

Written Within

By Carl Seaholm

For those seeking peace of mind in a time filled with too much information, loud voices, and seemingly less and less thought.

"The worst of all deceptions is self-deception."

-Plato

"All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth."

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter 1 Self-Diagnosis

Present Day - Late August 2020

'I can't make sense of any of it,' Luke's mind echoed like a canyon projecting a mad man's voice back at him.

He already knew what his therapist was going to say. That truth, happiness, and acceptance are the keys to improving oneself. Look for what it was teaching him. Embrace it. Accept it. Enjoy the time now before it's gone.

'Blah. Blah. Blah.' Luke thought. He noticed his fingers jittering as he focused anywhere but on his therapist's repeated words, 'I wish these damn painkillers would kick in already. This session is unbearable.'

An audible sigh escaped from Luke's mouth. He rubbed his temples in hopes to reduce the mounting headache in his head.

Rain gently threw itself against the giant window pans behind him. He couldn't tell if it was soothing or annoying. Just like everything else in his life, it was a mixed bag of positive and negative emotions waging war on each other.

The rain specifically, Luke came to the conclusion, was only annoying because he had always heard how rain was supposed to be cleansing. Yet it left streaks, stains, and dust that had clumped into a soft dirt.

One of Luke's green eyes flicked up towards his therapist who seemed to be rambling to no one, *'She doesn't understand. How could anyone understand?'*

Like she could read his mind, Luke's therapist turned and placed her full attention towards Luke while she spoke, "I know you think I don't understand. It's true but it also isn't. Everyone's own issues are relative to themselves. Yet, everyone is dealing with an issue of their own, on a relative scale, equal to that of others. So in a way, I do get what you're going through. We have to take these bumps in our road and find what it's trying to teach us."

"If you understand so well, then surely you get what I'm feeling. So, why won't you tell me what happened during those weeks in Italy? You obviously know."

The therapist removed her glasses and rubbed one of her eyes briefly. She was in her late twenties and Luke wondered how far apart in age they really were.

A strand of crimson hair fell from its place behind the therapist's ear. She quickly moved it back before responding.

"I have been telling you Luke. I hate to call you out but you haven't been listening to me when I tell you. I can only conclude that you're not ready to face those things yet, which is why you selectively ignore me. And furthermore why, why the world feels out of place for you. You're simply not accepting reality."

"I told you, I don't remember you telling me anything. I don't remember anything during those weeks. Can't you just tell me again? Besides, how can I not be ready to face something when you won't tell what it is? I relearned how to walk just fine after a few months. What could be harder to face than that?"

The questions came out frustrated. Like he was fed up with this room and the questions, despite it being one of their first sessions.

Even so, he had asked the same question time and time again, 'What happened during those weeks?'

Still, Luke didn't bother to listen to a response. He knew she wouldn't tell him. He immediately returned to his hands. Only hearing a buzzing drone over incoherent chatter.

Luke would be the first to tell you that he saw through her. She needed broken people. She literally lived off of it. It paid for everything in her life. All the way from her overpriced makeup, to her clothing that screamed for New York's approval.

That's all anyone was to Luke since his accident. Mindless zealots bowing to the master that was society itself.

As though he couldn't sit still with the two weeks of memory he was missing, he shifted his suffering gaze from the palms of his hands to the window just behind him. Twisting so that his back was to his therapist but his feet still pointed towards her.

"Luke?"

It didn't matter if Luke heard her or not, he didn't *want* to hear her.

Instead he watched a cloudy sky swirl and crash into itself. Swift winds of storms sent ripples through the buildings of Manhattan. Accompanying rain gently threw itself against the glass windows of each building. Grime and dust collecting on the windows were washed away by the rain as streaks of dirt.

Luke craned his neck towards the window, noticing again how the streaks of dirt left behind a wake of their own existence.

Strands of black hair shrouded parts of his vision. Yet, he let it remain there, blocking parts of the magnificent, yet gloomy view.

His therapist called his name again, "Luke."

A bit of air pushed through Luke's mouth, a slight frown followed.

"Can I go now?" He asked without turning around.

"We have only just begun..."

"Please?" Luke hoped she hadn't heard the crack in his voice.

"Where would you go? Back home to sit in an apartment alone? How would that help?"

"I'm supposed to meet Ezekiel for coffee."

Luke heard the therapist sigh, "Luke I know this isn't pleasant to revisit but ignoring the issues won't bring you peace."

"Ezekiel said therapy never really worked for him either. So maybe therapy just isn't for everyone?"

