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Specter Of Silence

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SPECTER OF SILENCE

I folded into the bleachers, trying to dissolve into a mirage of popcorn-chomping children and beaming parents. I wore a crumpled red knit polo, my uniform at Video Galley, where I worked part-time. Small town. People talk. *The president of the school board has a schizophrenic son.* The bleachers were alive with chatter, everyone discussing me, I assumed, the ungrateful son who barely made it one semester in college after his well-to-do parents paid his expensive tuition to a fancy out-of-state university. He left, came back crazy. Heard he got the shit kicked out of him, got arrested, asked a policeman to shoot him. They locked him up and sent him back.

One year ago, I was on the football field. I wore a long gown of shiny royal blue. Mom said it matched my eyes. My friends and I stole each other's mortarboards and flung them through the air like Frisbees. We sat in neat rows of metal folding chairs under a blue sky on a sunny Minnesota day. Though we didn't know why it was a tradition, we inflated beach balls and flung them into the air.

My father, then the vice president of the school board, rigged the ceremony so that he would disperse the last half of the alphabet. Earlier in the day, I told him, "If you hug me or make a scene, I will kill you."

"I'm proud of you," he said, eyes puffy, as I shuffled by.

The next twelve months removed whatever promise I once possessed. I gained sixty pounds and a diagnosis, lost my freedom. The psychiatrist told my parents that a "college environment" wasn't healthy. I moved my stuff into the basement.

When my mom's friends climbed down the aluminum steps to say hello before the ceremony, I saw sympathy in their eyes. I was pitied. I lowered my head, shielded my face with the midnight-blue brim of my baseball cap. They said it was a beautiful day for a graduation and reminisced about the little girls coming over for sleepovers, watching *The Little Mermaid* and playing Pretty, Pretty Princess. Before saying good-bye, the parent would nod in my direction and say, "Hello, Thor, it's good to see you," as if confirming that they still recognized me behind the bloated skin mask I wore for a face.

I spotted my ex immediately, strolling down the hill in her gown. Inside of me there was a swift collapse, as if I were on a plane that had been shot

out of the sky. Zoe spotted her new boyfriend near the fence and broke from the procession of marching seniors, jogging in high heels, clutching her mortarboard, flashing him a lover's smile under blond bangs. At that moment I understood why people say *You may want to sit down*. She pecked him on the lips, struck a pose I recalled too well—bit lower lip, hands on hips, head cocked right. I should have looked away, looked at the baseball field in the distance, looked at the crying baby behind me, looked *anywhere*. But I'm the type of person that never looks away. She went to him once more, clutching his neck, pulling him to her mouth, kissed him as if a crazed mob were ripping them apart. This is why you're given three digits for emergencies: when the doorknob shakes and the window shatters, you won't remember shit.

My father, now the school board president, stepped to the podium to start the ceremony.

"Good evening, and welcome to the Brainerd High School Class of 2004 and your supporting cast of family and friends," he said.

Beach balls soared through the air.

"It seems like yesterday that I was sitting where you are...well, 1975 to be exact," Dad said. "I still remember the thoughts going through my head: blah, blah, old man, just get on with it and let the celebration begin! See, we're no different after all."

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The crowd politely laughed.

"Graduates," Dad said, "I hope you feel the flood of love coming from your families and friends tonight..."

I stared at the pile of blond hair collected on Zoe's shoulders, the air thick enough to bite and chew. Behind the sunglasses she gave me for my eighteenth birthday, I cried. She looked back, smiling, and for the briefest of moments, as though we were together again, I thought that it might be for me. But she was looking at Nate, who waved, which made her smile more.

My hands shook and I pinned them between my knees. Closed my eyes, shivered. I had spent most of my life in Minnesota and never been so cold. All I wanted was to go home and sit in a warm bath, fall asleep for a few hours, escape the racing thoughts of all I'd lost—Zoe at Christmas dinner talking to my younger brother; Zoe at my sister's figure skating competition in St. Cloud, throwing her mittened hands in the air when Quinn wasn't announced as winner; Zoe buying a Minnesota Twins jersey in the kids' section at Target and wearing it with me to the Metrodome, where she feigned

interest as I tried to teach her about defensive alignment, pitch selection, and correct bullpen usage.

