

I've been keeping a diary for years, ever since I was first diagnosed about 5 years ago. It's not meant for other people, I rarely share the contents of the notebook with anyone, it's not anything significant or great – it's just something that I need to do. I need to get the insanity out of my head somehow and so I do it with pen and paper. I always have a little black notebook stuck in my back pocket and I always have a pen. It's grounding, it's liberating and it's completely harmless – it's the opposite of harmless actually, it's helpful. It's not a day-by-day recounting of my experiences – I don't find that helpful, I find that traumatizing. Like most things in my life right now, it's a creative project, it's a way of venting my insanity on paper and then looking back and reading something interesting. It's not nonsense usually, like some people expect it to be, it has a plot and a structure and it feels like something out of a Thomas Pynchon novel. But when I look back at it I see that I've taken a moment of pain, a moment of psychosis and irrationality and I've turned it into something beautiful. There's a saying that stress is just energy that's being directed at the wrong thing...and I believe that. More to the point I believe that psychosis is just energy, and being able to direct that energy toward something creative and something interesting means that I can look back at those moments of pain and say to myself that I created something out of it, I did something beautiful with it.

Psychosis can best be described as an overwhelming feeling of energy. When it's about to set in I get these pulses of energy, a wave of indescribable coldness that runs from the top of my head down to the tips of my toes. It was unnerving at first – I'd run to put my hoodie on, I'd take my temperature to see if I was running some kind of obscene fever; but before too long I'd be lying in the fetal position trying to get a grip on what's happening to me. The waves of energy subside and I suddenly feel a sensation that's something like being light-headed...like my consciousness is abandoning my brain for safer territory. I feel like I have no control over my body, I watch myself doing things; absurd things like lighting pieces of paper on fire or searching for something – not a specific thing, just a vague something - in the crevices of my room. And then the stress comes...not your average kind of stress, not the kind of stress that makes you perform well on a test, but an overwhelming sense of impending loss, a quick panic that overwhelms me. It feels a lot like death coming for me, like my time has arrived. I look about me, desperately searching for that vague thing that will make me feel better. But everything seems unbelievable, everything confounds me, everything seems like it comes from a nightmare. Sometimes the floor turns into liquid and I'm afraid that I'll drown in the viscous liquid of the hardwood floor of my house, I'm afraid that I'll be lost in the sticky substance as everything around me melts and becomes obscured into the miasma of the room. It becomes hard to breathe because, for some reason, I'm holding my breath and I think that if I just hold my breath long enough that the sensations which overwhelm me will end. But it never seems to end, I seem to exist in this place forever, a place where there is no concept of time, a place that seems to last an eternity...my

own personal hell. And that's when the voices come, sometimes I can make out what they tell me – they tell me to kill myself sometimes, they tell me that he's coming to get me...that he's already taken my mind and that now he's coming to take the rest of me and that he'll be here at any moment, most of the time the voices are just screaming at me, screaming nonsense, screaming threats. And doom sets in...it's the end of my life and it's going to end before I even did anything significant. And then shapes start to form in front of me...I try to close my eyes but it doesn't do any good, I can still see the sticky substance of my room and I can see the shapes form into something more substantial through the lids of my eyes. The forms come together and take shape into these figures. Figures that I've seen before, figures that I've drawn many pictures of and painted many paintings of. They just stand there, as if they're debating with each other – they're naked and their bodies' are grotesque, but they have masks on. Masks which frame a bleak nothingness where their eyes should be, or masks framing these piercing eyes that become the only clear thing in the melting room...I can picture those eyes right now and those eyes always send shivers up my spine. And when the figures finally take shape and when they become definite I don't need the voices to tell me that they've arrived, though the voices certainly tell me that they're here. The voices tell me with this kind of snide self-assuredness that lets me know I should have expected this all along. And I would run, I would try to get away but I'm paralyzed with fear, and I know that if I get out of my chair or get off my bed I'll be swallowed up by the sticky substance that used to be my floor.

But the figures never do anything but discuss the matter of my capture with one another; they never approach me to take me to wherever it is I'm supposed to be going. They just stand there and I survive it and I plead with myself to get my consciousness back. And I know that my consciousness will come back, I have that one little hope. Because I know, deep down, that nothing can take me like that. Because, deep down, I know that I'm protected and I know that it's all a hallucination. Somewhere, inside of whatever is left of my brain, is the part of my brain that's connected to my soul, the part of my brain that has such a tiny voice, a minute reassurance amidst the chaos that tells me the truth, a voice that tells me to look down at my hand.

