

Hum

By Matt McAteer

This is the first time that I've seen my father in nearly three weeks. As he stands on the other side of the wired glass window, leaning up against the wall by the nurses' station with his hood pulled up over his graying hair to keep his ears warm, I can tell he's anxiously counting down the seconds until the clock strikes 6:30. If he comes any closer then they won't buzz us in. And even after these contactless days, at 50 feet out I know that his untrimmed facial hair is growing in white and patchy, feeling rough like a weathered stone if you were to rub up against his solid cheeks. It's odd for me, standing with my mother and the other patients' families here for the visiting hours. Not too long ago I was on the other side of this door. There's not much of a difference between patient and inmate, between a hospital and a jail. A sense of agency is lost, and there is little control over the self. A few moments pass before the electric hum of the magnetic lock echoes through the empty halls and the door opens with little force.

They say that your sense of smell is the strongest sense linked to memory. That's why so many people dislike the smell of rubbing alcohol and sterilizers- they're a subconscious reminder of one of our first traumatic memories, being born. That may just be an old wives' tale, but

there's something about the smell of this hallway that fills me with a sense of relief, and also a feeling of paranoia, like coming home after a long day to an open door that you could have sworn you locked. I glide my hand over the grainy railing that lines the walls of the ward for any of the patients wearing the orange fall risk bracelets. The only two I'd seen in my time here were on older women with histories of alcohol abuse.

Everything else at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center has been immaculately renovated. When you walk through the main entrance, a beautiful and massive sculpture of the Earth made up of different pieces of blown colored glass hangs from the ceiling, and classical music coming from a player piano fills the atrium. All of the rooms look like they've come straight out of some futuristic, sci-fi movie and have all state-of-the-art equipment. And then you get to the third floor, to the psyche ward, and suddenly you've jumped back to the mid-20th century. The walls are a dull and fading beige color, the floor tiles sandish and speckled with patches of black, gray, and brown. They still have those flavescent lights that paint your skin with a yellow hue, and the computers they use are big and bulky, like they haven't been replaced since the early 2000's.

On the walk down the hall, I pass my old room, which I had all to myself my first two days here. It was certainly a blessing, not having to bother a roommate with my sobbing late into the night, though that had all subsided, mostly, by the third day. Maybe because I had become accepting of my situation, or maybe because of the medication they handed out to keep us somewhat sedated. I peek in as we pass. Both beds are made up with white sheets tightly tucked under the thin mattresses as though no one has slept in them since I left. The bathroom door has been left slightly cracked open and the lights are still on. I leave the room to itself.

“Hey, bud,” my father says in his low tenor as we get just close enough to hear. His face is even more sunken in than it was when I last saw him. His cheek bones seem higher now and I almost can’t recognize him.

I write my name into the visitor log. Only four other names appear before mine on the page, and their sign-in dates go as far back as two weeks ago. That’s nearly 18 visiting sessions worth of time that so few people came in to see their loved ones. In that regard, not much seems to have changed since I was here. I’d probably only have to flip back a few pages to see my mother’s and father’s names signing in to see me. There were afternoons and evenings that I was the only one to have any visitors.

“Hey hon,” he says to my mother. She doesn’t scold him for it now, but she will when they meet up at a coffee shop or fast food restaurant to exchange the things that had been left behind in the apartment. That kind of language is no longer permissible. The only thing keeping them as husband and wife is the simple fact that divorces aren’t free. But for now she plays it off and just says hello. They hug, but it’s a strange embrace- the kind a person would give to someone they’d just met.

Visiting hours used to be held in the common room, where a young man around my age named Peter used to sit and hold dominion over the television remote and we were all subjected to whatever it was that he wanted to watch. He always used to complain that the doctor wasn’t giving him the right dosage of his medication, that such a high prescription could cause him to have seizures, but nothing ever came out of it while I was here. He and I always got along pretty well. He was quiet, damn near silent if he wasn’t criticizing the doctor or asking me for the time. I was the only one who ever wore a watch, and patients weren’t permitted to have their cell phones in the ward.

But now, the dining room has been designated for people to spend time with those they've left here. It's much more private, almost intimate, in these closer quarters. The three of us take our seats at a table near the refrigerator, from where my friends and I used to try to sneak ice cream when the nurse on duty had her back turned. We sit in silence, another family just sobs amongst themselves, and a third whispers just out of audible range. This is the room where I made my first friend in the ward, a person whom without I'm not sure how I would have gotten through the days that I spent here.