Quinn, my baby sister, was introduced, president of the student body. She walked to the podium, shoulders back, eyes on the stage.

“Isn’t it perfect that we are gathered here on the football field tonight to celebrate our graduation together as the class of 2004?” she said. “After all, this is where it all began for us, on this very field. It was way back in 1992, and we met here together for Kinderfriend Day. I was thrilled Baxter School got to wear one of my favorite colors at the time, a snappy teal green. Just like tonight, our moms and dads were in the bleachers blinking back tears.”

I swallowed acid, remembering Zoe in that short skirt asking for a putting lesson so that I would wrap my arms around her waist. If I couldn’t slow my pulse, I might vomit on that child sitting in front of me wearing a Kirby Puckett jersey.

“I’m talking about changing yourself from the inside out,” Quinn said. “Would you like to be a better listener or a better talker, more self-confident, kinder, or more disciplined? What are the parts of you that you would like to leave behind when you graduate tonight? Maybe a bad temper or dishonesty or a terrible tendency to talk about people behind their backs? We have the power to change.”

I squeezed the bleachers, inhaled mouthfuls of air the consistency of foam. The future was a terrible weight, an insufferable force.

“Let’s leave this place tonight, determined to be our best,” Quinn said. “Not the brightest or most beautiful, but the best. You deserve nothing less. May God bless each member of the Class of 2004.”

I bolted down the bleachers as soon as the mortarboards flew, sweat forming an adhesive between my skin and uniform as I sprinted through the parking lot. I punched the dashboard, slapped the driver’s-side window with the back of my left hand, spiked the Oakleys to the floor, peeled out of the parking lot. Crossing the Mississippi Bridge, I almost jerked the steering wheel, veering off the road, jumping the curb, crashing through the metal railing, and free-falling to the river below. I’d panic for just a second as the car sunk, water seeping into the cabin. I’d try the door handle. When it wouldn’t open, I’d punch the window a few times. And then a calm would come over me as the water reached my chin and the car settled on silt. *Last swim in the Mississippi*, I’d think as my head went under.

I sobbed all the way home. Considered the medicine cabinet full of pills, the steak knives glinting from the block, the neighbor's gun. But my family would be home soon to celebrate Quinn with cake and presents.

I went to my bedroom and gambled recklessly at Party Poker. I cleared the last several hundred dollars from my online account. The money was better off with *HoldEmJoe*, *Poker_Prodigy_42*, and *CaliCardChick*, I thought. *Good-bye guys*, I typed into the chat box. First time in my life I had been a magnanimous loser. I'd more or less gifted the cash to them, but I wanted to believe I'd finally learned to be a good sport. It was a pleasant thought. I wouldn't die a sore loser.

It was past midnight and everyone was asleep. Out of whiskey, I sat alone, thinking about my psychiatrist's office and the thousands of dollars spent there bitching about my life. I thought about the handful of pills I gulped down every morning, each prescription costing hundreds of dollars per month. The price of depression was astounding. What right did I have to feel anguish, with such genuine misery in the world? All those malnourished kids, and you're driven to suicide living in a six-figure home. You're a weak thinker. It's chemical, I reminded myself. I didn't choose to be schizophrenic. It was as far outside my control as skin color or height.

As suicide moved from the comfortable space of fantasy to the terrifying domain of reality, all I wanted was to talk to my mom one last time. I opened my parents' bedroom door, paused for a second as my eyes adjusted to darkness.

"Mom?" I whispered.

"What is it?" she said, tired and alarmed.

"Can we talk?"

It wasn't an unusual request. My pain spiked when the sun set. Only under the cloak of darkness would I confide. We assumed our customary spots in the living room. Mom, wearing pink pajamas, sat on the small couch facing the window overlooking the lake. I sat on the large couch facing the fireplace. Positioned at a right angle, we could make eye contact or not.

"Don't leave right before the miracle," Mom said. "God will rescue you."

I longed for her to give me some tangible advice, something to latch onto. Not Bible drab. Sometimes I put up that wall immediately—"I don't want to talk about God, Mom, I want to talk about how my life fucking sucks"—but tonight I would let her talk. She deserved that. I wouldn't have her looking

back on our last conversation and remembering me as an asshole. I'd been that enough. Tonight I would listen and nod.

