

KING

OF

SOMETHING LIKE A MEMOIR



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STARS

King of Stars
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You will burn and you will burn out;
you will be healed and come back again.

- *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*



Prologue

I can count the stars that line the ceiling. They stretch on as far as these four walls can contain. A pale glow wrapped within a sky of blue wrapped in a sea of dark.

Within these four walls.

And I count.

One, two, three...

Some large with five pronounced points. Others, small dots that seem so far away. Stuck to a popcorn ceiling, fan spinning rhythmically overhead. I find my hands reaching out, gliding aimlessly, slowly through the air.

In front of me.

Ahead.

Reaching for the stars.

Four, five, six...

Hands drop to the shag carpet that nests my body. Fingers comb through long, navy blue poly-blend strands. Breathing in the weight of solitude. Life underwater. Moving at an almost dreamlike state. Floating, drifting within my own aquarium.

In this moment.

Under stars.

Drenched in blue.

Seven, eight, nine...

I am sixteen.

One

This story is not about me, but about the mirrors in life who lift a bag of bones from one stone to the next. Parents who raise a boy they love into a man they are proud of. Grandparents, an aunt, friends, bullies, acquaintances, bosses, exes. The characters who reflect what we absorb.

The messengers.

The creators.

The guides.

The boss I interviewed for would become the man who saved my life. The man who became my husband. Chris. It's about him and his journey.

My parents who walked with me every step of the way. It's their journey.

I am the culmination of these people, their history, an interpretation of senses. From one to another to another to me. To Chris. To his family. From them to me and back to my mother. My father. My aunt. A ping-pong tournament of human experience, bouncing from one to the next in an endless match where both triumph. Where two players are infinite because their game is not solitary. Our reach is forever.

I'd like to think I'm special. My words unique. My thoughts a grenade.

I'd like to believe I'm the only, the one. But most folks do.

This story is my story is only the making of every other person I've encountered. And those I may never encounter. It's our story. It's your story. Every touch, every smell.

The music that acts as a soundtrack, or the silence that can raise a storm. Little details of great big episodes, they are more than me. And their resonance is massive.

It can be lonely. Humbling. Freeing, I guess. To eventually realize that I am not so unique. That I am layered human experience. Both the light and the dark, a vessel of gray matter shooting forth at full speed. The inevitable by-product of existence.

It's the musicians struggle to write lyrics that capture truth; a composed series of metaphor and word play carrying messages of authenticity. The great emotional outpour of moments in time.

Then the music.

The complex entanglement of instruments, of vibration swimming together in harmony.

Pulling heartstrings with guitar strings. It is the vehicle. A slow build to an anticipated chorus with the inevitable crescendo. That soul-clutching climax when air leaves the room.

Molecular stillness.

Frozen heights with only the faintest echo of a *thump thump* in spiritual floorboards.

That crescendo.

A tornado of escalating discovery, memory whirled around present affliction, saturated by future ambition. It's all there. The moment of enlightenment. Awareness. When everything comes together in a beautiful package. When life is a movie and you suddenly get a glimpse of the script. The character bios, the web of history, every cause and effect.

It's why he said –

It's because they –

My grandmother died so I –

Thirty years ago he –

His father is a –

That night before my –

Because I love –

So on and so forth and on and on it seems to go from one generation to the next. Layers upon layers upon layers of hidden messages, carried associations, held opinions, passed on bullshit that becomes personal truth when really, really it's not mine.

We are a collection jar. One penny, a dollar bill, a quarter donated in a slit to our subconscious.

A woman on the street who I thought was a homeless crazy turned out kind and considerate. She taught me I still judge others. That there is goodness in everyone. My own fears linger and I project them forward.

I smiled.

She said hello.

I said happy holidays then walked faster.

She said Chris and I look like brothers.

I said we are husbands. I thought she was going to throw a nasty remark.

She said congratulations and told us not to ever argue with each other.

I felt like an ass and overcompensated with sugar-coated sweetness as we parted ways. She probably doesn't even remember our thirty-second encounter, while I now write about it months later. Someone may read these words and take something from it.

And so the imprint is passed.

Her life affects mine affects another. A little trickle of massive proportion.

The song hits a crescendo, the feeling cinematic. Then disperses back to ground zero. To life-level. Where it marinates in the psyche, slowly altering hardwire.

