

When We Could Only Play Gin Rummy*

I remember the numbness in my knees as I walked down the hallway. It seemed to stretch on for miles. The floors, the walls, the doors—they all shined and glistened, tempting disease to invade, but there was little life to terrorize. This was the prison where death played.

His room was straight ahead. The sounds hit me before the smells did. Machines whispered, growing louder with each hesitant step pulling me closer. There was a steadiness to the hum, a gradual, lifeless incline to its thumping rhythms. The smell crept closer. All too clean, all too inert.

I followed my two older brothers into the room. They took a step and looked away. They moved to the side, heads turned and faces down. The bed became clear—he became clear. The machines that once whispered now begun to roar. I stared and stared and felt the unblemished skin on my face begin to crack. I couldn't look away.

We weren't on the boat, breathing salty air and destroying the waves that dared to touch us. We weren't on our bikes, pedaling through the windy streets. We were in the hospital, crumbling.

His eyes were closed, and his body lay motionless. Tubes acted like tentacles sucking out the poison. They clung to every thumping and screaming machine in the room. They worked in a wicked synchronized fashion, pumping liquids into his veins, causing his skin to swell and bloat out of proportion. He wasn't my father he was a blow up doll, lifeless and abused. He wasn't recognizable. How could he be after a gallon of vodka, a bottle of sleeping pills, and nearly twenty-four hours of

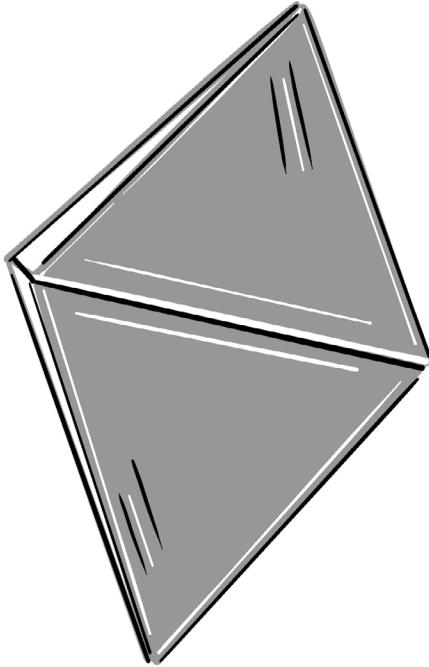
unconsciousness?

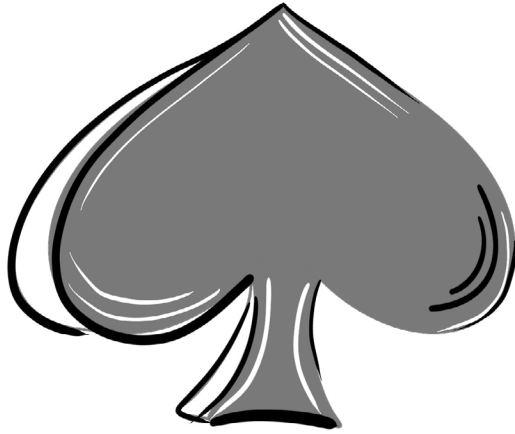
I don't know how we got to that hospital room. With my parent's divorce at the age of one, the back-and-forth lifestyle became the norm for me. School nights were with Mom (who remarried) and weekends were with Dad. That made Dad's house the fun house, the one to look forward to. We used to make pizza in the kitchen. He would throw the dough in the air, speaking gibberish that he claimed was Italian. Then we'd go watch some silly movie that he would narrate. The next day, we were up early and out in the world: waterskiing, boating, tubing, snow skiing, cycling, hiking—anything that accompanied the word “adrenaline.” I could say the change had been gradual, but standing in that room, staring at my father's bloated and broken body, I felt like the transformation had occurred in seconds.

