

Chapter 1

The best part of the walk, in the opinion of most, was when the dense and deciduous dropped away to reveal the central meadow. Clear, still, and serene. There, milkweed stalks shot up towards the sky with a confidence that most are never able to muster. Pokeweed pollen drifted lazily to the floor, and landed on the ever-changing soil. The slick backs of beetles ached under the punishing glare of the sun.

Visitors would walk along the exterior of the meadow, where the people of the past had carved a dirt path, but never through it. No human would stoop so low as to crush those kind grasses beneath their feet. All who beheld that clearing left feeling a sort of reverence for nature. And they always came back.

On that day, early in April, Rachel was to lead a group of patients on a walk through those woods, and past the meadow that lay within it. The walk began at Mclean Hospital, the massive institution that stood adjacent to those woods. Rachel was an employee there, a so-called “mental health specialist.” The hospital and the nature near it were engaged in a sort of synergistic relationship--a give and take for which both were grateful.

The staff within the unit of the hospital from which those patients came, AB1 South, led willing patients on walks through those woods daily. The staff used the term “fresh air walk” to refer to them. “Fresh air walk” sounded appealing, and thus the

healthy staff members struggled to understand why so many of their patients refused to join them for these walks. It was hard to understand the mind of a patient.

Rachel waited in the courtyard for the group of willing patients to trickle out the door. It was odd how lovely the courtyard was. There was a vegetable garden--twin raised beds dotted with precocious seedlings. And a white gazebo that channeled a sort of refined elegance.

"Looks like Deborah is joining us for the walk today. Hey Deb!"

Deborah, the former crossing guard, had a walk that was more like a waddle. She felt old and useless, and you could see it on her face even on the best of days. No one was able to convince her otherwise. "Hey, I'm comin'"

Rachel addressed the younger woman next to her. "See, you're not the only new one on the walk today. This is Deborah's first time."

Jodie responded with a shrug. "I wish I was in bed."

Jodie was admitted to the unit one month ago, and learned Rachel's name soon after. Most patients were not so quick. "I'm just good with names," she'd claimed. And yet, the gesture felt special to her. When Jodie needed something--her morning medications, a stress ball, a new toothbrush--she went to Rachel first. Rachel was delighted to think she might be someone's favorite staff member.

And thus, her presence filled Rachel with a pleasing warmth. Rachel realized then that she'd never seen her new friend in the sunlight. The light illuminated every brown hair in the halo of frizz that framed her face. Her face was a bright, rich olive tone, and it was easy to see the dappled brown spots on her nose and cheeks. Freckles?

She was wearing the maroon, papery shirt and pants given to patients upon admission to the hospital. Patients were able to have family or friends bring in their clothes from home for daily wear, but some patients never managed to find someone to bring them those things. So, they wore those same hospital clothes every day. Within the unit, those patients were identifiable by their clothing, and thus constituted a sort of lower class. The unloved.

Persuading Jodie to go on a fresh air walk had been quite an ordeal. But it was a necessary one. Rachel wanted, or perhaps needed, Jodie to see the grounds and the nature beyond them with her own eyes. And not just see it, experience it. And not just experience it, but experience it together with her. Twin pairs of eyes taking in the richness of the natural world. They would feel tickled by the same breeze as it flitted across the tips of their noses, only to then be enveloped by the reaching maws of the forest. Together.

Accomplishing this required persuasive effort on Rachel's part.

Rachel, as a mental health specialist, was often tasked with performing "checks," in which she walked through the unit and checked on every patient therein, making sure to take note of their location on her clipboard. She used this opportunity to say hello to Jodie. Jodie didn't have any choice in the matter--she couldn't lock her door.

It was always dark in Jodie's room. The blinds were closed. The sunlight's rays were explicitly forbidden--daylight dared to enter.

"How about you join us on the fresh air walk today?"

