

Is Fred in the Refrigerator?

TAMING OCD AND RECLAIMING MY LIFE

Shala Nicely

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Publisher’s Note

This book portrays the author’s experience with mental illness, and the publisher’s intent is not to provide psychological services with the material presented. If you are in need of treatment for OCD and/or related disorders, please seek therapy from an experienced mental health professional. The Resources and References section at the end of this book provides a variety of self-help resources as well as links to treatment provider databases.

Author’s Note

The identities of some people in my story have been disguised or composited to protect their privacy. Any clients mentioned in this book are composites of multiple people with whom I have worked and do not reflect the experiences of any one individual. Any errors in recollection of the events of my life portrayed in this book are strictly my own.

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For Mom and Dad



Contents

Foreword	i
Prologue.....	v

PART I

1 The Accident	3
2 Rule #1	21
3 Pas de Deux	31
4 The Quest	41
5 Sun and Shadows.....	55

PART II

6 The Gravitron	81
7 Fueling the Fire.....	101
8 The Letter	115
9 The Accident II.....	129
10 The Most Dangerous Appliance	137

PART III

11 Changing the OCD Mind	151
12 Playing a New Game	165
13 Adversity to Advocacy	181

14	Owning Imperfection	199
15	Belief	209
16	Shoulders Back	219
17	Fading Echoes	227
18	Ending the Quest	237
19	A New Rule #1	255
	Afterword	269
	Acknowledgements	279
	Resources and References	285
	About the Author	291



Foreword

Full Disclosure.

I can't imagine two more fitting words with which to begin this brief introduction to *Is Fred in the Refrigerator?* and the truly remarkable woman behind it.

As someone living with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), I've long battled compulsive urges to disclose what might not otherwise be apparent. My natural inclination is to delineate here the myriad reasons why I simply cannot be impartial in extolling the importance of Shala Nicely's story. She is, after all, both my longtime advocacy partner and my best friend.

But because I no longer allow my OCD to dictate what I can and cannot do, I've humbly accepted Shala's invitation to write a few words about the story you're about to read. I'll also further tweak my "Doubt Bully" and declare with great confidence that Shala's recovery journey is the most inspiring I've witnessed in more than a decade of doing OCD advocacy. What makes it so are again those two words: *full disclosure*.

For Shala, full disclosure is the very antithesis of what OCD demanded of her for so much of her life. As you'll read, her

unforgiving “Rule #1” long kept Shala from breathing a word about her inner challenges, even to those she trusted most. That she has chosen to disclose in these pages the most intimate details of those trials, with unflinching courage and candor, speaks volumes about both how far she has come and how committed she is to using her story to help others.

In our shared advocacy work, Shala and I aim to help individuals impacted by OCD reap the benefits of what we call “Greater Good” motivation. We’re big believers in the notion that “we help ourselves by helping others,” and, more specifically, that *purpose* and *service* are far more powerful motivators than *fear* and *doubt*. Throughout our workshops and online course, we offer up day-to-day examples of our own applications of these principles, but time and again, I find myself pointing to Shala’s personal and professional transformation as the ultimate demonstration.

In 2010, at the age of 39, Shala made two Greater Good decisions that would forever change her life (and the lives of countless others, I’d argue). First, she decided she’d put her story down on paper so others could learn from it. After years of going undiagnosed and then stumbling her way through the mental health system, she’d found proper treatment, and she knew she could be of great *service* to so many other tortured souls by recounting her journey. Doing so, of course, would require her to push through full disclosure fears of a magnitude few of us can even fathom.

And yet, Shala chose *service* over *fear*.

She committed herself to write this book, and she began the long, tedious process of making that happen.

Sensing almost immediately how powerful that decision was, Shala soon made an even bolder one: after years of building a highly successful, secure career in marketing and business, she decided she’d go back to school and reinvent herself as an OCD therapist so she could teach others what she’d learned about treatment. I still

shake my head when I think about that commitment, because I know just what Shala had to sacrifice to make it: namely, every semblance of security and comfort she'd attempted to find for herself up to that point. She willfully stepped into a profession all but defined by its uncertainty and lack of traditional control.