"Or maybe he didn't give himself to it fully?" The therapist retorted.

His eyes nearly rolled themselves from instinct.

Luke knew he couldn't ignore his therapist all session again. Still, he felt as though watching the rainstorm roll in was all he wanted to do at that moment.

A dreary Chelsea district peered back at him through the window. The famous glass buildings of the financial district and Lower Manhattan sat just behind.

"Luke, did you hear what I said?"

"No, remind me." He sarcastically threw his hand in her direction.

He pushed the shame down deep. Shame for how he was acting. He never used to be like this.

"Bad things happen to everyone. Surely you know that. You have had a rough time, I understand that. But life won't be better until you decide it to be. If you shut yourself inside and bite anyone who tries to help, all you'll get is people trying to avoid you. You reap what you sow. Do you understand?"

"So I sowed seeds that led me to lose the use of my legs temporarily, and lose two weeks of memory too?"

She looked at him. Contemplating.

"That's not what I meant. What I meant is..."

Luke cut her off.

"I know," his irritation is palpable, "Bad things happen to everyone but if I respond badly that will send more bad events my way. Because my actions cause others reactions to be that equal to my initial reaction. Isn't that correct?"

The therapist tensed her hand into a fist before speaking, "You're quite smart Luke. So why resist the help?"

"I resist because you get paid more if I stay here."

"You stay here because you refuse to work with me. Therefore I get paid more."

A genuine smile tore across Luke's face, even if it was facetious, "Now there's a genuine answer. I like authenticity more than when you opt for flattery."

"It's true I get paid to do this," she said with a trying smile back at Luke, "But I do this because I like helping others lift themselves up. It makes me feel good. I won't keep you here any longer than you need to be, so long as you try while you're here. I promise."

When Luke didn't respond, she tried to keep the conversation going, "You can call me Ciara if you'd like. You don't always have to call me your *therapist*," she said the word like it was an insult.

Refusing to call her by her name was another form of rebellion Luke seemed to relish. At least until his painkillers made the session easier for him to get through.

During his second session he figured out that doubling his daily dosage made the constant conversation bearable. He knew abusing painkillers wasn't smart, but Luke justified it by telling himself, 'What are drugs for if not to help someone feel better?'

"I think I'll stick with 'the therapist' for now."

She eyed him from her desk, "Fair enough."

Luke took her in. Her red suit matched the coverless book she had in her hand. That, mixed with the fact they were 13 stories up, made Luke think she was the devil incarnate. Here, to judge whether Luke's soul is to remain here, with her forever or not.

Another uncharacteristically snide comment began to form on his lips but was cut short.

She tensed at the same time, and spoke before he had the chance, "I'd like to take a step back. I know losing yourself, even a few weeks of time can be very hard. You feel your identity slip and that tight bond between time, memory, and self gets fractured."

"Who says I've lost myself?" Luke shot.

"Luke..."

"Don't 'Luke' me," he cut her off, "I don't want to be here. I don't want to talk about what happened. I just want to go home until I feel better and then live my life."

Luke tried to steady his quivering upper lip.

After a moment, his therapist whispered, "Luke, it's going to be alright. But we need to discuss this for you to heal. Alright?"

"But why? Everyone in this world is already fake. I'll just fake it till I make it."

He tried to laugh but couldn't bring himself to do it.

The therapist brought her long fingers up to her high cheekbones as she thought, "You're obviously very bright. But there's a difference between the methods of pretending something is fine and accepting that it isn't. You're lost and confused, angry and scared because you won't allow yourself to think about what's happening. Here's an example, do you think an amputee can ignore a Phantom Limb until their limb grows back? No, they have to face their reality in order to move on with their life. No matter how painful, mundane, boring, or terrifying it might be, they will remain stuck unless they face what is truly ailing them. It's not the missing limb, because there are plenty of achievers and important people that are amputees. It's lying to themselves, distracting themselves rather than accepting what is. The pain they feel and hide away that just mounts and mounts. *That* is what really ails them. The issue is that we humans want so badly to control what happens around us, but we can't. When we try to and undoubtedly fail, our subconscious lashes out. The only thing we can do is control how we respond and how we learn from it."

Luke blinked. His mouth remained open as he grasped for a retort. It was a good analogy. Yet, Luke struggled to buy into the idea that this midwestern therapist was not ready to pry any information from him she could. So she could then leverage it against him and keep him shackled in the office.

But for the moment, she had made sense. With that analogy, she cracked through to Luke when no one else except Ezekiel could.

Luke shook his head, "You're not listening to me, I don't remember and you won't tell me. Got it?"

