

Chapter One

Suicide seems logical. But maybe I'm wrong. I don't feel strongly about it either way. I guess that's why I've been standing on this stool for so long.

I'm pretty sure I should do it. I spent the last of my inheritance the other day. I have no résumé. I've never had a job, and I don't feel like looking. Two years ago, I stopped talking to my only friends because they fell in love with each other. Shortly after, my mother died. I haven't spoken to anyone outside the service sector since.

A crow caws.

I used to want to be a writer. I wrote my first story in grade three. It was about a superhero with the power to turn anything into food, just by touching it. Like King Midas, except not really. Mom was ecstatic I'd found my passion. She bought me lots of writing books. She registered me in programs for young writers. She made me practise writing every day. For years, every story I wrote was homework for some course.

John Kennedy Toole killed himself because every publisher he sent *A Confederacy of Dunces* rejected it. I don't even have a novel written. And after Mom died, I lost my drive entirely.

The stool I'm on does not belong to me. Nothing in here does, other than the twenty-one speed bike. My legs are tired.

The door opens, and the bright light makes me squint. A silhouette stands framed in the doorway. The silhouette is male, I think. Around 5'7". "What are you doing?" it asks.

Say something.

"Not much."

“It looks like you’re committing suicide.”

“Really?”

“Well, no, not really. That rope is too long, for one. You’d land on your feet.”

“Oh. Geez.”

The silhouette takes out a silhouette of a cell phone and dials three numbers. “Hi, I need an ambulance at 37 Mainsail Road. I just found the young man who lives downstairs attempting to commit suicide in our shared shed. No, he’s not hurt. I’ll keep an eye on him till you get here. No. I don’t think the police will be necessary. Okay. Thanks.” He hangs up. “I don’t think we’ve ever been formally introduced. I’m Sam.”

I remove the noose from around my neck and step down from the stool. My thigh cramps. I ignore it and offer my hand. “I’m Sheldon Mason.”

“Why did you pick the shed to kill yourself in, Sheldon? Didn’t you figure I’d be the one to find your body? Awful first impression.”

My cheeks heat up. “There’s nowhere to tie the rope in my apartment.” I shrug. “I was going to make up for it. I left you everything I own in a note I left on my coffee table. Including that bike over there.”

“I don’t know how to ride one.”

“Oh. Well, I left you a lot of books, too.”

“I like books. Anything else?”

“A cat.”

“I’m allergic.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

Say something.

“So, what were you coming in here for?”

“The lawn mower.”

“You’re the one who mows the lawn?”

“Yeah. Did you think it mowed itself?”

“I thought the landlord did it.”

“You don’t look out the window much, do you?”

The ambulance arrives. The sirens aren’t on, and it doesn’t pull up in any kind of rush. The driver gets out and gives us both a friendly hello. He shows no special interest in either of us—just opens the back door. I climb in, and so does Sam.

“You’re coming too?”

Sam shrugs. “Nothing better to do.”

“What about the lawn?”

“I tend to procrastinate.”

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I soon wish I’d brought a book. I’m very tolerant when I have a book. Otherwise I’m forced to look at reality, which in my experience is glacial and dull. A nurse takes my blood pressure and after that we’re told to sit in the waiting room. Which we do. For hours. I guess the suicidal aren’t a priority unless they’re really feeling motivated.

Around suppertime I ask Sam, “Why are you still here?”

“Told you. Nothing better to do.”

“I heard your cell phone ring like six times.”

“No one important.”

“I’m not, either.”

“You kidding? Trying to kill yourself makes you VIP.”

“Not really. You just don’t want to sound like an asshole when you tell people you found the kid who lives downstairs trying to kill himself. You want to be able to say you stayed until he was safely committed, and you did all you could.”

Sam scratches his nose. “Did you know most people who are hanged urinate and defecate as they die?”

“So?”

“Is that really how you wanted to be found?”

