

Mike Alvarez



ENGULFMENT

1

I was early. After nearly a half-hour of waiting, a woman with jet black hair introduced herself as Dr. C—and ushered me into her office. The room was spacious, with a large wooden desk separating the doctor’s swivel chair from her patient’s. Behind the desk, three double-hung windows lined the wall, the vertical blinds parted down the center to let in what little light the skies offered. It was a cloudy winter day, but a dry one without a hint of snow.

“Have a seat,” said the doctor, smiling. She was young, probably in her early thirties, and probably straight out of medical training. I didn’t want to be one of those difficult patients one sees on TV, so I smiled too.

“So tell me, what brings you here?”

2

The man in front of me took his money from the cash dispenser. He got on his bike and started pedaling.

“Would you like to make another transaction?” asked the ATM. Confused, I tapped “No.” The machine spit out a card. It belonged to the man on the bike.

I ran after him, yelling at the top of my lungs, “Wait! You forgot your card!” Luckily, the red light, the rush of incoming traffic, stopped him. He heard me. Or my footsteps. Or saw the expression on people’s faces, wondering if a drama was about to unfold: A histrionic teenager chasing after his lover? Or a pickpocket running from the law?

I handed the man his card. He tipped his red cap forward as thanks.

3

It was a good day. I had done a good deed. Instead of eating in the commons, I took myself out to lunch.

Looking at the menu, at the chandelier lamp dangling from the ceiling, I thought to myself, *What if I had given the bank card to the wrong man?*

I felt pale.

“Are you ready to order?” asked the fresh-faced server as he poured water into my glass. I shook my head. I couldn’t produce a word.

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“Well let me know when you’re ready.”

I could see the man on the bike making unlawful transactions. The rightful owner of the card will demand an investigation. He will remember when and where the card had last been used. Was there a camera? Yes, there was a camera. To the right and above the ATM. He will see footage of me fleeing with his card. Asian male with blonde hair. Not highlights, not blonde on black. All blonde, down to the roots.

I heard sirens wailing. It was the police, or an ambulance, I wasn’t sure. The wailing grew louder. I covered my ears, but the sound continued playing inside my head.

4

Without going into specifics, I told the doctor a few things – about my fits of anxiety, the pervasive dread that harm will befall others and somehow, I would be responsible. About the strange feeling that someone might be watching me, looking into my dorm room from outside my window, listening in on my phone conversations.

“Do you fear that you yourself are in danger?”

“No.”

“And this listener, this peeping Tom. Is it someone you know?”

“No. It isn’t anyone real.”

But some things were too embarrassing to say. I didn’t tell the doctor that to thwart these imagined dangers, I often knocked on wooden surfaces in threes. That I knocked again when all three or four digits of nearby clocks were the same. That each time I knocked, I invoked the name of my deceased grandmother.

Dr. C— wrote at a furious pace on her plastic clipboard. Occasionally, she would look up at me, as if to say, *Go on, I’m listening.*

5

I turned on the shower. The shower head wasn’t positioned correctly. Water was hitting the partition between stalls, not me. I tilted it. It came off, fell to the floor and cracked.

An intense beam of hot water struck me in the face. It was worse than getting hit by a wet towel. Immediately, I turned the dial.

The pipe looked alien without a shower head, almost phallic. A tentacled monster. I rubbed my face in circles with both hands, massaging the pain away. I was lucky it didn’t hit me in the eyes, only the cheeks and forehead.

The air got cold fast. I wrapped my towel around me. I picked up the head to tack it back onto the pipe. It slipped from my fingers and shattered on

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impact this time. Plastic, not metal. There was no fixing it now.

I returned to my room. As I put on clothes, I thought, People will get hurt. By the shower head. They will walk absentmindedly into the stall. They will turn the dial. The beam will hit them, in the eyes this time. Maybe in the mouth, too. Or up the nostrils. There will be screaming. There will be a hunt for the culprit, the one who broke the head. There will be fingerprints on the shattered pieces. They will yank me away, make me pay for the damages, for the lost eyesight.

I went back to the stall, surveying the damage. I acted like one who had come looking for a misplaced item, in case other people walked in.

I told myself I'm being silly. That people have eyelids to shield eyeballs. That gravity will pull the water down, not up nostrils. That water washed away fingerprints. That it was not my responsibility to fix the shower head. That coincidence had broken the shower head.

6

There was a book sale at the public school where I worked. Children lined up in front of the booth. I could see the indecision on their faces. *This or that*, they wondered, scratching their heads, fumbling with the big bills and the small coins in their small hands. The spectacle, the glossy paperbacks, the coveted hardcover, reminded me of *Hercules and his Twelve Labors*, of *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*, who had kept me company every Friday after school in fifth grade, by the night lamp, until three or four in the morning, when grandma woke up and ordered me to bed.