He sounded exhausted. Like he was ready to give up this act of not caring.

"Hmmm," she nodded slowly and wrote. She carefully picked her words, "I believe that *you* believe that."

As quickly as she had cracked through Luke's shell, he patched it up again, "Oh I see, I'm just crazy now? Who even decides what is crazy and normal then?"

"True," she paused and nodded. An eyebrow flicked up slightly, "But I'm only talking about you. You decide what is normal. All I'm here to do is help you heal inside. You have those that are worried about you. It's why you're here. It could be that maybe you have a hard time losing control in life, or that you resent the fact that life is fleeting. You can't control the accident that made you lose your memory, but from it, you can find a fragment of yourself you didn't know was missing," she left the statement hanging, allowing her voice to slow again into that all too kind rhythmic tone and await a response from Luke.

Luke now picked at his fingernails, noting how bland the carpet around him looked. Which, to Luke, fit the rest of the room nicely.

Ciara, his therapist, sat behind her desk. Emanating that of a principal ready to scold a student rather than the therapist she was.

For some reason, seeing her with a self-assured smile across her face, safe in her place of judgment as a therapist, while he saw things that he knew weren't there made him snap a little bit inside.

She tapped her finger a few times. Luke figured she was probably holding back a snapping tone of her own.

She seemed genuine in her desire to help. But maybe Luke's visions were his subconscious telling him something. Something about what she was *doing*.

Luke already had a distrust of anyone guising 'help,' as a rendered service. He refused to trust any therapist, as they were only there to listen to his problems for a handout. Luke seemed to think that he was nothing but an ATM to her.

"Luke, there is no reason you and I can't be civil during these sessions. I can tell you realize something is wrong," she said carefully.

But Luke didn't hear her. He felt his painkillers kick in and wrap him in a warm blanket of comfort.

He looked straight ahead, behind her desk where she had been sitting to her bookshelf, ignoring the plea for cooperation.

When Luke initially saw this office, he only thought about how the office seemed like a set design or a pop-up shop. Her desk and chair had made him squirm slightly. They took up too much space and seemed impersonal. The bookshelf to her left was so well color-coordinated and organized that first day that it could only be for show. Books must have been bought to fill the spaces and give a cozy atmosphere to the room.

Yet, when Luke looked at the bookshelf now, it was somehow more cozy, more real. He saw photos of his therapist and her family. Her husband stood proudly next to her, a hand on the shoulder of their son. A son, whose rebellious black hair, paired with an annoyed face, told a story of a teenager being dragged to some photoshoot he clearly didn't want to be at.

She must have had her son at a very young age.

The young boy in the photo was probably eight or ten years younger than the son in the picture. Yet their current emotional maturity was not too dissimilar.

Luke lowered his head, looking away from the bookshelf.

"I know, I'm sorry. I do realize something is off. I shouldn't be wasting your time," Luke relented.

Ciara set down her red book on the couch. Its design cover had been taken off, and the red binding was all that showed. The small binding of a spiral memo book poked itself out like a bookmark of the red book enveloped it.

The therapist leaned in, nearly whispering, "I can't imagine what you're going through right now, Luke. I'm so sorry. But I can't help you if you don't help yourself. Okay?"

Luke nodded and looked at his shoes. Biting back a desire to let go emotionally.

"Good," she said before picking up the book and opening it, "Would you mind telling me when you first realized things weren't right? Aside from your legs not working I mean."

He shook his head again, harder this time. His overgrown black hair whipped the sides of his jaw. Luke could feel the stubble scratching at his hair as it did.

"It's safe to discuss anything you want here. And I can only help you if I know. It will only help."

Luke turned and focused on her now, but his mind drifted back to the weather, quietly pounding the window. He didn't have to say anything. She knew the answer Luke would give her.

"Well there is something. But I'm worried about sharing it with you."

"Why not?"

Luke shrugged and looked back outside. A ray of sun quickly broke through the clouds before disappearing, but now he couldn't be sure if it was real or imagined.

He couldn't wait to go and get coffee with Ezekiel after this. He wanted nothing more to leave.

"Because it scares me. I feel like I'm losing grip on reality. I don't know what's real and what isn't. That time I lost, even though it was only two weeks, has me sort of confused by everything."

"All the more reason to tell me then, right?"

Luke breathed, knowing he had to give her something, or he'd never be free of her. While he wanted to lie at first, he couldn't stop the truth from coming out, "Sometimes... sometimes... I've been seeing things. People. Well a lady I guess. She makes me feel less alone."

