery on campus, switching majors three times before finally settling, I’m happy to say, college was very, I guess you could say, normal.

There was no fucking up this time, failure was not an option as the only one who could catch me if I fell was myself. I’d have to figure out my way through the whole college thing and finally be a damn grown up. Honestly, it was exciting.

In time, I began poorly navigating my way through developing interpersonal relationships. Not really even having a fully developed personality and still mimicking many behaviors out of my own mother's playbook, it comes as no surprise the majority of those relationships did not last long. Approaching all personal interactions under transactional pretenses, I didn’t exactly do a good job of making new friends, or understanding others in general.

Fortunately enough, in time life provided me the opportunities to develop who I actually was. To no shock to anyone, I became funny.

Chapter XVI: Fake Dicks

College ain't cheap and I like fucking.

This is the part of the story where I start selling fake dicks for a living. An unfortunate aspect of my upbringing is that it transpired during a time of great economic collapse. While this was occurring it was called a recession, however to anyone who actually had to live and work through aforementioned economic downturn like myself, you know it was in fact the beginning of a larger scale economic collapse, culminating in a major financial depression in 2020. We of course at the time, had no idea, no clue what so ever that we were truly being fucked over financially. We just knew as a generation that things were expensive and we had to keep hustling for every single penny.

Now, I don't believe in bragging about having a decent work ethic because...well because fuck you, everyone should have one and it's not something worth bragging about.

However, upon entering the fake dick era of my life I was footing steep bills to stay in school and on campus and needed more than just working in the bakery. No car or bike I walked about the old town attempting to find a job that was within walking distance of my 7X12 apartment in an old elevator shaft on campus. Fruitless at first, my inability to satiate a need for instant gratification in the form of getting a job quickly and easily left me frustrated.

BREAKING NEWS: YOUNG ADULT FRUSTRATED AT NOT GETTING WHAT'S WANTED, WHEN IT'S WANTED! JOIN US AT 11!

Wrapping up a shift at the bakery, I loaded up a plate of food, put my headphones in and sat down to eat, angry, defeated and just grumpy. A fuck buddy of mine and his roommate joined me at the table where we bemoaned about our woes.

"Hey Sarah, you know that jack shack across from the movie theater is hiring?"

So naturally, I went at got a job at the jack shack selling fake dicks.

The shop that housed the jack shack in question was rather infamous. A rental section for movies, with a mile long member list made it so an old town favorite was to gossip about who was watching what with their loved ones and alone. Silicone,

jelly, and leather treats and toys adorned the bright purple walls, while neon lighted glass cases of lube, poppers and rhino pills surrounded the register. The kicker was though of course, the smelly, sticky, purple, black lit jack shack in the back itself.

I'm sure this needs explaining to some who don't remember the whole Pee Wee Herman thing or who haven't been exposed to the concept of jack shacks and theaters. Most metropolitan cities have a few of these and St. Louis is no different. There are still even a few porno theaters open in the city to this very day. Jack shacks can oftentimes be more rare, typically found off an interstate exit in a place where the locals only have enough teeth to tear the meat off the bone.

HOWEVER, a jack shack is somewhat of a different animal than a regular theater, and this one was nothing short of a possessed unicorn on methamphetamine's.

Hidden around a corner where the florescent lights always seemed to be burnt out was a long, dark purple hallway that always smelled of bleach, with a hint of pineapple jizz.

Imagine, Mr. Clean's cum rag.

Yeah, that's what it smelled like.

The ominous hallway was filled with black doors, nine or ten of them, each leading to a room no larger than the size of a small half bathroom. Each room was outfitted with a chair, or bar stool, a rear projection television protected behind a pane of glass, and a controller for the television that was built into the wall next to the screen.

Now, I know you're asking yourself,

"Well, good golly Rue, I didn't learn about this in Sunday school, what was the controller for?"

WELL, LEMME TELL YA!

A surprisingly dope setup connected those controllers to a system of DVD and VHS players- yes, I said VHS- where a collection of about 18-20 pre-selected adult films were available for your viewing pleasure. ADDITIONALLY, for a couple of extra bucks you could select a film of your liking from the rental section, bring it to the register and we could set it up to view in a booth for you. AND, if you were really cool about your shit, occasionally we'd let you bring in your own movies from home.