"No thanks. But maybe I'll have the energy once these meds start working. I'm on some new ones." Jodie tilted her head in thought, then continued her thought with a

groan. “Effexor and some other one for sleep. I forgot the name. Dr. Reed loves messing with my meds.”

“Alright. But you know, participating in activities makes him and the rest of your treatment team more likely to discharge you. And I’m sure you don’t want to be here for much longer. It’s been pretty long already ”

Jodie shrugged. “Just a month or so. Anyways, I have no reason to leave. I have nothing to go home to.

Before I came here, I was bouncing in between a shelter and my ex-husband’s couch. No one will rent to me because of my history. Evictions. So I’ll stay here for as long as insurance will cover me.”

“Ex-husband?”

Jodie’s face was solid as granite. Her eyes were iron. “Yes.”

“Oh. Alright. Did you know you and I are the same age?”

“It wasn’t a divorce, by the way, it was an annulment. If that matters to you.”

“Our birthday is on the same day, but three months apart.” Rachel had noticed that while looking through Jodie’s record that morning, and was eager to share the newfound knowledge.

“Never again.” Jodie looked straight ahead, past the walls, her unfocused eyes blurry and distant.

“I think we’re talking about different things.”

“I don’t want another birthday and I don’t want another marriage. I like being alone. Actually, can I be alone right now?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.”

It was a good day for a first walk. Sunshine poured out of the sky like water. It nourished the earth, and replenished all it touched. It touched the cupped petals of the columbine, which emerged every year from dust. Notably, it was that same dust to which it returned every year as well, when the winter chill began to set into the soil, curdling the life force from which those flowers rose. Every year it was the same.

Rachel imagined that the sunlight must've felt particularly satisfying to Jodie, who'd been inside for weeks. But she knew it might burn as well. She glanced over to check on her friend.

Jodie's eyes were on the sky. She focused on clouds and treetops. It was satisfying to watch as her eyes searched and scanned the skies. Jodie had mentioned that she was originally from the Berkshires. Maybe that was where she'd learned to look to the sky.

Rachel's eyes were less ambitious. They looked to the ground. And then to the group. And then straight ahead. The group would soon be among the trees, but at that point, they were on the road, which belonged to cars. On either side, the street through which they walked was flanked by woods, trembling with life.

It became clear that one of those trees was more than just a tree, it was a perch, upon which sat a large bird. Rachel only noticed once the group of patients had stopped in their tracks, looking up to the sky. Rachel didn't find the bird particularly intriguing, but she wanted to understand.

"It's a red-tailed hawk!" It was Jodie who identified it, and her who exclaimed in delight.

“Oh! How can you tell?” Rachel figured she should mimic Jodie’s excitement. She didn’t know that Jodie was capable of such an outward display of emotion until that moment.

Jodie rattled off facts, like how the tail feathers were rust-red and how the back feathers formed a distinctive V shape.

“Huh.”

[Over the following month, there were four more hawk sightings. Jodie joined the walk every day that month. I haven’t written this yet. Maybe I won’t.]

I am dreaming, and she is there. We're on a fresh air walk, like usual, so Bob and Gillian and Arturo and Cam aren't far behind. Those are the usual walkers. But we aren't on campus, at Mclean. We're in Cambridge, my home. Or some corrupted version of it. Some version where the streets are clear and there are no cars whatsoever. It is just us. She identifies trees.

Honeylocust.

Ginkgo.

Oak.

Oak.

Oak. I knew that one before she said it. And yet, I marvel at her knowledge.

There's a red-tailed hawk. This time, I see it before she does. I don't recognize it at first. It's a juvenile, and thus doesn't possess the characteristic red tail feathers. It is beautiful, so I resolve to retrieve it from its perch and bring it to her as a gift. I call it down with just my hands. I reach out towards the sky, first cupping the sunlight and then the bird, as it glides down and lands with grace upon my palms. She sees the bird in my hands and her eyes widen. I can see the colors swimming in her irises. Brown and green and gold. Her whole face softens. As the hawk is passed from my hands to hers, our hands come in contact. But she doesn't mind. She isn't afraid to touch me in my dream. And she is happy.

