

Therapy

I have nightmares about being shot in the head. This worries my therapist.

“Do you want to kill yourself?” He asks in a platonic, studious voice, watching me carefully over the rims of his rectangular glasses. He is too young for this job. I know he’s older—he has a wife and a four-year-old girl—but he looks to be about twenty-two, with short black hair and what I can only assume to be an entire wardrobe of pale button down shirts and khakis.

“No.” It’s blunt and to the point. I don’t, and I don’t think I ever have, but I keep having these dreams, and he’s contractually obligated not to tell anyone, so I let him know. I do this both for my sake and his. Generally, I keep the real nitty-gritty stuff to myself. The nightmares, the insomnia, the panic attacks at three A.M. when my parents are asleep one floor below me. On occasion, though, I let him know what’s going on, just to be safe. For the both of us. Like that time that I didn’t sleep more than three hours in five days, and he practically ordered me to do deep breathing exercises twice a day. It’s good, you know, for the both of us.

I don’t have these nightmares often, just often enough to worry myself.

When I do have these dreams, I wake up in a grey state of confusion, staring at the stick-on stars that mottle my bedroom ceiling. The whole house is dark and quiet as a cave, save for the periodical yawning of wood and nails as the house churns restlessly.

On nights like these, I stare at the ceiling, sway my legs over the edge of the bed and feel my feet touch the soft wooden floor. My eyes don’t adjust because there is no light to adjust to, but I make my way through the maze of books and weeks old laundry littering the floor as if I had perfect vision. I walk down the stairs—their protesting creaks

alerting the whole house that I am awake and moving— and pace the kitchen on tiptoes. There is nothing that I want here, so I stand behind the counter and stare into the living room with the feeling of anticipation that only comes from being alone in a place in the dark. I'm pretty sure our house is haunted. When we first moved in, I was about nine, and my older siblings loved to torture me with stories of there being body parts in the walls. I'm old enough by now to know that's not true, but there is a sensation that comes from being alone here— something that drips at the back of your neck like ice and makes your heart beat just a little faster.

I pour a glass of water and lean against the stove, staring into the dark, maybe waiting for the ghost of the old man who used to live here to— I don't know— appear on top of the coffee table and tap-dance to Aerosmith. I don't know what I'm waiting for, but I just stand and wait.

When the cup is empty, I leave it on the counter— I'm notorious for leaving a mess in my wake, no matter the time of night— and creep back up the stairs. There are two rectangular windows above the end of my bed, and they mark the opposite wall like bright, blue eyes in an unblinking face, keeping watch over the world both inside and out. I pace to them quietly.

Tugging the curtain back an inch, I look out over the hill that dips into two sprawling fields separated by nothing more than the stray pencil mark of a creek. Nights like these, the grass is damp and the air is thick with fog. I can't even see to the edge of the property, but through the trees, nestled on a neighboring hill, there is a storm light that never goes off. It's grown a gooey, dark yellow with age, but burns bright and interruptive in the

encase of darkness. Diffused in the fog, I can imagine it's a forest fire, creeping through the hills with its bold glow. I breathe in and let go of the curtain.

Everything feels soft and dark.

It's not... *entirely* unpleasant. I hate that I'm awake so late at night— I know I'll feel terrible in the morning— but there's an undeniable thrill of the quiet dark. Not for the first time, I wonder how hard it would be to stuff a backpack and jog down the long gravel driveway and disappear. There's nothing here to run from, no domestic evil scares me here, but it's a tempting thought nonetheless.

This-- the waking up and creeping the halls at all hours, as well as the dreams-- worries my therapist. His office faces south west, and I only see him in the afternoons, so I've grown accustomed to the sun filtering through cheap white plastic blinds, casting just enough gold into the room to make the dust sparkle. The walls are painted red and beige. Not what I would have picked for a doctor's office, but the effect is surprisingly homey. His desk is dark brown, there's a filing cabinet in the corner, crayon and watercolor pictures scattered across his wall-- small details that remind me that this is no one's home, and only the ill come here. On the wall, a plain black and white clock taps away the seconds.

"How do they make you feel, these dreams?" He grins, because he knows this is a generic psychologist question. *How does that make you feel?* It's a good question, though, but I'm not sure I like the answers.

I press my nails to my lips— a habit I developed for silencing myself— and look over his shoulder at the slats of light striping the air. I shrug. "Scared. They're nightmares."

He presses a hand to his mouth to— but the way he does it is much more intellectual, more mature— and nods. He takes a drink from a bottle of water, and I can't help but notice that his hands don't shake.

My hands shake almost all the time now. I don't know if it's the coffee or the anxiety or just poor circulation, but I'm not one to hold on to delicate items anymore. I drop my eyes and twist the ring pressed against my knuckle.

"I think I'm going to try out for the spring musical," I announce, flipping us from one undesirable topic to another. I avoid looking him in the face. I avoid him like a pro.

"Really?"

"The people are pretty nice. Feels like I might be able to do it, you know?"

He looks at me and grins, but there's a glimmer of disappointment in his blue eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to kill yourself?"

I press my lips together. We've done this dance before. I like to skim topics. He likes to dig tunnels to china. I shoot him a sympathetic glance. He's just trying to do his job, but I'm tired of thinking I might be capable of something so grim. "I'm sure."

And I am sure. I think.

But the nightmares won't stop. I still wake up stunned and confused. Every dream just a little different, but mostly the same. The colors aren't right and time moves too slowly, then it's all noise and fear and blood. The police come, but too late, I'm dead, and I feel myself waking up with that jolt of slipping out of one reality and into another. It's like shedding a blood-soaked sweater and swapping it for a Sunday dress that doesn't quite fit right, and I don't know how to make it fit right. Then I'm awake and I begin it all again.

The dark, the stick-on-stars, the peace and quiet...

I breath in and go downstairs to brush my hair— I can't really explain why. I can't really explain why when it comes to anything, I just do.

He thinks the monotony of things keeps me calm, my therapist. He's not wrong. Sometimes I think of myself as Naomi from that movie, *Alan and Naomi*, where she sits in the stairwell and tears paper compulsively because the sound soothes her. Brushing my teeth soothes me. I've brushed my teeth five times in two hours. Brushing my hair, folding paper, clicking pens, opening and closing the freezer door— I can't explain why. I look at my raw gums and watch a hint of blood stain my teeth pink. I ought to brush again. I wonder, not for the first time, if I'm a psychopath. If people would cringe away if they knew that I compulsively touch certain walls in my house as I pass, or bite my nails so often they bleed, or scratch my face until there are pink lines from my eyebrow to my jaw.

And here once more, sitting in his office, twisting the ring around and around on my finger. The window is burning such a bright gold— like the storm light in my neighbor's yard— and I can hardly look at it. He's silhouetted by the window, this black-haired, blue shirted man with his homey office and books on prescriptions he's not legally allowed to give. He's too young for this job. This office is too much like a home. I wonder-- again, not for the first time-- what his notes say about me. He says I can see them anytime I want— but I'm too afraid to look, so I trust his word that I'm no crazier than anyone else my age.

It took me four and a half years until I was safe enough with myself that he could afford to let me go. But here I am, again and again.

I twist the ring on my finger in one full circle. Then back, as if undoing the first loop. I can't really explain it, but it soothes me.

I can't really explain why when it comes to anything, I just do.