Folks would regularly bring in the most fucked up things they could find in the world of porn at that time, seemingly vanilla these days, and ask for it to be viewed just to shock us at times.

The vast majority of individuals coming in and tugging for tokens were older men, who unfortunately simply lived lives where they could not jerk off using porn at home. Fifty hour a week company men, with 2.5 children, wives with menopausal hair cuts at forty, these guys had no time, no space, and no ability to do what they just needed to do. At first of course, I felt a sense of pity, but quickly it transformed into a disgust. Disgust for the idea of a life that lacked freedom. Gross. It informed my understanding of why the divorce rate is so egregiously high.

Of course, there were hookers, johns, pimps, couples branching out, people on the down low, and everything in between that kept things interesting. One of the most notable and comical encounters being when a couple, who'd just finished fucking, emerged from the jack shack free styling so beautifully the entire store full of customers began cheering them on.

“We poppin molly in dem booty holes, in dem booty holes, in dem booty holes, booty holes, booty holes! Poppin mollies in dem booty holes, in dem booty holes, booty holes, booty holes.”

Wish I knew his name. Fresh as fuck and I still hum that shit to this day.I may or may not have stuck a molly up my ass to for research purposes to see where the inspiration from the song came from as well. But that's another story for another time.

Hilariously enough, the ability to maintain a facade that I had perfected during childhood came in with the clutch when it came to selling shit. Not surprisingly, with turn over being high, my sales being just as high, and my drive to attain approval and validation from my superiors, I was working full time in no time.

Thereabout came a routine that I fell into and remained in until nearly thirty.

Full time school.

Full time job.

Part time job at school.

Part time job doing photography.

I'd grown to accept that I had a highly addictive personality and I could either let it destroy me, or find a positive spin. You can't lose yourself getting drunk, high, or attempting to process emotions you may not be ready to face yet, if you are too busy building yourself a future. Now, understand, it's still addiction. I just became addicted to work and finishing school strong.

Much of the development of my personality and emotional maturity fell to the waist side, but I was at least gaining forward momentum. I was still functioning in a means of being what I believed others wanted me to be, instead of attempting to figure out what I wanted to be myself. Selling fake dicks and having to be fake full time enabled me to avoid that development for as long as I could.

Having completely fallen in love with philosophy, and fallen back in love with theology, I had picked my majors and hunkered down, prepared to graduate regardless of the costs.

Five days a week I'd be bolting from class, then walking the three miles from campus to the purple jack shack with my textbooks on my back so I could do homework while working my shifts. It often stirred conversations when folks would see whatever I was working on and helped keep, what could oftentimes be a creepy job, light and relaxed.

One day a regular token tigger who often struck up conversations with me about his times in the Navy being in Japan and fascination with Buddhism, came in with a gift. Having been gifted everything from fast food, jewelry, used condoms, drugs, I'd learned early on working there it's best NOT to accept gifts from strangers while working at a jack shack.

This man however, delivered to me two books.

The Three Pillars Of Zen.

The Tibetan Book Of The Dead.

Buddhism had captured my heart at a young age, but it's concepts had been above my head for much of my life. An aspect of my studies in academia was that it allowed me to be immersed in such subject matter. He'd seen me often with books of Buddhist scripture, Ginsberg, Watts, he knew my interest was piqued.

“When I was your age I was on the other side of the world serving a purpose I didn’t understand. I found my love for the Buddha, Shibari and knew who I was all at once. Two great loves in one life. What gifts. These are for you. May they help you find who or who not you really are.”

He placed the books on the counter, nodded his head, and left. He’d been a regular for months, but never returned during my shift or any others again.

The Universe sent a retired Navy Yoda Dom to unveil the path to my understanding of the eight fold path while I was working at a jack shack selling fake dicks.

Chapter XVII: Drugs-Part IV of IV

Monday.

Monday is the day for some reason, perhaps cosmic intervention, that I always ended up tripping for years. Regardless of the substance, situation, or outcome, always on Mondays. It was odd, but I was getting a cosmic education in who I could be, so I rolled with the flow.

