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## The Slash Between

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THE SLASH BETWEEN

by

Tori Winslow Fica

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Jennifer Sinor  
Major Professor

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Jeannie Thomas  
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2016

## ABSTRACT

### The Slash Between

by

Tori Winslow Fica, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2016

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Department: English

In this Plan B thesis, I wrote a braided essay accompanied by a critical introduction. The essay moves between three different topics: Salt Lake Comic Con; the journal of James Holmes, the shooter in the Aurora theatre massacre; and my father's incarceration. Through the interaction among these three topics, or strands, I explore the lines we construct as human beings as a way of defining and controlling our world. I investigate such dichotomies as normal/abnormal, inside/outside, good/bad, and fantasy/reality. By the end, the strands reveal the fragility of the lines we draw and the futility of attempting to construct them. As much as we try to sort and categorize, life falls into the area between lines—both normal and abnormal, inside and outside, good and bad, fantasy and reality. Rather than trying to reestablish my own lines and boundaries after the trauma of my father's incarceration, I conclude that he falls in the space between categories, hovering the border. And ultimately, so do we all.

(49 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

### The Slash Between

Tori Winslow Fica

In this Plan B thesis, I wrote a braided essay accompanied by a critical introduction. The essay explores the lines and boundaries that human beings construct as a way to control the world around them. These lines create dichotomies of inside/outside, normal/abnormal, fantasy/reality, and others that allow us to define and categorize people and behaviors. When a line is crossed, we scramble to maintain control by redrawing our borders and redefining the transgressor in terms of this division—an outsider, excluded from the rest of us who are insiders. Being part of the inside group promises security and community because we are on the right side of the line. However, being on the outside, or on the wrong side of the line, carries with it the burden of isolation and rejection. Therefore, these constructed lines create as much pain as comfort.

Furthermore, life rarely, if ever, fits cleanly in between the lines we draw. Bad overlaps with good, fantasy crosses into reality, normal intersects with abnormal, inside bleeds into outside. Through the interaction of three seemingly unrelated topics—Comic Con, James Holmes, and my father’s trial and incarceration—I explore the lines we attempt to draw around our world, the comfort and pain that come as a result, and the ultimate futility of such a pursuit.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally and especially, I give thanks to my father and the rest of my family for supporting me while I unearthed so many difficult memories for us. Their love and encouragement never faltered. This project would have been nothing short of impossible if it weren't for every one of these amazing people.

Tori Winslow Fica

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### **Topic and Purpose**

Human beings are preoccupied with a desire to define, categorize, and sort. We draw lines between inside and outside, normal and abnormal, good and bad. In our minds, these boundaries give us a kind of control over our world. When a line is crossed, we scramble to maintain control by redrawing our borders and redefining the transgressor in terms of this division—an outsider, excluded from the rest of us who are insiders. Being part of the inside group promises security and community because we are on the right side of the line. What we may not immediately realize, however, is that being on the outside, or on the wrong side of the line, carries with it the burden of isolation and rejection. As much comfort as we imagine to gain from such boundaries, an equal amount of pain is meted out to someone else.

Furthermore, life rarely, if ever, fits cleanly in between lines. Bad overlaps with good, fantasy crosses into reality, normal intersects with abnormal, inside bleeds into outside. In practice, the boundaries we try to construct have no power to contain; they are elements of the collective imagination, and they are constantly ignored, crossed over, and shattered. What I explore in my essay, then, is the lines we attempt to draw around our world, the comfort and pain that come as a result, and the ultimate futility of such a pursuit.

I pursue this theme in a braided essay, a lyric form of creative nonfiction in which three topics, or strands, are woven together over the course of the piece. Many braided essays, my own included, consist of three types of strands: one is based on a journey or

site visit taken by the author, one is research-based, and one is personal. For my three strands, I chose to visit Salt Lake Comic Con in September of 2015; research James Holmes, the mass shooter at the Aurora movie theatre massacre; and examine my personal experiences as a teenager and young adult watching my father lose his job, stand trial, and go to jail. Below, I will further explain each topic and demonstrate how it functions in the greater work to enhance my central theme.

The essay begins with my trip to Comic Con, a space which defies definitions and boundaries by its very nature. Thousands of people from different fandoms and dressed as different characters congregate in the convention center for three days to celebrate their unified love of all things nerdy. On the floor of the entrance hall are thin lines of tape meant to keep the crowd organized. I emphasize the image of that tape as a symbol for the lines we draw in our own lives to maintain order. By the end of that scene, the tape is trampled and mangled, showing how easily our own imaginary boundaries are destroyed. When I enter Comic Con, I see a division between myself and the cosplayers—a normal/abnormal and reality/fantasy relationship. Dressing up as a fictional character for three days is, in my mind, abnormal. However, within the Comic Con world of fantasy, I am abnormal for not dressing in a costume. I am actually the one on the outside of the group. This makes me both “normal” and “outsider,” a duality that complicates the initial idea of clean, straight lines embodied in the blue tape at the beginning. This strand ends on an image of one of the cosplayers dressed up outside of Comic Con, reading a textbook on campus. I describe her as both standing out and fitting in, “like a dandelion forcing its way up through a crack in the cement” (25). What began

as a clear boundary between normal and abnormal or fantasy and reality for me at Comic Con ends in a gray area, the space between lines.

My second strand focuses on James Holmes as someone who resists society's efforts to define and contain him. On July 20, 2012, Holmes walked into a midnight showing of *The Dark Knight Rises* at the Century 16 theatre in Aurora, Colorado and killed twelve people, injuring dozens more. I use his personal notebook as a vehicle for traveling the overwhelming amount of information about the case and because many viewed it as the key to solving the mystery of who he was and what he did. The notebook is also significant because it is literally a container for Holmes. We want him to fit in between two brown covers and "thin graph lines on notebook paper" (4). It is a physical symbol of the lines we want to draw between ourselves and Holmes: good/evil, sane/insane, normal/abnormal. In other words, we want to make him an outsider. However, my strand unravels this easy definition for him. For example, I describe a scene of him riding a boogie board into shore at a beach in Ventura, aligning it with "the first time I rode my boogie board into shore at a beach in Ventura" (9). In that moment, as the boundary between myself and Holmes dissolves, the boundary between all of us and Holmes dissolves as well. Near the end of the strand, I include Holmes's use of *k/night* to define himself, concluding that he falls in between the two words, refusing to fit on either side of the line.

The final strand revolves around my efforts to respond to my father's trial and incarceration. It is in this strand that my personal stakes as the writer are manifest. Obviously, it is a deeply emotional topic for me and a question I have been untangling for



years. As a child, I had drawn a line around what it meant to be a normal father: he shaved every day, worked as a basketball coach, paid for a house and our food. However, as I show in the beginning of the strand, that line shatters when I see my father cry for the first time. He no longer fits my definition of *father*, and I struggle to know where to place him in my mind. I use the metaphor of his facial hair to move through the strand. It is a physical manifestation of normal/abnormal: normal as he shaves every day, abnormal as he lets his beard grow in jail. When he returns home at the end of the entire essay, he shaves his beard in the bathroom. That moment suggests a return to the “normal,” but I discover that the “normal” no longer exists. Watching him shave doesn’t feel familiar like it did before. My father and I have instead moved into a middle space “in the thin slash between words” (26). A space, I ultimately conclude, where we all dwell.