This story is not about me. No. I am not an island, not alone in making these connections.

I try and listen to the music.

Ok I'm done.

Enough of the heady babble.

Let's get into it.

Two

Judging by the sterile environment on his side of the cabin, my roommate in rehab is bland as the following joke:

Knock, knock

Who's there?

Banana.

Banana who?

Knock, knock

Who's there?

Banana.

Banana who?

Knock, knock

Who's there?

Orange.

Orange who?

Orange you glad I didn't say banana?

Now I am no comedian, at least not by trade, but that joke sucks. It's not even a joke, it's a piece of white bread. Not buttered, not toasted, not even a hint of peanut butter. It is straight from the factory Wonder Bread.

His decor is as follows. A stack of books provided by the treatment center, one

highlighter, one generic Bic pen. The spiral bound notebook of a second grader; wide ruled, certainly not college, probably purchased at a drugstore. It's green. The shade of green most people automatically think when someone says green. The kind of Kelly green that could pass for a primary color if green was primary.

Primary.

Maybe he's a primate.

A crisply made twin mattress with white hospital linens and thin blue wool blanket folded at the foot of his bed. A single photo of a girl who I imagine to be his daughter. A frightening Darth Vader mask with elephant trunks I later learn is for sleep apnea. In the bathroom, a single-blade plastic razor. A small can of Gillette shaving cream. A pack of tissues. A nose hair trimmer with a few blades of hair resting on the shelf next to it. In the shower, a plain black bathing suit draped over the curtain rod. A white towel soaked in a ball on the floor, a bar of Dial soap. And, of course, 2 in 1 Head and Shoulders.

On his desk, an orange.

The irony.

I look around the room, the wood paneling, the sole wicker dresser. My twin bed with matching hospital sheets, single deflated pillow and floral pattern quilt. Which I imagine hasn't been washed and is infested with bugs.

My duffel bag drops to the floor. It was inspected by administration upon arrival. No hidden pills or weapons. No music, no outside books or phone. Only clothes, toiletries and my red Moleskin notebook.

Despite where I am, what brought me here, I keep my nose in the air. My defenses strong. A fortress built with walls of affected superiority. I'm better than these people, these people, the ones with real problems. These people. The ones who come from another walk of life. These people.

I am too nervous to step outside where these people sit together. In a small pack of wild dogs. In a cloud of cigarette smoke. Too nervous they will laugh at the gay kid.

So I hide.

Like always, I hide.

My head hits the pillow, legs stretch off the edge of the bed.

Michael walks in the room. A tall, silly sort of man with blue eyes and shaved head. My body tenses. A white t-shirt proclaims he enjoys fishing, khaki cargo shorts, flip-flops. He is one large beer stain.

Michael throws a book on his bed.

“Hey man, I’m Mike.”

“I’m Ryan.”

We exchange informal introductions.

I wonder what he’s in for.

He talks about living in Orlando, about the guy who roomed with him before me.

I sit.

There’s not much to say.

Each word that dissipates in the cabin, each swirl of dust circling my vision, each spray of saliva that shoots from his mouth, solidifies my reality. The inescapable truth that I am here for thirty days.

I am twenty-eight years old.

This is where twenty-eight years of my best thinking got me.

In a musty cabin.

With a forty-three year old alcoholic named Michael.

“You can have the bottom three drawers.” He points to the wicker chest. “I’m in the top two. Only got some t-shirts and a couple other things.”

“Cool. Thanks. I brought a lot just in case.”

In case of what, I don’t know. A mid-rehab formal, perhaps. An impromptu rehab gala.

He looks at my large duffel bag, two suitcases and backpack.

“They’ve got a washer and dryer. You just gotta sign up to use it. Don’t leave your stuff in there though.”

Michael is easy enough. Approachable.

“We’ve got group in a few minutes. Come on we can’t be late. You got a notebook and pen?”

Somewhere in my mess.

“Bring that with you. You always need something to write with in case you gotta take notes.”

I ask how many groups are in a day.

“Five to seven, depends on the day. The therapists rotate. After we have dinner there’s a group activity like a game or movie or something.”

Five to seven hours of group therapy per day.

“Someone’ll give you a chore for lunch and dinner. Probably gonna be table setup since that was the last guys. It rotates every week.”