And yet, Shala chose *purpose* over *doubt*.

She threw herself into her studies and worked tirelessly for years to build a successful practice that, day after day, requires her to fight her OCD's demands for outcome certainty, a luxury that simply doesn't exist in the treatment world.

As Shala will share with you, another of our common beliefs is that there's great power in choosing to believe the universe is friendly. No, of course we can't prove that to be the case. But that's not the point. By choosing to live our lives *as though* this is true, we turn the tables on our OCD Doubt Bullies, who would have us believe that the universe is out to get us.

Shala's story, I believe, is a testament to the incredible value of this attitudinal approach to confronting OCD recovery, and for that matter, for navigating life. I want to encourage you to keep this in mind as Shala, through her beautiful writing and skillful narrating, takes you deep into her decision-making evolution over the course of her journey. I'm certain you will see for yourself just how much the "friendly universe" concept has transformed Shala's life.

Finally, I'm compelled to leave you with one last full disclosure—some fine print that Shala and I have committed to attaching to all of our work—not for OCD reasons, but rather because we believe it's one of the most important pieces of our stories.

We, as we're fond of saying, are works in progress, *recovering*, not recovered, individuals with OCD. We cringe at the word "cured," and we go out of our way to gently correct any references to us that include that word. If we're held up as OCD success stories, we want that flattering label to reflect our having learned to successfully live

with OCD, not any erroneous notion that we have put this debilitating disorder behind us.

This reality, I'm convinced, makes the memoir you're about to read that much more powerful. It's not some historical record of triumph, but rather the backstory to a truly inspiring, still-unfolding tale of phenomenal success that Shala continues to write day after day. And the hard-earned wisdom she has committed to share here and in all her work can and will change your life.

I know it did mine.

Jeff Bell
Sausalito, California

Jeff Bell is an author, mental health advocate, and radio news anchor. His two books, *Rewind, Replay, Repeat* and *When in Doubt, Make Belief*, have established Jeff as a leading voice for mental health awareness and "Greater Good" motivation. He served for eight years as a national spokesperson and board member for the International OCD Foundation, and he co-founded the nonprofit A2A Alliance to showcase and foster the power of turning adversity into advocacy. He and Shala co-founded Beyond the Doubt, an initiative dedicated to helping people learn to thrive through uncertainty. Jeff currently co-anchors the KCBS Afternoon News in San Francisco.



Prologue

I stood back, aghast. The jagged hole in the kitchen wall shouldn't have surprised me, considering the force that had created it. Stunned, I watched as eddying wisps of plaster dust pooled gently on the floor.

It was a gaping maw, lightless and foreboding. Appropriate, really, as I felt a similar darkness growing inside me, engulfing me.

What was happening? What was I turning into?

I slid down the opposite wall, tears obscuring the destruction in front of me. Stifling a sob, I grabbed the phone and dialed the number I knew by heart.

“Sydney, it's me,” I choked. “I think I need help.”



PART I



CHAPTER 1

The Accident

I'm four years old, in a room that's pale blue all over. Everyone in it is pale blue, too. What I see is dreamlike in quality, hazy and indistinct. People milling around on the edge of my vision. Machines chirping and whirring. I notice that I'm pale blue, too, lying down, unable to move. Yet strangely, I'm also hovering above myself. Watching. Waiting.

The mask is the first thing I see that's razor sharp in focus. Not a Halloween mask, but a black mask that looks a little bit spongy, attached to a funny tube. With the mask and its taillike tube hovering over me, I think of the long pieces of tire rubber I see on the sides of the highway, the ones that always remind me of fat snakes. The tube looks like a road snake, I think, and I try to smile, but I don't seem to have control of my face.

The mask is hissing softly, rhythmically, and it's coming toward me in slow motion. I am mesmerized by the mask. What is it doing? Who is the woman pushing it toward me? She has a mask on, too,

but hers matches my surroundings, ghostly and pale blue. She is saying something that sounds like kids trying to talk under water. I don't understand her garbled words. I just keep staring at the mask.

