

“Van Gogh Complex”

This story was originally written in blood. The plot, the characters, the anger—all of it. A knife was the pen and the scars marked the chapters.

I lived in a snow globe. It was beautiful. Serene. Exciting. Calm. A sanctuary. But from inside the glass, I peered out at dangerous hands; hands that at any minute would set off the serenity creating a turbulence in my world that would produce a chaos I handled with a knife on my skin. The physical pain made the emotional storm tolerable, and sometimes overrode it completely. Eventually the snow would settle again, and I would go on with my life, half-heartedly waiting for the next flurry that I knew was only a handshake away.

I was classified as SI, Self Injurer, which made me uneasy. First to be classified as anything at all, and then with those initials. The Sports Illustrated that was tucked tightly in my backpack carried a whole new meaning, and I couldn't open it anymore without feeling at least some animosity towards the completely innocent periodical.

I was in a room. The kind of room that attempted to be welcoming, but wasn't. The magazines were ones of educational value and served only as the backdrop to the more domineering rows of pamphlets. The pamphlets, which came in an array of colors, listed almost any disorder you could think of. I found it amusing that anyone would attempt to find meaning or a solution in something so sterile, so generic.

There was a guy across the small room, undoubtedly waiting for his counselor. He was in the office the last time I was there, too. He dressed normal and scribbled down answers to what appeared to me as math homework. He seemed alright. His yellow LiveStrong bracelet supporting Lance Armstrong and the cure for testicular cancer matched mine. I guess I never imagined a rubber bracelet could have been so bonding, or maybe so condemning. I was tempted to ask him what *he was in for*, but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Counselors scurried in and out; they smiled at me as if I was an abused dog they felt they had to be nice to. The look in their eyes told me they felt sorry for me. It made me ornery. They shouldn't have felt sorry for me, I felt sorry for them. Little did they know, I was analyzing every one of them. They were my project as much as I was theirs. They were humans too, which meant the only thing that set us apart, besides a degree, was I saw them for who they were and who they were pretending to be. They saw me as a file.

I watched a student leave the office and conjured up ideas about why he was there.

It was 4:00 p.m. and the guy that waited with me was collected by his counselor for an hour of "therapy" for a reason I decided to be left undeclared by my own imagination.

I felt abandoned. Like I was being tested. It was now three after. My hands were in my lap and I looked down at the scars that covered the outside of both my forearms. It was probably a mistake to have worn short sleeves there, so I folded my arms under my chest and waited another three minutes until my counselor was fashionably late. In her business, that could probably be traumatizing to some people. I just found it to be unprofessional. It was better I kept reminding myself that I was sane.

We walked back to her office and I sat in a chair of my choosing. She took the other one. She probably felt this was less formal than her sitting in her own chair and may have made me feel more welcomed.

I wondered what she knew and what I would have to say again. I wondered how they assigned "patients" to counselors. I imagined it to be like the NBA draft or something similar. A group of counselors met around a table with a bunch of new names.

Someone asked, "Who wants the girl from the Peace Corps with a fascination towards sharper objects and masochistic tendencies?" After several counselors toyed with the idea, one picked me and before the meeting ended, traded me for a severely depressed alcoholic who was afraid to ride on elevators.

Maybe it was less dramatic. Maybe it was more simplistic. White/female, okay. Obviously, this person should be matched up with a white female.

I had a slight prejudice against myself. There was something slightly more degrading about admitting your problems to your own kind. This, coming from a person who found admitting one's problems to begin with, was, in itself, degrading.

The talk between us was awkward. She tried to feel me out and I tried very hard to be open but something was different than it was last time—other than the fact that I had been reassigned to a different counselor. Last time I was heavily sedated on prescription cold medicine. My body again yearned for the calming effects of the liquid concoction spiked with Benadryl.

I mentioned where I came from—where I had been in the Peace Corps before going there.

“What is that?”

“A deliberate attempt to destroy civilization as we know it.”

It put me on edge. Explaining the place, hell on earth, that would forever remain nameless. But the look on her face told me she was looking for what it was in actuality—not my metaphorical interpretation of the place.

