

Goulash

Note: *I had the occasion to see this piece performed live by two of my best friends as part of a school-sponsored festival of new student work, of which I was co-curator. The performance sort of put me on an emotional roller coaster and, like most emotional roller coasters, led to furious rewrites.*

My father could only see his kids for six weeks every summer. Even now, I can't account for why, in the summer of 1999, he chose to send my brother and me to sleepaway camp for two of those weeks. He came into my room late one night and told me that, this time tomorrow, I would be in a wood cabin with no electricity, surrounded by water vapor and strangers. He told me to pack a bag. He told me to put insect repellent in the bag. I, with fifth-grade logic, decided that now would be a great time to hide under the bed and pretend that I was dead. But despite my most sincere objections, Dad drove us the three hours or so up to the Michigan boonies, threw us out of the car, and executed a three point turn before I even had time to ask if the enormous signpost in front of me really said "MUCC Camp."

At Michigan United Conservation Camps Camp (sic), we learned how to shoot, then how to aim. We learned how to cast a line, and build a fire. That was the bare minimum; Dathan, our cabin leader, was not impressed with the bare minimum. Dathan was bald on top with a long, platinum blond ponytail. Dathan carried garlic powder with him everywhere and put it on everything that he ate. Dathan's name was really Dathan. And Dathan sought to teach us a little more at camp: something about people, and how to get along with each other. The first step toward world peace, according to Dathan, is camaraderie. And the first step toward camaraderie is nicknames.

He doled them out with what I considered then to be a little too much enthusiasm. Pretty Boy, for the kid who brought hair products with him in a bag wrapped in a sock. Senior, for the kid two years older than the rest of us inexplicably placed in our cabin. Shaggy, for that kid that looked just like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo. Clone, for the kid who looked just like Pretty Boy. For my brother, Gary: Coleman. For me, Wynn. I made the mistake of asking for an explanation, and Dathan looked around the cabin to make sure everyone was listening before he explained that Erin Wynn was the name of his first girlfriend. Laughter rolled across the cabin, lingering a little longer with a heavier, sweaty kid who hadn't received his name yet. He gave me a look that made me understand what a gift feels like before a five-year-old tears into it. I had seen it many times before. I had found the bully. Unfortunately, the bully had also found me.

I had been picked on my entire life. I was the first kid in my age group to get glasses, the last one to stop raising his hand in class, the first one to understand algebra, the last one to understand that making friends with teachers wasn't nearly as valuable, socially, as playing sports at recess. Being bullied had become just another condition of my life, like hating the outdoors. In second grade, Darrington flushed my homework down the toilet so regularly that I just started copying it down twice. In 4th grade, Scenario taught me, in his own way, how to open a locker from the inside. And now, this kid was going to teach me about something I hadn't thought about before. He was going to teach me about blood. His name, as handed down by Dathan on that very first day, was Goulash.

Goulash started with the normal bully fare. He would flat tire me in line on the way to the mess hall, or push me into walls as he passed by, or rat me out to

counselors when I fled to the trees with a book to escape physical activity. Goulash couldn't go much further than that; unlike school, at camp I was able to stay close to my brother most of the time. Gary is only a little older than me, but much bigger; big enough to keep Goulash, who was actually slightly younger than both of us, at bay. In the beginning of the week, before Gary made other friends, we were inseparable. Goulash had to keep his distance. But my brother is an extremely outgoing and gregarious person. He spent most of the first day drawing a map of possible locations of the girls' section of the camp and by the third day he was making daily and nightly excursions, leaving me to fend for myself. I hid in the cabin, I varied my routes to and from activities, and I never talked to anyone about what was happening. I did what I was supposed to do.

By Wednesday of the second week, Gary was barely around and Goulash had taken notice. That was the day that he took the kid gloves off. First, he held the shower door closed while I was inside, so that I couldn't get to my clothes. He convinced, maybe coerced, some of our cabinmates to move one of the bunks to hold the door while he went to breakfast. I, of course, had to wait until the cabin was empty before I attempted to climb out, naked. By the time I got to the mess hall, there was no food left. Later, at lunch, Goulash knocked my tray on the floor, spilling mac and cheese (the only food I would eat from the mess hall) all over the tile. I had to stay late to clean up. When I finally got back to my bunk, there were no sheets. My pillow was gone. My towel was gone. My luggage was gone. My insect repellent was gone. Everything I owned was gone. It took me a while to figure out that these items had been hidden all over the cabin; in the bathroom, in other peoples' bags, even outside under the cabin stairs. Goulash was up in his bunk,

watching me. He seemed nervous, like a pitcher during a perfect game. Goulash laughed whenever I bent down to look under a bunk. In an uncharacteristic outburst, I whispered, "Why do you have to be such an asshole?" I meant for my voice to be inaudible. It was not inaudible.