In the way of dreams, it takes forever for the mask to reach my face, and yet it takes no time at all. Once the mask makes contact, I watch the "me" suspended above my body slowly disappear, and everything goes black.

I know something like this happened. I just don't know if it happened like that. Honestly, everything I remember about Sunday, August 17, 1975 and the weeks and months that followed is suspect, because, first and foremost, I was four years old. How much does anyone remember accurately about being four?

Of course, that's not the only reason my memory is fuzzy. There was the trauma. The Accident. How much would I really be expected to remember about an event so sweeping in its consequences that it would change the course of my entire life?

"Are we going to go feed the ducks at Warriors' Path?" I asked. I looked up at my mom, shading my eyes from the sun with my fingers.

"I'm sure your dad will be back from the lab by the time we get home, so you can ask him what he's got planned," she replied.

"Hooray!" I yelled, excited to spend an afternoon at the local park with my dad.

Mom and I started off across the church parking lot. Dad didn't often go to church with us. He preferred his chemistry lab on Sundays. I imagined him pouring glistening, brightly colored liquids into funny-shaped vials, like I'd seen cartoon characters do. It made sense why he'd want to do that, instead of sitting in a big room at church listening to someone talk.

“Did you have fun in Sunday school today?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, we read stories and colored,” I answered, still squinting at the noonday sun. “What did you do?”

Mom stopped and pulled from her purse a pair of orange sunglasses with ducks on the rims. “Here, put these on,” she said, handing them to me. “Well, today we had someone famous speak to us. A man named John Palmer. He’s on the news program your dad watches on TV. And he’s from Kingsport, just like you.”

“Kingsport, Tennessee?”

“That’s right, Kingsport, Tennessee.”

Now that was big. Someone from my hometown on TV.

Looking back, I wonder what my life would have been like if my parents had chosen another town. It wasn’t as though I was destined to live in Kingsport. We could just as easily have ended up in Rochester, New York, the headquarters location of the company where my dad worked, Eastman Kodak. We could have lived there in a different life, with a different end to this day.

Mom turned and waved back at her friend Carol, who stood at the other end of the parking lot. Brushing the curly brown hair out of my eyes, I spied Carol’s daughter Anne standing near her and gave her a big wave. Anne and I were in Sunday school and Montessori together.

Mom and I turned again and started walking toward the road. As we drew closer, bossy bursts of wind gusted behind the cars, as if they were trying to pull me along in their wake. Spying our Crayola-green Plymouth Duster parked on the other side of the two-lane road, Mom and I stepped down off the curb between parked cars to wait for traffic to clear. With my duck-themed sunglasses, I stared up at the Appalachian Mountains, their blue haze haloed in the sun, and thought about the fun I’d have that afternoon.

But it would be more than a year before I was able to feed the ducks again.

Another memory I might have made up:

I'm lying down, and everything is black, although I know it's sunny. Why can't I see the sun? It's as if someone has flipped a switch and turned off all my senses, except for hearing. I hear people screaming. I hear Anne screaming. I know it's her because I recognize her voice, as we spend so much time together at school. Lots of footsteps pound the pavement. Someone is breathing hard, like he's just run a race. I hear words without sentences: *ambulance*, *blood*, *leg*, and one I don't understand that sounds like "turn a cat." There must be a cat nearby. That's good. I like cats. We have a cat at home named Katie.

The sirens start then. Lots of them. Lots of people shouting. No one needs to shout. Don't you know I can hear you? The sounds, mixed up, senseless, become an unlikely lullaby that plays me to sleep.

The Kingsport Courier

August 18, 1975

Mother, child injured in accident outside of church

Kingsport—Two Kingsport residents were seriously injured in an automobile accident Sunday afternoon. A southbound automobile struck a car parked on the shoulder of Highway 23, which then struck Heather Nicely and her young daughter, Shala. Both Mrs. Nicely and her daughter sustained multiple fractures and contusions. Mrs. Nicely, of Foothill Road, was listed in “fair” condition at Henderson Memorial Hospital on Monday morning. Four-year-old Shala is listed in “poor” condition.