“How I appear after I die is completely irrelevant to me. Dead people don’t care how they look, or about anything else.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. Trust me. I’m sure.”

My name is finally called, and we’re led down a series of corridors to a room with a bed and a couple chairs. Turns out this is just a waiting room in disguise, since it’s another hour before I see anyone. When I do, it’s a nurse, and Sam is asked to leave the room while she speaks with me. She asks what my relation to him is, and why I think I’m here. She asks if I’ve been hearing any disembodied voices or strange noises. She asks if I’m sleeping well. She asks if I’ve been having trouble concentrating. She asks about my appetite. She asks if I’m irritable.

Then it's another two hour wait. Sam asks me if I'm currently attending school, and I say, "Have you ever noticed how every conversation you've ever had gradually became more and more pointless until, finally, it spiralled headfirst into redundancy?"

Sam tilts his head a little to one side.

Until I meet Dr. Cervenka the chairs are unyielding plastic or wood, but once he's available I'm escorted down more corridors to a room with soft, leather seating. Cervenka takes a couch. I choose an overstuffed armchair and watch him study a clipboard.

"Sorry about the wait. How are you feeling?"

"I guess 'ennui' would be the word."

"That's a good word. Why don't you explain to me what brought you here?"

"I was about to off myself when my neighbour intervened and called an ambulance."

"Very succinct. Why did you want to commit suicide?"

"Nothing about living interests me."

"Have you had thoughts like that before —that life isn't worth living?"

"Yeah. I've toyed with the idea of suicide for a while."

"Have you tried to act on them before today?"

"No."

"Why now?"

"I ran out of money. Living is expensive."

"You could get a job."

"I don't want to."

"Well, are you still inclined that way? Do you feel like you're a danger to yourself?"

"Suicide continues to appeal, if that's what you mean."

The doctor nods. “Looks like you’ll be staying with us a while.”

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Mom enrolled me in everything. Piano lessons. Soccer. Figure skating. Rock climbing. Gymnastics. Hockey. I don’t think she had any concept of gender roles. She registered me for little league, but I never played a game. Before the first one was supposed to start the coach hit some pop flies for us to catch. Except, one wasn’t a pop fly. One was a line drive that smashed into my face and raised a bump between my eyes the size of an egg. When it hit me, I spun around like a ballerina and landed on all fours. Blood dripped onto the sand. On the way to the hospital, I considered that I would probably die.

Eventually, I quit everything—even writing, though that happened later. Kung Fu, I stayed in for a while. Earned a couple belts. Pushed up, sat up, jumped jacks, ran laps. Once, the instructor called me a mental giant. I still don’t know whether he was praising my cerebral fortitude or calling me tall and retarded.

After my freedom, the next things the nurses took away were my sneakers. They didn’t explain this, but I think I know why they did it. I think laces are problematic. I’m broke, so Sam bought me a pair of black Reeboks with Velcro straps and brought them in. He also bought me *The Stand* by Stephen King, after I named him my favourite author.

Once I was admitted to the Psychiatric Ward, I didn’t expect to see Sam anymore. I’ve never seen a vehicle in our driveway, and as he handed me *The Stand* it occurred to me to ask how he got here. He walked.

“Why did you walk an hour to visit someone you don’t know? Why’d you buy me this stuff? I was going to kill myself in your shed.”

Sam smiles. “Our shed. And I’m over it.”

“Why are you doing this? I can’t repay you.”

“You will repay me. For the book, the sneakers and the ambulance ride. But don’t worry—I can wait till you find a job, and my interest rates aren’t that high.”

My debt is mounting quickly. Sam is feeding my cat, and he says in a couple days, rent day, he’s going to pay it for me. He’ll tell the landlord I’m out of town, which is technically true. The hospital is in the city—we live in a neighbouring town.

I’m sitting in the psych ward’s common area, listening to “Bohemian Rhapsody”, when a patient walks over and picks up my MP3 player from the coffee table in front of me. He’s short, balding and wiry. I take out an earbud. “Hi.”