College came and went. My stubbornness garnered me the energy to push through and graduate undergrad as a somewhat mediocre academic and even return to begin graduate work the following year. Still deeply lacking purpose, or direction in life, continuing to micro-dose and occasionally going the full McKenna, slowly but surely I was starting to heal.

I kicked off graduate school by moving into my first apartment down by the river. It was a tiny little cracker jack box, composed of two rooms, and an unreasonable amount of closets. My first crab shell. It was perfect. There was a further reason to savor this time in my life. Having gone under after the bubble burst my parents chose to move back to Florida to take care of my aging Alzheimer's ridden Grandmother. They were now more than a thousand miles a way, living a separate life from mine. I was free to fuck off and do as I pleased.

First, I got a dog.

Now, I didn't just get a dog.

Like all dog owners, I got the best dog in the entire world. No really, look at your dog right now, that's the best dog in the world. We can all have the best dog in the world.

Life is hard, get a dog.

Meandering my way up to animal control, I rescued this pupper doodle named by the staff there, Tommy. He was lab/pointer mix, about 40lbs, bone thin for his frame, paperwork alleging he was around three years old, it appeared he would be the perfect sized dog for my first apartment and what was essentially my first dry run of being a parent.

Nothing in life is simple, and bringing Tommy, who was quickly renamed Nova Tiberius, in my life was fraught with challenges. First and foremost, he's not a lab/pointer mix.

He's a Labradane. Yeah, that's a thing. Black lab and Great Dane.

Oh yeah, he wasn't three years old either.

Closer to five months.

I had before me, a puppy. A puppy that was going to be 100lbs one day.

What. The. Fuck. Have. I. Done?

Steer into the skid Rue, the only way out is through.

His puppyhood was nothing short of the hardest, scariest, most exhausting thing I'd ever experienced in my life. It was always the absolute greatest thing that could have ever happened to me.

Nearing the end of 2015 my life was for the most part stabilized. I was working three jobs, keeping distance from my parents, spending time in therapy every week. My co-dependent friendships and relationships were beginning to fray and fall off, and while that seemed like a bad thing at the time it was much needed. Things were genuinely looking up.

FRIDAY..... October 31st, Halloween 2015.

The veil is thin.

Why not go the hero's journey?

Why take take five dried grams to the dome?

It was the first time I'd ever tripped with Nova. He was not a fan. To be honest, neither was I.

Having not cleaned up my diet in the days prior, and only downed about 16ozs of water prior to eating the mushrooms themselves, my body was not as prepared for such a trip. While all deserve to trip how they want, I've discovered a certain formula for preparing my body for an intense psilocybin trip that works for me.

Understand, these are the things that factor in to my preparation before I consume any psychedelic substance. You should develop your own list of things to look out for if you ever plan to use medicine at this level. Again, this is just what I stop and take note of when planning out a trip.

I look out for changes relating to the following things-

-Obesity

-PTSD

-Alkalinity or lack thereof in my gut biome

-Date of last anxiety attack.

My body was still obese but I wasn't my heaviest. Nightmares, shock-mares, sleep paralysis, all were occurring minimally at the time. Anxiety attacks were also on the downturn.

However, as I was working three jobs and in grad school, I was drinking about sixteen energy drinks a day. My body was not optimally prepared to take five grams straight.....

and my brain responded...accordingly.

I was standing in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, it was about twenty minutes after consuming 5.25 grams. Watching as the walls began to curve outward, I knew this was a trip best experienced on my back laying in the bed. But, walking into my bedroom, something stirred in me.

Get in the tub.

You need to be in the water.

Folding my long legs into the bathtub, I let the warm water cover me up to my breasts. A few moments passed. I gazed out from the tub into my bedroom upon Nova sleeping in my bed. He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Pure of light, love and compassion. For some reason this incredible creature loved me. Weird.

Turning my focus back to the water that covered my body in the tub I noticed what appeared to be little waves crashing over my knees. Clearly a hallucination, but a deeply interesting one, I sunk into the water further.

The waves grew taller, my breathing grew shallow. My body was acknowledging the freak out before even I was consciously aware of it.

But, it wasn't exactly a freak out.

Hours moved at a snails pace. By one hundred and twenty minutes in, I'd had to call in help from friends because this was not something I could handle alone.

I fought the trip.