August 20, 1975

Mildred Henry
Henderson Memorial Hospital

Hattie Hauser
Tampa, FL

Dear Hattie,

I wanted to give you an update on Heather and Shala. We arrived from North Carolina the night of the 17th. I'm so glad we came as Vince really needed the support. He's been staying with Shala, and we're on another floor of the hospital with Heather. As Heather's parents, we get updates around the clock.

Heather has a badly broken leg, but she's conscious. She doesn't remember much of what happened, thank goodness. Shala is in worse shape: her pelvis and both legs are broken. They put her in a body cast up to her armpits. I have no idea what she remembers of the accident—I hope nothing.

Vince told us, somewhat dazed, that Shala's leg looked like a piece of beefsteak rolled in gravel before she went into emergency surgery. What a devastating thing for a parent to witness.

Did I tell you on the phone about John Palmer, the reporter for NBC? He was speaking at the church that day. Heather's friend Carol told me he put a tourniquet around Shala's leg before the ambulance came. And thank goodness—who knows how much blood she'd already lost.

I will give you a call later with more information about how they're doing.

Love,
Mother

To: All Nursing Staff
From: Henderson Memorial Orthopedic Staff
Re: Shala Nicely
Date: August 24, 1975

Please be advised that Shala is having hallucinations; she seems to be seeing things on the ceiling and walls. These are likely normal based on the trauma she experienced, but please note anything out of the ordinary on her chart.

Her father is quite upset by the hallucinations as they seem to cause Shala a great deal of distress. We have assured him this is something she will go through and there is nothing we can do to prevent them from occurring.

Please continue to check vitals on a regular basis and give Tylenol as needed for pain.

September 4, 1975

Mildred Henry
Henderson Memorial Hospital

Hattie Hauser
Tampa, FL

Dear Hattie,

Thanks much for the stuffed animal you sent for Shala and the flowers you sent to your sister. The flowers brightened up Heather's room, and Shala loves the bear.

As you know, we've been staying with your sister in the hospital so Vince can stay with Shala. He's been staying in her hospital room around the clock. Even though it's been a few weeks since the accident, it looks like they will both be here a while longer. I heard the doctor say another couple of weeks for Heather and even longer for Shala.

Thank goodness Vince is with Shala, although I can't imagine how hard it must be for her to be away from her mother for so long at age four. I'm sure she doesn't understand.

I should go—a nurse is coming in to run some tests. Take care of yourself.

Love,
Mother

To: All Nursing Staff
From: Henderson Memorial Orthopedic Staff
Re: Shala Nicely
Date: September 12, 1975

Please note that Shala's father has requested that the temperature in Shala's room be set no higher than 70 degrees. He mentioned several times that hospital staff are turning up the heat thinking the patient must be cold. Shala is complaining of intense itchiness under her body cast, which is exacerbated by heat.

Shala's father bought a small TV for her room. If he is not there you can turn it on for her, as it distracts her from the discomfort of the cast.

Please continue to check vitals on a regular basis and give Tylenol as needed for pain.

September 18, 1975

Mildred Henry
Henderson Memorial Hospital

Hattie Hauser
Tampa, FL

Dear Hattie,

Your sister is now home from the hospital after almost a month. She has to use a walker, but they expect her to regain full use of her leg.

Shala will be in the hospital for several more weeks. She has been moved to a room with another little girl named Jennifer. When I was visiting with her the other day, she asked me why Jennifer has bacon wrapped around her head. I asked her what she meant by "bacon" and she said they take the "white hat" off Jennifer's head and then they unwrap bacon from underneath the hat. Finally, I understood. Jennifer has a head injury, and they change her bloody bandages each day. I've asked the nursing staff to close the curtains from now on when they change Jennifer's dressings. Shala has seen enough.

Fortunately, Jennifer and Shala get along. Jennifer has a Cootie game that she and Shala play. I think you

know the game, the one where you put together big, plastic bugs? Shala has always liked bugs, so she and Jennifer are entertained for hours.

I've heard Vince call Shala his "mighty tough tyke" several times. After what she's gone through and survived at four years old, "tough" is an understatement.

