

My Decade on Broadway

In a group home, in New Haven

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Ten years is a dreadful amount of time to spend cooped up with very sick people, especially if you're sicker than most of them yourself. I know that *mentally ill* is the more accepted term nowadays—the one that NPR uses—but *nuts* or *whacked* seems closer to the bone, to the truth that people feel down deep about those who are unstable.

Or, should I say, the truth that I felt.

Parent's Foundation for Transitional Living (PFTL) is a residential living center in New Haven for those with severe illness. I'm often flustered when I try to describe my decade there to someone who's never been around the psychically wounded. Words like *peculiar* and *crazy* are the first words that come to mind, followed by some perhaps unexpected ones: *helpful*, *warm*, *comforting*.

PFTL's two-story red brick building runs for about a half a block, right between some Yale apartments and a church parking lot. When I was there, it was diagonally across from a defeated-looking Shell station and an addict-filled Popeye's; the thriving university was just down the block. The building is divided into a residential living center—the group home—and a supervised apartment program, where clients have their own kitchenettes and are more independent. During my stay, some residents moved out eventually, some disappeared when they ran out of cash, and some decided to stay there permanently. For those paying full cost, it was quite expensive. My ten years there, including medication, staffing, food, lodging, and case management, cost my parents about \$400,000, which didn't include the private psychotherapy.

The residents ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-one, with histories of multiple hospitalizations and, I think it's fair to say, a basic difficulty in adjusting to the world. Some of us were motley, mouths drooling from excessive medication. Others had difficulty

keeping quiet during the voluntary group meetings that were part of the resident and recovery enrichment program, which included horticulture, art, music, and discussions of current events. I learned rapidly that non sequiturs, psychotic rambling, and inspired verbal expositions were a madly popular form of communication around the building. Random, paranoid comments whipped through the air about venomous snipers on rooftops stalking the chosen or telepathic, or female police officers with teeth in their vaginas waiting to castrate clients. Stolen thoughts and hurtling ESP pronouncements ricocheted around the smoking courtyard, during some meals, and during late-night television viewing. Satanic spirits and religious riffs on everything related and unrelated. It wasn't an unusual request for one resident to ask another to please stop coveting his thoughts.

PFTL took me in on a clammy March morning in 1997, after I'd spent years bouncing around mental health facilities throughout the country. Eventually, I was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder—commonly known as manic depression—with hypomania, an avoidant personality, and an anxiety disorder. I'd also developed a brutal obsession with self-mutilation over that time, repeatedly slashing myself with razors. After seven years, I began burning myself with cigars and cigarettes. Earlier in my career, I went AWOL from a Hartford mental hospital, got my head shaved, picked up several packages of straight-edged blades and began slicing. I snuck back onto the hospital grounds and wandered the property, smearing my blood over the statues and buildings. There was a large, ornate, porcelain fountain with cherubs reaching skyward. I climbed it, hung on and screamed into the blackness. It was hellish but also gave me a phenomenal rush. I felt as if I were in a swirling, twisted dream. I know that sounds crazy—it was crazy—but it was the best feeling I'd ever had at that point in my life, and it was what I was shooting for each time I hurt myself in the future. *Carry me back to that fluidity of the dream*, I used to muse. *Get me back there!*

I was overcome by racing thoughts about cutting, cutting and my blood—the texture, the thick, sticky richness of it. I spent months lusting after a simple straightedge razor. Commercials for Gillette blades—the best a man can get!—would send me into a frothing panic. A year later, after being discharged, I got a room in a swanky hotel in downtown Hartford and brought in two small paint brushes, a plastic drop cloth, some hermit bars, a liverwurst sandwich, and a half-gallon of skim milk. Then I spent five hours slicing and smearing across the bathroom. I wrote giant bloody phrases to amuse an invisible audience: *I BLEED THEREFORE I AM* and *THIS THING CUTS LIKE A KNIFE!* I took breaks and watched *Entertainment Tonight* and the news throughout my night.

At around three in the morning, I panicked, calling my old therapist at his home.

"Christ!" he said. "Are you bleeding badly?"