His name was, and I suppose still is, Steven. I never got his last name. He had beautiful red clay colored skin, skin that I was almost jealous of, but he also had the IQ and maturity of an 8 or 9 year old; and of that, I was not envious. The first time he invited me to eat with him, he told me that he wouldn't bite and bore his teeth in a canine-like smile. He always ate whatever I didn't finish. He told me that his adoptive parents were afraid of him and that he was worried about where he was going to end up when he got discharged. He was kicked out of his home after he had turned 18, and apparently the homeless shelter he'd been staying at gave away his bed after they hadn't heard from him in seven days or so. I don't know enough about shelter regulations to know whether or not that was true. He was saving up \$200 to buy himself a new bicycle. I tried to tell him to buy a cheaper one and use the rest of the money for food and some new clothes or something, but he had his heart set on that bike. I guess I didn't really have any business trying to tell him what to do with his own money. I was never really the type of person with good spending habits.

He'd be waiting in the hallway outside of my room every morning to walk down for breakfast together. He'd ask me how I slept and then he'd say that he made sweet love to his pillow all night. I knew he just meant that he slept well, but I never had the heart to tell him how

that sounded. People who overheard would giggle to themselves, and I'd play dumb when he asked me what was so funny. Every day he wore the same tie-dyed shirt the occupational therapy students helped the patients make the day before I got here. I don't think he had any other clothes. No one ever came to visit him.

This man in front of me must be impersonating my father- must be a changeling or a doppelganger or something. This isn't the same man I grew up knowing, not the man who, as a five-year-old child, I stood crying looking out the window not wanting him to leave for work. Not the man who coached my sister's softball teams to countless little league championships. Not even the same man who lied about paying all of the bills and the mortgage the first time. That man could be forgiven. That man was redeemable. No. This stranger sitting in front of me, unshaven and hair graying, must be being played by some kind of crisis actor, like the ones people always claim survivors of tragedies to be.

There are two great and unplanned exoduses in this story. The first was our house, my childhood home, from which we were evicted during the summer after my freshman year of college. Two years had gone by, and in each of those months, my father didn't make the mortgage payment and decided that he wasn't going to tell us until the night before the sheriff officers were going to be knocking on the door. My parents, my sister, and I all found ourselves living in my grandmother's house. The second departure was from the apartment, which we were cast out of nearly one year after my stay in the ward, four years since we had been removed from the house. The circumstances were strikingly similar. This time, however, I was without my sister. She had gotten her own house down in North Carolina, and she was spared from the

sudden displacement. My father was invited not to live at my grandmother's house when my mother and I had to move back in.

He had gone to extreme lengths to keep our impending eviction from us. He lied about having a job, several jobs, he would pretend to leave every day for work just to come home and take the notices off of the door and out of the mail so my mother and I wouldn't suspect anything. My mother knew we were behind on the rent, but he promised that he worked something out with the office at the apartment complex. He even went as far as coming back with an official looking document that had a payment plan worked out with the amount of money we owed and how much we were going to be paying in addition each month to catch up- he even added in a fake account number and the complex's letterhead to make it look legitimate. He printed it out at the public library. I can't even begin to imagine what must have been going through his head.

And now he hardly makes eye-contact as he tells us how he's doing, how the doctor has him on progressively lowering doses of Suboxone to wean him off of the prescription pain killers that had constituted the personality of the father I'd grown up with, how he's made friends with this patient or that nurse, what his roommate is like. He says my aunt, his sister, had visited him the other day and brought him some of the snacks he likes to eat before bed. His constant tearing of wrappers at night used to drive my mother crazy. And as he gives us his update, he stares intently at his up-sticking thumb, alternating open eyes every few seconds or so. When he was growing up, Americans were taught that if a nuclear bomb exploded in the distance, they should hold out their arm, stick up their thumb, and see if the cloud was bigger or smaller than their opposable digit. If the cloud was bigger than your thumb, you'd know that you were in the

radiation zone and should start running. I wonder what kind of explosion my father is preparing for.