Like any game, the tormentor-tormented relationship has rules. They were there to make the game more interesting and, more importantly, to make sure no one got hurt. As a bully, you don't leave marks. You take care to keep the injury level low. This ensures that no punitive action is taken against you. Adults are just as lazy as you; they don't want to do work if they can avoid it; as long as you don't give parents anything to be concerned about, none of the teachers that see you punch your target in the back of the head in class are going to do anything about it. As a victim, you keep quiet. Don't tell any adults what's going on, don't talk back to the bully in any way. Stay down. Don't fight back. Your average playground tyrant doesn't beat up nerds because he hates them. He does it to feel powerful, and he does it for fun. As long as you don't make him angry, he has no reason to end his fun by putting you in the hospital. Calling the bully an asshole under my breath was an amateur's mistake, the perfect example of giving him a reason.

Goulash moved very quickly for a kid named Goulash. He was on top of me before I even got up off of my hands and knees. He lifted me up and threw me back to the ground, repeatedly. By this time, we weren't the only ones in the cabin. Pretty Boy, Clone, even Shaggy had dripped in, but they knew better than to intervene. No matter how one-sided an altercation appears, when you're eleven, it's never a beating. It's a fight, and every kid knows what to do when there's a fight going on; you make a circle of bodies, you chant, and you wait for it to be over. Notably, my

brother was absent. Notably, Dathan was absent. This wasn't like school, where you were surrounded by adults, where it was only a matter of time until a teacher saved you. There wasn't an end in sight. Luckily, I had enough experience to have developed the ultimate defense: escapism. I went to a different mental place. While I curled up on the ground, I thought about anything but Goulash throwing all of my possessions at me. I thought about what I would do when I got home, or how Dad managed to execute such an insane three point turn without clipping me, or anything except what was happening to me, and how everyone was watching, and how no one was doing anything, and how no one ever seemed to do anything.

Eventually, Goulash had me by my collar, off my feet and against the wall between two bunks. This is usually the part where the bully gets bored and lets up, but something happened this time that had never happened before: we made eye contact. It was completely accidental, and neither of us wanted it, but neither could look away. His face was filling my entire field of vision. I held my breath. His eyes were green. I had no idea what was going to happen.

The hidden truth behind bullying is that it's just as humiliating for the bully as it is for the victim. The bully feels compelled to bully, but doesn't really want to. Maybe he has problems at home, or maybe he was actually the target at his own school. But bullying isn't something you choose to do. The only kid in that cabin who had it worse than me was Goulash. The scrawny kids all feared him, thinking that they would end up like me. The older kids called him a fuckup, called him fat, made fun of him for picking on someone so small. The force inside him that caused him to lash out at me just fed itself. He can't help but pursue me, even if it means making everyone else hate him. And I simply wasn't strong enough to stand up for

myself. We could have kissed, our faces were so close. I swallowed.

It was Goulash that broke the silence. "What are you gonna do, spit in my face?" He pushed these words through his teeth. "Come on, I *dare* you. I *dare* you to spit in my face."

It was the eye contact. It had forced me to come back to reality. If you manage to stay unaware of who you are or what's happening to you, it's easy to do nothing. But now I could feel the eyes of the cabin on me. I knew they heard him. I knew what they would think, if I did nothing. In that moment, I saw them all as bullies. They were all just waiting me to show weakness, to prove that I was really nothing, before they would all pounce on me. Things would just get worse. All of a sudden, there were stakes. I had something to prove. Before I knew I was doing it, and long before I knew that it was wrong, I spit as hard as I could into Goulash's left eye.

I instantly regretted it. I noticed that Goulash's face was bright red. I couldn't tell what was sweat and what was spit. And maybe he was crying. I was crying. Somehow, we had tumbled together into this impossible situation. It was like neither of us had a choice. I cried because I realized that, whatever I did, neither of us could have really won. Goulash looked betrayed. I had broken the rules that kept us safe, and we both knew what had to happen now. I had fought back. I had stood up. Goulash had to show everyone he wasn't playing around. Goulash couldn't just take that from a fag like me. Goulash would have to punch me right in the face, as hard he could, maybe twice. He would have to break my nose. There would have to be blood. He would probably get sent home from camp, and I would walk around, nose off-center, for the next couple weeks, but everyone would know how things had happened. I shook my head back and forth until my glasses fell off--my mom

couldn't afford to replace them. Goulash pulled his right fist back.