### **Contemporary Father Memoirs**

I use my personal experience with my father as a means to explore the central question of boundaries; because of this personal strand, I examined other father memoirs as a starting point in the genre. The first father memoir I want to focus on is *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel. Bechdel does an excellent job of creating a complicated father figure in her graphic memoir. Instead of categorizing him as either despicable or sympathetic, she mixes several details together to present both sides. In the beginning, Bechdel compares her father to Daedalus, the father of Icarus, who “was indifferent to the human cost of his projects” (8). She shows him ignoring or yelling at his family, and we, as readers, begin to view him negatively. However, she complicates this characterization

throughout the memoir by revealing moments of vulnerability between her father and her, such as the strained, but sincere, conversation in the car after she has come out as homosexual. These complex details build up to the end when she writes “he was there to catch me when I leapt,” demonstrating that while he was fallible, he also loved and cared for her (228). By the time readers finish *Fun Home*, they cannot cleanly categorize Bechdel’s father as good or bad; he defies the boundaries they construct even as they construct them, reinforcing the idea that the attempt to construct such boundaries is futile.

The second memoir that influenced my own writing is Jeanette Walls’s *The Glass Castle*. The character of her father becomes just as complicated throughout her novel as Bechdel’s; however, it is Walls’s development of the narrative voice that is so fascinating about the work. As Walls grows older within the memoir, her narrative “I” grows older as well. We read events from a childlike perspective in the beginning, gradually learning more until we reach an enlightened, adult voice at the end. During her childhood years in the novel, Walls achieves a childlike “I” by refraining from extensive reflection and leaving details for the reader to make sense of on his or her own. For example, when the nurses ask why she’s allowed to cook hot dogs on her own at three years old, she explains the process of cooking hot dogs, taking the question at face value. Instead of exploring the underlying meaning of the conversation, she gives us this scene to reflect on: “Two nurses looked at each other, and one of them wrote something down on a clipboard. I asked what was wrong, Nothing, they said, nothing” (11). Walls offers only the information and insight she had as a child, showing readers the world through that lens. However, by the end of the memoir, after several instances of disillusionment, she brings

more and more maturity to the narration. We see one example of this maturing perspective when she realizes “what Mom was up against. Being a strong woman was harder than I had thought” (256). She stops believing in her father and accepting circumstances without question as a child, and she begins to bring more reflection into the novel as a woman. I used this narrative transition as a pattern in my own writing, not necessarily to reflect the age of “I,” but rather to reflect the development of the theme. In the beginning of my essay, the narrative “I” draws comfort from the clear boundaries around her—the idea of defining and containing is not yet complicated. By the end, however, I shift the narrative “I” to a more experienced version of myself, someone who is no longer confident in the power and possibility of boundaries. In this way, by theme rather than chronology, I map the increasingly blurry lines in my own mind and the conclusion that my efforts to construct them are useless.

The final father memoir that helped me the most in thinking about this project was *The Suicide Index* by Joan Wickersham. Wickersham differs from Bechdel and Walls in her choice of form; she follows a lyric form rather than a chronological form, examining her father’s suicide by way of an index. While her memoir is not a braided essay, she still weaves several elements together to examine her subject. I looked to her work as an example of breaking chronology without losing focus on the central question. By including scenes from before, after, and during the suicide, she approaches the subject from many different angles, building one on top of the other until we reach the final section titled “Suicide: where I am now.” She begins with a mostly chronological order of sections, telling the story of her father’s suicide and what happened the day after.

However, even her “standard linear way of telling the story” moves from topic to topic in a non-linear way (67). For example, the “day after” sections discuss her father’s business partner, a search warrant, and a mysterious bulge on her father’s head. Once she declaratively deviates from the linear form, even more disparate elements are thrown together such as her grandparents, Bullwinkle, and examples of suicide literature. She successfully incorporates scenes, images, and information from several different times and places and braids them together to provide the most complete look possible at an event as derailing and emotional as her father’s suicide. She could not have captured the story in any other way because her question has an answer that is far too large and complex to contain in a traditional form. As Holmes shows us in my own piece, there is no clean, linear answer to why; therefore, the answer should not come in a clean, linear form. It is this marriage between form and content I attempted to achieve in my own work, as I will discuss shortly.

While each of the father memoirs above provided me with examples of what I wanted to do, my piece differs from them in one important way. Bechdel, Walls, and Wickersham attempt to answer the question of their fathers’ true identities and characters in their individual memoirs. They approach their narratives as an investigation of the father figure and they attempt to answer the question, “Who was this man?” The writer’s relationship with her father is at stake as she writes her narrative. While part of my braided essay includes my father, I am not chiefly concerned with his character and our external relationship; rather, I am examining the imagined boundaries I had constructed around my father as a child that were transgressed. In other words, the focus is not on the

untangling of my father's character as good or bad, but on my own futile efforts to redraw new boundaries and establish new definitions of *father*.

### **The Braided Essay Form**

In many genres, writers depend largely on the content of the piece to present their theme; however, in lyric modes of creative nonfiction, the form of the piece works as an equal partner to the content in reaching the theme. Form must inform content, and content must inform form. A braided essay draws together three seemingly disparate topics, or strands, and aligns them under a central question. This allows the writer to explore his or her theme from several entry points rather than confronting it head on. The form also allows for flexibility in chronology, as the essay moves by associative ideas rather than the order of events. Finally, the braided essay breaks traditional linear boundaries—a quality that very obviously relates to my central theme. All of these elements made a braided essay the ideal form for my project.

First, the braided essay offered me a few different approaches into difficult topics. My personal experiences during that period of my life as a teenager and young adult, almost seven years in total, carry painful memories. Even now, I feel so close to the topic that I fear sentimentality. If written as a linear personal essay, I risk creating a sob story of my life or one long emotional outburst. My purpose is not to seek sympathy with my readers but to explore with them the boundaries we try maintain in our lives and the impact those boundaries have. Joan Wickersham expresses the same concern for her emotions getting the best of her in *The Suicide Index* as she writes about her father's

suicide. She chooses the lyric form of an index rather than a linear essay because “a formal biographical essay won’t work. In this case, with this writer, it gets too emotional, too easily out of hand” (159). I wanted to avoid my own emotional writing getting “out of hand” by situating it next to other topics. Both James Holmes and Comic Con are more distant and less emotional subjects for me as a writer; I can offer the reader different levels of emotion, making the essay, and the reader’s experience, dynamic.

A braided essay also allowed me to highlight details and ideas by association that may otherwise be lost in a linear essay. With a period that covered seven years of my life, I remember several significant experiences and details that insist on having space on the page. However, they are not significant in a linear way, nor would they carry as much narrative weight if they were fed to the reader in a chronological story. Robert Root explains in his essay “Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment” that “in the associative links of memory every detail makes sense, makes connections, but on the page the slow linear march of the chronology dissipates all the emphatic force of the narrative” (391). Within my personal strand, I describe a moment between my father and me when I was eight years old at my first soccer game. I also describe a moment between my father and me when I am eighteen years old and see him cry for the first time. These scenes do not appear chronologically in the essay because what each of those moments taught me, and what each one does to contribute to the central theme, does not operate on a linear timeline. The link between them is one of the “associative links of memory,” a gut instinct. Other metaphors that bind the essay together through these associative links include film and theatre, costumes, and, and literal examples of boundaries and lines. A

strictly linear essay would “dissipate,” as Root describes, the development of the essay’s central theme.