“It’s an island. Impoverished, filthy, and . . .”

“And what?”

“And nothing.”

She followed my facial expression with every question she asked—hers would inevitably match mine. It was uncomfortable, the conversation, but I remained emotionless.

“Hailey, have you ever thought about killing yourself?”

“My name is Hanna, and no—never.” *Have you ever thought about learning your patients’ names?*

“Why do you cut?”

“It takes away the pain.”

“What pain?”

“Any pain.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“It puts me in control.”

“Control of what?”

“Control of every feeling that passes through my body.”

She readjusted herself and shot me a cold, heartless glare before focusing her eyes on the yellow notepad sitting in her lap. I sat in silence as she wrote something down on her yellow paper.

When she finally looked up, she asked, “Is the island what made you start doing this?”

“Probably not. It’s just a place.”

“What about there . . . that was the first time you sought help for the mutilation. Why?”

“I was forced to. The psychiatrist was an asshole.”

She smiled at me, a forced smile because she felt she had too. Maybe so she appeared more friendly, but it was fake and extraordinarily troubling. She wasn’t a good listener, which was fine because I was not really comfortable talking to her.

“Why did you come for help here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“I guess.”

In actuality, I went to make my twin brother feel better. We joined the Peace Corps together immediately after graduating high school. He worried about the cutting, and when I left the island, (and him for the first time in my life,) he made me promise to stop.

The rest of her questions were mundane. My answers were short, and most the time incoherent even to myself, but she pretended to understand and nodded her head. She was lying. Pretending to understand. I didn't like it. I said things that were completely off-kilter, ramblings really, that honestly had no coherency. Then I looked at her with knowing eyes, and gave her a fake, semi-desperate look of, “*you understand, don't you?*” Of course she did. She understood, understood nothing. But she nodded.

“Perhaps you should come up with other ideas besides cutting, so when you feel the urge to cut you can do one of those things instead.”

Yes. Perhaps. Perhaps I could have done that. Perhaps instead of feeling the rush that followed my addictive behavior, folding origami into the shape of a swan would have provided the same feeling of passion through my veins. Or perhaps not.

I tried it her way though, and at three in the morning and after creating 82 origami swans in every possible color and pattern, I placed a knife to the inside of my forearm and created a landmark for the occasion—perhaps something for the swans to swim in. Then I slept.

I found myself back in the same room. I was going to cancel the appointment—but I am not sure what drove me back: utter curiosity or the desire to have something to challenge.

I guess in the grand scheme of life, the reason I went was not of crucial significance. Nevertheless, I sat in their unwelcoming welcoming room and dreamed of how it would end.

I thought back to the week since I had last been in the office. My biggest accomplishment was not in the lack of cutting, as I only did it twice, drawing an insignificant repercussion from my skin both times. Once you cut enough, I think you become immune, scar tissue is far stronger than your skin and thus breaking through it is tough and becomes tougher when a web of scars replaces your flesh. So, as I said—it was neither an accomplishment nor a failure. It was just an emotion. It was me making something intangible, tangible. I gave birth to the feeling, making it reality so I could destroy it. That's all cutting was, land-marking.

Anyway, the bigger feat for me had nothing to do with knives. The bigger triumph clearly over shadowed my severe decrease in blood drawing penetrations—and that was my ability to overcome the fear of opening my Sports Illustrated. Finally.

The visit would be my last. The last time I would look at the color pamphlets. The last time I would analyze everyone to enter and leave the office. The last time I would see myself as disturbed in any way. And why? Van Gogh.

She was late again, this time by mere seconds—yet forty-six seconds, to me, is enough time for a sane person to advocate suicide to himself under the right circumstance. But I got over it. Professionalism seemed less of a necessity in this world. She brought me back to her office. The seats stayed the same as they had been the visit before. She started asking questions, and I would answer her at a lesser intellectual level than I was capable of. Intelligence is a weapon, when people think you are less intellectually sound than you truly are—it is an atomic bomb. So as I half-heartedly fed her what she wanted to hear mixed with some fictitiously honest feelings of remorse towards the cutting, I looked around the room for some sort of inspiration.