Love,
Mother

October 16, 1975

Mildred Henry
Henderson Memorial Hospital

Hattie Hauser
Tampa, FL

Dear Hattie,

Finally—they released Shala from the hospital. But before doing so, they had to take off her cast. They used this little electric saw, but it must have looked to Shala like a chain saw. She screamed as they cut the cast off. Vince was none too happy with the doctors.

She had her first water therapy in a whirlpool today. She's going to have to relearn how to walk. She'll need to have physical therapy several times a week for a few months. Vince took her to A&W for her favorite orange soda afterward—he's doing a good job of trying to make all this bearable for her.

Love,
Mother

November 4, 1975

Heather Nicely
Kingsport, TN

Mildred Henry
Zirconia, NC

Hi Mother and Dad,

Some good news: Shala saw Dr. Cox on Monday and he gave her permission to begin walking again. She pitched a fit at therapy, but her physical therapist and Vince just let her scream it out until she was ready to try. When she and Vince got home, she showed me how she could take some steps with crutches. Her legs and soles of her feet get tired and sore, which is understandable after two and a half months of disuse. She'll get over her reluctance to walk in time—she hollered about the whirlpool bath at first, too!

Let us know how you're doing!

Love,
Heather

February 16, 1976

Heather Nicely
Kingsport, TN

Mildred Henry
Zirconia, NC

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the lovely gifts you sent for Shala's birthday. She's getting much better every day—from a body cast, to a walker, to crutches, to finally being able to walk on her own.

Yesterday we took her to the orthopedic surgeon's office for the first of what will be annual checkups. It's likely that her right leg will be somewhat shorter than the left. We'll see how much as she grows.

You and Dad have been so supportive throughout this whole process. I can't tell you how much it's meant to Vince and me, as well as to Shala. She loves her Poppop and Nana!

Love,
Heather

February 25, 1976

Mildred Henry
Zirconia, NC

Hattie Hauser
Tampa, FL

Dear Hattie,

Can you believe it's been six months since The Accident? It seems like that's become what we call what happened on August 17. It's a time marker for our family. When we talk about events involving Heather, Vince, and Shala, we refer to them in relation to The Accident. Everything was either "before The Accident" or "after The Accident." At least there is an after.

I recently talked with Heather, and she said Shala will have some pretty big scars on her legs. They look like caterpillars where the surgeons sewed her skin back together. On her left shin there's one that's at least four inches long. Vince rubs cocoa butter into the scars every day. The doctors said that will make them less visible, but according to your sister it's not working too well.

But more concerning to me are the scars we can't see: the scars buried deep in her mind. I can't even

imagine what she's seen, how scared she must've been over the past six months. If I catalog the horrors she's witnessed, I could include The Accident itself, her hallucinations, being separated from her mother for two months, that awful body cast (and the trauma of being sawed out of it!) and seeing all the sick and injured people at the hospital. A few weeks after The Accident, she kept asking me questions about a mask. She said she was dreaming about a blue room where they put a black mask on her face. I think these were memories from immediately before her surgery. How she could remember anything after being hit by a car I don't know, but she remembers having the anesthesia mask put on before her operation.

Shala has learned the world can be a very dangerous place. She's safe now, but I wonder, will she believe that?

Love,
Mother



CHAPTER 2

Rule #1

“**G**oodnight, Mom!”
“Goodnight, La,” Mom said, as she turned off the light and closed my bedroom door.

I turned over on my side and hugged my stuffed dog, one of twenty or so stuffed animals given to me after The Accident that resided on my bed. Closing my eyes, I thought about tomorrow.

Field Day. I loved Field Day. I was going to win the 100-yard dash, I just knew it. Well, if I could keep Priscilla from beating me. She was fast, but I was faster. I thought about what it would be like at the starting line, with all the third graders cheering. How proud I'd be to win, especially since my right leg was shorter than my left, corrected by an extra half-inch layer of foam visible in the sole of my right sneaker. Kids sometimes teased me about my shoes, but they wouldn't make fun of me when I had a blue ribbon in my hand.

I smiled and rolled over again in my nest of stuffed toys.