“This device contains components made from cassiterite, wolframite, niobium and tantalum. These minerals were almost certainly bought from rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who used the money to arm themselves. Your purchase not only helped sustain the conflict there—in which nearly six million have died since 1998—but also contributed directly to femicide, the systematic raping, beating and killing of women.”

I take out the other earbud.

“Do you think karma exists?”

I shake my head.

“I hope you’re right. Because our society conducts itself on land acquired by murdering the original inhabitants. We pretend we’re much more civilized than our ancestors, but we

finance suffering around the globe. We wear clothes made in sweatshops, we dump our waste on poorer countries, and we buy electronics bathed in blood. So I hope you're right."

He puts down my MP3 player and walks away.

Another patient comes over and offers his hand. It's very large. I only hesitate a little.

"How ya doin'?' I'm Fred."

"Sheldon Mason."

"I see you met the Professor."

"He's a professor?"

"He wishes he was. He doesn't even have a degree. Want to sit with me during lunch?"

The food's gonna be here, soon."

We walk to one of the cafeteria tables in the middle of the room. The second we sit down a woman wearing purple appears, pushing a metal trolley that's taller than she is. "I hear they're making *The Hobbit* into a movie," Fred whispers to me. "She'd be a shoo-in." She leaves the trolley at the end of our table, and Fred points at it. "Let's go there and back again."

Patients are trickling in. There is little conversation, and a lot of shuffling. I find a tray with my name on it and I follow Fred back to our spot.

"Hey," he says. "Isn't she about your age?"

"Who?"

"The girl sitting on the couch over there, who's staring at you like you're the last man on Earth."

I look, and she looks away. She's very thin, but attractive all the same. "This is the last place I'd look for a girlfriend," I say.

“Suit yourself.” Fred picks up a slice of turkey between two thick fingers and inserts it into his mouth. Next, a ball of mashed potato. He finishes his meal in fewer than ten mouthfuls. Then he looks at mine, untouched. “The nurses check your tray to make sure you eat, you know.”

“I’m not hungry. You want it?”

Fred slides the tray over.

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Dr. Rostislav is so neutral he seems almost uninterested. We’re sitting in a windowless room, in a section of the ward inaccessible to patients. This is my third day. I arrived on a Friday, so I had to wait till now to see a psychiatrist.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“I tried to kill myself.”

Dr. Rostislav nods, and writes something on his clipboard. “That’s a good sign. Some patients think they’re here unnecessarily. Acceptance is an important first step.”

“I don’t think I need to be here.”

“Oh.” He writes something else. “Are you still having thoughts that life isn’t worth living?”

“I’m having thoughts that killing myself is the only logical course of action.”

“Suicide is never rational. Self-preservation is a basic instinct. Humans have an innate fear of pain and death. If they didn’t, the species would be extinct.”

“Yes, fear does help us live long enough to procreate. But instincts aren’t rational. I don’t *want* to have kids. I have no desire to achieve anything. In order to continue living I need to find a way to subsist. I don’t want to seek social assistance. I won’t steal. And the jobs available to me are likely to be unpleasant. Why would I do something unpleasant in order to survive, when survival holds no interest?”

“I’m afraid you’ll remain an involuntary patient as long as you’re a danger to yourself.”

“I’ll remain an involuntary patient as long as the doors are locked from the outside.”

“Well, in the meantime would you be willing to undergo treatment?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

“We’ll start you on an antidepressant called Zoloft. A low dose to begin with. The active ingredient in Zoloft is sertraline hydrochloride. It’s a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, so it increases the amount of serotonin in the brain. Serotonin is one of the neurotransmitters that regulates mood. We’ll start you on that today and we’ll talk again on Thursday.”

“Okay.”

“Any questions?”

“No.”

Dr. Rostislav stands up. “See you Thursday.”

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There are inspirational messages plastered all over the psych ward.