Hard.

"I'M GONNA DIE, I'M GONNA DIE. I'M GONNA DIE." I got myself in a loop that last until hour three.

I was a stereotypical dipshit who's trip had gone sideways and didn't know who to correct course. But, no I wasn't. I was just overwhelmed. I could course correct. I knew it.

Gazing into the eyes of the friend that had come to my aid, I apologized for my failures as a friend, confronted the fact that I wasn't even really a human with a developed personality, and that I'd been spreading toxicity for a long time. Tears fell as I acknowledged all of my shortcomings. All of the behaviors I'd been conditioned by my mother to follow I'd carried into adulthood. No more.

No more selfishness.

No more bullshit.

This can't continue.

All surrender.

All reality began to disappear. Finding myself falling into a void, I was suddenly naked, scrawny, cold and in darkness, surrounded by others who were naked, tightly packed into a space and suddenly....

BOOM!

We were falling into one another and hitting the ground, feeling as if I was unable to take a breath. Like as if the air was thick with a poison. Doing my best to life myself from under the others, I couldn't. I surrendered and just as quickly as I accepted the surrender I was elsewhere.

Still naked, scrawny as shit, barefoot, running through a bamboo forest. The sun was setting and the light was casting warmth through the stalks. I was running towards something but I didn't understand at first what exactly it was. Gaining speed I was nearing what appeared to be the edge of the forest.

Able to decipher more clearly what I was chasing towards with each step I took further it became apparent upon reaching the edge that I was staring down Ganesha. The remover of obstacles.

Understand, at this point while I knew the importance of Ganesha, my focus in my own personal studies had remained on the teachings from the Buddha and not teachings from mainstream Hinduism. Not even in academia had I placed further emphasis on studying Hinduism outside of what was needed to further my understanding of any one topic.

But there he was. Standing at the edge of a field that spanned beyond the bamboo forest I'd emerged from. Why was he there?

The warmth of the sun skin kissed my bare skin as I starred down upon bleeding feet. The forest had done a number on my legs. Nothing new. I didn't want to keep running towards him, I didn't feel as if I had the strength to muster even within this vision. Feeling the shift in my own gut, I knew if I didn't continue onto him I would lose out on the lesson. Pushing myself with one last gust of strength, I ran through the orange tinged field towards my destination.

However, the close I got, the more of Ganesha disappeared into smoke.

Screaming, running faster I reached the end of the field grasping at empty air. He was gone. All that existed was a large doorway to a path I couldn't discern on the other side. Blocking the path now was no longer Ganesha, it was a human with their back turned to me. Grabbing the shoulder of the human and attempting to turn them around so I could face them,

.....it was me.

I was the person standing in the way.

As soon as I touched the secondary version I me, it disappeared into millions of particles, being rapidly absorbed into my naked, out of breath, scrawny, bloody footed body. The particles assimilating into me built me back up, I was no longer bone thin, bloody or breathless. It felt as if, I was whole. Filled with light once again, like a child, as if something had enveloped me with love.

The warmth faded around me. The cold of my wood floors in my cracker jack box could be felt on my feet. I opened my eyes and was home, holding Nova. He proudly serving as my guide back to reality.

Guess it's better to trip on the weekends with dogs instead.

Chapter XVIII: Collapse

The final full McKenna of my twenties was what signaled the collapse of who I'd been pretending to be for years. Many friendships fell away, my desire to continue to work two and three jobs was fading quickly, and I was realizing that I was coming to terms with who I was meant to be.

All toxicity was purged from my life for the most part. Another dog came home, and then even a few cats. The pack was stable, work while listless was stable, life was ok. Carefully, I waded into the waters of re-establishing a connection with my parents. Shockingly, it didn't back fire.

Fully medicated, even though she and my Dad were still drinking, my Mom was a much more muted version of herself. She was non-violent, and while her intellectual decline due to being so heavily medicated was profound, she was someone who could still make you laugh and occasionally kick your ass at scrabble.

Thanksgiving 2016.

Eager for my parents to meet my pups Nova Tiberius and our newest addition Huxley Blue, as well as show them I knew how to be a parent, I loaded the kids up in my minivan and headed down to Florida.