Of course my mother is cordial. She doesn't mention all of the financial and legal complications he's left the both of them with- the insane amount of back rent that we owe the apartment complex, the fact that he's destroyed her credit score yet again, nor the small problem of having nearly three fourths of our belongings locked behind the door of the apartment we'd been evicted from. When he asks how my sister and her baby are doing, my mom just says that they're fine. She doesn't tell him that his daughter intends on never talking to him again unless he pays my mother back all of the money that he owes her, a modest \$20,000 by my sister's estimates, nor that he may never get to see his granddaughter again. And my mother certainly doesn't mention how mortified *she* is, at nearly 50 years old, to be living with her own mother again. I'm baffled by her ability to sit here, unmoving and seemingly so forgiving. I notice that she isn't wearing her wedding ring. I wonder if my father has paid it any mind.

When she talks, all you can smell is cigarettes. Same thing if you were to hug her or even really just be within a few feet. She had smoked during most of my childhood and managed to quit about 7 years ago. The night that my father told us we were losing the house, I caught her on the front porch lighting up, and since then she's gone back to smoking at least a pack a day. And I think that's a pretty modest estimate. My sister and I tried to get her to quit again once we moved out of my grandmother's house and into the apartment, and she was making some real progress I think. But now I know there's not much hope for her anymore.

They sit and they talk and I just need to get away for a few minutes. I've never really been the type of person to let my parents know what it is that I'm doing. Ever since I was a kid, 12 or 13 years old, I'd leave the house in the morning and I wouldn't get home until sometime at

night. I'd never check in and I'd rarely answer my phone if my mother or father were calling. Not much has really changed. I get up from the table without a word and walk out into the hallway. Neither of my parents ask where I'm going, but I can imagine there's an almost dumbfounded look on their faces, but the expression must be fleeting.

There are only two other hallways that intersect with the main one. The hall furthest from the entrance door leads to the cafeteria where my parents are now, and the one I'm walking towards leads to the library. I call it a library because I'm not sure what else to call it. It's not its own room, it's just a little out-cove carved into the wall, with four chairs surrounding a coffee table with the names of previous patients carved into the wood, and a small bookshelf with no more than 30 books, but only one by an author that I knew; Anton Chekov. This is where I met Wesley Urban. Or, at least, this is where I first saw him, sitting by himself and jotting down something in a small notebook. I was excited by the idea that I might have found another writer who I could talk to. It's not that I felt that I couldn't talk to Steven. It's just that I felt like I spent a lot more time explaining things to him instead of having an actual conversation. I had hoped things would be different with this new person.

Wesley told me that he had just gotten out of prison for assaulting a police officer. He didn't go into much detail, other than to say that he had too much to drink and it was mostly a misunderstanding from what he remembers. Once he got out of prison, he nearly drank himself to death, and his girlfriend had called the police saying she thought it was a suicide attempt. He said he was just trying to get his life back on track now. I was surprised and relieved by his frankness, because a lot of the other patients weren't so quick to talk about the things that brought them to the ward. In fact, he's the only one who told me outright why he was here. For

everyone else, I had to guess or assume. Clues could be collected, conjectures made, everyone let out little hints about their lives before the ward. But the truth was always hidden somewhere far away.

Wesley and I both swapped stories about our past run-ins with the law and there's nothing like a good secret to generate trust and create a friendship. His real name isn't Wesley Urban, I'd rather not say his real name. That's what he said he would make his pen name if he was ever to get published. I told him all about some of the writers who I knew published under a nom de plume- Yasmina Khadra, George Orwell, Mark Twain. Is it strange that I only named male authors? When I told him I was studying English and Creative Writing in college, he asked if I would teach him. I was thrilled to try.

We sat in the library and took turns reading sections of the Chekhov book aloud to each other and anyone else who decided to sit with us for a bit. Whenever a particular paragraph or sentence or word stood out to us, we underlined it or made notes in the margins. We spent hours passing the book back and forth, trying to sound as prophetic as we possibly could. When one of the other patients came to us and asked if the book was the Bible, we told her that it was for us.