Michael walks into the bathroom.

Shuts the door.

Locks it.

I hear his pee hit the water in a loud, steady stream for what feels like an hour.

Then a quick squirt.

Drip.

Flush.

He walks out zipping his fly.

Burps.

“Don’t be late. They really don’t like that. Especially Fred. Have you heard about Fred?”

I shake my head.

His eyes widen to childlike saucers. “Yeah man. You don’t wanna mess with Fred. He’s a hard ass. He’ll rip you up in front of the group.” Michael laughs. But a serious laugh, like he’s replaying a scene of past public humiliation. “He’s one of the best counselors. He’s out there. Like an old hippie. But he’s no joke. Just don’t let him see if you’re nervous.”

I smile as if to tell him he’s crazy. Does he realize who he’s talking to?

“Seriously man. Don’t be late. See you there.”

Michael pushes open the screen door, it slams behind him. I see the other fourteen head into the therapy room, which doubles as a dining room.

The digital alarm clock reads 10:58am.

I feel like a calf thrown into desolate pasture. Surrounded by a vast emptiness that leaves me floating in space. Not adjusted to this environment. A stranger amongst strangers. Not sure what to do.

The red 8 transforms to a 9. A single line removed to create an entirely new number. To ignite a sudden weight in the pit of my stomach that in one minute I will be a present face before unfamiliar eyes. And there is no avoiding it. I will walk in like the first day of school, the same churning in my stomach from fear of meeting new people. An outsider.

Prey for the pack of wild dogs.

11:00am.

I’m late.

Day one

Three

I always wanted to be an actor. Performing on the coffee table, dancing around the house, singing into a makeshift microphone. Each performance began the same. A self-introduction to the crowd, which consisted of my grandma, grandpa, mom, dad and aunt.

“Ladies and Gentleman, introducing Ryan Michael Sirois!”

I wore my dad’s tank tops like dresses, walked on my tip-toes and always gave an encore or three.

I was meant for something great.

And I knew it like I knew my name.

I just had to wait. I had to sit and wait for it to one day happen. For the magical powers to be bestowed upon me. For white lights to engulf me and the narrator to announce I am the Chosen One. Gifted with telekinesis, teleportation, the ability to create anything and destroy everything if need be. I wrote stories, watched movies. Read books. Acted in plays alone in my room, creating characters with a full spectrum of emotion. From proudly giving speeches of glory out my bedroom window to crying over the loss of a fictitious family member. So genuinely distraught over their passing that I longed for a real death to experience such emotion, such passion over something. When my parents arranged playtime with other kids, I wanted to bring them into my world but they rarely followed.

So I went alone.

My two cousins were my closest friends and together we united in fantasy. We created alternate realities, intricate stories with special powers, witches and monsters. Places that took us far from the small bedroom we ran around with costumes and props. Blankets as capes, brooms and plastic swords. While our parents had an escape of their own, disappearing into the dark patio until we called for them to watch our performance. The smell of vodka and cigarettes lingered close by.

Those first ten years of my life were lived on Birchwood Place. A small, two-story townhouse tucked away on the end of the street. My memories of that time, that life, are fragmented and scattered. Spokes on a bicycle wheel. One memory followed by white space followed by another memory completely out of sequence. A movie paused at every other frame.

But I'd like to watch the film again. See the characters, the plotline, the story arc. I want to know my family then. My parents in their thirties, learning to care for a new baby. My grandparents who loved every moment of having a grandson. My aunt who rubbed my back until I'd drift to sleep. Always family. Always arms to disintegrate into, a shoulder to melt away on.

Fragments of memory.

My father held me while rocking in a chair by the crib. I fell asleep on my mother's chest, feeling the rise and fall of her lungs with each breath. Nowhere, there was nowhere more safe than the Birchwood Place townhouse during those first years.

My father built a floor-to-ceiling wooden bookcase across the entire living room with a rolling ladder. His vinyl album collection occupied the first two rows, bands like Zeppelin and The Beatles mixed with Motown and Jazz shaped the beginning of my future playlists. Family photos, old books, plants, a red gumball machine stuffed with multicolored round balls.

The opposite wall was made of Chicago brick – red, brown, white blocks. I traced the grout with my finger, careful not to smudge any powder on the white ones. Although a few smiley faces mysteriously appeared.