Stopping and gallivanting through Cahokia Mounds, The Smokey Mountains, Atlanta and then south Georgia, I gave the boys a true adventure romping through the south. Growing as a pack in a way I never knew we would, they truly became my best friends. We arrived and had what I can only call the greatest time I have had the privilege of spending with my family.

Keeping it a surprise to everyone but my Dad, I arrived mid day the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Shocking my Mom and Grandma completely. It had been years since either had seen me. I'd chopped my hair off, lost weight, my face had grown into that of an adults, they were seeing the newest version of me.

For the first time in my life, my family welcomed me with joy and open arms. It was confusing, but brought me a sense of gratitude. We'd spend twenty five years being such a fucked up dysfunctional family, and yet here we were, sitting together, just so grateful to be in the same room.

There was a calmness, an unspoken understanding that this is what we could be as a family now. It would always require distance, safety nets and strong firm boundaries, but we could be a family that loves one another to the best of our own abilities.

Feasting for the holiday and spending our time at the beach with the dogs or around TV playing scrabble. These were moments of such normalcy, and we'd never really experienced them before without the fear of another shoe dropping hanging over our heads. My Grandmother had regular moments of lucidity as Alzheimer's had not claimed her mind yet, and my Mom was present, polite and beamed of gratitude.

Time moved quicker than it ever had. The trip was over before I knew it. Hugging everyone deeply, a little feeling in the pit of my stomach told me this would be the first, and only time in my life I'd experience such joy with them. The pack and I packed up, heading home, and life moved on.

November 7th 2017.

For the entirety of that year I'd been working full time as a photographer and graphic designer. Every opportunity I'd be provided to do something photography or art related I jumped on. I was a working artist, raising a beautiful pack of furry kids, and managing to pay my bills with my creative efforts. Life was fucking fantastic. Even after being laid off for the winter season from one of my full time jobs, I'd still planned ahead well enough that my world didn't disintegrate.

Arriving home from a gig on that Tuesday evening, I got a call from my parents. They had just been calling to shoot the shit, give me updates on Grandma and her decline etc, etc. Our silences grew in the conversation and while I realized it was time to go to avoid any awkwardness, things were going well and I still wanted to hang out with them as much as I could.

"Do you two wanna play scrabble online with me tonight before bed?" I asked my Mom.

"No, I wanna play with your Dad. I can actually beat him, it's no fun to play with you, you always win." She responded. We chuckled.

"Well, I just wanted to hear your voice tonight, I love you Rue." She said as we said goodnight.

"I love you too."

November 8th, 2017

Forty five minutes away from home, at a Walmart like wedding venue, I was operating a photo booth during a tasting event in hopes of getting bookings. Knowing a few other vendors there and knowing the owner of the venue, I knew I'd be getting a free meal and some extras to take home making the gig worth the pay and drive. My phone was dead on arrival and I'd plugged it into the wall at the beginning of the event around seven that night. Ignoring it and doing my best to bark up some business, I remained focused on working the event until folks had begun to leave and vendors were allowed to eat. Gathering a full plate and a to-go box too, I returned to my table, grabbing my phone from the wall checking it for the first time in hours.

Nineteen missed calls.

One text message.

All from Dad.

"911. Call Me."

I shot up from my seat and bolted towards the kitchen doors knowing that the back door of the kitchen led to the smoking section. Dialing out while I walked across the ballroom my Dad answered on the first ring.

"What's going on, is it Sophie?" I asked

"No, Rue listen..." He said, but I cut him off,

"Grandma, what's happened to Grandma?" I barked at him, my heart was racing, my blood pressure was shooting up, each step I took was heavier than the last, and just as I took a deep breath in, I felt time cease to exist. The feeling was identical to the moment I woke up in the mirror, when I watched the sky shatter, the only things that existed in reality in that moment was him and I on that phone call.

I was feet from the back door where much needed fresh air awaited me that I believed I had to breathe in as quickly as possible when the words escaped his lips.

"Mom's dead Rue."

Air left my lungs so rapidly I could nothing but crumble into tears while collapsing to the floor.

Chapter XIX: Her Nirodha Was My Greatest Rue

In Buddhism Nirodha is one of the Four Noble Truths, and represents the cessation of suffering and its causes in such a way as to never reoccur.