"What's 9 times 4?" asked the chubby girl at my table.

"You know I can't give you the answer," I said, shaking my head. "But here's a little hint: 10 times 4, subtracted by 4."

The girl mouthed the riddle. Then she tickled the air with her fingers, plucking the invisible cords of an invisible instrument until the answer came to her. "Thirty six!" she exclaimed.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

I looked at the line again. It was shorter. Soon, another table would be invited to fawn over the merchandise. It was now a little Hispanic boy's turn. He pointed to a paperback with a dark green cover. I couldn't make out the title, but by the style and color of the font, I reckoned it was a thriller, like the *Goosebumps* or *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* of my childhood.

"That would be eight dollars," said the blonde girl manning the booth.

The boy handed the girl a bill. She unfolded it.

"Do you have three more dollars?" she asked. "You only gave me a five."

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The boy shook his head. He did not say a word. The girl returned his money. He kept eyeing the book.

I was struck by pity for the boy, by the want in his eyes, by his silent appeal to the girl's generosity. It pained me to see his fantasies, his right to an adventure, denied him.

The girl apologized. Defeated, he left.

I felt like I had failed an important test in life. By obeying the rules, by not slipping three lousy dollars in the boy's pocket, which I could have easily produced, I'd given him a brutal taste of rejection, of life outside the pages, beyond the margins and milk cartons and theme party drinking straws.

7

"I want to get a sense of how much these episodes are interfering with your life. So if you could just humor me by answering some questions. Are you getting enough food or sleep?"

"I think so. I've definitely gained the Freshman Fifteen. I was one twenty in September. Now I'm a hundred thirty-five pounds."

Dr. C— chuckled. I did, too. "Well, that's to be expected. And school. How are you doing in school?"

"I have a 4.0 so far."

I liked how smoothly the number rolled off my tongue, how impressive it sounded. It made me seem less defective. I surrounded myself with an aura of achievement, to prove, if only to myself, that I was capable. To me, high-functioning meant sane.

"I like studying. It even distracts me from my thoughts."

"I see that you've exploited this coping mechanism to your advantage. What else do you do to keep yourself occupied?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Friends. Family. Work."

"You work?"

"Only part-time, at the local elementary school. I help kids with their homework."

"How nice. Is that what you want to be? A teacher?"

"Yes. A fourth grade math teacher. Or a psychologist. I'm not sure yet."

"Well, you have plenty of time to figure that out. In the meantime, we have got to do something about your anxiety."

8

A hand went up in the air. "May I go to the bathroom?" asked the timid black boy with dreadlocks.

"I got this," I said to my coworker.

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I escorted the boy to the bathroom. He went in, and I waited outside, leaning against the tiled wall and tapping my foot.

Minutes passed by. "Is everything okay in there?"

No answer.

I feared that the boy may have slipped and fallen, cracked his skull open against the sink or urinal. But if I went in there, what would the cameras think?

The thought that I'd be accused of molesting a child horrified me. So did the accusation of inaction. I felt trapped.

I heard a flush, followed by water running down the sink.

The boy stepped out of the bathroom. "Did you wipe your hands?" I asked.

"Yes, Mister Alvarez."

He took my hand and walked towards the classroom, leading me out of my quandary.

9

I slipped my bank card into the ATM. A guy I knew from my dorm, whom I mentally referred to as *Trench Coat*, stood behind me, awaiting his turn. "What's up?" he said when I glanced in his direction.

I gave a polite smile, said "Hi." The machine asked me to punch in my "four-to-six-digit" PIN number. When I punched in the first digit, I had the strange feeling that *Trench Coat* was looking over my shoulders. He was tall, and I was short.

But he wasn't looking. He was texting on his Nokia, his glasses reflecting the glare of its screen.

I moved up closer to the ATM, my figure bent over the type pad.

The guy's just minding his own business, I admonished myself. *And without the card, a PIN number is useless.*

I took my card and twenty bucks and left.

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I could hear the clock ticking, the tip of the doctor's pen against paper, my black boots against the carpeted floor.

"I consulted many textbooks in psychology," I said. "I think I'm obsessive-compulsive."

The doctor put down her pen. "You might be on to something."

I didn't fully believe I was obsessive-compulsive. My fears were always in flux – rarely, if ever, about the handwashing, the tile counting, the hair pulling, the picking off of scabs. But obsessive-compulsive was the closest match

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to my symptoms that I could find, and it was something that I could accept. It didn't seem crazy – unlike schizophrenia, or borderline, or its other siblings in the dreaded psychosis family.

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Dr. C— opened one of the tall cabinets against the wall. Inside were glowing capsules in plastic containers, more varied in color than the rainbow, and neatly arranged in columns. They looked like jelly beans – some transparent, others translucent or opaque, but all equally dazzling.

“I think Zoloft might just be the solution to your problems.”