Potted plants lined the sliding glass doors toward the back patio. Maroon shag carpet ran throughout the house. A beige sectional and large wicker chair that could umbrella your body like a clamshell. A blue, crème and brown abstract diptych framed in gold hung against the brick wall.

Dad played The Beatles on repeat. I'd wake up to him blasting "A Beautiful Morning" on Sundays. Slow dancing with my mom to Billy Joel's "Leave a Tender Moment Alone", a bubbled glass tumbler of Vodka in her hand while my head rested on her hip.

Sepia tone memories too pristine to fully digest. Unreal, untouchable. Memories filed in volumes of photo albums compiled over decades, albums I find myself sifting through repeatedly.

But life split into chapters.

The little boy with a loving family. The little boy who walked on his tip-toes. The little boy who played Barbie and dress up. The little boy who put on shows for everyone. Who was affectionate. Who doled out kisses and hugs. Who had the high-pitched, squeaky voice. The little boy who clung to his mother because she was his best friend. The little boy who knew he was going to be someone great.

Somewhere he splintered. When the first seeds of shame were planted. When I became terrified of the dark and slept in my parents room until thirteen. When I started Kindergarten in leg braces due to two broken femurs at birth. When a boy in first grade threatened me for how I acted. When I was told I walked like a girl. Talked like a girl. When I realized I wasn't like the other kids.

Something, somewhere began to pave a path to darker woods. A fork in the road where I, I took the one less travelled. Or maybe the one most travelled.

Or maybe the one I was meant to.

Or maybe –

I don't know.

Through thick brush and mud caked trails; through branches and shadow I walked. Like Dorothy deeper into the woods as she neared the Wicked Witch's castle. Closer to the beginning of something new. Something more exciting than farm fields and Munchkin Land. Than good witches and golden roads.

I wanted to be the Wicked Witch.

Childhood.

The great mystery.

Four

Pen in hand, on my red Moleskin notebook I write.

Day 1

I walked into rehab around 12pm. Chris and Mitch drove me, a drive that somehow was much too short for the amount of confusion pulsing in my brain, kind of like leaves in the fall picking up wind and gliding through open space with a certain grace and calamity all at the same time.

Goodbye's were exchanged as I watched Chris walk around the perfectly squared shrub that acted as a wall to the outside. I watched his yellow short sleeve polo as he, emotionally saddened by our first length of time apart, turned one more time to see my face — then he disappeared to freedom.

My initial paperwork was filled. I answered all questions directly and in a matter of fact fashion I assumed made me seem more educated and well adjusted than any of the other patients. However the realization I forgot my checkbook to pay for the first half of treatment was pretty much a direct shit on my ego. I had to call my mother to ask for money. And suddenly I am deflated and brought back to the fact that, yes, I am here for a reason.

Anxiety sets in as I now have to meet the other fifteen patients sporadically through the coming half hour of acclimating myself to my new home.

The dingy green carpeted, wood paneled room with two twin beds and white wicker furniture makes me realize this is no picnic.

As I aggressively began sanitizing every drawer, knob, and object that frightened me to touch, I ask myself if I am crazy. I mean here I am with a gigantic container of sanitizer wipes trying not to touch anything in fear I might catch the plague. Wicker furniture from 1983, a random white IKEA pleather love seat that clearly fell from 2006.

My roommate is unknown still at this point, but upon close examination of his toiletries, belongings and clothes, I not only know I am the gay roommate for the straight – now totally uncomfortable – mystery roommate, but he’s a snorer.

I’ve entered treatment blind to who I am. All I know is how to play a character, how to wear a mask to conceal any layer of authenticity. Manatees have skin two-inches thick to protect their body from predators. Alligators avoid them because even their mousetrap jaws can’t bite through the manatee’s armor.

My skin is rice paper.

Any cut, any questionable glare, any off smirk or comment, will tear me apart.

But my mask. My mask is bulletproof.

Where a monsoon may be brewing within, the Titanic colliding with an Arctic heart, my mask remains unwavering. Cold as the waters under which the great ship was swallowed.

Five

I was five when I began to hide in my bedroom closet. My father's suits lined the interior, creating a thick forest of pressed cotton and gray tweed in which to disappear.

His smell filled the narrow, dark space. A scent rich with comfort, musky and sweet.