Tattooed on my left hand is a Bible verse – Psalm 91:11 “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all of your ways.” My mom has been reciting that passage to me for years – whether it was me waking up screaming from a nightmare as a little kid or whether it was her reciting that passage in the middle of all this madness. It's the one assurance that I have, in that moment, that there is nothing evil out there that can take me; because I'm protected. So I look down at my hand and I start to make out the whole of the tattoo and I strain to remember that Bible verse...sometimes it takes me a while, but I get it...I remember it. And when I remember it that's my reply to the voices, that's my reply to these disfigures. And before

too long, the disfigures get blurrier and blurrier until they finally disappear just like they'd appeared. And before too long the walls and the floor start to take shape again. And before too long I regain my breathing and I breathe deeply and I breathe strongly and I regain my composure. And when I have my breathing under control and I wipe the tears from my eyes there's this moment of clarity, and I take stock in the fact that everything is as it should be, that I've survived another one and I tell myself that I'll survive the next one. I have always survived; I'm always going to survive.

Sometimes I see these same figures walking down the street or sitting in chairs in waiting rooms or at coffee shops. And in those moments a kind of panic awakens in me. But it doesn't last long. Because I've drawn them so many times, because I've painted them so many times that they've become familiar to me...almost like old nemeses whom I've learned everything about. They'll never approach me and I'll never approach them. I'll draw them and they'll discuss whatever it is that's so important to them.

I learned about input/output systems in first grade when we were learning how computers work. Their mechanism of action is incredibly simple: someone inputs a command and the computer outputs the result. It's similar with humans – throughout our lives we receive input from a variety of sources and, as a result, of that input we receive we output the results; we output ideas and behaviors and we talk a certain way, we act a certain way, and we have a certain perspective on the condition and facets of our lives. That's how we learn how to speak – those around us speak and we slowly learn to output the results and start speaking ourselves. But what about when something goes wrong with that input/output mechanism? When such a mechanism goes wrong in a computer it throws an error message, sometimes it just spews out random data.

My name is Chris and my input/output mechanism is malfunctioning, I sometimes throw an error message, I sometimes spew out random data. It doesn't make me any less intelligent, it doesn't make me any less moral and, though it certainly makes me feel this way, it doesn't make me any less of a person. But there are all kinds of biases out there – the media has done an incredibly good job of depicting the mentally ill as a bunch of sub-human degenerates bent on the destruction of all that is civil and right, of all that is sane. Because we can understand the sane, we can understand the existence of collective consciousness, we are reassured that everyone else sees that tree and we take for granted that there are people who see so much more than a tree. It's not dangerous to see more than the tree, it's maybe a little bit frightening, but we seem to take so much stock in our ability to think clearly and to perceive rightly that suddenly the existence of a group of people who don't always think clearly or perceive rightly (whatever that means) is frightening. And because it's frightening it must be dangerous. Nothing could be further from the truth.

When I was first diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder I was attending a small private college in rural Minnesota...and I was refusing treatment. A group of kids, who already didn't like me, found out that I was mentally ill and decided to make my life more miserable by banging on my bedroom door late at night and mocking me terribly, threatening to kill me. Before they didn't like me because I was the only male painting student at the college and therefore wasn't enough of a man. After they found out about my mental illness I was someone who deserved to die. I fail to see the connection between having an illness and deserving to die. More recently I told a girl that I thought she was pretty – she told me that she didn't believe me because I was crazy and was probably hallucinating the whole thing. Last month I visited a doctor to get something checked out; as soon as I told him that I suffered from a mental illness and gave him my list of medications his whole attitude changed. He went from being friendly and cordial to rude and dismissing, he ignored the symptoms I was complaining of and left me without treatment and without a diagnosis to get medication to treat me. Sometimes it can seem like all of life is against me. Sometimes it seems as though there is no hope, that there's no point in continuing my life because it just isn't worth it...because I'm not worth it, because I'm not a valuable person like everyone else. And I've tried many times to discontinue my life – because there was no hope, no relief and no end to the suffering.