The final years of her life had been filled with a shift in demeanor. She wasn't the dark, violent, unstable person she had been throughout my childhood. In the end, she was pleasant, not high functioning certainly, but filled with much more light. Funnier too. She may have lost her sharpness in the end, but the humor never died.

Addictive tendencies towards alcohol had plagued her for decades, so much so at a certain point, she even tired of being drunk. In the final seven days of her life she'd quit drinking all together. She'd begun to feel better. In those final days it appeared as if perhaps she'd shaken the booze once and for all. Perhaps this was the beginning of the end of much of her suffering.

On November 8th, 2017, Dad found her unresponsive, and it was later determined she had died of a heart attack.

Arriving home an hour after receiving the news, I could feel her presence in my crab shell. There was no shaking an energy in my home attempting to encompass me with a feeling of her embrace and her voice trying to convince me things were ok. Incapacitated with grief and shock, I bellowed in agony and walled myself up emotionally. Her energy faded from my home quickly after I retreated into myself, and before long, I passed out from crying.

Without skipping a beat at 9am the following morning I loaded the kids up in my minivan and took off. Much needed to be accomplished and there was no way Dad would be able to manage it all himself.

Silent the first four hours, the dogs passed out quickly and I sat uncomfortably with my thoughts.

Was this some sick joke?

Have I had a mental breakdown?

Is this real?

Of course, reality, which was the road disappearing in front of me as I made my way closer and closer to home was ever present and I knew this was all too real.

We'd just spoken. She was just here. How is this happening all so suddenly?

Rain slowed us to a stand still in the Smokeys'. I was getting twitchy, like she used to when she was lacking stimulus. Plugging my iPod into my stereo, I set it to shuffle.

Sara Brightman- Time To Say Goodbye

Fuck. Nah.

Next

Queen- Another Bites The Dust

WHAT THE FUCK UNIVERSE?

I shut the stereo off for a few minutes. Too much. Just too much.

Stopping at a gas station, I got the dogs to pee, grabbed food and got back on the road moving finally at a decent pace again. Reluctantly, I turned the music on shuffle and hit play.

The Beatles- All You Need is Love

Bursting out in laughter at first, I just couldn't hold back anymore. That laughter quickly shifted to tears. I was beside myself. Managing to make it through about ten more minutes of music, I was quickly over stimulated and drove the remaining seven hours in silence.

Arriving shortly after midnight on November 10th, the energy in the room she died in was palpable. It hung thick in the air like smog over the smug. You could feel something so terribly sad had transpired there.

Dad was numb. Rightfully so. Doing our damndest to sleep, but failing, we awoke early the next day and began preparations for her funeral. My cousin coming to our aid and assisting us with dotting ever I and crossing every T, we drank our way through the forty eight hours leading up to the private final viewing.

It was all so surreal. Dressing and doing my makeup in the very bathroom she'd died in, I gazed deeply in the mirror, holding onto the strength I knew lived within, I prepared myself for the most painful moment of my life.

A few family friends and cousins joined us at the empty funeral home.

Here is it.

A moment most of us will live through, and no one will ever be prepared for.

Keeping my head down until they opened the french doors to the room she was in, I looked up and there she was. Invited to say goodbye and spend time alone with her first, I stepped into the room where she was displayed.

Breathless, I starred at her.

Please jump up and scare the shit out of me.

Please let this be the grandest master manipulation a borderline personality has ever carried out. We'll get you a god damn trophy.

Please.

Don't let this be real.

My head started to hurt and I became immediately aware I was not breathing and my knees were locked. I relaxed and felt a chill come over me. I started laughing. It was the absolute perfect temperature in that room, couldn't have been more than 66 degrees.

Mom would have loved it.

She was always one who loved good air conditioning.

Calmness encompassed me as I noticed the stillness of the room. She wasn't twitching, itching, or clenching her jaw anymore. She wasn't manic, or heavily medicated, or miserable with her alcoholism anymore. She was finally at peace.

All I had ever wanted for her had finally happened. Her suffering had ended.

At the expense of her life.

Regret consumed me.

It was real.