Mom often said that God's promises were the only thing that provided her hope. She knew I would pull through because God was benevolent and would listen to her prayers. He would save me through her faith. She wrote down scriptures on note cards and carried them in her purse. She taped them to the dashboard. During those months, she never wanted to be far from her favorite verses.

"Let me read you a verse we read in Bible study this week," she said. The book was on the kitchen counter. Her desired page was bookmarked and highlighted. "We were under great peril, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life. Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On this we have set our hope that He would continue to deliver us."

80 We were so wildly divergent on our opinions of God at the time—while today, 2 Cor. 1:8–10 is tattooed on my left arm—that I regarded her as having been brainwashed by a cult. She was a robot preset to espouse biblical nonsense, dispense hope. Her God was a merciless tyrant, a heartless terrorist. At best, He was a deadbeat, a runaway father, abandoning His children when they were most in need.

Several long months later, a new psychiatrist would finally expunge my schizophrenia diagnosis. We expect apologies when a friend forgets to hold a door open. You don't get an apology after a misdiagnosis. Simultaneously there are too many people to blame and no one to blame. You come to understand that you deserve as much responsibility as anyone. But that comprehension doesn't happen until after you can grow a beard, after you consider marriage and babies, after you've experienced loss. When you've been told you are schizophrenic, required by law to swallow handfuls of pills each week, you don't blame yourself. You accept the diagnosis. You blame the pastor who compares you to Job. You blame the friends who don't return your calls. You blame your parents for their genetics, the shitty spin of DNA roulette that stopped your ball on mental illness. You blame them for having you. You blame God for turning His back. Mostly you do that. Easier to direct anger at faith. God couldn't respond when I told Him we'd never speak again. Couldn't respond when I told Him that He was a fucking asshole. Similar to punching a pillow.

“I’m so beyond relying on myself or anyone else,” Mom said. “I can’t see a way out of this but trusting God with you.”

I told my mom goodnight, but not good-bye. She told me later through tears that this hurt her deeply. I walked down the stairs, leaving her to turn out the lights.

As I waited for Mom to fall asleep, it occurred to me that our conversation was inherently cruel, that someday she’d look back on it with great regret that she hadn’t seen the telltale signs. She would think she could have saved me. What she wouldn’t understand was that nothing could have dissuaded me. It was time to go. Sometimes you just know. I hastily wrote a suicide note on my laptop. Didn’t do it because I had anything special to say. Wrote it because that’s what people who commit suicide do. Can’t kill yourself without writing. Perhaps that idea set the course for the rest of my life.

My note began and ended with “I’m sorry.” It told my family they shouldn’t blame themselves, that there was nothing they could have done to help me. It told them I loved them very much. It told them I was going to a better place. It was banal, second-hand tripe that didn’t sound like me at all. A shit-stain of a final message, a final fuck you. Couldn’t even muster an ounce of emotional resonance in your own suicide note. Wouldn’t even picture your brother’s face until that last *I’m sorry*. You erased Will, focused on those two words, in all their hollowness, and convinced yourself that he would understand someday. You refused to picture the rest of Will’s life, the misery and shame a twelve-year-old would suffer after his older brother’s suicide.

I swallowed thirty trazodone pills, ten times the maximum recommended dose, enough to induce deep sleep but not vomit. Suicide requires movement, and depression weighs more than a semi. You need a spark of mania to initiate the plan, handcuffs for the nerves. I counted fifteen pills, wiped them off the counter into my hand, tossed them into my mouth. The first time around, the pills clotted in my throat as I tried to wash them down with water. I clamped a hand over my mouth to secure them as I gagged, swallowing furiously. I chewed the next fifteen into a foul-tasting paste.

Trazodone increases serotonin in the brain, a natural substance that is supposed to maintain mental balance. Developed in Italy in the 1960s, trazodone was first sold as an antidepressant and then as an antipsychotic. Later, ostensibly when more effective antidepressants were developed, psychiatrists began prescribing trazodone as an off-label sleep aid. The medication’s “potent α_1 -adrenergic blockade” causes sedation, which, along with “5-HT_{2A}

antagonism,” can produce a hypnotic state. I would know. My father is a pharmacist.