"Not as severely as before," I said.

"Just walk out the lobby and go to the Civic Center and I'll have an ambulance meet you there," he said, "Goddamnit, David. You've got to stop this or you'll die. You're out of control."

I left twenty dollars and a note on the television for the chambermaids: *Don't worry, I'm basically okay and do apologize for this childish mess. Sorry for scaring you—take care.*

During those severe incidents, I chose to get help, to phone my doctor or walk toward the security guards on the grounds of a hospital when I felt as if I were going to pass out. I didn't let myself drift away. I never intended to die. There's a difference between crazy self-destruction and pining for that total, annihilating blackness, isn't there?

But why did I save myself? I'm not sure. It seems a kernel of hope lingered, remained. Was that spark divine? Did God save me? Did she reach down and deliver me for some reason, some infinite purpose, or is that just my ego suddenly expanding into a Hollywood epic? I mean, who would play me in the movie?

By the time I arrived at PFTL, I'd already had too much

neo-Freudian therapy, shock treatments, and medications. Eventually, I morphed into what I call a professional mental patient, a not-incredibly-rare breed. A careerist. When I was in the role of chronic guy, it was sad and bloody and depressing, and sometimes psychotic, but there was comfort in it. I knew what was expected of me, and I became quite skilled at it.

My early years were good and relatively carefree, save for a physically abusive older brother, but who doesn't have one of those, right? As an eleven-year-old, I also watched my dog get cut in half by an Amtrak train—I remember being shocked, fascinated, and terrified by the lack of blood on Jiggs. Truly, though, the years were good ones, playing little league sports and even being labeled the “friendliest” of my class in the high school yearbook. I left for Skidmore in 1984 feeling excited and anxious about school. Unfortunately, at college, I snuffed my intellectual curiosity with disaffection, marijuana, cocaine, and a little LSD. Hemingway and Updike rescued me at the end, but by the time I graduated in 1988 with an English degree, I was clinically depressed and predictably cynical. I worked at a paper outside Boston for nine months after graduation, writing about holiday decorations, aldermanic play-by-play, gargantuan potholes, and vandalized rose bushes. Just before the paper went bankrupt in 1989, I wrote obituaries, an ironic portent of things to come.

“Hello,” I'd say in my formal voice, as I dialed neighborhood morticians. “I'm calling to enquire about the life of a current client of yours?”

I started mutilating myself in May 1989 after living alone, losing a girlfriend and the job. Mutilation was something I'd never heard of and it came upon me quickly, a thrilling discovery. The first evening I did it, Michael Jordan was hitting a clutch jump shot against the Cleveland Cavaliers. I was watching it on television with the sound turned off. Fats Domino was singing “Blueberry Hill” on an oldies station and I was rereading an old break-up letter from an ex-girlfriend. There was butternut squash with Smucker's strawberry

preserves waiting to be put in the oven. Without much forethought, I sat down at the table and took apart a disposable Bic razor. Then I brought my right hand quickly down on my arms, shoulders, chest, and belly. I did it carefully at first, almost with civility. I didn't want to cause any trouble. Then I started spastically moving around in circles to the music, wiping the blood onto the letter and speaking in a level voice to the invisible girl: “This one's for you, hon.”

Thirty minutes later, relatively at ease, I sat in the bathtub, watching the water grow rosy. My skin stung but I soaped away the mess, cleaned up, and went to bed. That evening, I dreamt of three dung snakes devouring my insides, but the next day, I felt calm, less tense. *I can do this*, I thought. *I can keep this secret to myself*. I wandered through Copley Square for a few days, going to matinees and then coming home and self-mutilating.

I crumbled when I returned home to Guilford for a weekend visit two weeks later. After my father asked me how life was going, I found myself trying to eat my parents' couch in the living room. I remember thinking that if I could just get the whole couch inside my mouth, I could muffle the screams and stop that terrible sound from emerging. It's peculiar what comes back, the tiny things, but for me it was the slightest touch of my nine-year-old sister Julie's hand on my back. “Why is he so sad?” she said to my mother.