“If a window of opportunity appears, don’t pull down the shade.”

“He who seeks rest finds boredom. He who seeks work finds rest.”

“The only job where you start at the top is digging a hole.”

This afternoon, Sam made up his own: “It’s better to lead a life filled with failure than one filled with apathy.”

When I’m feeling over-inspired, I sit in the TV room. There aren’t any inspirational messages in there. This evening, there’s a patient I’ve never seen before. He’s sitting cross-legged and bouncing up and down. He meets my glance with a wide smile. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

He looks back at the TV, still bouncing. I try not to stare, but it’s hard to avoid looking out the corner of my eyes. He catches me, and says, “Can I help you?”

“Um, I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you bouncing like that?”

His smile doesn’t change. “Why not bounce? Life is too short. There should be more bouncing.” Continuing to bounce, he picks up the remote control from a nearby table and changes the channel. *America’s Next Top Model* is on. “Those people want to be models,” he says.

“Yep.”

“Have they made reality TV out of your dream yet?”

“Sorry?”

“I always wanted to be a chef. Then they made a reality TV show about becoming a successful one, and now I don’t want to do it anymore. What do you want to be?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. If you could be anything.”

“A writer, I guess. I don’t think they’ve made one about that.”

“They will. Soon. You’ll watch aspiring writers do treacherous things to each other, and endure unspeakable humiliation on national television, in order to achieve their dreams. You’ll realize you aren’t willing to do any of those things. Then you’ll just give up.”

Already done.

He changes the channel, still bouncing. “When you’re insane, everything makes such perfect sense. Would you agree?”

“Oh, I don’t—I’m not—”

“Everything seems to just add up, you know? Little things you never even thought about before you were nuts, they all seem to fit together. Do you want to be alive?”

“I—”

“Sane people want to survive. Humans are hardwired to survive. If everything upstairs is ticking along smoothly, you want to be alive. But it’s funny, you know. The most successful people are risk takers. When you take a risk, you jeopardize your security—your finances, your relationships, your personal safety. It’s downright suicidal. But the most successful people take risks. It’s insane. Know what else is funny? In order to be really good at something—in order to be a truly world class whatever—you have to be obsessive about it. You have to want to do it all the time. You have to be a little insane.”

He changes the channel. He bounces.

The Professor walks in. He says, “Global warming is like finding out the entire human race has terminal cancer.”

I can’t handle them. Not both of them. I get up and leave.

As I walk through the door, I hear a loud noise to my right. Rodney, a heavysset guy around my age, stomps around the corner. His eyes are bloodshot. “Hey. Sheldon, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you smoke?”

“No.”

“Come into the smoking room with me.”

“Okay.”

Once inside, we each take one of the plastic chairs that ring an ashtray on a pedestal. He lights a cigarette. He tells me that in a couple months, there won't be a smoking room in the Psychiatric Ward anymore. They're closing it down. “Big mistake, that is,” he says. “Big mistake.” He shows me his fist. The first three knuckles are bloody and torn. “See this?”

“Yes.”

“I was on the phone with my girlfriend. She pissed me off. I punch things when I'm pissed off.”

“Really?”

“Go to the kitchen and get me some orange juice.”

“No.”

He holds up his bloody fist. “See this?”

“Yes.”

“Go get me some orange juice.”

“No.”

“Do you see the blood?”

“Get it yourself.”

He stands up and points his cigarette at me. “I know where you sleep.”

He opens the door and leaves. I get up and follow him out. He stomps off toward the rooms. I start walking toward mine.

A nurse intercepts me at the door. "Is anything wrong?"

"No."

"Did Rodney say anything to you?"

I shrug. "He said things."

"Do you feel safe?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let me know if you need anything. I'll be at the Nurses Station all night."

"Thank you."

I enter the room and go to my bed in the far right corner. One of my roommates is snoring. I take off my sneakers, shirt, pants and socks. I get under the sheets and I fall asleep.