Ironic it came from a framed painting of an artist who cut off his ear. Self Mutilator.

Van Gogh.

That was it. The end of my visits to the shrink. Between my good friend, Mr. Van Gogh, and an Anthropology lecture the day before that focused on the purposeful self inflicted knife wounds of Native American Warriors on a Vision Quest, I decided I was somewhere in between the two—a vision quest and a brilliant expression of inner turmoil.

They say that the brilliant mind often fights with the most demons. I believed this to be true, the thoughts that lurked in my head. On the other hand, I wondered who “they” were or was. Was it the brilliant who claimed their own brilliance was diminished by the voices who said “cut off your ear”? Poe. Poe was a good example, too. Hemmingway was a drunk. Who knows what Doctor Seuss was on, but I imagined it to be extreme. Princess Dianna cut, so did Johnny Depp. Van Gogh cut off his ear and Indians cut themselves so their spirits talked to them.

I guess that was the beginning of my vision quest.

It was months before I would cut again. My life was generic. The whole thing.

At least up until that point.

I had these dreams. They scared me. Many times, they were so real. Sometimes I woke up still angry, still hurt. Sometimes I couldn't separate reality. The part that would forever be untold.

It was 2 a.m. and about two months later when I cut again.

The flesh on my left arm, which by that particular night was already too tough to penetrate with my normal blade, made the blood seem less precarious.

Yet, there was a certain freedom in letting go. And I did. At 2 a.m. after crying myself to sleep and reawakening to the nightmare that was currently my

life, I did the equivalent to someone pinching you to make sure you were not dreaming. Except I was awake, and it was a knife, and a true nightmare—not a dream.

It was 2 a.m. and I gripped the knife firmly in my left hand and brutally attacked my right forearm in a series of slashes that ended with a furious array of regret dripping from the shallow incisions in the form of my own blood.

When it was over and all that was left was a bloody knife, I laid on my back and let the burning sensation of my arm decrease before putting on a long sleeve shirt and rolling over and falling asleep.

And this is how things went over the next few months. Sometimes the marks would be worse than others. Sometimes people would notice. When the winter ended abruptly and short sleeves replaced jackets, I started cutting my thighs in between the “dog scratches” that frequented my arms. It was an addiction. Many medical professionals believed a self-mutilator became dependent on the endorphins his or her body would release when it sensed pain. This is probably pretty accurate. I figured it was a phase, though, and I would eventually get over it. I was right.

On the last occasion, I was sprawled across the floor and watched the blood spill out of the trenches and pour down my arm until my silver watch was covered by the red of my own blood.

For the first time in three years, I took it off. Time didn’t matter anymore. I tilted my head towards my closet and made eye contact with myself in the full length mirrors. That’s the last time I saw myself alive.

It was an accident. I was angry, I just cut. Blind. Not paying attention. Too Deep. Too much blood. I went to wipe it away like I had done so many times before, but it kept coming—an angry cascade of red.

I would die alone in my room in a pile of my own story. I hit a vein, but I didn’t know it until the funeral.

It was eerie, seeing myself in a wood box, my family crying. I wanted to console them, but I couldn’t. I just stared at a body that I knew so well, a body that I had seen in the mirror every day for my entire existence. A body that looked cold and bloated and sad. It was wearing a dress, long-sleeved, ugly—if I were still alive to voice my opinion, I would not have been caught dead in it. Yet, that was the irony in my life.

On my death certificate, the coroner scribbled suicide. Compulsively misunderstood—for eternity. I was never suicidal, I loved life. I cut to feel it, feel something. Bury the numbness. It was just too deep this time.

Submission Guidelines

For information on submission guidelines please email us at
fictionfix@hotmail.com

I didn't ask what your problem was, but why don't you tell me a story...

"I would die alone in my room in a pile of my own story. I hit a vein, but I didn't know it until the funeral."

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