Senior came up behind Goulash and grabbed him. Nobody expected this to happen; not even Senior expected this to happen. He tore Goulash off of me and threw him onto the bunk to his right, my left. I slumped so that I was seated against the wall, and instinctively grabbed for my glasses, so they wouldn't get trampled. Goulash screamed, which was normal, but it was too loud to be driven by frustration, and too guttural to be triumphant. He wasn't getting up. I looked over to the bunk where Goulash had landed and noticed that there a dark red stain was spreading across the white sheet. *Who spilled Kool-Aid?* No, it spread too slowly to be Kool-Aid. I put my glasses back on.

Goulash's head had scraped against an exposed nail on the bottom of the top bunk. His face and his hands were covered in blood. I looked at my hand, and there was blood there too. I thought about the eye contact, and the betrayal, and the rules, and about how I had broken the rules.

Pretty Boy had enough presence of mind to get Dathan, who had been outside the cabin the whole time smoking a cigarette. I had no idea that blood made people move so fast. He cleared everyone out except for Goulash and Senior. I left before anyone could give Dathan the story.

Ambulances came and went. I had stuck my neck between the posts of a gate, not far at all, as it turns out, from our cabin. For the first five or ten minutes, the rest of the kids were gathered around me, trying to get me to explain exactly what had happened. They thought it was cool. I reconsidered the wisdom of lodging my neck inextricably between two fence posts. On the one hand, the pain it was causing me was making me feel like I was in some way making up for my betrayal. On the

other hand, the other boys wouldn't stop asking me about what happened, and all I wanted to do was to forget. Once I started thinking of them as part of my punishment I felt better. As a kid I stuck my head into fence posts, loose chain-link fences, and stair banisters at every opportunity, but at this moment it was particularly appropriate.

Eventually, everyone filed back into the cabin. Goulash was gone and the sheets were changed. I wasn't talking. I stayed in the fence until my brother came back from another afternoon spent in the girls' cabins. He pulled me out by the calves. I thought my head was going to come right off.

"Why are you outside by yourself?"

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

"I spit in Goulash's face, then he fell, then he started to bleed and I came out here."

The popular view on bullying is black and white; bullies and victims, evil and good. But the passage of time has only destabilized my own perspective. All I'm sure about now is that I'm not innocent. Bullying has always and will always happen whenever you put people, especially kids, together. When a practice is so commonplace, it's pointless to try to place blame on any individual involved. For bullying, we can blame society or we can blame no one. But if we're trying to understand what went wrong here, what made this day different from every other day, the answer is simple. I was the one that broke the rules. I was the one who put the relationship between Goulash and myself into unfamiliar and dangerous territory. Whether or not the rules of our game were fair, they were there for a

reason.

Goulash didn't come back. There were only two days left of camp anyway. Before I finished packing my bag, I went back over to the bunk and checked for the nail. I wanted to check it for evidence, something to assure me it was real. I thought maybe I'd keep the bloody nail. Of course, they had removed it. There was nothing left of the blood on the bunk, or the ground, or anywhere else.

The Onychophage

Note: *Writing this essay put me into a negative feedback loop of neurotic behavior (my anxiety about my habits causes them to intensify, which causes the habits to increase in frequency and intensity, which augments the anxiety, ad nauseum) for about a month in the summer of 2009. It was great for my writing. "The Onychophage" was part of my Summer Arts Fellowship project and my BA thesis, and won the David Blair McLaughlin Prize for Special Skill in the Form of English Prose at the end of my 4th year of college.*

Here's a quick list of excuses that I have used to explain the appearance of one or more of my fingernails:

- "I slammed it in a door."
- "Guess I clipped that one a little too short!"
- "I was bitten by a dog."
- "When I sleep, I scrape my nails across the headboard."
- "Oh, you know, it's just one of those things."