Chapter XX: The House Of Elephants

Of all the adventures, insanity, and metamorphoses that have taken place in my life, there has always been one constant in the background, The House Of Elephants. A home in north Florida that's been in the family for over a century, with a body count of what we think is around thirteen.

Filled with dust, bugs, and hundreds of little decorative elephants. Having been trinkets loved by multiple generations of the family, the collection had grown to an outrageous level by the time I'd returned to the home for Mom's funeral.

Stagnant residual energy from deaths of decades past knocks you back ten feet when you open the front door. The remnants of the presence of a preacher man who unrelentingly worshiped God still echoed through the walls. My Mother's laughter still reverberating. You could burn a hectare of sage and it couldn't clear the vibes there. The elephants it would seem held onto much of the energy there. To no surprise of course, the home was electrified.

Returning home from the funeral, having awkwardly addressed a crowd that for the most part I didn't even know, I was exhausted. Laying across a bed that fit someone a quarter of my size in the center room of the house I stared at the ceiling fan.

What am I supposed to do on the other side of this?

How will I get through the day without crying?

Should I even be crying? Is she even worth my tears?

Did the last few years of kindness she'd shown me makeup for the first twenty years of my life?

Did the fact that our last words to one another were 'I love you' make everything ok?

What happens when Dad dies?

I'll have to do all this again.

Fuck.

My mind spun in circles, looping back around again and again to the constant, this just hurts. Eyes aching from crying for five days, I couldn't stare at the ceiling fan anymore. Looking around the room, my focus settled on the dozens of elephants that adorned the bookcases filled with my Grandfather's old dusty books. Glass, geodes, clay, metal, wood, they were made of every material imaginable. They been there as long as I could remember, and I wondered how much of my life had imprinted energy upon them and this room. How much energy was imprinted upon all of them?

The urge to shut down, wall up, and avoid overwhelmed me. A master of avoidance, I could say fuck it, and walk away from every ounce of this pain and let it explode in the form of a lupus flare or high cortisol somewhere down the line. Grab all them feelings and shove them down right below my liver and let it fester. Yup, sounds like a good plan. At least I know it's a plan that I can accomplish successfully.

Alrighty, let's cue up my favorite song and hop on that dance floor- DJ hit it with The Compartmentalization Conga!!!

Standing up and walking over to the bookcases, one of the elephants had caught my attention. It was made of jade, with one ear and one tusk broken off. Little bugger seemed to have live through some shit. I found it odd in twenty seven years I'd never noticed this one, even with having such an affinity for jade I'd worn the stone for years.

Holding this tiny, fragile, broken thing in my hands I knew one day I'd be the steward of this collection. When everyone was gone, lives said and done, I would be left to look after these things, these memories, these emotions. Whether I chose to face those feelings then or later, they would never cease to be something I'd live with. One day I would be the keeper of The House Of Elephants, the feelings, the haints & haunts, and the memories of my family.

That was just it though. I would be the keeper.

These things were not going to keep me. Those things, that house, the feelings, they were not going to own me. They were not going to define me or get shoved down, hidden away in my liver at the bottom of a bottle. No. There was no going back to that person anymore.

I felt hope.

This sorrow, struggle, rage, and guilt, this was going to be my fuel.

I held that little jade elephant in my hands for a long time. Admiring its flaws as they made it more distinguished than if it'd been whole. Without re-defining what it was, or the strength the elephant symbolized, brokenness and all it had endured made it beautiful.

Unable to contain myself, I chuckled.

What irony.

Grief surrounding the loss of a parent is a complicated thing. It drowns you in sorrow, then burns you in rage, and drop kicks your soul in the dick with emptiness. Things that seemed absolutes are no longer certain. Perspectives you'd aligned with, no longer make sense. Half of what brought you earth side is no longer here. It is confusing. Some days you know which way is up and some days you don't. Smells that trigger memories can cut your day in half with panic and sorrow. You thought you were ready to forgive and forget, and then life takes you a different direction.

It is debilitating.

It takes time.

In time however, the pain lessened. The days lost to melancholy dissipated. Accepting as the days marched forward I'd already lived through the worst life could dish out having survived; my childhood, my grief, my myself, the scars carried within my soul only forged greater strength fueling forward momentum in life. Only giving me further insight in how to always find the humor in the plight and fill the voids with laughter.