“But I thought Zoloft is an antidepressant. I'm not depressed.”

“Zoloft can be used to treat anxiety. Recent research suggests that anxiety follows the same neurobiological pathway as depression.”

I looked at the puffball on the cardboard slip case – happy on the front, sad on the back – the one I'd seen bouncing pitifully up and down in commercials. The pills themselves were the color of noonday skies. They were small, each half the size of an eraser head. To think that one could manipulate something the size of a grapefruit was disquieting.

“I'm not sure how I feel about taking these pills.”

“Hang onto them, just in case. If you decide to take them, take one tablet every morning for the next couple of weeks. We'll schedule for another appointment, say, in two weeks?”

I took the trial sample from Dr. C—. I put them inside the bag on my lap, underneath the gloves and the bundled scarf.

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“You can make a lot of money selling that,” said Tatiana, who lived three doors down the hall in room 120.

“Do you want one?” I offered jokingly.

“Fuck no. Those things mess with your mind.”

“Do you really need them?” asked Tatiana's roommate Mary. “I mean, you don't look depressed.”

“Well the doctor thinks I'm obsessive-compulsive.”

“You are not obsessive-compulsive. My aunt is obsessive-compulsive. You should see her house.”

I didn't correct Tatiana for confusing the anxiety disorder with the personality disorder. I didn't have the right, not when I was forcing clusters of symptoms into the wrong box, symptoms the girls knew nothing about.

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13

A knock on the door. "Is Bernie around?" asked my roommate's lady friend, a short black girl who wore her hair in pigtails.

"No. I think he's in class."

The smile on her face widened. "Perfect," she said.

Without my invitation, she walked into my room and sat on Bernie's bed. She took out a large piece of cardboard from her messenger bag. The cardboard folded in half. The keys of a typepad had been drawn, sloppily, on one half with a black Sharpie. The other half had a rectangle that almost touched the edges of the cardboard.

"I'm just gonna make a little switch."

She bounded up to Bernie's desk and replaced his laptop with the cardboard knockoff. I was appalled. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Relax, it's just a prank. I'll give it back when he comes looking for it."

Thoughts rushed of me being accused of theft, of colluding with a thief. I didn't think this prank was funny at all.

The girl ran out of the building, hugging the laptop to her chest. "Wait," I yelled, but she didn't hear me. I chased after her, two pairs of short legs trampling down grasses in the courtyard.

"Give it back. Please."

She looked at me, wide-eyed, her pupils dilated. "Alright, alright, I'll give it back. Jeeze. Don't have an aneurysm."

14

I phoned room 120.

"You sound agitated," said Mary.

I was glad she noticed. I wanted her to notice. I didn't know how else to explain that I didn't want to be alone with my own thoughts.

"What's wrong?"

I danced around her question, meanwhile hoping that she'd invite me, like a vampire at the threshold between night and light, reason and unreason.

"Look. Why don't you come over, and you can tell me what's bothering you."

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The gym floor shined with floor wax. Scattered everywhere, the children jump-roped, dribbled basketballs, knocked down bowling pins, chased after one another – a circus of pint-size performers.

Like a spectator watching a tightrope walker, I held my breath, fearing for the worst.

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16

My supervisor wedged a pen behind his ear. “You’re positive?” he asked in a baritone voice.

“Yes. Positive.”

I told him that I enjoyed working with the children at the school, but had decided that I should focus on my studies. It wasn’t a lie. Finals were fast approaching, and I was taking five very demanding courses. But it wasn’t the truth either.

Nobody could argue with someone who quits a part-time job because he wishes to do well in college. He and I both knew this.

“We’re sad to let you go, but I guess I have no say in the matter.”

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I put the unopened tablets on the doctor’s desk, next to the mug with the blue Pfizer logo. It seemed fitting, Pfizer being the manufacturer of Zoloft.

“Are you sure?” asked Dr. C—.

I nodded, thinking there was a better way, an alternative that didn’t tamper with my neurocircuitry. Pills are for invalids, I thought. I’m not an invalid.

“It’s been almost a year since the onset of these symptoms, and I’ve done okay so far. I’m sure I’ll manage.”

Dr. C— looked at me with sympathetic eyes, as if I was making a very big mistake. “If you change your mind, please don’t hesitate to come see me.”

But I couldn’t see myself coming back. It occurred to me that what I wanted was someone to talk to, not someone to write me a prescription.



Mike Alvarez is a Communication PhD student, and a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow, at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. There, he is studying the phenomenon of cybersuicide and the representation of suicide in film. He also received his MA and MFA degrees from Goddard College, but prior to that, during his undergraduate years at Rutgers, he suffered from terrifying delusions and suicidal depression. Mike is currently writing two books: a memoir of his past struggle with mental disorders, and a study of the link between phenomenal creativity and suicide. Visit his website at www.mfalvarez.net.