Ciara was writing furiously, but she made sure to prod and keep Luke going, "You feel alone?"

"Yeah, it feels like I've been quarantined all year. Bored, alone, nowhere to go and except stir-crazy. But now that I can leave the home, it will go away soon I'm sure. Except, well, I guess I won't leave. So this lady brings me messages and helps me feel less alone."

The therapist nodded and looked up at the dimmed lights, seemingly trying to imagine what that would be like.

She looked directly at him, "You know you aren't alone, though, right?"

Luke nodded.

"That must truly be awful, though," she concluded, "I'm sure anyone would feel the same way you do."

"Maybe, but it is the perfect situation for many people. To sit inside and have no responsibilities or ever have to leave."

"No one likes to be forced to think or do anything, Luke. It's human nature. It's also human nature to want to be a part of something bigger than yourself. It's natural to feel this way. We can hope for the best of circumstances in life, but we must work with what we are given. That doesn't mean we don't need to ask for help when lost, confused or scared."

Luke again nodded, agreeing with the simple yet insightful statement.

"Before I dig deeper into this lady, I want to ask you, does this have anything to do with why you were found unconscious in the middle of the street? It's the main reason you're here now and I want to make sure I'm understanding the full picture," She prodded again, scribbling something down in her book without bothering to look up while she responded.

He shrugged again, deferring to her, but the therapist didn't help him. She only looked up from her notes and stared. Letting him stew for a few moments before another sigh escaped him.

It was the most she had ever gotten out of Luke, she wasn't ready to give in yet.

"Maybe... I guess it was before her though," Luke reluctantly admitted.

"If you'd be comfortable doing so, would you mind telling what about this lady led you to that moment?"

Luke tried to think, all of his problems the past few months had mounted, meshed, and become an unending blur.

Luke found a sour taste in his mouth at the realization she was winning him over. He was telling her things, bit by bit. It had taken a few sessions, but now he was not afraid to discuss it with her as much.

Part of Luke disliked it. Deep in his stomach, though, he had had enough of his selfish, rude, and entitled nature the past few months. It wore on his usually kind heart like sandpaper against a stone.

"Can you tell me more about this lady you're seeing?"

"You're going to think I'm crazy. I'm worried you'll throw me in an insane asylum or give me a lobotomy," Luke shook with frustration and anxiety. Suppressing the urge to let go and cry only made it worse. A tear tickled his nose as it fell from his eye.

"This isn't the fifties, Luke. I wouldn't even know where to go for either of those," she laughed nervously. When Luke didn't similarly react to her joke, she continued, "So, why don't you let me decide if you're crazy or not. Because so far, I'd say you've been in a rough situation. I don't think that makes you crazy."

Luke placed a hand on his jiggling knee.

"When I got back from the hospital, I... uh... well, I saw a lady in the streets... A homeless lady. She was holding signs, and they were all meant for me. Like written for me. They didn't have my name on it or anything. But Ezekiel told me she wasn't real, and I'm starting to think he is right," as he spoke, his therapist leaned forward.

"How do you know now she isn't real?"

"Ezekiel and I got into an argument about her. He told me he was scared that I was seeing things. I wanted to prove to him I wasn't crazy and so I went out to go and... well I don't know what my plan was. Maybe introduce myself and shake her hand. Or bring her sign back and show him. I just wanted to show Ezekiel that she was real. Next thing I knew I was on the ground being awoken by paramedics."

The therapist paused and only addressed one part of what he had said, "I know it's not fun going over these details. But I promise it will help."

She looked back down at her book for a split second.

A lightbulb went off in Luke's head. Pieces in Luke's head fell into place. His blood didn't cool, but it was replaced with a different heat.

'*She's new,*' Luke realized. He was just as new to his situation as she was to hers. Luke felt dread sneak back into his mind.

'*No one new can help me,*' he thought.

"Does any of this really matter? I feel it won't help unless I can remember."

"Luke, of course it matters. You said it yourself in our first meeting. Your past makes you and your thoughts who they are. Everything you did has led you here, and everything you do now will lead you elsewhere. To understand why you're in this room with me, to get where you *want* to go, we must discuss what led you to that accident and got you here. So you can better understand yourself, your actions, and what is or isn't in your control. That being said, why don't we first discuss how you came to realize this lady wasn't real. Then we can backtrack from your

last memories before the trip, then after, before finally piecing it all together to see if we can figure out some things about your memories?"

Luke nodded and prepared to give up control to his therapist. Mostly in hopes that as he unraveled what he remembered, it would unravel the piece of him that was still holding back.