Even though he was in his 40's, Wesley was broad and decently well-built. A few inches shorter than me, but in his cowboy styled boots we were just about the same height. He had a thick, black goatee and wild eyes that seemed always preoccupied with something else, even if he was looking right at you. For some reason, it was always like he was spacing out. I'm not entirely sure that he actually belonged in the ward. He didn't exactly get along with the staff. He was always argumentative and lacked a general sort of respect for the nurses. He was a good-looking guy and would ask me if my sister had any friends she could hook him up with. I never found out where he was originally from, but he had the most unique accent I'd ever heard. He

softly, not silently, but softly pronounced the “l” in calm or the “b”s in comb and lamb. And though I didn’t meet Wesley until the fourth night of my seven days spent here, he would eventually come to really dominate my memories of the ward along with Steven. He was the only other patient who I could really talk with. While I always tried to have conversations with the nurses and occupational therapy students, it felt more like they were patronizing me, like they were talking with any other patient. I guess they didn’t have any reason to think otherwise of me. I guess it isn’t really fair to expect any sort of special treatment. Wesley was the first person who I thought could match my wit. He and I would pace back and forth down the long halls, talking about literary theory and some of the good books we’d recently read, explaining our understandings of Eastern and Western philosophy, and debating the place and purpose of religion. Steven would trail closely behind us, the halls not wide enough for the three of us to stroll side by side, and he’d try to toss in his opinions or ask questions when he didn’t understand what we were talking about, which was often. It was in moments like these that I really began to see the differences between Wesley and myself. While I was always patient with Steven’s questions, taking time to find analogies that might help him understand, Wesley was less so, usually offering a passive insult, if not an affront outright.

It was actually my idea- for me and my mother to go visit my father in the ward. After having stayed here myself, I know how important it is to have something to look forward to everyday. The hours pass by much faster if you’re counting down towards something. And I know how lonely this place could feel. Because even though you’re surrounded by people at all times, there’s always some part of themselves that people block you off from here. Everyone is hiding something, and it’s usually the thing that landed them here.

Steven told me that Wesley scared him. He said that Wesley seemed angry and that he was afraid he might hurt him. He said he didn't want to see Wesley get angry. He said that about a lot of the patients. After all, Steven was this skinny kid who had always had a rough go of things, and he said he'd gotten his fair share of ass kickings. I told him that I knew how to handle people like that, but more importantly I added, was that Wesley was our friend. We had no need to worry about him. But if I'm being honest, I had no idea how to handle a situation if things got out of control. I'd only ever been in one fight, and I was only 12 years old at the time. But Steven seemed to feel comforted by my assurance. And that may have been the most therapeutic interaction I had during my whole stay.

I feel like the ward isn't the same now as it was when I was here. Obviously the patients have changed, this isn't a long term facility. But I mean the dynamic. Everything seems quieter now, there aren't any patients roaming the halls, no one is sitting in this little library that we spent so many hours at, my father hasn't reported on any of the goings-on. I know I can only stay out of that room for so long. I know I have to go back. And I do. I do go back. I'll continue to sit in silence at this table until the guard comes and tells us that the visiting hour is over. It seems as though my father knows better than to direct any questions at me.

Only two other tables are being used by other families. A girl in scrubs whispers with her mother and sister. She must have just gotten here earlier today or late last night. She has scars going up her forearms, thin lines from a knife or a razor blade and larger patches that I assume are from burns. I suspect she's an attempted suicide. I was, too. Did you know that no more than

thirty percent of suicides are accompanied by notes? And they almost never provide any real answers. More times than not, the victim is just leaving instructions or reminders- *I want to be cremated, remember to water the plants, I left a will in my bookshelf*. The crisis counselor at the first hospital asked me if I had a plan- how I would do it. I told him it really came down to a process of elimination. There were no tall buildings close enough to my home, I didn't have access to any sort of prescription pills that would kill me quickly, and I had no way of getting my hands on a gun. All I figured I was left with was hanging. And apparently having put so much thought into a plan was enough to recommend me to be committed.

I stayed overnight in the first hospital while the counselor looked for a ward that had room for me. Before that night I had no idea how in-demand a bed in a psychiatric facility was. My father kept telling me that he was hoping I could just get some sort of prescription or a meeting with a psychiatrist if he brought me to the emergency room, he said that he really didn't want me to have to go to a ward. And to tell the truth, I wasn't too thrilled about it either. But my mother told me that I should really be doing whatever it was that the professionals thought was best. I didn't really think a stint in a ward was what I needed, but the counselor told me I could either commit myself voluntarily, or he'd get me forcibly committed. The latter would end up on my record, so the choice was an easy one.

I was brought in to the ward wearing the light blue scrubs of the first hospital I had gone to the day before, while everyone else here was dressed in the prison forest green of St. Joe's. You don't get your own clothes for the first 24 hours, so you're stuck in the air-conditioned high sixties in paper thin shirt and pants that smell like flash steamed vegetables and body odor, made of a material something like stretched-out cotton balls, and without much force at all it wouldn't

be hard to tear right through them. Some of the wiser and well-seasoned patients wore their blankets around, draped over them from head to ankle, looking like ghostly holy saints as they shuffled through the halls.