But I always make it. And I will always make it. I have always made it because there's so much beauty in the world that I'd be missing out on. I have to make it because I bring joy to peoples' lives and I would only bring destruction if I were to kill myself. But that's hard to hold on to, it's hard to remember that; because there's so much going on inside my head telling me that I'm worthless, that I'm no good. It's hard to remember how important I am and how much joy I bring when the concept of reality – its very essence, the assumption that most people make about its very construction and existence – is being called into constant question. I call it surreality because it makes everything seem so unbelievable.

Sometimes, when I'm getting sick, I'll try to take an inventory of the objects around me and I'll try to inventory the lamp across the room, and the lamp will confound me. The lamp can't possibly exist; the lamp can't possibly be real. The lamp must be a farce – who's ever heard of a lamp anyway? Then the very idea of a lamp becomes so ludicrous to me that the lamp becomes a threat...I'm afraid of the lamp, the lamp is plotting against me, it's plotting my destruction with the books next to it, and, suddenly, there are the voices in my head, reaffirming how evil the lamp is, how I must run away from the lamp. So I say to the voices "how do I know the floor is actually there?" They have no good answer, they just tell me that they know I hallucinate so how could I possibly trust my senses to tell me with any certainty that there's really a floor there. And a horror spreads from the core of my chest out into my extremities. I'm trapped in

my chair with a lamp that's plotting with the books and I can't escape because I can't trust that the floor is actually there.

So I take out my little black notebook and fish out my pen and start writing a story about it. I write about a lamp that plots with a book to destroy everyone in the house. And I write about how the lamp and the book don't make it very far because the floor is a nice floor. And when the lamp and the book jump off the table and onto the floor, the floor disappears and then reappears after the lamp and the book have fallen into the void that's underneath all floors. I write about how the floor just saved my life.

And though I'm still in the grips of paranoid psychosis, I feel better because the floor is my friend. Then I decide that I want to say 'thank you' to the floor – so I get up, confident that the floor won't disappear because it's my friend and without giving my original fear of the lamp a second thought, I find a bucket and a mop, I put the dirt-riddled rugs in the wash and I give the floor a good cleaning. Most of the time, by the time I'm done washing and mopping and scrubbing, I'm back to normal again – the evil lamp and its cohort, the book, have been forgotten; the only record of them ever having been given a thought is in that little black notebook of mine.

My experience these past five years has certainly been filled with nightmares – it's certainly been trying, trying my patience and trying my grip on reality. But I've been re-learning how to live. I try to keep it as simple as that. Sure there's the amazingly complex structure of what schizoaffective disorder means on a philosophical and physiological level, but I think it's best for me to keep it simple. So I think of it in terms of having the reset button on my life pushed. And when I think about it that way I know that all I need to do is figure out how to live most successfully. When a computer is malfunctioning – when it's throwing an error message or spewing out random data – one of the first things to try is rebooting the computer...hitting the reset button. And, in hitting that reset button, the computer has a chance to rearrange itself...to put order back into the chaos that caused it to malfunction; and, oftentimes, that reset will make the computer function properly.

I oftentimes think about what my life would be like if I didn't have food allergies. The conclusion I've always come to is that my health would be poor. I would still be eating food that isn't good for my body; I'd be well on my way to having a heart attack in my early 40s. If I didn't have food allergies I probably wouldn't have discovered my love for cooking. Having food allergies has been incredibly rewarding. I'm physically healthy because of it and my mom and I get to bond over cooking meals together every week. Sure it sucks to always worry about cross contamination at restaurants and when friends cook for me and it's sometimes annoying to have to read the ingredients on everything I buy from the grocery store, but there are great benefits to having food allergies. In similar ways there are benefits to having a mental illness, and I think that

it's important to try to think of those benefits. It's afforded me the opportunity to speak before you here tonight, to share my story with you; it's given me the opportunity to bond with other friends with mental illnesses, who might otherwise not have shared their diagnosis with me if I weren't open and vulnerable to them about my own illness; and, through bonding with them over our struggles with mental illnesses, I've been able to help them through their struggles and offer them advice on how to live with it and they've been able to offer me support and advice in my own struggles. We've become closer because of our respective mental illnesses. Because of my condition I've been given the opportunity to open my own donation-based computer repair business where I get to work on computers for my community at affordable rates. Because of my illness I'm able to paint more than I have been able to in past years. I've been able to create something beautiful out of all this madness and share that beauty with other people in the hopes that they'll understand a little bit of what I'm going through.