I stepped into the garage, where the air was chilled and stale. Mom’s SUV took on a pinkish hue from the tiny red light of the garage door opener. I packed rags into the exhaust pipe. I peeled off a strip of duct tape, the ripping sound shattering silence. I used the entire roll to seal the rags. The silver Mazda Tribute roared to life inside the lonely garage. I killed the vehicle’s lights and put my hand over the exhaust pipe. The seal held.

I curled into a ball in the backseat, pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. I blinked for the last time and tried to remember my life: baseball-themed eighth birthday party, Dad being dragged across the sand in Florida as his parasailing adventure went awry, Macy’s Day Parade in New York when I was in seven, Snoopy crashing into that huge building as I held onto Dad’s leg, certain the building would topple, Mom making T-shaped pancakes the first day of every school year, my job emceeding the beauty pageants Quinn and our cousins put on for the adults every summer, walking on the grass of Fenway Park with Dad, watching Will, as a four-year-old, run off our tour boat in San Antonio because he couldn’t hold it any longer, peeing in the bushes beside the River Walk. The faintest hint of a grin tickled the left side of my mouth. I’d lived a full life, I decided. I’d lived.

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Suicide was a decision I’d made for myself, and I found it hard not to respect that. Once you lose all autonomy, even the option to commit suicide represents freedom. I knew perfectly well that it didn’t much matter whether you died at nineteen or eighty, since either way everyone else will go on living for thousands of years. What used to disturb me was the idea that I had fifty years of life still to come.

As I ruminated about my life, a prickly, plummeting sensation flooded my torso, as though I were being pumped with laughing gas. A shadow washed over me, but the garage was pitch black. The cabin lost air. Woozy from the pills, I tried to convince myself that I was having a schizophrenic episode. But I knew that it wasn’t a hallucination the same way you know whether a loved one is being truthful with you—it’s a conviction that washes over the mind, stains the bones, settles in the heart. There was a hollowing sensation in my chest, as though I were being gutted by an ice cream scoop, a warmth through my torso and legs like I was pissing myself, the feeling of being watched so acute that I wanted to melt into the leather seat, disappear. An updraft of static surged across my body. My face, and my face only, went cool,

chilled to the touch, as though I'd ducked my head into the freezer to cool off after playing a long game of basketball. There was something there. There was something there.

The shadow outside the window wasn't in the shape of a man. It possessed no physical characteristics of a human. It was just there. It was just there, tall—obstructing the garage box's tiny red light—and thick. It had a mass about it, without the menacing red eyes you see in your dreams. In health class junior year, the teacher told us that having a heart attack felt like someone standing on your chest, pulling up on your arms, crushing air out of your lungs. I felt like I was having a heart attack.

I yanked the strings of my hoodie until there was only a small opening to breathe through. That's where my memory ends.

“Thor! Thor!”

A hand shook my leg.

“THOR WAKE UP!”

Swam upward, ripped at water.

“THOR!”

Every muscle screamed. Quinn was in the front seat shutting off the car when it hit me: I had become an “attempt” instead of a statistic. I had failed. I looked out the back window. The garage was open; it was dark. The vehicle's clock read 5:16. Quinn had just returned from Grad Blast. I kicked pudding from my legs and staggered up. Calves asleep, I wobbled forward as nerves sputtered to life.

Dad saw them when he left for work, three oil-soaked rags lying next to a ball of duct tape behind the Tribute. Nearby was a cardboard circle, the spool. Sometime during the night, the tape broke. The rags dislodged.

“It is only by the grace of God that Thor is alive now,” the psychiatrist wrote after an emergency session with my parents and me that afternoon. “The parents' inaction with the suicide attempt in not taking him to the hospital could have been deadly. I have explained to the parents that if Thor attempts to harm himself again and they do not take him for emergency medical treatment, I will be forced to contact the County for a violation of the Vulnerable Adult Act.”

Luckily there was no time to discuss the attempt further. Quinn's graduation party with all her friends was that night. I mixed Jack-and-Cokes for myself and lured Will downstairs with an *NBA Live* challenge—*You can be the*

West All-Stars, and I'll be any team you want. He gleefully ran up the score, alley-ooop after alley-ooop to Kevin Garnett, our favorite player. No idea how close he'd come to not having a brother. I kissed him on the head after the game and he walked upstairs. Then it was just me and a screen asking if I wanted to restart.