Later that night, I was in the emergency room at St. Raphael's in New Haven and the doctor asked me to take off my shirt and soon my father was saying, “Okay, okay now.” I remember the silence, that long pause as they both checked out my body with the various wounds. From there, I was hospitalized for a month and a half at St. Raphael's and discharged, followed by two inpatient stays in the summer and early autumn.

With each cutting spree, the wounds grew deeper and more serious and I grew more determined to damage. Incidents were followed by brutal shame and extra doses of self-loathing. For nine years, from Vermont to Kansas to Chicago, I tried halfway houses, top-tier hospitals, electroconvulsive therapy, and some mediocre

clinics. Eventually, I tried to live on my own back in Connecticut, but only lasted two months. I felt doomed, stupid, and embarrassed that I couldn't stop the mutilation, but at the same time, somewhere in my mind, it didn't feel so far away from beautiful. I was young and sick and I thought I could handle it. I was pretty wrong.

The night before I moved to PFTL in 1997, I sat in a Branford apartment and removed eight cheap Black and Mild cigars from a plastic case. I had started burning a few months before—it was less messy than cutting, showed more control, I thought. (Now available at stores everywhere: smokes! A new and improved way to wound without detection!) I hated smoke, even from pot, and felt the same about cigars, but I learned to enjoy the smell of my skin being singed. My burnt flesh smelled faintly of freezer burn, of danger and dead hair. I decided that ashtrays, generally, maintained good attitudes toward the whole smoking process. They didn't pull away but simply stood their ground.

The next morning, with suitcase and sleeping bag in tow, I rang the buzzer at PFTL with my feet and toes smothered in blisters and Neosporin. I was thirty-one years old and a social worker had recommended PFTL to me, which was a good thing. I didn't have anywhere else to go.

On one of my first days at the home, a large African-American staff person told me and six other men how important it was to scrub our crotches with Dial soap each morning. We had been rounded up and brought into a windowless office just above the kitchen and told how to wash properly. "There've been numerous complaints about malodorous males from guests and some female clients," he explained. "We've gone ahead and purchased soap and deodorant—please, take your pick and get to scrubbing." With that, he offered a collection of Dial and Right Guard deodorant products in a Rite-Aid plastic bag and we passed it around sheepishly. So concluded my first group meeting at PFTL, for daily living skills.

It was dangerous to have the world feel so distant, and all I did

when I first arrived was wallow. The staff tried to cheer me up but my cycle was simple: sleep, medication, therapy, eat, *World News Tonight*, *Wheel of Fortune*, medication. A damp, well-worn couch in the main room was all I wanted. Not a woman, or a book, or an autumn afternoon with rag sweaters and a football game at the Yale Bowl; just the spongy couch with the miniature pheasants scampering across the fabric. I remember lifting my face off that couch and gazing out the first-floor window into the real world zipping past seven feet away. There were honking city buses, cherry-red trolleys, tricked-out Lexuses blasting hip-hop, and untouchable Yalies with their ripe buttocks. There were homeless men in bug-eyed sunglasses and dirty dreadlocks, heaving themselves against broken grocery carts with chattering cans and bottles. Everyone moving right by, not even glancing over. Leaving me and the others behind.

The tricky part about describing my decade at PFTL is that good people—interesting, creative, and talented people—were overshadowed by the more acute, psychotic bullies dominating the place. Yes, there was camaraderie, warmth, and understanding of one another's wounds during my stay. But there were also folks who'd stomp into the main room and inform us that they'd just defecated on the back stairs or did bong hits across the street. (Granted, one might argue that I was just as disturbing to the environment with my self-mutilation.) One evening, during our snack time in the main kitchen, a very troubled, six-foot-three Syrian with wraparound sunglasses tormented a frail fellow from New Jersey.

"You little shit!" he screamed. "End the occupation! Leave Israel or we'll return you to the ovens!"

How do I not describe that? How do I not mention it? I have a great friend still living there, and there were some nights of defiant celebration over illness, some lively moments. But I can't lie. The ten years were excruciating, scary, and hard.

There was a very brave fifty-nine-year-old worker named Daisy, with a heavy Congolese accent, who screamed right back at the annoyingly disturbed when they encroached during meal times.