Finally, a braided essay in and of itself crosses the traditional boundaries of chronology that we like to try to construct for our lives, reflecting my piece’s theme in the form itself. Using what Madison Smartt Bell calls a modular design (such as a braided essay) will “liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward” (215). Life does not unfold in a clean line of cause and effect, no matter how much we attempt to construct it that way. For every event, there are countless reasons and results each with its own branching webs of reasons and results. The braided essay afforded me the freedom to move across these perceived boundaries of cause and effect, demonstrating to my reader with form that such borders and lines are our own imaginary constructions that can interfere with the truth.

### **Project Reflection**

In the writing and rewriting of this essay, I found myself ending in a different place from what I had predicted at the start. The braided essay is truly an organic form, and much of the work is in letting the material show you where to go. While I began my project with a vague idea of what I wanted to create, I could not force my message onto the writing. The truth at the heart of my piece came through in the minute details that stuck in my mind, the tiny pieces of information that stood out like bits of glitter. I spent most of my initial drafts writing about such details without really knowing why they

mattered; however, it was only in following these lines of thought to their end that I realized the true central message.

After the early exploratory drafts in which I uncovered a few different themes, I broke the essay into its three separate strands. Handling all of the material at once was overwhelming—like swimming in the middle of the ocean. Instead, I swam to shore and created each strand on its own. First, I molded the Comic Con strand into a defined arc with a clear central theme; doing this provided me with a frame through which I could view the other two topics. Next, I packed all of the Holmes information into a working strand as well. However, because I created the two strands separately, their themes, while similar, didn't line up precisely. In order to tie them together, I drafted my personal strand in between the two instead of by itself. In this way, my personal strand worked like the glue of the essay, filling the gaps and binding the disparate pieces together into a unified work. From there, after combining all three strands, it was a matter of aligning the material with the central theme that I've described in this introduction.

If writing a braided essay demands a lot from the writer, then reading a braided essay demands just as much from the reader. Despite my best efforts, my braided essay will never fully answer its own question; it's the nature of the form and the nature of the question I'm asking. There is no clean answer at the end, packaged neatly with a bow on top. It is for the reader to draw his or her own conclusions from the interaction of the three strands. In this sense, the braided essay is a collaborative form—not only collaborative between three disparate topics, but also between the writer and the reader. While I attempt to untangle my answer from the material, the reader attempts to do the



same; we each bring our own experiences and interpretations, so our conclusions may be different. However, if the reader is willing to do this work, then my essay fulfills its goal. For the purpose is not to lead the reader down the same path that I travelled; it is to show that we all land somewhere in between the lines. And in that way, we all end up in the same place.

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## The Slash Between

Thousands of characters, fans, super nerds, and curious bystanders stood in a line, snaking back and forth across the giant convention hall. I couldn't see the entrance through the crowd, only a huge banner hanging from the rafters with *Salt Lake Comic Con 2015* printed across it. I stood in the back half of the line with my friend, Cody.

From the outside of the line, it looked like nothing more than a mass of people crowding toward the entrance gates. Along the cement floor, though, thin strips of blue painter's tape marked out rows and borders through the mess. I tapped the toe of my sneaker on top of the strip of tape keeping me in line. *I could cross this if I wanted to*, I reminded myself, *it's just tape*. But I stayed in my place, watching all of the characters around me stay in their places as well. I found myself scanning the thousands of shoes near the ground, trying to glimpse the small blue line cutting its way through the crowd like a river through a canyon. A whisper of a boundary. I was glad for it.

As I looked around, I realized this might be one of the only places I could go where I felt more conspicuous in a t-shirt and jeans than in a mask and cape. Normally for a convention like this, Cody would have dressed up in a purple suit, white face paint, and dyed-green hair. The Joker was his best cosplay. But because he knew I wasn't going to wear a costume, he came with me this year in plain clothes. I wore a blue t-shirt with Captain America charging into battle on the front. Below him were the words, *Only the Strong Survive*.

I tried to pick out the cosplayers who were dressed as characters I knew. Some Disney characters, a few faces from Nintendo, quite a few Marvel and DC heroes. I thought I would have recognized more, having grown up with Saturday morning cartoons and my brothers' video games. But more and more costumes sprang up that I couldn't name. Again and again, I nudged Cody, pointed at a character, and whispered, "Who's that?" After a while, I stopped trying to remember what he told me. There were too many fantasy worlds to keep track of.

As 10:00 AM crept closer, the crowd's mess of conversations boiled more loudly, more urgently. It felt as if even the air in the room were counting down the seconds. Instead of standing in place, people stepped forward, surging closer to the front. The blue tape boundaries disappeared underneath the shuffling feet as more and more people broke the line order. Finally, a man stepped up on a table at the entrance gate and shouted through a megaphone.

"Welcome to Salt Lake Comic Con!" he said, and the crowd exploded into cheers and applause.

"Are you ready to get started?" he asked. A second explosion, even louder than the first.

Then he stepped down, and I couldn't see him anymore. Everyone stood for a second in slow-motion silence. Waiting. Then the gates opened and order was lost in the bottlenecked surge to get inside the convention. I picked up my backpack from the ground and gripped it hard in front of me. Cody was gone, probably lost somewhere up ahead of me. My feet moved automatically with the push of the crowd. I felt something

stick to the bottom of my shoe, dragging along behind my heel, but I couldn't see what it was through the swarm of legs. As we all poured through the entrance and into the convention hall, I fought to the edge of the crowd to search for Cody. Leaning against an empty space on the wall, I glanced down at my shoe.

A piece of blue tape, torn, twisted, and streaked with shoe prints, hung from my rubber sole.

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In the pixelated photo on the phone screen, my little brother stared wide-eyed and made an *O* with his mouth. I had pasted a cartoon set of glasses and a big nose and mustache over his face. Both of us leaned toward the ground in our stiff wooden chairs to keep our laughter from leaking into the solemn courtroom. We were goofing off during one of the fifteen-minute recesses of our dad's trial, even though, at sixteen and eighteen years old, we knew we were supposed to be serious. But after so many of these court sessions, sitting stiff as boards in our wooden seats, listening to attorneys spit words we didn't understand, it felt good to fill our lungs with quiet laughter. Everything was going to be fine, I thought, because my dad looked like a wall during the hearings—still and strong.

After breathing out the laughter, I walked out of the courtroom to stretch my legs, or maybe to go to the bathroom, I don't remember. But as I pushed open the heavy wooden double doors, I saw my dad. His attorney, my mom, my grandmother, and a few other faces were crowded around him in the corner of the hallway. His hands smothered

his face. His eyes red and wet. His breath heavy and uneven. I almost didn't recognize him.

