

The Self Diagnosis

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Please note, this work includes content related to mental illness.

He was back. A blackness like the hollow of an open throat, a cave between two palms. Black as ink, and so much so that it was impossible to tell whether it went on forever, or stopped short at four walls. His body was luminescent and vivid. He could count the freckles all along His arms, trace the scars between His fingers, feel the sweat beading across His forehead and collarbones, ready to fall. Calluses and creases, canyons of unfamiliar but such familiar segments of His white body. Like a lit match stick in an empty room, He drew all attention. And He knew there was attention, somewhere out there, folded in the onyx cloth of the void. Someone was watching Him. Someone was waiting.

The self diagnosis. Is it that the medical system has failed us, or armed us? The news cycle propagating the constant influx of new symptoms, the social media reels looping common human experience into uncommon human functioning, the desperation of an individualistic society to attach a name to uniqueness, or a generation of youth battling to belong? What are we? True, we are ever evolving, and the diagnosis of mental disorders is more common now that we have a far better understanding of what a disorder looks like. There is little fault on the psychologist, but what of the self diagnosis? What shades have we begun to color ourselves with, now that we have been given finger paint?

He was back again, in the tepid empty void of His mind. He had never attempted to move from this very spot, although who was to say what any spot was with no landmarks? It was His body, and His body alone, in this limitless stretch of black. He was the marker for what was and wasn't, what should and shouldn't, what began and ended. He should have been the answer, but He knew there was more. Someone was watching Him. Someone was waiting.

A million new people with a determination to be misunderstood. There's a reason medical professionals descend on the general public with warning talons, urging us never to self-diagnose. The HealthClinic says it's cancer, the MayoClinic says it's organ failure, the sketchy backlogs of page two Google says it's certainly an STD and it's best you lay off the rodeo for a while. With the sheer breadth of information at our fingertips (and the exceptional cost of healthcare), it is almost easier to dress ourselves in the outlandish diagnoses of the internet then undress ourselves in the presence of a medical professional that may or may not have the answer. It's easier to consult forums of strangers that think they know, rather than a stranger with a degree that says they know. And why should this stop short at the body? Before us now is the precipice of the abnormal mind, ready to be gift-wrapped and bowed, ready to be ripped apart at Christmas, ready to be judged. Is the judgment sound this time? What

does Google say?

It was many years before He decided it was safe to navigate the void of his mind. When He did, His footsteps made sloshing sounds, like rainboots through thick puddles, and the floor rippled out around Him farther than He could see. A presence was sharing the void with Him: a fluttery, warm presence like a hummingbird tickling the edges of a daffodil; and it almost welcomed Him into the dark. The atmosphere was becoming thicker, and He could feel it rubbing up against His body, combing between His fingers, resisting Him. Perhaps He was sinking. Perhaps He was floating. If someone was watching, He wanted to find them. And if they waited, just long enough, He'd make it there.

In the coming generation, there is an allure to a diagnosis. The romanticization of disease, the bejewelment of trauma, the idea that normality is a tragedy and staying relevant is becoming unhealthy. Psychologists are watching the dramatic rise of self-proclaimed rare disorders, most commonly ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), Tourette's, OCD, and even Bipolar Disorder. Because of the phenomenon's similarity to Munchausen Syndrome or Munchausen by Proxy, in which someone goes to great lengths to give themselves or another person the appearance of serious illness to garner sympathy, Dr. Marc Feldman from the University of Alabama humorously coins it "Munchausen by Internet." More familiarly put, "illness appropriation," an increasing practice and belief that mental illnesses should be celebrated, normalized, and consequently, appropriated. Why?

The void was webbing between His limbs, and He could feel himself peeling through it. Like carving through layers of plastic, He wriggled through the invisible blackness toward the unknown presence. It was warmer now, as though it were a great sun shielded by clouds, and He was getting closer to the sky. He was a rocket cleaving through

the atmosphere, breaking free from His boosters at the brink of space, climbing into the stars. Even as the void became thicker, He was becoming lighter, drifting into the nothingness. If someone was watching Him, they must have been very patient. If someone was waiting for Him, they must have been inches away.