I tried going to school for about three years after being diagnosed. Every semester during those three years, save for one, I had to drop out for medical reasons. Because I was hospitalized, because I was too psychotic, because my memory was so terrible I couldn't remember the material in the class, or because I was getting ECT. And every time I had to drop out I was devastated, it was another failure and, instead of looking for healthy ways to spend my time, I would spend my time scheming on how to get back to school and succeed. I would build my hopes and expectations for myself only to have them crushed the next semester. But in my scheming I was ignoring the things that would truly make me healthy enough to participate in society, in my scheming I was looking at short term answers for long term problems.

People usually have one or two things that define their identity, that make them feel like a valuable member of society. They usually have one or two things that they use to judge their own worth and value. For many people it's their job, or it's their family. For me, it's my intelligence, I've always been very smart and one might say that it's a defining characteristic of me; in standardized tests I always scored in the 95-98th percentile and I passed all of my IB tests with 6's and 7's (the highest scores you can get) without really studying as much as my fellow classmates were. I'm not good at sports, I'm not particularly charismatic – I'm just really smart and it's come to define my identity. My value and identity was school where I got to exercise my brain and learn new things. It was my job at a computer repair shop where I got to use my intelligence to fix computers. It was my ability to paint well and use my brain for creative purposes. For many years, it was me banking on getting a PhD. I'd invested myself fully on getting an MFA in painting or a doctorate in philosophy or computer science. It was a reason to get up in the morning, it was a reason to work hard, and it was a reason to keep going. I went to an IB school in high school. IB is like AP on steroids, a way for high school students to take college classes in high school and possibly enter college as a junior

instead of as a freshman. It requires an obscene amount of work (about 6-8 hours of homework a night on average) and the testing is strict and very difficult. I thrived in that environment, I got to use my brain all the time to work on difficult problems in every subject and the discussions that we had in class were almost always stimulating and fascinating. My experience with IB cemented the idea that my intelligence is where my worth is and where I would find the most success when I grew up.

I tried to carry that over to college but, by the time I got to college, my brain wasn't helping me – I was hospitalized, I got too sick to attend classes, I tried to kill myself. I became obsessed with the idea of killing myself to the point that it became a frequent topic during therapy. In the constant struggle between my rational self and my irrational self I knew I couldn't kill myself...I knew it was a terrible thing to do. But, between the voices in my head and the delusion that death was the kind of relief I needed, my psychiatrist started talking about electro convulsive therapy – ECT -three little letters that would change my life. After thinking it over, praying about it and talking about it with my fiancé and parents I decided that I would do it.

Dr. Guerra, my ECT doctor, told me that it would change my life. It's one thing to be warned of a drastic change in your life, it's quite another thing to actually experience it. I would liken it to being reborn but I like the idea of having a reset button pushed on my life. That button had already been pushed before when I was diagnosed and now it was time to push it again. ECT is the worst thing that ever happened to me, but it's also the best thing that ever happened to me. It made my life completely fall apart, but it also let me build my life anew. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for ECT.

It's funny, ECT wiped out my memory to a large extent but I can still remember what the process of getting it is like as if I was still getting it now. I got it three times a week for 6 months and then once a week for about a month before I finally called it quits. My Mom and Dad took turns driving me to Louisville, where Dr. Guerra practiced. My appointment was at 6am so they'd get up and get ready and then come to wake me up at about 4am. I didn't have to really do anything to get up...I just got out of bed, put some pants on, took my pills and was ready to go. I slept most of the car ride there. We'd get to the hospital and I'd sign in and one of Dr. Guerra's nurses would come out to get me and take us into the waiting room. The waiting room was almost like an airport terminal, only there were free donuts and coffee and you could change the channel on the TV. The ECT nurse would lead me into the first room where they would give me a memory test to test my short term memory and they'd give me a Beck test which is a questionnaire designed to give as objective an outlook on depression as possible. Then they'd make me drink this vile tasting liquid which was supposed to suppress my stomach acid and reduce nausea from the anesthesia. Since I had such a problem with nausea from the anesthesia I was given a suppository of some stomach medication that would make things a little bit better post-procedure. I'd be led into the bathroom where