I felt as if I had stumbled onto a movie set. The director would scream "Cut!" and security would wave me off. The lights would come on, a makeup crew would hustle out of the woodwork, and my dad would ask for more eye drops to finish the scene. He'd pull me in, rub my hair, and laugh about how I ruined a perfectly good take. But as I froze there by the heavy doors, no one shoved me away or told me to leave. I wish they had. Instead, a family friend hurried to my side and whispered, tears lining her eyes, "Kevin committed suicide." Or maybe she said, "Kevin shot himself." Or perhaps a more tender "They just found Kevin at his house. They think he took his own life." I don't remember the delivery, only the message.

Kevin was one of my father's oldest friends. They'd known each other since elementary school, and all of his childhood stories included Kevin as a character. He loved him like a brother. That morning Kevin was set to testify for a second time against my father in what had become a very painful, very public trial. He wilted under the spotlight and started taking depression meds. But that morning, he couldn't take it a day longer. He shot himself.

Those words echoed along with my dad's heaving gasps, and I wanted to walk back into the courtroom I had just left. Back to the stiff wooden seat next to my younger brother. Back to where our laughter sliced through the silence. Back to the place where fathers didn't cry like children and "suicide" wasn't a word I understood. But I knew that walking through those dark doors wouldn't take me back to anywhere I'd ever been. The

room where I had sat just moments before was already gone, fading out like the end of a movie.

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The cover is brown except for the center box where there's space for a name and course subject. *James Holmes* is scrawled across the top line in sloppy cursive, the *J* tilting sideways, the *s* looping larger than the capital letters. Below, on the line for the course name, he's written *of Life*. The two words sit snugly on the thin black line, promising what we might find inside the pages: his life, his mind, tucked neatly in between thin graph lines on notebook paper. We want to peel open the cover, peek inside, staring at the insanity just long enough to see all the answers, then snap it shut again. It's a boundary we can feel. I already know how the notebook ends—I've read it before. Yet I want to believe the small promise sitting on the thin, straight line. Maybe this time, it will make sense.

Right after high school, he had his sights set on studying neuroscience. He attended a summer camp internship at La Jolla's Salk Institute for eight weeks that summer, where he worked on a computer program to plot a person's perception of causality—the idea that every effect has a cause behind it. A video of his final presentation at that summer camp shows him at eighteen years old, six years before it happened. The moderator introduces him to the audience with a short bio: he likes to play soccer, and his dream is to own a slurpee machine one day. He walks to the front. Thin and young in a collared shirt, chuckling softly at his own jokes with the quiet audience. His hair is dark brown and short. His voice is mild and flat, like any other inexperienced

student struggling through a public presentation. As I watch, I realize that I've never heard his voice before. I've seen his face; I've read his writing; but I've never heard the careful rhythm of his voice. It's not unpleasant. If I close my eyes and listen, I can almost imagine how the audience saw him during that ten-minute presentation: quiet, quirky, almost endearing.

After it happened, the newspapers adopted the term "brainiac" to describe him as a student. Boy genius. Bright, promising scientist. Highly intelligent. Such wasted potential. But then, in a breaking story, his mentor from that summer camp in La Jolla was quoted as saying, "His grades were mediocre. I've heard him described as brilliant. This is extremely inaccurate." I read all of these reports and wonder what the truth is, really. He had to be smart to get into the competitive neuroscience program at the University of Colorado; they only accept a few students into their graduate program every year. Yet he struggled in his oral exams at the end of the lab rotations. His classmate asked him if he passed. "Nope...I'm quitting."

The answer, perhaps, lies in between genius and failure. And it's perhaps the answer we would most like to avoid: Average. Like everyone else, and so, like us. The nearness makes us uncomfortable. He cannot be like us. There must be a boundary, like the promise on his notebook cover. He was different, smarter, overly intelligent. We would rather have him standing above us or below us than next to us.

\*\*\*

I stood next to Cody in the far corner of the entrance hall and watched more and more cosplayers pour through the gates. We had wandered away from the masses to get



our bearings and look through the Comic Con program. “Which panel do you want to go to right now?” Cody asked, scanning his finger across the table of times and room numbers for each session.

“I don’t know,” I said. “If there’s one you want, I’ll go with you.”

“Alright then. There’s one in a half hour that I’d like to see. We can head there now I guess.”

We made our way from the corner, through the maze of vendor and artist booths, and out the doors to the main hallway. Cody nudged me left, and we joined the flow of foot traffic going that direction. With so many different costumes, the stream of people looked like a parade with no music and no theme. The terrifying Pyramid Head from *Silent Hill*, with his massive, bloody sword and ominous mask, marched behind Sailor Moon with her short skirt and bright hair. Batman and The Joker passed me from the opposite direction, laughing together. Horror and magic, villainy and heroism—they were all tossed together in this building like a bizarre salad. Nothing blended in, yet everything belonged.

Almost everything.

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My dad shaved every day that I can remember: before church, before coaching a basketball game, before his court appearances. Sometimes if I finished getting ready in the morning before he did, I would sit on the queen bed in my parents’ room and watch him shave through the open bathroom door. He stared into the mirror below bright yellow lights and moved his hand carefully with the razor, stripping away the Barbasol cream

that looked like marshmallow fluff but smelled like soap. When he reached his neck, he would tilt the top of his head, covered in a wave of combed black hair, away from the sink. To get his chin, he'd jut out his lower jaw like a turtle. Finally, while pulling the blade around his mouth, my father would form an *O* with his pink lips, shaving in small strokes as if he were painting a careful portrait.

I liked his routine, his repetitive control over the ever-growing facial hair. I liked watching the white fluff come off in clean lines with new, smooth skin shining underneath. I liked how he looked through the doorway—tall, focused, careful. I liked thinking that a good quality razor and a can of Barbasol cream were enough to keep the world in check.

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He calculates the world in his notebook with a mathematical proof, defining the value of life and death like  $x$  and  $y$ , mystery numbers in a grand problem. On the third page of this proof, he calls violence a false response to life's problems—like multiplying both sides of an equation by zero. It turns falsities into truth.  $0=0$ , he writes, *problem solved*.

*However, mankind hasn't found a better alternative...I have spent my entire life seeking this alternative so that the question of how to live and what to live for may be addressed.*

Then he lists the four alternatives he has tried to use his entire life, explaining below each why that solution didn't work. First, ignore the problem. *Didn't work. Forms of escapism tried included reading, television, and alcohol.* Second, delay the problem.

*Didn't work. Pursued knowledge to increase the capacity for answering the questions with improved cognitive function. Third, pawn the problem. Didn't work. Everyone else didn't know the solution either.*

He writes *the problem* like a defined value, a constant. And he explains why each solution didn't work as if he just chose the wrong numbers. He masks himself in mathematical language, giving the impression of logic, definition. But the words don't add up to meaning. The proof is unsound.

Fourth, love or hate.

Nothing is written below this last alternative. And I wonder if it's because he realizes the futility of pretending to have fit it all into an equation. Perhaps the last one is blank because he simply doesn't know why it didn't work.

Naturally, from the moment it happened, the media started reaching for bits of information hidden among the shreds of his old life, trying to weld them together into an explanation. Did he have friends? Was he loved as a child? One station sent a helicopter to hover over his parents' house with a zoom lens immediately after that night, expecting to find the answers somewhere in between the straight fences of that suburban backyard.