As I snuggled under the covers, the scene in my mind abruptly changed. Third graders disappeared, replaced by a crowd of raucous adults dressed in medieval attire. Hundreds of them swarmed, buzzing, agitated, all looking the same direction.

I froze, tensing beneath the quilt. I knew what was coming. I whirled around in my mind to see what had captured the mob's attention, afraid of what I'd see. What I always saw.

They were there, of course: two people lying on wooden slats. Glinting steel blades hung precariously above their necks: a guillotine. My mind mercilessly flung me forward to see the faces of the innocent people about to die. Reluctantly, I looked—and uttered a pitiful “no” as I stared once again into the eyes of the condemned.

Mom and Dad.

With a sharp intake of breath, I sat up, fumbling for the lamp on my bedside table. Clicking it on, I grabbed my head, as if I could pull these horrid thoughts out of my mind.

“No, no, no, no,” I cried. “I don't want that. I don't want that.”

Why did I see these things? What was wrong with me?

I thought about my friends. During sleepovers when we shared our deepest secrets, whispering quietly in our sleeping bags, no one talked about seeing their parents' heads chopped off on a nightly basis. No one.

At nine years old, I knew it wasn't normal to see these things. I knew I was somehow different, and not in a good way.

I also knew what I needed to do. How I took care of these thoughts. Still sitting up, I closed my eyes tightly and began my nightly ritual of replaying the grisly scene. I conjured a crowd of grungy people from the Middle Ages, tightly packed around a platform, chanting with raised fists. Mom and Dad came next, laid out on planks, dressed in the clothes of royalty. Their necks were bare below the quivering guillotine blades, hanging mere feet above their heads.

The blades started to fall. “No!” I screamed in my mind, as I forced the blades back up, repeatedly raising my hands, palms up, as if I were weighing invisible objects. This movement was important, I knew. I needed it to keep the blades from falling, from killing my parents.

Because there was going to be no death in the story I now played in my head.

Why didn’t my mind understand that?

As I continued my new story, the executioner—my nemesis—kept releasing the rope that held the blades in the air. He wanted them to crash down and sever the heads of the people at the center of my world. The people who were my protectors.

I fervently pushed up the guillotine blades with my hands, eyes closed, willing my mind to stop, to let me recreate the story my way. After several moments of mental struggle, the executioner finally held the rope firmly in place. I had won a temporary stay of execution.

Quickly, I turned around in my mind. I spied modern bleachers, filled with a studio audience of decent-looking people, tucked just out of direct view behind the executioner’s platform. I looked up. Cameras and lights hung near the ceiling of my sound stage. Glancing over at the man to my left, the cameraman, I saw his “thumbs up” signal, which said he was ready to roll.

“Action!” someone announced, and my new movie was off and running.

My parents, lying on the platform, looked brave and beautiful. Music swelled from my mind’s speakers, heightening the scene’s tension. Mom and Dad clasped hands. From the music, the studio audience knew the blades were about to fall, to end the lives of the courageous Sir Vince and Lady Heather Nicely.

Suddenly, a knight, resplendent in armor and chain mail, on a steed closely resembling the Black Stallion, thundered into the crowd. The stallion reared, splitting the mob. Without a word,

the knight dismounted, rushed onto the platform, and pulled my parents to safety. The executioner, sensing his last chance, allowed the blades to fall, a moment too late. They missed their mark, just as they always did in my movie, splintering the wood below with a hollow clunk, signaling the start of the triumphant aria that ended my mental masterpiece.

I opened my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. I'd saved my parents again. I saved them every night. In my twisted world, I was my parents' protector.

Sitting on the sloped pitch of my front yard in the fading dusk, Brian and I played with our Snoopy action figures. "You take Charlie Brown," he said, handing me the small plastic toy. "I'll play with Snoopy for a while."

"Okay," I said, taking the Peanuts character. "Do you want to go inside and play?"

"No, I have to go home soon. Mom told me to be home at dark," Brian said, glancing at the disappearing outline of his house across the street.