I'd take my suppository and take off my shirt and shoes and put on a hospital gown. After I was done with that I'd come out and they'd lead me to a bed. I remember the first time I was there they took someone out of the operating room and she looked absolutely frightening; her hair was frizzy and she was breathing from an oxygen mask, she looked like she was dead. And all I could think is that I'm actually going through with it – I'm going to have tens of thousands of volts of electricity shot through my head, enough to give me a seizure. They microwave some of those bags with rice in them and put them on your arms to make it easier for Dr. Guerra to find your veins – I'm not really sure how well they worked. The nurses were very nice and would chat with me while I was waiting for my turn...I don't remember their names but I do remember their faces – they were such kindly faces. When it was my turn to go in they'd roll me into the operating room and Dr. Guerra would greet me with the sound of old-timey cowboy/folk music coming from speakers attached to his iPod and to the smell of his Wrigley's Spearmint chewing gum. He'd ask me how I was doing and get updates on my condition and my life all the while trying to find a vein to put his needle in. Anesthesia burns when they put it through a normal vein, it burns double when they put it through your hand and it burns triple when they put it through your wrist. After Dr. Guerra found my vein he would put the surprisingly heavy ECT paddles on my shoulder. They always scared me and they always brought to light the reality of my situation – I was doing something drastic, almost desperate, in an attempt to save my life. Pretty soon Dr. Guerra would say that he's going to put the anesthesia in and he'd say, "Off to sleep," in such a gentle and soothing voice and I'd try to stay awake as long as possible but it was a losing battle and I was always asleep within seconds – next thing I knew I was at home with a terrible headache and a nauseous stomach, and either my mom or my dad was there with some ginger ale and some crackers and I'd sit there and munch on them as I tried to readjust myself to my headache, to my sleepiness and to reality.

I have little to no recollection of November 2010 to May 2011 – the memories are gone and probably won't be regained. I've forgotten most of what I learned in college and I only have vague recollections of what high school was like. Those memories that remain have largely been retold to me by friends and family; so I don't feel as though I own those memories, they're just stories that somehow involve me. I've forgotten many movies that I've watched dozens of times, lyrics to songs, people in my life, important memories like my grandfather dying or my fiancé breaking up with me; so many memories either gone or never recorded in the first place. So far gone was my memory that a few days after my fiancé broke up with me I called her to ask if she wanted to hang out with me, not remembering that she'd broken up with me a few days before. I don't even remember what she told me when I called her, oblivious to recent events, I just know that it happened and that it must have hurt...because it still does. It's another bit of surreality, to know that I existed just like I exist now but I'm not able to access those memories like I know most people can. That period of my life is just one big blank

space. It sometimes frustrates me when people talk about events that happened around the time of ECT because I know that I should know about that, I know that I should be able to recall the event – but I can't, it's an enigma. They tell me stories about my childhood or about adventures that I had in high school and I have no clue that they even happened...I have absolutely zero recollection that those events took place.

My friend Maggie told me when she came to visit me a couple of summers ago about when I was first diagnosed. We both went to the same college in rural Minnesota and, in many ways, she was my only friend there. I would sometimes come over to her house in a state of dissociation – I simply wasn't participating in reality and couldn't communicate what I needed or what was wrong with me. I would stand outside her apartment and call her, she would answer and I would hang up immediately. Knowing that something was wrong, she would come outside to see if I was there and she'd invite me upstairs to sit on her couch; and there I would stay for hours. She would play movies for me, play my favorite music, make me food, talk to me – she tried so many different things to try to communicate with me, but I'd just stare off into the distance. Eventually, after sitting on her couch for a while, I would get up and leave and go back to my dorm. I never knew that I did that until she mentioned it to me.

During ECT, I couldn't read because I couldn't follow the plots of novels or the arguments made in philosophy texts – they didn't make any sense, they were just a collection of words strung together in a mysterious way. I'd forgotten how to draw and paint. I felt so stupid coming out of ECT and re-entering the real world. There were people I was friends with that I re-introduced myself to, much to my embarrassment. A great deal of my friends I don't actually remember meeting and I still have no clue when and where I met them. Things I'd known before were a mystery to me – I knew that I knew them, I just couldn't access the information...it eluded me, so many things eluded me. I forgot how to navigate Denver and my own neighborhood. I had to call a friend from the train stop one time on my way to church because I didn't know how to get to the church which was only a few blocks up the street from the train station. And it felt as though it was going to always be that way. I felt as though I was always going to be an illiterate artist who couldn't paint or draw, and who didn't know his way around his own home town. I was a prisoner in my house, my friends didn't really come to visit me and, since I can't drive a car, I was stuck alone in the house all day with nothing but my thoughts, nothing but this vast sense of loneliness; an emptiness that stretched as far as I was able to feel. I did get out of the house occasionally, there were times when I was able to get a ride to Denver to have coffee with a friend and I cherished those times. Because when I was in Denver, among my friends, I felt as though I belonged to something. But, for the most part, I was left to myself with no responsibilities and nothing to do. Like I said, I couldn't paint or draw (I'd forgotten how) and I couldn't read books...my two main passions were gone. I tried watching TV and got sucked into some