Bruce, a forty-nine-year-old client who hurt his shoulder attacking a state hospital worker years ago, repeated questions incessantly. One night, he wanted to be assured that his dinner was saved for him.

"They're saving it, right?" he said, turning back and forth around the doorway. Doing spins on one leg.

"Absolutely, Bruce," Daisy said, "but you can't ask me any-more—I got mouths to feed."

"Saving it, right?" he said, twisting around the entrance to the kitchen. In and out, in and out of the doorway.

"You must leave the kitchen, you must leave my kitchen!" she hollered and Bruce, struggling with paranoid schizophrenia, stuck his tongue out.

"Bruce, please leave," she repeated. Then: "GET OUT!"

At that point, Bruce, who stood several inches below six feet and weighed about 165 pounds, quickly ran across the room and threw a few roundhouse punches, catching Daisy in the side of the head. When she hit the floor, he kicked her legs, screaming her name. I looked around. My peers stared, openmouthed. The meal was burning—I think it was Sloppy Joes—and he was hitting her again. It took me about eight seconds to react but I eventually dragged him off Daisy and threw him on the ground. He quickly bounced up, cursed, and ran away. Ten seconds later he returned and shouted, "Save my dinner, please!"

Another client helped Daisy up, and she plopped down on a chair and held her face. "Ah, the pleasures of working with the infirm," she said, trying to grin. Her ebony cheek was bruised, her hair as tight and gray as ever. Bruce ended up in the emergency room and Daisy went right on with her shift. We ate quietly that evening, all on edge. Other than the infirm comment, Daisy didn't talk about it again. I thought that was pretty extraordinary of her.

They held art therapy in a finished, low-ceilinged basement on Saturday mornings. I'm exactly six feet and had to bend over in one section down there. It sometimes felt like I was going to be crushed,

like that subterranean world of despair and malaise had grown so heavy that the building was caving in on us. A crooked billiard table was set against the wall and clients' artwork hung on a clothesline. Wild, abstract paintings, delicate still lifes of fruit and crucifixes, lonely figures surrounded by black-eyed Susans and bursting, purple daisies dangled from wall to wall. With the hues and shapes being crafted on those mornings, the room transformed itself into a beautiful refuge, a safe nook of color.

I think self-mutilators feel emotionally dead or numb and they hurt themselves to ease their pain, to see that they are alive. To feel anything. Or they have trauma in their past, and they can't cope with strong emotion, so they wound. Emotional pain is the common thread. But each person's wounds are specific, each psyche a mishmash of slights, memories, horrors. Some cut, some burn, some break fingers and bones, some punch themselves, some pick at themselves, some pull out all their hair. The list is lengthy.

Cutting and burning myself never brought me closer to that dreamy, brief fugue that I experienced the first time. It also isolated me from those I loved. An old therapist had said that most nonlethal self-injurers burn out of the habit by the time they hit thirty. They move on, they grow up. They find a mate, a passion, a life. I hung on until I was forty. Toward the end of my troubles, I clung to them desperately. It had been who I was for a decade and a half. Where was I to go if not to some new hospital, where I'd meet another collection of tragic, harried women (they were mostly women) who mangled their bodies like me? What would it mean for me to stop?

When they stopped giving allowance money at PFTL, I brought my used CDs to Cutler's to get cash for implements. After several trips to the hospital with that funding, the home took away my music. When the tunes disappeared, I started trading my books; parting with Freud was a piece of cake but John Cheever and Kate Chopin were painful. I traipsed down to the Book Trader Café with *The Essential*

Book of Poetry beneath my arm.

"You sure you want to unload this?" the cashier said. "It seems like a keeper."

"You know how the economy is," I mumbled weakly, ashamed and unable to make eye contact. I have sunk to a new low, I thought, but quickly pocketed the six dollars and hustled over to purchase blades. Then I waited for the precise time to mark myself up.

A doctor with a white goatee and spectacles eventually reached me; a former English teacher, he was a reserved and bookish man who always dressed in linen and earthy colors. I had started seeing him just after the turn of the millennium, and he worked on basic things: my breathing, going for walks, remaining honest. I thought he was nuts.