"Okay." I had to go in soon, too. But I didn't want to. I didn't want to go to bed, even as I tiredly rubbed my eyes, which were always ringed with smudgy dark circles in my school photos. I wanted to stay outside and play.

Field Day had come and gone, and I'd returned home proudly carrying my blue ribbon for the 100-yard dash. My neighborhood friends and I now basked in the warm, languid days of summer. We slept in, meeting up daily in the late mornings for hours of imaginative play.

"Are you still going to Hilton Head next week?" I asked Brian.

"Yeah, but I wish you could go, too."

“That’s okay. I’ll have fun at the farm,” I said, knowing he and his sister Emily really would like me to go with them. I didn’t want to hurt Brian’s feelings by telling him I’d rather go to the farm.

What started out as a place to help my dad get away from work, the farm became our family’s beloved weekend retreat. My dad craved intellectual challenge and loved his chemistry laboratory at Kodak. Loved it so much, in fact, that sometimes he had trouble leaving it. When I was in Montessori, I’d once done a worksheet where I completed a sentence starting “I wish ...” with “... I could see my Daddy more.” My wish was resolved by the eventual purchase of a sixty-acre mountain farm, just far enough away from the lab to make going into work on a whim inconvenient for my trying-to-recover workaholic father.

At the farm we had no phone. No TV. No air conditioning or heat, except what our wood stove produced. During our weekend visits, if I wasn’t entertaining myself by bareback riding my two paint ponies, Misty and Flicka, or helping my dad with one of his farm projects, I was lying on the porch swing, reading everything I could get my hands on. From *The Black Stallion* to *Ramona the Great* and *Encyclopedia Brown*, I craved my daring literary friends and their incredible adventures. I loved them because they reliably ended their journeys with a happily ever after.

As I lay in the swing, reading in the drowsy heat of summer weekends, I recognized I was a lucky kid. My parents made sure their only child’s every need was met while they tried hard not to spoil me—an effort at which they failed miserably. How many kids had not one, but two ponies? How many children had sixty acres, half of them forested, to roam at will with a beloved dog, Mac? How many girls had a clubhouse built just for them into the loft of a barn?

And how many kids also saw, when they closed their eyes to sleep, images of those same ponies being slaughtered? The dog being tortured? The barn burning down?

I may have been a lucky kid, but I wasn't lucky enough to get out of having to go to bed, where I now employed a brand-new strategy to try to tame the ever-morphing monster in my head.

“Dear God, please bless Mommy and Daddy, Poppop and Nana, Grandma and Granddad, Mac and Cricket and Patches ...”

I stopped, aware something was off. I'd said the names of our cats out of order. It was Patches and Cricket, not Cricket and Patches. I had to start over. Again.

Kneeling on the carpet beside my bed, I craned my head to listen to the sounds coming from the den, wishing I were still outside playing with Brian. The voices from the TV were muffled by my bedroom door and the folding door separating my bedroom and bathroom from the den. That folding door was my salvation. It made a low rumbling noise any time it was opened, giving me time to scurry back into bed where I was supposed to be.

Hearing only muted laughter from *M*A*S*H* on TV, I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and started my plea to God again.

“Dear God, please bless Mommy and Daddy, Poppop and Nana, Grandma and Granddad, Mac and Patches and Cricket and Misty and Flicka and everyone on the farm. Please bless Brian and Emily and Julie and Janet and Christy and all my friends. Please make sure that nothing bad happens to anyone, ever, and that no one ever dies or gets hurt. Amen.”

I opened my eyes. The light from the hallway peeped under my bedroom door. Sitting back on the floor cross-legged in the sliver of light, I looked at my knees, deeply indented with impressions of the carpet. I had been at this for ten minutes, maybe longer. I could feel in the pit of my stomach, though, that it still wasn't right. I would have to start again.

Things had changed since Field Day. My mind had become more demanding. It wasn't enough to be the director of a blockbuster mental movie, saving my parents from the almost nightly horrors of the guillotine. To be absolutely certain everyone in my world would be safe, I now had to pray. Repeatedly. Or really bad things would happen. And it would be all my fault if these things did happen because I had the power to prevent them.

I held the safety of my world in my hands.