Because it was home.

I crawled behind suits, past jacket arms, shiny buttons and pleated pants. Sat directly behind the wall of clothing and shut the aluminum folding door behind me. Light trickled through a row of slats on the panel, otherwise I was engulfed in a blanket of darkness.

I once took the daughter of a family friend in the closet with me. Two children led into shadow, cuddled in secrecy. Our lips found each other. My first kiss.

I was overcome with excitement, with confusion and questions. The rush of doing something in secret, hidden by the dark, was exhilarating. Heat pulsed through my body in a way it never had. A five-year-old Casanova, I was not. A budding Jekyll and Hyde, maybe.

I liked hiding.

I liked pretending.

Secrets made me feel strong. Special. I had something no one else did.

But once the adrenaline subsided, once the rush faded to awareness, I was met with something else. A hot dagger pressed in my gut. A feeling I would grow to understand well, one that would develop the beautiful complexity of crystallized molecules. One that would shape my inner dialogue for decades.

Guilt.

My earliest memory of guilt, of feeling ashamed. I ruminated over what I did fearing anyone would find out. Fearing she would tell her parents about our closet romance. So I did what came natural. An involuntary action organic as breathing.

I buried the bone deep within the forest; beneath thick layers of ivy it would remain unearthed.

To rot.

Because nothing happened.

It wasn't real.

I convinced myself it wasn't real. And if my parents confronted me, she made the whole thing up. I was embarrassed, embarrassed because somewhere inside my head a voice said I was wrong. Bad. I had done something ugly.

Each time our family met, two invisible hands wrapped round my neck. A beating heart beneath the floorboards waiting to expose my indiscretions.

Once the seed of guilt is planted, it will inevitably root. A growing curiosity matched a quickly expanding list of secrets. Of things I knew to hide. Because no one could know I stole a Rainbow Bright doll from Kindergarten, too embarrassed to ask for my own. Or that I bit my arm and blamed it on a boy in class who made fun of me. The guidance counselor knew, my teacher knew the truth. My accomplice already confessed to our false accusations. But I stayed firm. Stuck to my story. So while the other kids participated in an elementary school marathon, I stayed inside the classroom. And as kids filtered back with toy prizes, I knew my secret kept me from being part of something.

Instead I hid.

In the kitchen of a plastic playhouse, pretending to be somewhere else.

Hiding because I felt so deep in my core, even as a child, something was wrong with me.

Once I hit puberty and began to grow facial hair, I was too ashamed of my blossoming manhood to ask my father how to shave. So I found a disposable razor, handheld mirror and travel sized shaving cream from their bathroom, then proceeded to teach myself. I was petrified of them finding out, petrified to face

these changes and transformations. I saw myself as a child, as a little boy who was meant to stay that way. Not a young adult with rapidly developing peach fuzz and an onset of dark hair sprouting up in strange places. I cleaned my face and immediately hid all traces of evidence above the shelving unit in my bedroom.

No one would know.

Until the day my dad found the stash and confronted me. Mortified. I was not supposed to be changing. It was like losing myself; the boy I knew was fading and I would fight till the bitter end to keep him. Because the loss of childhood, these signs of growth, were shameful. I was the baby. The only child. Hair on my face, physical changes, symbols for the death of innocence.

So I told my father I used the razor to remove hair from my toe. I most certainly was not shaving my face.

And that is how we left it.

I thought I had one up on him, fooled him. He let me believe that. When really I think he didn't quite know what to make of me yet.

In my closet, I felt safe. Isolated in a confined and dark space. Where secrets hid behind coats and hangers, a metaphor for so many things in my life. Closeted sexuality. Hiding from confrontation, from fear. Burying secrets. Isolating from people. I wanted to find the deepest depth, farthest far I could until it felt like I didn't exist.

Like no one would remember me.

Like I could just –

Disappear.

I fell further into the belly of darkness.

The safety of a hidden face, an extinguished flame. Eyes shielded by shadow, by draped layers of fabric and anonymity.

It was here, here the heartbeat would silence. Here the voices would quiet. It was here I would bury bones. Bones from the skeleton of a boy I suffocated. Here I could evaporate. Become a matrix of particles beyond human sight. Woven through threads of my father's suit, blankets tucked on a shelf, specs of dust floating aimlessly in the air.