The smile leaves her face as easily as it arrives. She is horrified. She's screaming. It's dead, she says. I look at the hawk in her hands. Its eyes are bulging and covered with a translucent, viscous fluid. Its distended belly has deep lacerations, from

which maggots push and squirm their way out of intestinal tissue. Its skin, exposed by a lack of feathers, bubbles and shifts, as if boiling lava is trapped beneath.

She drops to the floor. I feel a searing pain under my ribs as I watch her sob.

Anna was the head nurse that day, and also the nurse assigned to Jodie. In Rachel's eyes she was somewhat intimidating, simply by virtue of being so accomplished and put-together. She drove a car to work every day. (It didn't matter what type of car it was. It was a car and she drove it).

She was young compared to the other charge nurses, and thus had less experience. Despite this, she seemed to possess an unflinching self-assurance. It was visible in the way she walked across the room, her long cardigan flapping behind her like a sand-colored cape.

"Hey Rachel, how's it goin'?" Anna greeted her as she entered the nurse's station. She always did. Her tone was jovial yet authoritative, with a tasteful tinge of vocal fry. She was a good nurse. Many were less kind.

Rachel was at her desk, pretending to read through her notes. Beneath her carefully maintained mask, she was desperately trying to attenuate the sinking feeling within her stomach. She'd awoken that morning with her knees to her forehead, curled up and choking on her own breath. That was how she cried. She had no control over her body when she felt that way--her chest insisted on convulsing violently, as if every bit of her insides needed to escape through her mouth and nose. The sound of her own wheezing simply provoked her body even more, and she'd gain relief for a moment just for the shaking to start again a moment later. She was helpless.

Hours later, she still couldn't shake the feeling that she would never be more than she was.

Anna was at the whiteboard, writing notes to the staff. She made a list of three names, three patients who were leaving.

“Jodie is getting discharged? When, tomorrow?”

“Uh, yeah, according to the notes from her treatment team. She’s heading to Rogers for a residential. Their trauma recovery program I think? Probably for a few months.”

There was silence. “Remind me. What is Rogers again?”

Anna raised her eyebrows, as if concerned. “It’s this center in Wisconsin that does a bunch of residential programs. We send a lot of people there because they seem to have pretty good outcomes.”

“Wisconsin.” Rachel said the word as if she’d never heard it before. It slid off her tongue like oil.

I am dreaming, and she thinks I am dead. She is at my funeral. The funeral is held in the living room of my apartment, and there are only a few people there. My mother, my brothers. My high school psychology teacher. My high school psychology teacher's dog, Charlie. And my roommate from freshman year of college. In my dream, she no longer hates me. My apartment-mates are in their respective bedrooms watching YouTube or engaging in intercourse with partners (or both), and thus they miss my funeral.

I am in my own bedroom, watching the funeral proceed through my slightly-opened door. Jodie is standing at the center of the room, delivering a eulogy. Her skin is gray-white and I can see every vein in her hands. I cannot hear what she is saying, but her tears flow down her cheeks like rushing water from the reddened pools of her eyes. She is so devastated by my death.

I see her and I am happy.

Rachel is at the fish tank when Jodie arrives. The fish tank was a place of peace within the unit--a source of life within those sterile hallways. The walls in AB1 South were adorned with art created by patients. Someone, at some point in the past, decided that covering every inch of wall space with pieces of patient art would project an air of kindness. Unfortunately, it made the unit resemble a preschool in a disconcerting way.

Before Jodie had the chance to speak, Rachel admitted softly. "I know"

"I don't know what I'll do. All I have is a flight to Wisconsin."

"I can take you there. I have access to a car. I can take you if you'll drive."

Rachel was able to drive herself, but she preferred not to. It was an aversion so base to her that she had trouble describing it to others. Driving required a level of radical confidence--confidence in one's knowledge, confidence in one's skill, and confidence in others. She possessed none of those things.