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I've been putting my fingers into my mouth since birth, and I've been biting them ever since I've had teeth. My mother says she passed her habit on to me. When I decided to try to quit, she was my first source of advice; she had kicked the habit somehow, before I was old enough to form permanent memories. I asked her for her methods and she gave me what she refers to as a "fail-proof" two step process. 1) Start wearing Lee Press-On Nails, and 2) schedule a biweekly appointment with a nail technician at Lifestyles Nail and Hair Salon up the road so that you have

someone to shame you into good behavior, finger-wise. It was clear from the start that this fail-proof two step process was non-viable in my case. All the same, I did consent to one trip to Lifestyles. My NT's first glance at my middle finger prompted in her a visible start and some sort of sharp verbal expression, like "What happened?" or maybe just "Oh, my."

Options for self-rehabilitation, given the restriction of not wanting to deal with high-level cosmetology, were limited. The most common suggestion by far is of the bitter-tasting nail additive variety, clear polishes with names like "Nibble-no-More" or, my personal favorite, "Control It!" I've heard of these before. I've tried them before. They served less as an impetus to change my habits than as a barrier to the execution of my daily routine. Over time, I stopped even relating the two. The application of the additive became as common and mindless to me as the application of socks. The bitter taste became as ubiquitous as the nail-biting. After about a month of this, it occurred to me to call my doctor, in order to explore the cause of this constant bitter tinge in my mouth. I took one second of silent meditation, then decided that "Control It!" was not working as well as I had hoped.

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I find the explanation that most textbooks give of the fingernails' form and function severely lacking. For example, most diagrams don't even indicate the free edge, which is the part of the nail that extends above the nail bed. I haven't had a free edge on any of my nails for as long as I can remember. Instead, for all of my nails, the first centimeter of nail bed is exposed. The top of the nail is uneven and

ragged. The skin around it is red and raw; it's too new to be the outer layer. Dried blood accumulates on the edges of my nails from time to time. It's a dark enough red to register at first as black, as if that part of my finger had died. Although, I don't experience as much blood loss as you may expect from tearing into my own flesh daily. I've learned how far down my finger I can go before I start to hit blood vessels. Even if my vigilance wavers, it's nothing major. I worry more about my white clothing than my fingers. I do fear, though, that I've lost some feeling in my fingers, notably the tips, where they're supposed to be most sensitive. Recently, a friend of mine managed to glimpse my left index in an especially brutalized state. "Doesn't that hurt?" My response: "No. Should it?"

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There are some obvious consequences of nail biting; generally speaking, they're cosmetic, and I've learned to live with them. Hiding the fingers themselves was more a matter of misdirection than anything else. For example: at restaurants, diners, bars, I always hold my glass with fingers curled inward, with my nails touching the glass itself, to that no one drinking across from me would get a substantive look at them. This sort of approach, though, didn't fly when it came to obfuscating the actual act of biting. Shoving your fingers into your mouth gives off an air of childishness, as if you've just been called into the principal's office. Nothing kills a job interview or date faster than reminding whomever it is you're trying to impress of their little brother.

When it comes to trying to quit, I've had no success with any method that I

would consider to be viable in the long term. If ever I have stopped biting my nails for any significant amount of time (a day, a week), it has been because I have replaced onychophagia with another compulsive behavior. My first serious attempt to quit centered around a large box of mint toothpicks. I was eleven. The box went with me everywhere, even though it was about as large as a Gideon Bible. A toothpick was in my mouth constantly; in school, at home, in bed, while I ate or brushed my teeth. The toothpicks were both inconspicuous oral distractors and pointy instruments of penance in case I gave in to temptation. This went on for about 6 months, until my mother intervened; I had started swallowing the toothpicks whole, as opposed to throwing them out. This, according to Mom, posed a serious threat to the various linings of my digestive system.

Most recently, I've been flossing upwards of a dozen times a day. I keep a bag of pre-strung floss picks in my desk drawer, and I usually grab two or three whenever I leave my room. At first, the floss would come out of my mouth with as much blood as plaque, but now the bleeding has all but stopped. This is, my dentist tells me, a sign of very healthy gums; it's reassuring that this new compulsion, at least, has independent utility. The downside is that flossing anywhere but the bathroom makes you appear even more mentally unwell than biting your nails. The only thing more repulsive to a potential employer/romantic interest than someone thrusting their own fingers into their mouth is seeing the inside of that same mouth being probed by a piece of string. Gum health is a non-factor. Additionally, I'm almost positive that I removed a filling during a battle with some insidious food product, an apple or a strip of beef jerky. All this to say: placeholders were never the solution to the problem.