Maybe that's why my eyes couldn't look away—I couldn't understand. I wasn't in that room, I was everywhere that we used to be in all those years of our childhood and our memories. I was only fifteen years old, but my adolescence *had* been stripped away from me. I couldn't understand, and I didn't want to understand. All I wanted in those moments, and the hundreds of moments that followed, was a belief that we had had something. I was remembering not what I needed to remember—the depression and substances that had always consumed him—but what I wanted to grasp and feel. I chose not to remember his screaming episodes, breath hot with rum and coke. I chose not to remember the way my limbs would shrink as his rampage climaxed and then cooled with tears of apology. I didn't want to remember the weekends when I didn't hear from him, his body slack from sleeping pills. Those moments were silent, blurred, in that room on June 24th, 2013. Instead, I held on,

like those wicked screaming tentacles, to a hope of where we could be.

Standing in that room, my feet were encased in concrete, and the numbness in my knees had slithered up to the red in my cheeks. I knew there were tears trickling down my face, and my features must have been compressed into some ugly resemblance of confusion, but I didn't feel my reaction. I was mesmerized by his. The pain, even in his state of comatose, must have been incredible. His body had started to convulse, and his face would contort. His eyes would open for a wild second and shut back away in a soundless scream. It was too much to see. Maybe the doctor standing in the corner realized this, because he told us it was time to leave.





My brothers and I turned in an aching silence and allowed our feet to pull us from the scene. We started out of the hospital but were stopped by a social worker. We were brought into a closet-sized room in the back hallway of the Maine Medical Center. With my oldest brother being eighteen, a legal adult and the next of kin, the mass of papers and responsibilities appeared before us. The brown-haired old lady spat a bunch of words and numbers into our faces. She spoke with a tired voice; words pushing out of her lips like a script. Ultimately, she concluded, we had to pay for all of this.

She gave us some more papers, her card, and promised she'd be in touch. I wonder what kind of thoughts raced through her brain as she handed thousands of dollars of debt to three teenage kids.

My dad's actions on that one day cost him, and us, four months in the intensive care unit, six

months in physical therapy, and, literally, an arm and a leg. The bills grew bigger, louder, redder. But I didn't see any of that. I saw a stronger, better, happier Dad. I knew what we were striving for, what I was striving for. His therapy was an hour and a half from our town. I made the drive. I skipped school dances and parties to spend the weekends with him in Portland. We played cribbage and gin rummy. He still always won. It wasn't like the races we used to have on our bikes or swimming in the ocean. He was sitting in a wheelchair, with no function in the right side of his body—but I still looked at him as the father who drank freedom and bled adrenaline. His apartment was dark with cool tile floors, but I forced the resemblance of our past life into them, into him, into us.

I believed with every blonde hair and brown freckle of my being that my dad would get better. Sometimes I would joke, “Life was too easy for you to conquer before, Dad. Now, God wants to see you do it as an amputee.”

Maybe my dad could have gotten better. Maybe he would have tackled the world again, but he was never given the chance.

Once he got strong enough to make it around by himself, he moved back to our hometown of Boothbay. He got an online job to try to help with the bills. The state found out and rejected his welfare. Now that my dad could “work,” we had to pay for everything. Medications, therapies, trips to the hospital, and the numerous doctors—it was enormous. The state threw him out and built a wall. My dad tried to climb it and couldn't.

It wasn't just trying to walk again, or to use his arm again, or to write again—it was how to tackle a faceless, unwilling world again. Maybe he was tired of trying to overcome everything, or maybe he was scared. Either way, I never got to see who



my dad might have been.

I remember his memorial service. I remember the way we talked about him. It was the same joyful, hyperbolized past that I had become obsessed with in the past two years. No one mentioned the second and final suicide. No one mentioned his struggle to overcome a physical and emotional pain. We spread his ashes in the very same ocean that we had braved in the years before—the very same ocean that we made our own. During those moments of joy and adrenaline, I knew he was happy. I knew I was happy. We were victorious in a callous world.

by Annie Baumm

**Content Warning: Addiction and Suicide*