And anyways, the back seat was a peaceful place. There, she could sink into the nylon upholstery and rest in comfort, knowing that someone else was doing the driving. She'd feel the seats give in to the weight of her, and let the gentle sensation of tires on rough asphalt rock her to sleep.

Jodie turned out from the fish tank to look out the window. The prison-like grating in the window obscured the view, but Jodie could still see beyond it, to a road that was seldom used. And beyond that, to the impenetrable wall of trees that separated Mclean Hospital from the outside world. "I would rather do this alone. But I'll think about it."

I am remembering, and I am with him. He is someone who was part of my life back then. He is no longer.

I ask him if I am too much for him. He says no.

I ask him if he will leave me. He says no.

I ask him if he loves me. He says yes.

I ask him if he likes me. He stares straight ahead.

I regret asking.

He doesn't return my calls for weeks. He's missed our nightly calls before, but not like this. I am lost.

I have no one, so I curl up and choke on tears every day during those weeks. First forever, all the time, then for hours, and then just for minutes. Such abject pain cannot sustain itself indefinitely, except in cases where the person completely collapses. Those cases are particularly tragic because the pain doesn't have the chance to escape your body once you are dead. I fear your descendants may suffer the consequences.

I know he is not gone forever. I know he will be back because he said he wouldn't leave me. I know he cares for me because he told me he cares for me.

One day, I finally muster up the strength to leave my home. I hear that exercise helps heal the heart, and I need to pick up some groceries anyways. But when I open the door, I see that it is raining hard. How did I not notice the rain through the windows of my bedroom? Why have I failed yet again?

I look down. There is a brown grocery bag. It is sopping wet, and as I lift it, it falls apart and its contents are clumsily cast across my feet. My books. The Mists of Avalon.

The Name of the Wind. Letters I'd wrote. A teddy bear. All the things I'd given him. And the ripe smell of mold.

How long had they been there?

In this moment, the cruelty of our world becomes frighteningly clear to me. Whatever structure was holding together my insides collapses completely. My chest deflates and my ribs cave in and my body turns in towards itself and disintegrates. This is the first time I die inside. But I soon come to understand that it will not be the last.

I am ashamed that I have never been so destroyed before in my life.

I often dream of violence. It was so present in my home growing up that it has seeped into my subconscious, and haunts me in my dreams. But when I feel that pain--when I relive those memories--I don't collapse. I don't even cry. I wake up screaming in agony.

This is a different type of pain.

Questions and notes:

- I wonder if I should change the name of the main character. She is Rachel because that was the first name that came to my head when I was writing a previous story with this same character. However, it is a little similar to my name in that both contain “chel” and I don’t want there to be such an obvious association between me and this character. I mean, I don’t want it to seem like I am just writing about myself. Maybe this is a silly concern.
- Maybe it should all just be in the first person? I have no particular reason for choosing the third person.
- I skip a lot in this section. I skip over the weeks in which Rachel and Jodie’s friendship really develops. I plan to return to that, but I wonder how much time should be spent there. Originally, I was thinking that the vast majority of this story would happen after Jodie leaves the hospital. And that the focus of the story would be their journey to Wisconsin. But maybe I should rethink that.
- I think I’ve neglected to show how psychiatric hospitals like Mclean can be pretty bad places to be. Staff can be uncaring and/or cruel. I mean to make some commentary on how those with severe mental illness are treated by society and institutions like these, but I’ve neglected to do so thus far and have now run out of time. I will expand on that in later revisions.
- The dynamic between Rachel and Jodie is going to become rather toxic and unhealthy in future chapters. The process of them becoming embroiled in this sort of mutually abusive dynamic is meant to be the crux of the story. (The nature

of their respective difficult pasts affects how they deal with others and handle relationships/emotional intimacy. In some ways, these two characters end up continuing the cycle of abuse by passing on. Because “hurt people hurt people” I guess.) Are there any hints of this dynamic building in these first pages? I know I should probably add more.