After I met and befriended Steven, my relationships with the rest of the patients began to blossom. Before Wesley arrived, I spent a lot of my time in the library with Steven, an older man named Jerome, and two much older women, Julie and Jackie. Julie was a very religious woman with a history of being physically abused by all the men in her life. She told us that her father used to beat her and her brother, and after he died, her brother stepped up to take the mantle. She was always worried that men might get violent, but she assured me and Steven that she liked us and wasn't concerned about us in that way. She loved animals, and had dreams of opening up her own animal shelter. I never said it to her, but she'd be better off just trying to volunteer at one, running her own would be a lot of responsibility. I didn't doubt her conviction, just its reality. Her face was thin with rosy cheeks the size of golf balls and her hair looked more blue than white.

And as for Jackie, well if I had to pick one patient out of the whole lot that really needed to be institutionalized, it would have to be her. If you've ever seen *The Shining*, then you've seen her doppelganger- the old lady rising out of the bathtub with her hands out-stretched and cackling. She always had this distant look on her face like a droopy bloodhound. She'd stare down the hall and ask if anyone else sees the giant Komodo dragon crawling towards her, or she'd look out the window and tell us that a tiger was jumping across the roof tops. She said the doctor was really a monster who controlled all of the flies in the ward. Once, while she was staring at me, she asked if I've ever seen the movie *Close Encounters*. She ended up telling me I looked like one of the aliens with my hood pulled up.

Jerome had the saddest story out of everyone. When he was in his twenties, he was engaged to his high school sweetheart with a kid on the way. Three months before she was due, she died from a heroin overdose. He had struggled with addiction in his teens, and by the time she passed he was sober for nearly 6 years. That changed the next day. He said he didn't even make it to her funeral because he was so wasted on whatever drugs he could get his hands on. By the time he was 30, he was homeless, turning tricks to feed his revived addiction, eating out of the dumpsters behind restaurants in Paterson. At 40 he was diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis, either from sharing needles or all of the unprotected sex. During my first nightly wrap up group, he shared with everyone that the doctors haven't given him a whole lot of time left to live. The diseases left him at a mere 130 pounds, which looked even thinner on his 6 and a half foot body. His eyes were always bloodshot and hooded by his sagging lids. He always sounded tired and he probably always was.

The night that we found out that we were being evicted from the apartment, I had just gotten home from school. Before pulling in, I saw that I had a missed call from my mother and a text asking when I'd be home. I figured she just wanted to know so she could get ready to start making dinner. When I walked in, a suitcase was packed near the door, my mother was in tears and frantically speaking on the phone, and my father sat on the couch bent forward with his head in his hands. I thought my sister or my niece had died.

When my mother told me that we were going to be getting kicked out the next day, I just put my back pack on the table, grabbed a roll of garbage bags, and started packing up all of my belongings. Things like this don't come as a shock to me anymore. This was round two, and I had gotten out all of my frustrations with losing my home the first time. I just put on some

music, lit a cigarette, and got to work. Once my car and my mother's were full, I got on the phone and started calling people to come help us move the things we could- friends, family, my boss who drove a large pickup truck. My friend Dominick was the only one to actually come. My sister called to apologize to me on my father's behalf. She said she wished she could have come to help, but North Carolina is an 8 hour drive. My mother went out with Dominick to get boxes and tape for any of the things that might get broken being thrown into bags. I could hardly bear to be in the same room as my father.

On my last night in the ward, I sat in the small library with Wesley and a young woman named Jessica, who was missing most of her front teeth and had bulging eyes like a chameleon. She had done something to her ankle and needed crutches to get around, and she was obsessively sexual in her demeanor and dialogue. Steven went to take a nap before dinner, and Wesley and I were discussing *Moby Dick* as Jessica sat there listening as though we were two prophets delivering a sermon. Wesley was mostly interested in the Romantic writers, and though my interest lies more in post-modernism, I did my best to keep up.

Amongst other things, Jessica had quite the mouth on her. She was crass and rude to the staff, but she was fun for us to talk to, and when you have nothing to do but talk to people, an entertaining personality becomes a hot commodity. As we sat in the library, talking about the roles of defiance and duty in the novel, a nurse walked passed us and Jessica just couldn't help but yell out "nice ass." The nurse turned back to look at us, and both Wesley and Jessica gave her a face and laughed a bit before Wesley turned back to me.