Sometime toward the end of the sentencing hearing, the defense attorney called his parents to testify. In the middle of the father's testimony, the jury watched a slide show of baby pictures and family videos, including a clip of Jimmy boogie-boarding in the easy surf at a Ventura beach. He was probably nine or ten at the time, still small and smiling. His dad stands in the water up to his thighs, reaching around his son to turn him in the right direction for the approaching wave. They're silhouetted in the bright sunlight

of a beach afternoon, and the camera pitches and shakes with the efforts of a young mother trying to capture her boys standing there in the water. The son grips the board as the foam rushes over his legs, and he shouts over the loud fizz of the beach, gleeful and panicked, as his father lets him go. Moments later, he tips over and disappears in the rolling water. The video cuts to the next clip. He's lined up again next to his dad, clutching even tighter to the board, staring straight ahead. The water swells behind him and pushes forward into a gentle breaker. This time, he rides it all the way in, bouncing into shore like a skipped rock. This time, you can hear cheering and laughing bubble up in between the wind and wave noises. This time, he smiles at the camera, proud. He looks just like I did the first time I rode my boogie board into shore at a beach in Ventura.

The attorney asks, after hours of testimony, "Is he still a part of your family?" "Is he still your son?" "Do you still love him?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

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The visiting room of the Ventura County jailhouse looked just like a movie set. Shadowy light dusted the black plastic telephones that clung to the walls of the visitor booths, and a slice of thick glass split the room in half. The silver phone cords hung down like nooses on either side of the transparent wall. My sister and I walked toward an empty booth and squished together on the single stool, each of our outside legs bearing most of the weight. We were visiting our dad there for the first time. As we waited, I noticed an

armed guard in the corner, staring at a spot on the back wall like a nervous actor. I noticed the stale smell of breathing and cement. I noticed the man two booths away whispering through the glass to his son, brother, friend, father. My leg started to get tired.

After a few minutes, I saw my father walk through the doorway on the other side of the glass. Orange jumpsuit. White sneakers. Thick, black numbers over his chest. Under the baggy clothes I could tell he'd thinned out, and his jet-black hair was now peppered with shocks of gray. A silver-striped wiry beard covered half of his face like a mask—I hardly recognized his smile underneath.

He sat down on the opposite side of the glass wall, and we both picked up the phone. My sister and I took turns holding it between our faces so we could both hear the grainy messages from the other side of the bulletproof boundary. His voice sounded tiny and distant, as if he were thousands of miles away from us. We all did our best to keep the conversation going by talking about everything we could remember to mention: the Christmas he would miss in a couple of weeks, my sister's preparations to leave on a church mission to Brazil, my third completed semester of college. As our time dwindled to a few final minutes, I asked him why he had grown a beard.

"No warm water and a razor that's worth about three pennies," he explained. "It's too painful to shave in here, so I'm just letting it grow."

"Are you going to keep it?" I asked.

"No, no. I can't wait to shave as soon as I get back home."

I nodded, wishing I could hand him a better razor through the glass, but I didn't have one. There weren't any openings in the wall anyway—just an unbroken line between us.

\*\*\*

Around lunchtime, Cody and I wandered, dead-footed and empty-stomached, into the noisy food court. Every booth was themed after a different universe or character—Harry Potter pulled pork sandwiches, Chewbacca grilled cheese, the list went on. I grinned at each menu; even the over-priced, lukewarm food somehow fit into the Comic Con world.

We loaded our plates and headed toward the eating area, looking for a seat. I scanned the tables, each one surrounded by a hodgepodge of cosplayers with a few empty spaces sprinkled in between. Suddenly, I felt like a child standing on the edge of the school cafeteria, searching for my place. Cody, noticing my hesitation, pointed to a few spots where we could sit. But for each table he suggested, I found reasons why I couldn't. The group of Batman villains? No, they look like they're having a good time by themselves. Those steampunk characters over there? No, too far away. What about those X-Men? I don't know what I would say to them.

Finally, we settled on the closest table with the fewest cosplayers. Only one girl, dressed as Zero Suit Samus from *Super Smash Bros.*, sat there with two guys dressed in plain clothes. They were chatting quietly and staring at their phones. Carefully, we picked our way through the plastic chairs and grey round tables, balancing the sloppy food on our plates.

“Do you mind if we sit here?” I asked Samus as we approached the table. She wore a vibrant blue body suit and a high ponytail of bright blonde hair that didn’t quite match her skin. A wig. It was a simple costume.

She looked up from her phone and glanced at her friends, who nodded. “Sure, no problem,” she replied, returning to her screen. We sat down on the opposite side from them and started on our lunch.

Cody and I picked at our food in silence while the room around us rumbled with conversation. After a while, when the awkward feeling started to settle over us like smoke, I looked up from my plate and asked about the only conspicuous things at the table. “So why Zero Suit Samus? Why did you pick that costume?”

She perked up in her seat and set her phone on the table. “Well I’ve been wanting to do this cosplay for a while, so this year I finally did. Plus, I’m not super crafty, so I didn’t want to build a whole suit of armor like Samus’s other costumes,” she replied, smiling.

“So are you a big fan of Samus then?”

“Not really,” she shrugged. “I think she’s cool, but I mostly picked the costume because it looks good and it’s super easy. In fact, I didn’t really know much about her until my friend suggested I do this costume.”

“Hmm,” I nodded. Cosplayers, I thought, picked their characters for the chance become the people they wanted to be. But sitting now with a Zero Suit Samus who knew almost nothing about who she was, I felt cheated. Looking around at the rest of the food

hall, I wondered how many of the people chose their characters out of convenience rather than connection—how many were just wearing costumes.

I returned to the half-eaten burrito resting on my plate. With the next bite, a few pieces of rice tumbled off the top. I used a napkin to wipe off my Captain America t-shirt.

\*\*\*

His mother started keeping a prayer journal in January of 2013 until the end of 2014 while the court proceedings marched forward like an exhausted soldier. She published it as a book in early 2015—*When the Focus Shifts*. I sat down to read it later that year in September, only about a month after the final curtain fell on the sentencing hearing. It was the early afternoon, and I was waiting for the barista to shout my name across the mumbling café with my hot chocolate and croissant in her hands. Moments earlier, I had checked out the book at the university library. I held it tight in one hand like a precious, fragile artifact. The flimsy, 100-page paperback whispered promises from its cover like another notebook I had read earlier that year; promises of answers and explanations.

In the stiff, yellow armchair in the corner, I peeled the cover open to start reading. I thumbed through the first couple of pages, each one arranged like a poem in the middle of so much white space. The typeface was clean and clear, and I wondered what her handwriting looked like in the real prayer journal.

Almost thirty pages in, the date is May 24, 2013. She calls the piece, “Followers.” *Who are the followers? Are they lonely, curious, deeply compassionate about mental illness, or just interested in things that cannot be explained?*



I had tracked the case from the very beginning, attempting to piece together every court update and news article into a clean line I could follow. Her words rose off the page and looked me in the eye. *Who are the followers?* Who was I? Lonely, curious, compassionate, or just fascinated by the unexplainable? I had followed from a distance, looking from the outside through the window of a computer screen or a piece of paper.