It is a controversial stance to take—mental illnesses should not be celebrated—but must we be reminded that mental illness states exactly what it is? Illness is a weight someone carries on their back, forever; forces themselves to swallow every waking morning, forever; drags behind them like a ball and chain and shackles, forever. Mental illness takes us by surprise and also never surprises us when it shows. Mental illness is the partner beside us in bed, the shadow chasing us to work, the nightlight and the darkness, the empty stomach and the incessant, debilitating hunger. Mental illness is a violent poltergeist, and no, it should not be celebrated like a trophy, but discussed with awareness and gravity, like an imminent threat. Because to those that have it, it is.

He ripped through one last layer of webbing, and suddenly He was falling. Air swept Him up so fast, He hardly had time to gasp, and He was tumbling through the dark, hurling into space, plummeting toward an invisible ground. His lungs burned and He thought He might be screaming, but it was silent. His arms flailed. His mind swallowed Him whole. He was spinning and spinning and spinning, and then—

Again, the argument toward normalization. The word itself leaves a bad taste in the mouth – what is normal, anyway? Why push one way or the other, when each of us is unique and unidentical? Though this is precisely the point. Normalization is the very human method of comparison to others, gauging what should and shouldn't be, marking the line between right and wrong. Normalization is what turns mental illness not into something to

be discussed, but something to be adopted. Make ADHD normal, and everyone can have it, and the genuine attention to treatment it requires is lost. Make DID normal, and the ongoing intense argument amongst psychologists over whether or not it exists to begin with is settled: it does not, and people lose treatment. Make any mental illness normal, and it becomes a diagnosis for the taking, but no longer an illness, and real sufferers begin to suffer more. Mental illnesses should not be normalized, they should be recognized. Just as we come in different shapes and colors, we come with different minds. What is normal, anyway? It does not exist, and hence, mental illness should be treated with sincerity and acceptance, rather than normality and allure.

—He woke up, right where He had started. He was back, but now the presence was all around Him, breathing on Him in hot, wet exhales. He could feel it in the sweat cascading down the column of His neck, pooling between His collarbones, tracing his form like the stencil of exhaustion. He shivered and pulled Himself into a fetal position, rocking back and forth. If He could wake up once, surely He could do it again – but this time into the real world instead of the void of his mind; with real people instead of empty air; with a better reason to keep going than an aimless search for an invisible force, like the one wrapped around Him now. But He had been trapped in His mind for so long, He wondered if He'd ever

escape it at all. The presence shifted in distaste to this thought and drew away, condensing into a solid form that sat across from Him in the void. Curiously, He looked up at the creature. And it was Him: crisp and real like a reflection in a mirror. The beast haunting Him was Him. And what was He to do?

Then again, what could possibly grant me the authority to speak on such controversial topics? I am not a psychologist (although, I would like to be). I am not all-knowing (although, I am often regarded as a know-it-all). But worse, I am not a saint, because I too partake in the self diagnosis, thumb-tacking myself with labels that just might explain why my memories are so black and yet my wonderings are so infinite. I too partake in the over-indulgent spur of research into minds I may never understand, or perhaps understand too well. I too am hiding from the doctors, because a diagnosis may be an answer, but it is also the atomic bomb nestled in the homeland of my entire career. Mental illness is a weight I carry on my back, forever; force myself to swallow every waking morning, forever; drag behind me like a ball and chain and shackles, forever. Mental illness traps me and he puzzles me, welcomes me and mirrors me, watches me and waits for me, at the edge of the void. He sits across from me, memorizes me, smiles at me – the warmest, safest smile. It is wrong to adopt a diagnosis that is not yours. But if it is yours, my lord, hold on.

I was back.