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I decided to do some quick calculations: adult fingernails grow at an average rate of about .9 inches per year. I've been biting and consuming my nails since I was about 6 months old. I assumed that all of my fingernails were, on average, about an inch wide. So, .9 inches per year per finger · 21 years · one inch thick · 10 fingers = 189in^2 of keratin consumed by me over my entire lifetime. I've never been able to visualize measurements like that in my head, so I went outside with a tape measure and drew a 9x21 inch rectangle on the sidewalk in sidewalk chalk. I imagined laying a thin sheet of myself over this rectangle that I had drawn. It was big enough for me to set a nice meal in. I was horrified to find that my sharpest emotion was disappointment. I expected it to be bigger. This was, after all, my life's work, and I wasn't satisfied with a rectangle almost exactly the size of two pieces of notebook paper. I started to do some quick recalculations. I hadn't taken into account the faster nail growth rate for children, which could increase the results by something on the order of 85%, nor had I taken into account racial or gender or hereditary or diet or seasonal issues, nor did I take into account the significant amount of surrounding skin and cuticle that I've also consumed. I would imagine that, given these outside factors, the amount of biomass that I've actually 'phaged is about 2.5 times what I had drawn on the sidewalk. This realization brought an immediate feeling of pride, with a strong what-kind-of-ill-individual-is-proud-of-this aftertaste.

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I was sitting on the Green Line train in Chicago, looking to get a sense of how common nail-biting is. My initial finding was that I am the only person in Chicago who bites their nails. I had to stay on the train for half an hour before I found even one other onychophage, and it was a little boy, maybe 7 or 9 years old. He was playing his Game Boy with one hand and eating the other. His mother was with him. I kept waiting for her to slap his hand, like my own mother would have done, and did do, in this exact situation. I never once thought that she wouldn't put a stop to it in some way. Maybe slapping was too old fashioned; a strong word, or maybe she would remove the Nintendo from the boy's vice grip. After 5 minutes, I just wanted her to get it over with already. After 10 minutes, I was wondering whether it would be acceptable to approach Mom about maybe having a word with her son. After 20 minutes, I was overcome with the strong compulsion to walk across the train and slap his hand myself. I was never given the opportunity, because the two of them were only on the train for another two or three minutes anyway. Mom took one of the Tiniest Compulsive's hands in hers as they walked off the platform to the stairs, and the boy chose to use his free hand for gaming, not sustenance.

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Are there support groups for people like me? I want to walk into room 108 of the learning annex and say, "Hi, my name is Aaron, and I'm an onychophage." I want a sponsor, 17 years clean, to call whenever I get the urge, to tell me to take it one day at a time. I researched potential places to get this sort of attention, and, not

surprisingly, came up very short. There exist all-BFRB (body-focused repetitive behaviors: see below) support groups, but none of them are particularly local. And besides, I feel uncomfortable about being lumped into the same category as the certifiably ill. Going to their meeting space and attempting to identify with them (and, worse, having them identify with me) would force me to face something that I don't think I'm ready to face. That I may have a disorder, that I may be some sort of -maniac.

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After a little bit of research, I was able to put a name to my constant companion: onychophagia. From the Greek -phagos, meaning "one who eats", and the Latin onych-, meaning claw. I hated the name. It sounded barbaric. Onychophagia is one of those compulsive disorders that isn't dangerous or common enough to have earned its own classification. Instead, onychophagia is generally accepted to be a sub-disorder of a group called BFRBs, or body-focused repetitive behaviors. BFRBs as a category are correlated with body-dysmorphic disorders, or BDDs. A BDD sufferer sees something wrong with their body that they can't fix, and this self-perception threatens their ability to operate in society; sometimes, a BDD sufferer develops a BFRB as a coping/compensation/perceived-body-rectification mechanism, to take action against their perceived flaw. There are a theoretically infinite number of different kinds of BFRDs, but so far only three have names. There's the aforementioned onychophagia, trichotillomania (compulsive hair-pulling), and dermatillomania (compulsive skin-picking). I'll be the first to admit that

nail biting is the tamest of these three by far.

The idea of trichotillomania is sort of hard for me to handle, so I was lucky that all of the images of victims that I perused just looked like men and women with relatively advanced cases of alopecia areata. There's nothing in the static image of a person with a large section of their hair missing that suggests that they're pulling it out themselves, or that it was pulled out at all. Trichotillomaniacs may or may not consume the hair upon removal, but most psychiatrists agree that any consumption that does take place is more of an evidence removal/embarrassment issue than of any deeper, possibly oro-sexual motivators.