Behind closed doors.

Within the mouth of a cave.

A cocoon.

Where I could unfold myself and dissolve in the comfort of solitude.

A little boy in his little haven, the little haven that grew with him. A shield against the world he feared. Pretending. Always pretending to be somewhere else.

Years pass.

At ten we said goodbye to Birchwood Place and moved to a new home miles away. I found myself in darker corners, seeking refuge as bones began to surface like artifacts rising from the ocean floor. When it was no longer about hiding, but surviving. A place where I crawled into myself while crawling out of reality.

A sanctuary.

Another universe.

A world crafted of stories and fantasy, the supernatural. A world of discovery. Music, art, books. A world where I unraveled the tightly wound chord that defined me.

The armor could fall.

But what was I escaping from? What was the great big monster that made me seek refuge in dark corners? The beast of shame that made everything a reason to hide. To keep secrets. To feel so uncomfortable in my own skin.

It was this thing.

This thing I knew was inside of me. Made me feel out of place.

This thing you know is there but can never quite pinpoint until someone else says it. Or you see a movie. Or stumble upon it.

People ask when. When did you know you were gay?

Which is a strange question to begin with.

When did you know you were straight?

You don't. There is never a moment of realization like, *Oh, that's what it is! I'm a homosexual.*

It's just this thing that's always with you. But you don't know what it is. It's like knowing your eyes are a different color than the person next to you, but it takes years to find out they are called this word green.

When did I know I was attracted to boys and not girls?

Who knows.

This thing inside I couldn't identify as a child, couldn't talk about, but knew something in me didn't match the messages I was learning. In fairy tales, in movies, in conversation. The prince and the princess, when a man loves a woman they make a baby. I identified with the princess and wanted a prince. So it became a growing secret. A constant heartbeat.

I guess when kids at school called me faggot enough I eventually found out what it meant. Or at least what the word faggot referred to. When boys started to date girls in Middle School, I had absolutely no desire. Except maybe for the boy.

Like when boys start to develop an eye for girls.

I started to develop an eye for boys.

It just happens.

And it clicked.

They called me gay and faggot enough for me to realize they were right.

But at that time, being gay was something else. It wasn't about being attracted to someone of the same sex.

It was about me. My character, my interests.

I played dress up. Pretended I was a girl. Played with Barbie because G.I. Joe was boring. I wanted to be the girl character in movies. I liked playing with my hair. I was affectionate. Always crafting gifts for my family, writing, drawing. I only felt comfortable with other girls.

I thought these were the things that defined me as gay. As this thing of shame. So I tried to shut it off after learning what little boys should do. Tried pushing them so deep in shadow, bury them so far in the forest. Tried to change my voice when kids said I sounded like a girl. Because this little boy – the walk, the talk, the dolls, the art, the stories, the dress up – this little boy seemed wrong.

And I had to hide him.

I had to hide me.

Being gay was this thing. This thing that was not a good thing. A thing people hit you for. A thing they teased you for. A thing they didn't want to be your friend for.

The fact I might be attracted to other males was not at all what being gay had to do with. It was not a thought in my mind yet. Even though that is solely what being a homosexual means. It's not your character traits, not your hobbies or personality. It is simply someone who is attracted to the same gender.

But as a child, being gay was a word that defined an outcast.

It was a dark cloud looming overhead every day.

A defect.

A boy gone wrong.

This gay thing is a me thing. It represented all those pieces of me that were bad. Shameful. Gay was an all-encompassing word for everything to hate about myself.

And I searched.

I always searched for someone.
Someone who could stand with me.
Someone who could walk with me as one.
I searched as early as I can remember. For my prince, for my twin, for the
companion who would hold my hand so I wasn't alone.
Who would take the pain of being gay –
The pain of being me —
Away.

Six

Six of us populate a circular glass patio table. A pyre of cigarette butts collect center stage as an ongoing art piece depicting the rampant evolution of craving and apathy in remote societies. Or something.

The lot of us with nothing but minutes to spare.

I am beginning to pick up on the rehab lifestyle quickly.

A lot of smoking, a lot of eating, a lot of talking.

A pack of chain-smoking wild dogs who make me wonder why I am here.

I sit quietly.