But her words were staring right back at me now, and I realized I wasn't on the outside. We were insiders together—she and I. Her desperate attempts to box the trauma inside a book, to define someone so close to her in words unfamiliar, mirrored my own. Perhaps that's why I kept reading. I turned page after page, reading each prayer with a swirl of anticipation and relief: Anticipation for the answer; relief that she couldn't find one either.

\*\*\*

My father came home from jail over the holiday break on January 2, early in the morning before any of us had woken up. As I rolled over in bed and opened my eyes, I thought I heard my parents' voices down the hall, bubbling through their open door. Both of their voices. The sound jolted me awake, and I sat up. My father's deep rumble and my mother's joyful jingle, they formed a kind of symphony that I hardly recognized. The house had been silent for so long.

Just outside my room, I heard my two brothers open their door and stagger down the hallway toward the sounds. Their bursting excitement joined the chorus, and I started toward my door. As soon as I opened it, the voices snapped from muffled noises to clear words. *Home. Missed you. So glad. Back.* I padded down the hall a few feet to their

doorway, pausing at the threshold for a moment to watch the scene. My parents lay in bed close together, no space between them. My brothers sat around the edge, facing my father and grinning. If it weren't for the pajamas and messy hair, it would have looked like a posed portrait, framed between the four edges of the doorway.

I stood on the outside, studying the picture for a moment longer. I recognized pieces, but the whole of it felt foreign, new. Like a spot-the-difference game in the back of a kids' magazine. I could see a few: lines on my parent's faces; my father's beard; a guarded look hiding behind the smile in everyone's eyes. As if no one quite trusted the happiness.

My father looked up at me from their bed, breaking the still image, and waved me into the room. I started moving toward him, past the doorway. Then, in a moment, I leapt onto the bed and pulled my brothers toward him, all of us piling on top of our dad like we used to when we were small and he was stronger than all of us.

\*\*\*

On the sixteenth page of the notebook, he asks *Why?* He asks it 175 times over eight pages. At first, he starts small, five to a line, whispering *Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?* like a shy student in the back of classroom. Two pages later, his *Why?* has grown larger, louder, messier, only three or four to a line. *Why? Why? Why?* They pelt me from the page like hail. *Why? Why? Why?* Now he's written two per line—*Why? Why?*—the scrawled letters bursting across the neat graph paper lines. The word begins to lose its meaning in the repetition. *Why? Why?* The letters become nothing more than looping, knotted designs. *Why? Why?*

A final *Why?* rests at the top of the twenty-fourth page with nothing else below. It spans the full width of the page, floating there like a disembodied shout into an empty cave. Below it, the page answers with unflinching white space. It makes me want to hold my breath.

\*\*\*

In third grade, I joined my first soccer team. We called ourselves the Purple Pandas and I wore lucky number three. My parents came to the first game of the season with their lawn chairs and blankets, ready to sit on the sideline and watch all of the eight-year-olds chase the undersized soccer ball around the field like a pack of hounds.

The pack itself was a mess of elbows, arms, and little legs hustling in every direction. I kicked anything that came in front of my foot. Sometime during the confusion of the game, a player pushed me and I fell hard onto the grass and dirt. Green streaks stained my lavender sock and tiny dashes of blood burned on my knee. I rolled into a sitting position and clutched my leg to my chest, the sobs already shaking my small body. Tears blurred the players, grass, and sky into a swirl of colors, and I howled.

The referee, probably someone's dad, blew the shrill whistle, and the hive of kids reluctantly stopped kicking the ball into each other's shins. My coach walked out to centerfield, helped me up, and escorted me outside the field boundaries to my parents. The game continued.

After a few minutes, I settled on my mom's lap, sniffing away the leftover tears. The shock of getting hurt had worn off, and the burning had faded. From my perch, I watched the swarm of colored jerseys whirl around the field like a top. My feet itched to

kick and run with everyone else, and a new ache formed in my chest. The white, spray paint sideline looked like a wall. Wiping my nose on my sleeve, I leaned toward my dad in the lawn chair next to me and asked him to tell my coach that I was ready to play once more.

But he looked back at me and shook his head. “No, you can’t go back in yet. You have to wait for the coach to put you back in. That’s how the game works. If you want to keep playing, then get up when you’re hurt and don’t cry. You’ve got to learn to suck it up.”

The ache spread to my throat, and I felt a new burning in my eyes. Silent, I turned to face the whirligig game once more. Through my watery view, the smug sideline seemed to tremble and slide. But I didn’t let the tears fall this time—I wanted to go back in.

\*\*\*

One of the evidence photos of the theater after it happened shows popcorn scattered across the dark floor; some of the pieces are stained dark brown with dry blood. It was probably Orville Redenbacher’s, grown more than six months before in Omaha, Nebraska over 500 miles away. The kernels probably came from acres of outstretched stalks reaching for sun, roots reaching for water, shuck hands nursing strands of hopeful DNA into golden hulls. Combines would have stripped the yellow seeds from the hairy cobs, air pumps drying them into armor-hard kernels with fourteen percent moisture content. Enough to make the leap later on. Each kernel probably tumbled its way through four screening processes to make it to that theater: the sifter to brush away shattered

seeds; the vacuum pipe to pull out pieces too small or too large; the gravity table to shake off those that didn't make weight; finally, the electronic eye to watch each kernel fly by and shoot down the last of the deformed or defective with an air cannon. The flakes in the photo, then, passed every test—the ideal size, weight, and shape.

Probably just a few hours before midnight the night it happened, a young theater employee opened a bag with those perfect Orville Redenbacher kernels and scooped them into the silver, oily popper. I imagine a young man in a polo, with mousy brown hair and a shy smile. Once the kernels started cooking, he probably closed the lid and turned to the swirling red and blue slurpee machine to make drinks for faces he wouldn't remember.

A few miles from the theater, another young man, who used to dream of owning a slurpee machine one day, loaded a Remington 870, a Glock 40, and an AR-15 into his small white car.

Inside the popcorn maker, the oil would have started to smoke and lick the sides of each yellow kernel; inside the kernels, hard starch would have sweated steam and softened into a gel. Hulls harden into crystalized walls. Hold the steam. Raise the heat. Build the pressure. *Why? Why? Why?* Starch and steam surged against their armor. Each golden kernel became a cage.

At 356° F, almost 200 degrees hotter than the point at which humans can burn skin faster than they can feel it, the first of the mass of popcorn kernels would have split with the pressure. And everything probably happened in a sliver of a moment. The steam disappeared into a cloud. The gelled starch, desperate to escape itself, froze into a cloud

of movement. And the brand new popcorn flake, caged only a moment before, leapt up in the blast toward the silver lid, trying to tap the sky.

Despite all the drying and sifting and shaking and shooting in the months before, there would be “old maids” in every batch—those kernels that crouch beneath the flurry of transforming flakes and burn black in the spitting oil. Their hulls look, weigh, and feel correct; their moisture content is close to fourteen percent. But their hopeful DNA, cradled before in a corn plant, built a few shells that wouldn’t hold up. Chinks in golden armors. Just large enough for the metamorphic steam to leak out in a slow, defeated whimper.