A few minutes later, a young blonde nurse came over to us, and without much warning, began yelling at Wesley for his inappropriate behavior towards the staff. In his defense, he didn't actually say anything. And, at first, he calmly tried telling her that. But I think she was really just using this as a chance to yell at him for all of the other things he'd been doing. As she kept yelling, he kept denying responsibility until the point where he flat out asked her to get away from him. He said it calmly a few times. Then more sternly. I'm no medical professional, but if a patient in the psyche ward with a history of violence asks you to get away from them, maybe you should. But she kept pressing and pressing and pressing and finally he blew up.

He called the nurse a bimbo, a stupid whore, and a Barbie bitch. And he didn't just say it, he screamed it. He began throwing books down the hallway, he smacked her clipboard out of her hands and kicked it across the floor, and he began swinging one of Jessica's crutches around. At that point, other patients came out from their rooms or from down the hall to see what was happening. Wesley had gone completely critical. Of course there was quite a bit of fallout following the explosion. Among the victims were the blonde nurse, one of the two security guards called to restrain Wesley, myself, receiving a few bruises holding Wesley on the ground, and old Jerome, who had no intention of getting involved when he first opened his door.

While we were alone together in the apartment, my father, still sitting on the couch, asked if he could talk to me, but I started out doing most of the talking. I asked him if he could do me a favor, which he said he'd be happy to. I told him to do anything but just sit there. I called him an asshole. I told him I couldn't believe that he could do this to us again. I told him that I asked my mother not to hate him the last time, when we lost the house, that it wasn't his fault that his head

was so messed up, but I wasn't going to do that for him now. I told him that I don't hate him, but that there was no coming back from this.

He told me that he was struggling. He said that he sees things and hears voices that tell him to do things, to lie to us. I told him that I'd give him two weeks to check himself into a hospital and get help, or I'd be done with him forever. I guess that sounds a bit melodramatic. He tried telling all of us that he had something called a hero complex, which makes him lie so that other people have a higher opinion of him. My sister would eventually lay into him hard, saying, amongst other things, that he doesn't have a hero complex, he has a lazy complex- that he isn't sick, he's just an asshole. They haven't spoken since.

Immediately after the dust from Wesley's blowup had settled, the ward had taken on a new level of silence. No one was wandering the halls or talking on the patient telephone. Though a few people sat in the common room, the T.V. was muted, and the normally chatty patients sat there playing with their fingers. Everyone else was tucked away in their rooms. I quickly got to work trying to make up for Wesley. As I caught Steven up on all of the excitement he had missed, I started to see for myself why he was so afraid of Wesley. Steven had seen something in him that I was too willing to ignore.

The first thing I did was speak to the blonde nurse, to explain to her where the miscommunication had occurred and to set the story straight. She wasn't too interested in hearing events as they actually unfolded, but she did thank me for intervening. She didn't apologize for her role in escalating things, though.

Next on my list was Jerome. During all of the commotion, Wesley spewed at Jerome a series of words I dare not repeat, because it feels uncomfortable just to think about let alone say out loud- a series of racial slurs that I've never actually heard said to someone in a real sort of derogatory way. In response, Jerome told Wesley to suck his dick, a demand that completely sent Wesley flying on an attack course towards Jerome. I had to tackle Wesley and keep him down on the ground, whispering in his ear that he was about to make a terrible mistake, until security arrived and the problem became theirs.

When I finally found Jerome, sitting in his bed with his sheets wrapped around him, I tried explaining to him what it was that led up to the altercation. Though I couldn't be sure of this, I told him that Wesley didn't actually believe the things that he said, that he picked up a lot of that language and hostility response in prison, and surprisingly Jerome told me that he understood. There were no hard feelings. People do stupid things all the time, he told me. He was a bit upset that Wesley didn't come make this apology himself, but Wesley had too much pride to ever do that. I understand that there is no possible justification for the things Wesley said. I understand the Jerome's reaction to these sorts of transgressions stems from a long life of having experienced attacks just like this. I just wanted things to get back to the way they were just a few hours beforehand.