Natalie is next to me. A high-strung Jersey transplant who can unleash a minimum of sixteen hundred words between breaths. Loud, aggressive, complete lack of filter. She is in her late thirty-something's, standing a proud four feet and change with a mouth that can make a truck driver blush. Natalie is an uppers kind of girl.

Then Wayne. A conflicted redneck who wears hospital scrubs most days. Not because he's crazy or in need of jeans, but because he likes the feeling of his junk swaying freely in the loose fabric, unbound by the shackles of underwear. A forty-year-old still unable to get that pat on the back from his father he so desperately sought approval from. Wayne sleeps with Nat after lights out. He likes guns, cars, women and heroin. But in reverse order.

Jessica is twenty-four. She is a single mother. Jessica has the hair of bleached straw, generally pulled into a short ponytail. Her round body moves with the conviction of a tanker. She says things like, "I'll fuck that bitch up", or "A'int nobody tell me what to do". Jessica has a one-year-old son. Jessica shares a room with Nat. She is non-discriminatory when it comes to mind altering substances.

Then Margot. I'll get to Margot later.

And me.

I ask Margot for a cigarette.

"How many more days you got?" Nat asks Wayne. She gnaws on her ring finger. I notice each of her nails are chewed down, fingertips chapped and raw. She flicks her cigarette. Ashes blow on my shirt. They look like constellations against a night sky.

"Thirteen," Wayne says. "Thirteen motherfucking days."

I try not to make eye contact. I smoke to stay occupied and appear purposeful.

"You gonna hit me up after we get out?" Nat asks with a smile. She pulls a piece of skin from the tip of her tongue.

Wayne spits then grabs his crotch. "You gonna sit on this when we outta here?"

"Fuck off." She throws an empty cigarette pack at him then puts her stub legs on the table.

Jessica lights a cigarette with the butt of her last, squinting as smoke puffs in her face. From the corner of her mouth, cigarette hanging from the other, she says, "What's your name again? Ryan?"

Act cool.

I say yes.

I don't belong here. I'm not like them.

"How you like it so far?"

"It's okay. I mean, I don't know. My parents wanted me to come."

"What was your shit?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's your drug?"

How do I answer that?

"I don't - I don't know. Pills, I guess. But I did whatever. Pills is what I had a hard time with."

"The little blue guys?"

How does she know that?

I nod my head. Take a drag from my cigarette.

They all smile. Nat laughs.

“Join the club,” Margot says.

I look to Margot, an older woman in her forties, “You too?”

She takes a drag. “Oh yeah. Those are the worst, everyone’s hooked on those things. The oxy’s, roxy’s, all that shit. Those are a bitch to get off of.”

“Margot’s a pill disposal. Aren’t ya girl?” Nat nearly chewed off her entire finger.

Margot rolls her eyes. “I’m much older than you kids. I’ve had time for my tolerance to become expensive. Man I was up to like forty of those things a day. Then you gotta crush ‘em – you sniff ‘em? Or do you shoot ‘em up?”

Suddenly I feel like the not cool kid in school again. I was nowhere near as intense as these guys. Maybe I don’t need to be here. Maybe my parents and Chris just overreacted. This group is way worse than me.

“I don’t,” I say. “I mean I just swallow them. Sometimes I snort them, but that’s it. How did you take forty a day? That’s crazy.” I can’t hide my collision of shock and awe. “How are you not dead?”

She laughs.

They all laugh.

“Ain’t that the question,” she says. “I *should* be dead. But I’m still here for some reason. I guess the guy upstairs has some plan for me, I’m still kickin’ for a reason. That’s why I’m in treatment again. I need to get straight, I can’t keep wasting away like this. Not anymore. I’ve got my girls, my husband. I can’t keep running anymore.”

And I think I know what she means.

“Me too.” Jessica pulls up her bra straps which lift two bowling balls off the floor. “I got my baby at home. My ma’s watchin’ him till I get out. But he don’t need no addict mom doin’ what I been doin’. That kid is too important. My ma’s been raising him anyway. I wanna get him back.”

Little by slowly my judgments start to fall like cotton from the sky. Little by slowly I think a brick loosens within my fortress. Little by slowly I feel a scared boy peer through my eyes to see if he can come out.

Everyone has a story.

And I am just now beginning to see the tip of the iceberg.

KING OF STARS

RYAN MICHAEL SIROIS