The theater employee would have turned again toward the rumbling popper as soon as the tiny explosions started to wane, the clamoring taps to slow. Then he would have dumped the steaming flakes and blackened duds into a foamy mountain below. Later, just a few minutes before midnight that night, he scooped them into a red and white striped bag, handed them over the counter to hands that may have lived to eat only the fluffy, buttery flakes at the top before dropping the rest on the ground.

On the other side of the building, another young man had just faked a phone call to slip out the back exit of the theater, sliding a green, rubber stop underneath the door before it latched. Next to his white car, he strapped on thick, black body armor to protect himself, no more questions pounding in his mind.

On that night, those flakes and kernels spilled across the floor eighteen minutes into the movie when gunshots exploded faster than anyone could feel. Scrambling steps and bloodied bodies crushed the butterfly flakes into muddy piles on the ground, where

no young theater employee would sweep them up. And the old maids sat still in the hot blood, while everyone else wondered why.

\*\*\*

On the page in my high school journal dated February 1, 2009—I would have been sixteen years old—I see the beginning. *The investigators have decided to press charges against Dad.* The investigators. I didn't know names, faces, departments. I didn't know who to blame for the food stamps my mom pulled out in the checkout line of the grocery store, the comments at the end of the online articles about my dad that my parents told me to ignore even as I swallowed hot, angry tears, or the strange sense of helplessness that hung darkly in my house like a storm cloud. But I knew there had to be someone to blame—I needed there to be a villain in the story. So I wrote *the investigators* in my journal like dark characters plotting in dark rooms. Fitting them into two words, between two lines on notebook paper, felt like control to me.

*This means that at any time, Dad can be arrested. Luckily, they agreed to allow Dad to turn himself in, so they will call to let him know when they want him.* I use my parents' word there—*luckily*. We're lucky, they told me. Lucky that police wouldn't show up to our house unannounced to drag my dad away in handcuffs and whatever clothes he happened to be wearing at the time. Lucky that we could line up to hug him the morning before he left, that my mom could drive him to the station to turn himself in.

*We will have to bail him out with money we can't really spare and then he will have to go before a judge. None of us really thought it would come to this, and all of us*

*are scared and worried. We do not know what will happen, or how we are going to afford any of it.*

I notice the pronouns. *We, us.* Not *I* or *me*. I place myself inside the group, moving where I'm pushed—I'd rather be stumbling toward the dark, growling unknown together than watching from the outside. Then I shift to *you*:

*But I think that the times that seem the worst, when you want to quit so badly, are the times it's most important to stick to it. You never know how close you are to the end.* I imagine myself repeating the idea in my mind—*how close you are to the end.* The phrase gave me a finish line, a goal; it turned the problem into a competition where if I just sucked it up, if I just stayed in the game, I could win. The pep talk was thin and rehearsed, lines I'd memorized from hearing my parents repeat them like a mantra. We all practiced so many times that they started to sound true. When I wrote that in my journal, I only half-believed it. *How close you are to the end.* You also never know, I realize now, how close you are to the beginning.

\*\*\*

He's nearing the end of the notebook now; there are only a few pages left of his writing. He chooses the location for the shooting—a movie theater. A benign center for entertainment. There are no political agendas and no violent histories there that might stain his violence with reason. A message. On this point, he is clear: *The message is there is no message.*

For four pages, he cases the Aurora Century 16, analyzing each screening room. He sketches boxes and circles doors, scribbles notes and draws arrows. Exits, parking



spots, audience size. I imagine the whole night played out in his head over and over until it looked the way he wanted it to.

The careful plans and lists devolve into a stream-of-conscious river on the page. *No more fear, no more fear of failure. Fear of failure drove determination to improve, better and succeed in life. No fear of consequences...No more fear, hatred unchecked...I was fear incarnate. Love gone, motivation directed to hate...No consequences, no fear, alone, isolated, no work for distractions, no reason to seek self-actualization. Embraced the hatred, a dark k/night rises.* He places himself in the thin slash between two words: *knight* and *night*. Hovering the fragile boundary between light and dark.

On the night it happened, I sat in a theater 500 miles away in Ogden, Utah, between my two brothers. It was summertime. I was nineteen. We all grew up watching Batman on Saturday mornings, and we wouldn't miss the midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* for the world.

Commercials for the snack bar, movie trivia questions, and "exclusive" Hollywood interviews played across the massive screen as background noise to the buzz of half-whispered conversations. We had taken our seats near the top row. The chairs were black and squashy with pull-down cup holders fit only for giant sodas. On either side of the screen, rich, red curtains burned in the lamplight.

I checked my phone compulsively, willing the clock to go faster. Four minutes until midnight. Twenty-two minutes before it happened. Twelve people making their last memories. Popcorn popping in machines across the country, and old maids falling into the bottom of red-and-white striped bags. From my purse I pulled bags of gummy worms,

peanut butter M&Ms, and Mike & Ike's that we'd smuggled in. "Open them now so we don't make noise later," I whispered to my brothers. I didn't want to miss a second of the movie.

Finally, the lights dimmed to low embers, the screen cut black, and a satisfying shadow filled the theater. My eyes felt smothered for a moment in the new darkness, then shocked by the bright green screen before the first preview. Suddenly pulled from their conversations and glued to the screen, the audience started a scattered applause. We all tried to contain the excitement, but it came bursting out of us one by one.

For the next two hours and forty-five minutes, I lived in Gotham City, watching Batman struggle, fail, then return triumphantly to save us all from a nuclear bomb by flying it over the ocean; he fakes his own death, gets the girl, and lives a happy life from that time forward. Everything works out perfectly. With the closing credits, all of us in the audience exploded with cheers, whistles, and sharp clapping. The sound filled the theater like smoke that none of us minded choking on. Pure. Genuine.

Afterward, we drove back to my apartment, gushing over every incredible moment. We got to bed at 4 a.m.; I didn't see the news until the next morning. So for that night, at least, I believed that Batman had saved the day once again.

\*\*\*

Cody and I started toward the exit at the far end of convention center, through the rest of the hundreds of vendor booths. We moved in single file, sliding our feet forward one inch at a time through the ocean crowds. On either side, people stopped mid-stride to look at the artwork, posters, and t-shirts draped across the tables. I did my best to keep

moving forward—after a full day of skirting between costumes and weaving through lines, my feet were whining at me to sit down.

We shoved around the corner of one row of booths where the crowd thinned out and we could walk faster. Up ahead, I could see the giant Exit banner hanging from the roof, and I started toward it like a desperate swimmer to shore.

“Tori! Cody!” a voice chimed over the crowd’s white noise.

I peeled my eyes away from the exit and looked around. A girl in loose pink pants and a pink crop top, with a long braided ponytail, came skipping toward us from behind a table along the sidewall. “What are you guys doing here?” she asked with a huge smile.

Her face, smiling expectantly, looked familiar to me; I recognized her from school, but I couldn’t remember her name. Cody, who knew her better than I did, jumped into conversation. “Your costume is so awesome!” he said.

I nodded with a weak smile, trying to remember her name and recognize her character.

“Uh...who are you?” I asked, embarrassed.

“I’m Ty Lee from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*? Didn’t you ever watch that show?” she replied.

Cody looked at me with wide eyes. “You’ve never seen that show?”