"You are a blessed man underneath all that fat, medication, and sickness," he said to me one day.

"Blessed?" I said. "I'm forty, women are repelled by me, I'm obese, and I'm surrounded by nonlinear conversation at dinner."

"Perhaps, but you have the power to correct your delusions," he said, leaning forward. "Many people are unable to do that."

"Okay."

"I'm going to call you Duplicitous Dave for the deception you've practiced," he said. "You've got to be aware of when you're fooling others and when you fool yourself."

"Duplicitous Dave?" I said.

"Watch how this works," he said, standing. "You purchase the razors one week before you injure yourself, right?"

"Sometimes," I said.

"In between that week and the self-mutilation, every time you see a staff member, every time you talk to family, every time you come see me, you've lied."

"Okay," I said.

"You must see this," he said gently. "You don't buy your razors

in a fit of blinding rage. You buy them with a plan. Perhaps you get nuts while you're cutting, but it's preventable." He stopped and sat back in his chair. "Your healing is doable, if you stay honest. Call me about it. Pull aside a staff person and get honest with yourself."

The last time was Halloween morning, 2005. I had gone to the Shell station several days before and purchased cigarettes. On the way to see my therapist, I stopped and sat on a bench outside of the Yale Law School. I quickly put two packs of Merits out on my forearm. As soon as the first cigarette touched my skin, I knew I was done. No relief or dreamy, stoned groove arrived; just shame, embarrassment. Quickly, for the fuck of it, I mashed the rest of them onto my arm.

Oddly nostalgic as I watched the blisters form, I studied the Yalies hustling to class. They looked determined, voluptuous, and vital. I wondered how many slip through the cracks. How many don't make it? I got up and walked toward my appointment with my doctor, passing the Grove Street Cemetery. I looked up at the entrance and read the engraving: THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED. A few senior citizens were walking through the cemetery, getting a tour.

It felt as simple and complex as unlocking a sliding, plexiglass door that I'd been trying to slam my way through for many years. As I walked down Grove Street to make the tail end of my appointment, I felt very aware of how rapidly time flew. How much was stolen from me and how much of it I'd wasted.

"You've lost another opportunity to right yourself," my therapist said when he saw my arm. "You'll have to wait until you're out of the hospital to prove you mean business."

He called the ambulance and we waited together for the EMTs. When they arrived, they joked about the Red Sox, quickly dabbing some Bacitracin on me. We walked through the hallway. People stared, then glanced away, ducked back into their offices. I wanted to explain that I wasn't really a mess, that this wasn't me. But they'd turned back to their lives, and soon I climbed into the ambulance.

A couple embraced inside a café across the street. The girl's breasts strained against her ivory sweater and the man laughed. They turned and looked my way.

"You having a tough time, pal?" the technician asked me as he strapped me into the stretcher.

"I've been worse," I said. I wasn't hospitalized again.

Positive things became possible, reachable. I volunteered at a neighborhood soup kitchen and then found a job counseling peers at Connecticut Mental Health Center. I moved to the apartment side of PFTL and acquired my own room. I began to shave alone for the first time in thirteen years, without a staff person observing. Taking the blade and using it for how it was intended felt, at first, lascivious, a panicked thrill. It was like I was betraying so many old friends with that act. It took a while for everything to turn, but things do take me a while. A year and a half after burning myself on Halloween, I started looking for new apartments.

I left PFTL on August 10, 2007 and I've only been back to visit twice. There's a feeling of crushing weight when I'm there. It tumbles onto me like a soggy wool blanket, so I stay away. They've fixed up the place nicely, given it a fresh look. Touched up the trim around the doors with periwinkle blue paint. There are new people, new staff, but the longtime folks remain. I have a fantastic friend living there, working through his own struggles. The bottom line, some would argue, is growth. Did I improve there?

"Stop your complaining, why don't you!" I imagine a staff member yelling now. "It worked for you, don't you see? You're out, you're better now, aren't you?"

So I am. Yes, I am.