stupid reality television shows on MTV, but they were never satisfying. My life seemed to revolve around waiting for people to sign onto Facebook so that I could chat with them. I felt as though I was always going to be living at my parents' house – trapped in Aurora with no car and no friends nearby.

I was wrong though, because I'm stubborn and because I'm hard working and because I'm blessed. I decided to try my hand at a math class in preparation for starting a computer science degree (again, I had my heart set on a PhD). It was an easy math class, but it got me out of the house, it got me thinking critically again, and most importantly, it got me drawing again. After class I would ride my bike over to my favorite coffee shop to wait for my mom to pick me up when she was done with work. I was determined to teach myself how to draw again and after a few days of drawing at the coffee shop I met a guy named Helios, who was also an artist. We started drawing together and talking and my drawing started to improve rapidly – both from muscle memory coming back as well as from the critiques Helios would give me. I'm proud to say that I can now draw better than before and my paintings are much better than before ECT. I've regained my confidence – even to the point that I've developed a new drawing technique that I don't think existed before I invented it.

It's important for me to remember that it's just a reset button...it's not a power button, it's not a 'hello, you're going to get a mental illness now your life is over' button. 2 years ago I wouldn't have dreamt about living on my own. Now I have my own room in a house on Capitol Hill. Sure, I need more support than the average 25 year-old living on their own; but that help is crucial to my survival. It took me a long time to swallow my pride and ask for help – it took a long time of suffering before I agreed to come home and see a psychiatrist and it even took a long time before I started taking my pills consistently. Some people, me included, are just idiotically stubborn. But I've learned to take my stubbornness and turn it into an advantage. I reset my thinking from "I'm going to be stubborn and refuse treatment because I'm not really sick and don't need help" to "I'm going to be stubborn with my illness and get as much help as I can get." Like many things in life, it's just a matter of perspective. You can either be combative and resistant – from pride or from denial; or you can learn how to live with it and thereby successfully treat and manage the illness.

When I was first diagnosed the concession in my family about my diagnosis was that I would take my pills and I would get better – that the pills were magical and would treat my schizoaffective disorder much like one can treat high blood pressure; just take the pill and it'll be fine. There's so much more to it than just the pills! My psychiatrist has told me dozens of times that he wishes there was better medicine. But there isn't.

Anti-psychotics, mood stabilizers, anti-depressants...I've got a crate full of a variety of them and they're all miserable to take. They all sedate me heavily, to the point

where, sometimes, 12-14 hours of sleep a night isn't enough. They make me hazy and unable to think clearly (which is already enough of a problem when you have a thought disorder), they sometimes make my hands and lips shake uncontrollably. One of them, because I've been on it for so long, will temporarily paralyze me or give me small seizures. Some of them give me nightmares, some of them make me drool uncontrollably, they impair my memory (which, again, is already impaired because of ECT and my illness), some of them make me nauseous, most of them made me gain a substantial amount of weight, they make me lethargic, the list goes on but the bottom line is that they make me feel sub-human...like I'm less of a person.

There's so much more to it than just the pills and those things, those secondary things, are, in many ways, much more important than the pills. But the pills are still important. It took me years to find the right dosage of my arsenal of medicine. But when I finally found it, I found that the pills just enabled me to go out and do healthy things. The pills alone weren't the answer for me, they just make it so that I can go on walks every day with my dog, Kerrin, and my Dad, they make it so that I can sit outside in the sunshine of my yard and whittle away a couple hours of the afternoon drinking root beer and drawing pictures. The pills let me function enough to get out of my house and spend quality time with my friends and family.

I aced that math class that I took during the summer two years ago; set the curve on most of the tests and ended up with the highest grade in the class. I thought it was sure sign of success for the rest of my career as a student. So, in the Fall of 2010, I enrolled in a computer science class with the hopes of doing as well as I'd done the previous semester. Unfortunately, I learned another big lesson about mental illness – stress makes things much much worse.