Suddenly I remembered school-day afternoons with my little brother, watching the cartoon. The character with the pink outfit jumped into my mind: an acrobatic fighter who smiled and laughed her way through every battle. I nodded and smiled. “Oh wait yeah! I remember her now! I haven’t watched that show since I was a kid.”

She laughed. “Yeah she’s great, huh? I just love making things come to life. Bringing a fictional story into the real world. The look on people’s faces when you *become* that character...it’s amazing. It’s the best when they ask you to do things the character would do.”

“What have people asked you to do like Ty Lee?” I asked.

“Well, I picked Ty Lee because I feel like I can relate to her, and I can do some of the acrobatic things that she can. So whenever someone recognizes me, I’ll walk on my hands for them.”

She then leaned forward and kicked her legs into a handstand. After a moment of balance, she moved a few feet away from us, “stepping” from one hand to the other, her feet pointed up in a straight line. A few people nearby stopped to watch, pointing and smiling. *That’s Ty Lee.*

\*\*\*

He leaves us on the last page with the reason he promised in the beginning. It’s large and underlined, like an announcement. Reason. Two sentences fall beneath it, the second traced over several times so it’s bolded. I imagine him writing the letters again and again, engraving the words into his mind as much as onto the paper.

Reason

*The reason why life shouldn’t exist is as arbitrary as the reason why it shouldn’t.*

***Life shouldn’t exist.***

On August 7, 2015, Judge Carlos Samour held the future of James Holmes's life on a few sheets of paper. The sentencing took eleven minutes to read, and everyone in the courtroom stood straight and stared fixedly as if they were watching a movie.

"We the jury," Samour read, "do not have a unanimous sentencing verdict on this count, and we, as a jury, understand that as a result, the court will impose a sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole on this count."

The vote, one of the jurors confessed later, was nine to three. Nine for death, three for life. She spoke to a journalist on the condition of complete anonymity. "I don't think any one of us three would ever tell you that he deserved life...It's just that the other option wasn't an option. It was one or the other," she explained. "You didn't get anything in the middle."

There are just blank pages left at the end before the final brown cover. I've read it through now many times, hoping as I scan each page again, that the answer will float up between the words. *Why? Why? Why?* I no longer know who's asking, and the answer, he points out, is arbitrary. *The message is there is no message.* Boundless white space. Like static on a radio when the broadcast ends.

The juror continued, speaking as one of the three for life. "It may not be the answer you'd like to get, but it was the correct answer to get. It may not be the answer you'd like to give, but it was the correct answer to give."

\*\*\*

On the following Monday after Comic Con, I caught the bus up to Utah State's campus in the late afternoon. There were only about ten students on board, and we all

stared at everything except each other for the five-minute ride. As we crested the hill and pulled into the drop-off zone near the student center, I noticed a girl in loose pink pants and a crop top, with a long braided ponytail, lying in the dry grass next to the sidewalk. Ty Lee from Comic Con was lounging up against her backpack in full costume, reading a textbook. Students with heavy backpacks shuffled past, glancing sideways at her but never stopping to admire her costume. Here on the campus lawn, she wasn't Ty Lee—she was a girl in strange clothes.

As I walked off the bus with my bag draped across my back, I studied her. The image of her strong arms stepping through the middle of the crowd with her toes pointed at the sky leapt to my mind. Against the dull gray-green of the grass, her pink costume stood out brightly. She didn't blend in, but she fit in the scene—like a dandelion forcing its way up through a crack in the cement. She was too absorbed in her book to notice me walk by this time, and I didn't try to get her attention. I didn't want to break the spell and learn her real name. I just wanted to remember Ty Lee with a textbook.

\*\*\*

A few hours after my father came home from jail, he walked into the bathroom to shave, just like he'd told me he would. By then the bank had foreclosed on our home with the bathroom where I used to watch my father make faces in the yellow light. We were living in my grandparents' old house with a single bathroom off the creaky hallway. From the living room I heard the buzz of the electric razor he'd gotten a few years back; I walked down the hall and paused at the bathroom to look inside. He faced the mirror, without shaving cream or gelled hair, and moved the razor under his chin in smooth,

Careful lines. Dull, gray curls littered the sink with each slow stroke. While he stripped the time from his face, I waited to see the clean, smooth skin shining underneath I remembered from when I was a kid.

But at the end, as he wiped up the carpets of hair, rinsed his skin, and patted his face with a clean towel, I didn't find what I was waiting for. The smooth skin had turned pale and limp, like a shirt that's been washed too many times; his normally full cheeks slacked around his jaw. For the first time in my life, he looked old. And even though the shadowy hair was gone, and he was back in our house shaving over the bathroom sink, the scene didn't feel familiar.

Months later, his face tanned and filled out. When I visited in the summer, he looked almost the same as before. We laughed together and ate dinner as a family; he called me "kiddo" like he always did. But when I studied his face, I remembered his beard. How foreign his face looked through the glass wall in the jail. My father/inmate. He was both, yet neither one completely. Somewhere in between. He fell, as we all do, in the thin slash between words.

## Notes

- 4 *The cover is brown*: All of James Holmes's quoted writing in this piece comes from the notebook that he mailed to Dr. Lynne Fenton, his psychiatrist, a few days before July 20, 2012. It remained confidential during most of the trial because of severe gag orders from the judge, and many people viewed it as the key to the case, the Rosetta Stone of Holmes's mind. It was released to the public on May 27, 2015 and can be read in PDF format on the Denver Post website, <http://extras.denverpost.com/trial/docs.html>.
- 5 *A video of his final presentation*: The recording of his presentation at the Salk Institute was leaked to YouTube through an unidentified source, despite the Institute's best efforts to keep it confidential. The full presentation can be viewed at the link, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEPAip5vT4Q>
- 5 *in a breaking story... "This is extremely inaccurate"*: Sam Quinones, "Accused Movie Shooter Called a Mediocre Student Intern," *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, July 22, 2012. In this same article, Jacobsen, the "mentor," insists that to call him a mentor to Holmes is misleading and even slanderous.
- 5 *"Nope...I'm quitting"*: People's Exhibit #1046 in the trial, a chain of text messages between James Holmes and Hillary Allen, a classmate. The full chain can be viewed on the Denver Post website, <http://extras.denverpost.com/trial/docs.html>.
- 8 *the father's testimony*: The entirety of Holme's trial is available on YouTube from the 7 News Denver Channel. It was broadcast live online during the court proceedings because of the overwhelming demand for public access to the trial.
- 12 *keeping a prayer journal*: Arlene Holmes published her prayer journal near the end of the trial. Many questioned her motives, suggesting the book was a publicity stunt to sway the community in favor of a life sentence for Holmes. However, she insisted that it was an effort to spread awareness about mental illness and the "immorality of the death penalty." According to the foreword, she donated all proceeds from the book to "medical and mental health services."



- 16 *One of the evidence photos:* Dave Perry, "New Photos Show Aurora Theater Shooter's Explosive Booby Traps, Ravaged Cinema," Aurora Sentinel, September 11, 2015. The Araphoe County District Attorney's Office released these evidence photos to the public in September 2015, a couple of months after the end of the trial.
- 24 *one of the jurors confessed later:* Jordan Steffen, "Aurora Theater Shooting Juror Breaks Silence, Says 3 Voted for Life," The Denver Post, October 2, 2015.