Trich is similar to nail-biting in that the biggest dangers are mental--embarrassment and general obsessive-behavior-related issues (feelings of powerlessness, confusion, etc) are common, but serious physical ailments (outside of, well, hair and nail loss) are rare. This is not the case with dermatillomania. DTM is by far the meanest of the named BFRDs. This isn't just pulling at your skin lightly. A dermatillomaniac pulls the skin completely off (again, with the possibility of consumption). At best, this creates a tender spot and a red mark, and at worst a deep, bleeding wound that resembles a cold sore or a particularly heinous bout of acne. And unlike trich, the pulling here is non-localized; the pictures I saw showed people with 10-20 open wounds on their arms and legs, with dozens more either in the process of healing or of scarring indelibly over.

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Nail biting is almost universally considered a nervous habit: brought on by

some external stimuli, some way of comforting oneself through an emotionally rough time. This hasn't been my experience. I don't bite my nails when I'm anxious, I just bite them all the time. At least, this was the idea. I've started to think that the ubiquity of my gnawing implies not that it has nothing to do with anxiety, but that I am anxious all the time. It's not a leap to think that whatever anxiety motivates the `phagia is below the surface; not even the act itself is entirely conscious. Sometimes, I won't even notice what I've been doing to myself until I taste blood. And, during extended periods of stress, my rate of consumption will increase without my notice. I'll look down at my nails and they'll be unrecognizable as such and I'll have no recollection of when or how it happened.

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I do visual scans at intervals of about 7-10 seconds. If a nail is getting long, I'll bite it down. If a dent or bump has formed in the surface of the nail, I'll scrape it with my front teeth until it's smooth. If there's a ragged section of skin or cuticle, I'll snag it in between my canines and tear it out. This process repeats itself throughout the day (or week or month or lifetime) until the nail in question gets too short or brittle. That nail is left alone until it returns to relative normalcy, at which point a small imperfection will restart the process. At any given time, I'm only really working on 6 or 7 of my nails. For example, my left thumbnail took some serious damage during a recent emotional crisis and hasn't really recovered, and so has earned a respite from visual scans, biting, etc.

I understand that referring to a compulsive disorder as "my life's work" makes

me appear insane. By way of explanation: when I was young I had many chores assigned to me, and I rarely did any of them. I had to change these habits when I came to college and was all of a sudden responsible for my own laundry, room cleaning, etc. The more I forced myself to engage with various cleaning agents and brush-topped implements, the better I felt. This, I reasoned, was the rumored Pride of a Job Well Done. But stranger than this new sensation was its familiarity. It's how I felt after a long, aggressive session of nail biting. Where the two feelings diverged was in the after-effects. Folding a load of laundry is a completely positive action; bringing order where there was once chaos. But the relief I feel from biting the tip of my fingernail is unwarranted, and it has a bitter aftertaste. What have I accomplished? How have I improved myself?

The answer, of course, is that I haven't. But I haven't hurt myself, either. If nail biting could kill you, I would be dead a hundred times. I don't even know what it's like to have fingernails. It seems almost inconvenient to me. Sure, opening soda cans and removing stickers doesn't involve nearly as much effort for others as it does for me, but I've never scraped my nails against anything unpleasant and had it reverberate through my skull. I have hangnails all the time, but they don't hurt. And the knowledge that, whether you like it or not, your finger will be in your mouth is a big motivator to develop good hand-washing habits. I'm not suggesting you start chomping an index as soon as possible, but this line of thinking did raise in me another question: how long do you have to have a disorder before it becomes the new order? It's possible that curing my onychophagia would create the same something-is-off feeling in me as developing onychophagia would in an otherwise normal person. Which brings me to a third a final question: wouldn't it be easier to

forget the whole thing and just accept myself for who I am, borderline-compulsive disorder and all?

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I long ago abandoned conventional quitting methods in favor of the odd and the extreme. My latest ill-fated idea was to carry around with me a permanent marker. Whenever I succumbed to temptation and bit my nails, I made myself put a dot on my hand with the marker. The intended effect was threefold: to give me an ever-growing visual reminder to keep my hands out of my mouth; to provide a little embarrassment as a deterrent; and to play against my own compulsive nature by giving me impossible-to-resolve marks on my body. Instead, I couldn't stop biting my nails, and the dots marched up my hand onto my right arm, and then my left. I looked like I had an exotic disease, which I suppose wasn't far from the truth. The jaguar spots that eventually encroached upon the shoulder/neck borderlands were definitely a symptom of *something*. But I didn't feel sick. I felt nothing short of normal, which may have been the most glaring symptom of all.