You've either had a supernatural experience and believe, or you haven't and won't. No room for nuance. It's the reason I don't talk about it. I'd hear, "You thought you felt a spirit and that's the important thing" or, "Considering the circumstances, it's entirely normal to be overcome with emotions like that." I could confide it in a co-worker, who might say, "I see ghosts all the time—we're lucky." And then I would question her sanity. If I got drunk at a party and let it slip, I might hear, "I wish I'd seen one." But you don't want that. Don't ever hope for it. Didn't blame the researcher who told me, "All the people I've ever interviewed who survived an attempt have a story similar to yours. I don't know if it's the lack of oxygen or the pills or the endorphins." Instead of telling him that the duct tape was found snarled into a neat ball on the garage floor the next morning, as if eleven-year-old Thor had winked at me by bunching it up as he did his stick tape after a hockey game, I said, "I wouldn't believe me, either." It took years to acquire that confidence. Trusting a perception of what can't be explained takes years, I think. And those who put unwavering faith in the unexplainable are mocked, called crazy. Eventually that label became my biggest fear.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, renowned author of *On Death and Dying*, wasn't surprised that reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) increased greatly in the mid-1960s, shortly after CPR became widely utilized. Patients on the precipice of death were being saved at unheard-of rates. You've heard the story most of them have told: out-of-body levitation, white lights, assurances from long-dead relatives. Kübler-Ross reportedly nixed the final chapter of her book, which dealt entirely with NDEs, when a friend told her no one was going to believe the story of the drawing found in the man's apartment shortly after his death, showing a map and clock foretelling the location and minute of his death; no one was going to believe the story of the kid talking to his dead sister; no one was going to believe the story of the woman in cardiac arrest who described with one-hundred-percent accuracy the doodles at the top of the med student's notebook. It didn't matter that Kübler-Ross, an atheist and respected psychologist, had witnessed each

incident personally. The book wouldn't be published with that chapter. It just wouldn't. She knew that.

I realize that people who fail while attempting suicide, especially those with religious beliefs, look for reasons to explain why they were spared. It's romantic to believe that a divine presence intervened before your death. It allows you to think that you're here for a reason, that something out there is watching over you and has plans for you. I wonder why that idea threatens so many people, including me. Why can't I accept it? Maybe because that idea removes us from the comfort of our little boxes, forces us to ponder impossibility. We're confined by laws—gravity and certainty in our beliefs. Humans are neurologically uneasy regarding ambiguity; we feel anxious when faced with conflicting information. As a species, we're wired to decide on absolute interpretations. We're wired to avoid conflict, to celebrate biases as insights, to preserve our interpretation of reality, even if it means disregarding contrary evidence. Nobody wants to say, "I don't know."

Ever since that night, the thing I'm most afraid of in the world is spirits. In rooms where I know someone has died, I become claustrophobic and uncomfortable, sometimes sweating through my shirt before I excuse myself. For three nights after I watched *The Sixth Sense* on DVD, I couldn't sleep. I left my night-light on for a month after that, opening my eyes every few minutes to make certain I was alone. I leave the room when someone brings out a Ouija board. I won't go into a cemetery after dark.

They say to wear your scars as badges, reminders of what you've survived. Don't believe them. Nothing that needs surviving is best remembered.

Survivors obsess. They run fingers over maps, searing ill-fated journeys into mental perpetuity. It wasn't waking in my mother's SUV to my sister's frantic shakes that forced rebirth. It was the realization—after the last orange pill bottle hit the trash can—that I would have tried again. No carbon monoxide next time. A handgun to the temple, clean and easy. Had to be a handgun. People didn't take into account a shotgun's kick. Put the barrel under your chin, pull the trigger, and you might lose half your face on the recoil and survive. I used to think about that every day.

If I hadn't gone against the advice of my psychiatrist, my pharmacist father, of everyone around me, I'd be buried next to my great-grandfather in Brainerd.

Thor Reabe Nystrom
1984–2004
Devoted son and brother

My last lie.

Winters would come, sod would freeze. Mom would visit in her black coat with the imitation fur. She'd cry under a gray sky, snow to her ankles. She'd ask me what she'd done wrong, what she could have done differently. I'd stand next to her and beg her to resent me, to relieve her pain. But she'd keep showing up day after day, fresh roses on polished stone. And I'd die again every day with her. Her hair would turn silver and her skin would prune and her bones would calcify and still she wouldn't give up on me.