The last person on my list was Wesley. Despite how awful he had behaved, I had hoped he didn't feel betrayed by me. For holding him back, for telling him he was wrong, for making these apologies on his behalf. I couldn't forgive him for his bigotry, but he was still my friend and I still needed him I think. When we finally sat down together, he actually apologized to me for having to step in, for having to stop him from, as he said, beating the living shit out of that guy. He didn't even know Jerome's name. And though he said we were fine, things definitely

changed. The next morning, on the day he and I were expecting to be released, he didn't meet me and Steven outside of my room to walk to breakfast together. He didn't even sit with us. It wasn't until just before lunch time that we even spoke, when he told me he was going to steal the Chekhov book and asked me for my phone number to keep in touch. I wrote it down and he stuck it inside of the book sleeve.

When he wasn't in the cafeteria for lunch, Steven and I figured he was meeting with the doctor, getting his discharge papers in order before leaving. Mondays were largely considered discharge days, because they usually don't let anyone leave on the weekends, so if you're looking good on a Friday, then you know you'll be out Monday. The three of us, Steven, Wesley, and I, were all expecting to get out that day. And by the time we finished our meals, Wesley was gone. Steven told me that the doctor recommended he stay for an extra few days, and he was bummed he couldn't walk out to sweet freedom with me.

Before you leave, the doctor always likes to have a one on one with whoever it is that you're going home to, just to catch them up to speed and let them know what they can be expecting in the days and weeks to come. My father asks my mother if she'll go to the one on one with him, and even though she's made it painfully clear that they will never be living together again, she agrees to go. My father is the one who came in to see the doctor when I was here. While they talked, I said my goodbyes and collected my things from my room, and then waited in the small little library area, trying to memorize all of the titles and authors that were sitting on the shelves. The last book on the bottom row was the collection of short stories by Chekhov that Wesley said he was going to take. I picked it up, flipped open the dust jacket, and the piece of paper I had written my phone number on was still there.

My mother was waiting for me in the atrium when I got released. She ran up and wrapped herself around me tightly. On the way to the car, I saw Wesley standing on the corner, getting ready to cross the street to the Walgreens to pick up a Western Union order his ex had sent for him. I thought about yelling to him, but I just stood and watched him cross the street.

On my last day here, news was released that Chester Bennington of Linkin Park had committed suicide by hanging. While my mother and I waited in the hospital lobby before being let upstairs to the ward, a woman was reading a *People* magazine with a cover featuring a story about Mariah Carey's battle with bipolar disorder. I feel like these things are signs for something, I'm just not sure what they're telling me. Now I'm starting to sound like my father. Of course Mariah looks stunning on the cover, her skin made-up flawlessly with her breasts tastefully peeking out of her black tank top and a smile reminiscent of the Mona Lisa. I wish they'd show us something ugly, something truly representative of the Hell she's found herself trapped in- her makeup undone, bloodshot eyes from being up until three or four in the morning, an over-sized sweat shirt that she swims in to hide the scars like so many other people out there. I've never tried to deliberately hide my scars. My mother once asked me if I wanted to get them laser treated. I told her no. I've always thought them to be a conversation piece.

In another six months, I'll see my father again, this time in a Dunkin' Donuts instead of a psychiatric facility. He will have missed spending Christmas with the rest of us, New Years, my 23rd birthday. A lot happens in half a year. He'll swear that he's changed. He'll swear that he's working now, that he's doing much better, that he's spoken to my mother and there is a glimmer of a chance that they'll move back in together. I want to believe him. Not for his sake or my sake or even for my mother's. That's just the way things have always been, and lately it's felt like the

world is new and strange to me. We'll sit at a table, drinking our coffees- mine black with a bit of sugar, his a macchiato with three extra pumps of their caramel sauce- and he'll try to explain and apologize, but will anything ever really change? He'll ask how my sister is doing and I'll tell him. She's been reaching out every once in a while, he'll tell me. That's nice, I'll say.

As my mother and I sit at this table with my father, his hood still pulled up over his head as he wrings his hands telling us that he should be getting discharged by Monday or Tuesday, my mother reminds him that he still has things in our storage unit that he'll need to collect so that she can fit in my sister's wedding and prom dresses. Right now they're hanging in my mother's bedroom at my grandmother's house.

Before we leave, I stop again at the small library space. The Chekhov book is tucked tightly between a romance novel and a dictionary in the corner of the bottom shelf. I hadn't noticed it earlier. Some of the notes Wesley and I left in the margins have been scribbled over, others are still there- some underlined or circled. Our signatures are still written on the back of the front cover. No one has bothered to black them out.