It was back to the old problem of me reading my text book (this time with the aid of the computer reading it for me as I followed along), and by the time I got to class I'd forgotten everything I'd read, sometimes I would take a break from reading to go to the bathroom and when I got back I'd have to start the chapter all over again. I'd take notes in class and listen attentively to the lectures but, by the time I got home, I'd forgotten the lecture and my notes didn't make any sense. I got worse and worse, my memory got worse and worse, and finally my psychiatrist told me that it was time for me to drop out of school and find something less stressful to do with my time. I was devastated – I was going to be a successful student, I was going to become a software developer, I was going to get my PhD. Reducing my stress level was a tall order – because the thought of being out of school was equally stressful. I'd invested my sense of worth into something material and something impractical for the reality that I'm presented with. My therapist had multiple talks with me about my feelings of failure and worthlessness and about the reality of my situation. I can't work and I can't go to school – they're both much too stressful and it was going to lead up to a never ending cycle of going to the

hospital and possibly getting ECT again. I was going to have to invest my worth in something else, something more substantial and something visceral and real. I was also going to have to apply for disability. It felt like giving up, it felt like failing. But eventually, with my Dad's help, I started the long and overly-bureaucratic process of applying for disability. In the meantime, I started seeing a cognitive and behavioral therapist. She and I started working on giving me tools to help improve my memory. My CBT taught me a breathing technique for dealing with stress, she taught me to not be as hard on myself as I had been when my memory was failing me. Now, instead of beating myself up because I don't feel very intelligent when I can't follow books or remember what I've read or what's happened in my life, I simply say "another time, my memory will improve in a little bit." And my memory does eventually return to me, and I'll have a period of time where I can read difficult texts and where I can have complex discussions about various topics with my friends...and I've learned to make the most of those periods of time and cherish them when they happen because those times will not last. More than anything, my cognitive and behavioral therapist taught me that my mind is in constant flux and that nothing is permanent. She taught me that I'll have bad days and I'll have good days and that I ought to use the skills she taught me to survive the bad days and to make the most of the good days. I shouldn't force myself to have a good day and I shouldn't berate myself when I have a bad day – it just is.

But life still seemed hopeless most days, I had these tools at my disposal and I felt like they were going to waste...I felt like there was no rhyme or reason to my life and that I was just floating along, like an accident. I think sometimes that it got to a point where I was so depressed that I didn't even care about killing myself...there was no point to it, there wasn't even the thought that connected how valuable I was with how much damage my death would create, I had simply stopped caring. And I was trying to use the tools but everything seemed so futile, everything seemed so pointless and, in all honesty, I wasn't making as good of progress as I professed I was to either my family or my doctors. But then came along Kerrin. Kerrin is my dog, she's my best friend, she's the one that gets me up in the morning, she's the one that gets me out of the house every day to take a walk, she's the one that gets me to go to bed in the evening with her sad puppy dog eyes and her little huffs that she makes as she lies on my bed to try to get me to join her, telling me to put the paint brush down or log off the computer. She's my constant companion and a great source of comfort. She notices when I'm stressed or depressed or getting psychotic; and when she notices that she'll come to comfort me; she'll jump up on my lap and look at me with such love in her eyes, she'll curl up in my lap and petting her gives me something concrete to concentrate on. I know it's commonplace to call your dog your best friend but the phrase is definitely applicable in my situation. Before I had Kerrin my days were days of chaos – I got up when I wanted to, I went to bed when I wanted to, if I didn't feel like going for a walk I didn't go for a walk...I had no responsibilities.