As I sat on the floor, willing myself to have the strength to kneel and begin again, I muttered, "This all started with my stupid head." And my head wouldn't stop punishing me.

I uncrossed my legs, leaned wearily against the side of my bed, and reached back into my memory.

I'd been six, maybe seven, swimming in the baby pool at the Moose Lodge. As I splashed happily in my bright green swimsuit, I thought it would be fun to dive, just like the seals I'd seen on a TV special. Standing in the shallow pool, I plunged seallike, headfirst into the water.

THUNK.

My head smacked the bottom of the pool.

I don't remember what happened next. Did I get up out of the pool crying? Did I run to my mom? Did she even see it happen? None of that mattered.

What did matter was that later, when I was eight years old, my mind randomly fished this one sopping wet, seemingly unimportant memory from the recesses of my subconscious and presented it to me, explaining that I had made a grave mistake.

That when I'd hit the bottom of that pool with my young, developing head, I'd given myself a fatal disease: head cancer. That if I

hadn't made that dive, I would have been fine. But I had, and it was all my fault that now I was going to die.

It was the first time my mind had turned against me.

After that day, my eight-year-old mind increasingly preoccupied itself with that fear of dying. But I hadn't known what to do with it. There hadn't seemed to be anything to do with it, so I'd lived my life—in the classroom, on the school bus, with friends, at home—terror-stricken. So much so that on the day my second-grade teacher talked about my class advancing into third grade, I thought with sickening surety that I'd be in a small coffin, lifeless, by that time. Because why would I think such thoughts about dying, if they weren't going to come true?

Then, as strangely as the thought of head cancer—my mind's first foray into terrorizing me—had emerged, it had disappeared, only to be replaced some time later with new assaults: gruesome nighttime visions of medieval executions, animal torture, and general disaster.

I pulled myself back into a kneeling position beside my bed. It really didn't matter what had happened years ago, especially because in the past I'd just accepted my mind's death-obsessed thoughts as the truth. Now, however, I had tools to try to convince it otherwise. Tools such as mental movie-making. And praying. I had no idea where these tools had come from, but I knew I had to use them. Not doing so could have consequences too overwhelming to bear.

I bowed my head and started again.

“Dear God, please bless Mommy and Daddy, Poppop and Nana, Grandma and Granddad, Mac and Patches and Cricket ...”

There was nothing wrong with praying, of course. But deep down, I knew that while what I was doing was necessary, it

wasn't *normal*. So I couldn't get caught doing it. As I repeated my angst-filled appeals to God, I listened carefully for the rumbling of the folding door, my signal to abandon my heavenly petitions and retreat into bed.

I finished my prayer and opened my eyes, stroking the head of one of my stuffed animals. Then I closed them and started praying again. Most of the time, it just felt better if I did my prayers four times. I was sure to get at least one or two of the four perfect, and perfection was mandatory to ensure the earthly salvation of those I loved. Sometimes I even needed to do my prayers sixteen times, because what could be better than four times four?

Finally finishing, I stood up and flopped exhausted into bed. I squinted at the clock softly illuminated by the light under the door. Nine fifteen. I had been at this for at least twenty minutes, maybe thirty.

All of a sudden, I heard the folding door's telltale rumbling. Then my dad's heavy footsteps, pausing outside my bedroom. I froze, pretending to be asleep.

Mom and Dad could not know what I was doing. No one could. Because my mind told me no one could know. It was Rule #1:

You cannot get caught doing these things or thinking these thoughts.

Because if you do, you will have to explain yourself.

And you don't tell what you see in your mind.

Because if you do, all those bad things you see...you will make them happen.

I didn't question this rule. I lived by it. Because I could not let those bad things happen. I had to keep everyone safe. It had become my job.

My dad, satisfied I was asleep, walked away, turning off the hallway light and closing the folding door behind him. Recognizing

I'd been holding my breath, I breathed out, releasing a little of the tension I held in my upper back as I fell into a fitful, dreamless sleep.

The tension never seemed to totally go away, however. How could it, when I was trying to bravely hold the weight of the world on my nine-year-old shoulders?