I remember the day that I went to get Kerrin and it didn't become special to me until I started introducing her to other people, especially males. I rang the doorbell of the house where the lady I was supposed to meet lives, who rescues dogs from Mexico, and I was greeted by Kerrin who, when the door opened, proceeded to lick my hands and eventually my face when I stooped down to get a better look at her. She was so loving, so affectionate, so full of vivacity and life. I took her for a short walk, just to be completely sure, but I didn't even get half a block of walking her before I knew that Kerrin was mine and that she'd be mine for a long long time. Her initial affection became all the more special to me when I introduced her to my chess partner, Drew, and gradually to my other friends. She was wary of them, she shirked and approached them cautiously. But, with me, she was so affectionate right away...her whole manner of being seemed to ooze with love and she seemed to be telling me "we're going to be best of friends, I love you and I trust you." And we are best of friends. She's improved my mental health so much, she gives me someone to be with all day long, even as I'm hidden in my house consumed with the irrational fears of the outside that sometimes consume me. She sleeps right next to me every night, sometimes with one paw resting on my leg. She greets me in the morning by licking me in the face and talking to me as if to tell me that it's another great day in the world. I find it difficult to quantify exactly what the little girl means to me; except to say that she changed my life – she brought me out of a hopeless world, she gave me someone to be responsible over...a reason to get up in the morning and be active and get outside, she gave me a new life. And with that new life, finally, came the true utilization of the tools that my CBT had been giving me.

Disability came, eventually, and it came quicker than it does for most people – I got it within 6 months and didn't have to appeal the process or reapply. I was mostly done with the cognitive and behavioral therapist and I felt as though it was time to move out and live on my own. I still remember the drive home with my dad from my weekly chess date with my now roommate, Drew. I was excited by the idea of moving out, of finally getting out of Aurora, and I was talking up a storm about how awesome it was going to be and how much I was going to love it and how much good it was going to do for me. I'd been talking about moving out for months, about how, as soon as I got my disability check, I was going to find a place to live and move out. My therapists supported the idea, my psychiatrist supported the idea and, because I had the blessings of my doctors, my parents supported the idea. But in the middle of my blabbering about how amazing it was going to be when I moved out I looked over and noticed that my dad was crying. I hadn't stopped to think what my moving out was going to do to my mom and dad, all I had thought about was getting back to the city that I loved. I didn't know quite what to say to my dad, on the one hand it was nice to live with my parents...they're the most supportive people I've ever known, always there for me when I've needed them. My dad would come home from lunch every day and sometimes, especially when I was going through ECT, he would find me crying and completely

disconnected from reality – he would forgo his lunch, email his boss to say that he was going to be late, and he'd sit with me and tell me that everything was going to be okay...he'd invest in me and let me know that he valued me. It would be much more difficult for him to offer that kind of support if I didn't live there. My mom would also come to visit me, sometimes they'd both be there for lunch and it became a bit of an anchor for me in the bleak period of time that was ECT and post-ECT, no matter how hopeless I was when I got up in the morning I knew that a smiling face was coming home to ask me how I was doing. And I think that they drew a great deal of comfort for themselves from knowing that they could come home relatively quickly when I wasn't doing very well and that they would come home to be with me every night to make sure that I was okay. I don't think that I truly understand how important that was to them because I don't have children of my own...but I think that I can at least respect that.

But it's funny how God works in your life, how he sets up a system for you to make a transition, such as moving out on your own, much easier. My dad lost his job in February of 2011. I know that he was devastated by that loss but it ended up being so wonderful for me and him. It was during one of the darkest periods of time in my life, I was lonely...so lonely, and to have him in the house to go on walks with and talk to was truly a blessing. Then, shortly before I received disability and moved out, he found a job in Denver. The job ended up being a 15 minute walk away from where I live right now. We can continue our daily walk ritual and spend time with each other every day. If I'm doing poorly he can still come over to be with me and he has a boss who understands how important it is when my dad does have to spend time with me. My mom calls me every day to wish me good morning and it's nice to have a quick chat with her when I get up.

It hasn't been the easiest of transitions – I still get psychotic, I still get wild mood swings, I still get unbearably depressed sometimes, but those things are going to happen wherever I go. I spend my days painting or fixing computers. I'm able to go out and get coffee with my friends, I even live 5 blocks away from my favorite coffee shop and there are about 5 or 6 different coffee shops all within walking distance from me. I've started taking free online classes through MIT to learn everything from string theory to computer science. I'm able to exercise my brain and learn new things, but I'm able to do it at my own pace; so that if I'm having a bad day and my memory and cognition aren't so great I don't have to go to class and I don't have to stress out about missing assignments or failing tests because I only have to do what I want to do in the class. It's as close to an ideal life as I can manage. Sure there's still stress in my life...but it's substantially less than when I was taking a full load of classes and working 50-60 hours a week at a computer repair shop.

My life was never over; I am not doomed to a life of worthlessness. It was just a reset button. It will always be a reset button. Like I tell my mom – I'll make it, I always have and I always will.