

remember to BLINK

by

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This is a work of fiction. References to real people (alive or deceased), real events, and real locations are used only to provide a sense of authenticity necessary for impact. That's all, I swear.

This is a preview of the full book, containing only chapters 1 and 2. This document may be distributed freely so long as it is not modified in any way. If you like what you read here, the full story can be purchased through blink.bucketweb.com

If you would rather purchase through your local bookstore, it may not be in stock but the following ISBN will help them order one for you: 1-4116-1121-7.

Warning:

I am not an author.

I am not writing this for you.

I am not here to entertain you.

Read a few pages before you buy this.

Or steal this.

Or borrow this.

Or ask for this as a birthday present.

Make an informed decision.

Half the fun of art is the rejection,
Especially by the ones you love and respect,
And besides,
I'm used to it anyway.

a war for control that is fought in the mind
between memory and truth
between blame and excuse
between the last thing remembered and the lost track of time

For my brother,
The best opponent I'll ever have.

I.

Where do I begin?

I've heard that the first few pages of any story are the most important. I'm not a writer, so I am terrified by how to start.

This story is about my life.

Stories like this are a description of a conflict. But with this story, I can't tell where to begin, because I still have to figure out where the conflicts began. How it has all come to this.

My memory is completely fragmented.

“Fragmented” is a term we use in computer science. It usually refers to the documents and other files you have on your computer. It means that each file is broken up into pieces to fill up the space between other files, getting the most out of the space that you have. When you read a file, the computer uses an internal table of contents to put it together in the right

order.

This book will have no such guide. If I straightened this all out for you, you wouldn't understand.

Maybe I should have a plan before starting. Research. Outline. Prepare. Gather opinions. Brainstorm.

Fuck it. I don't have time for that.

Given my mind's tendency to wander, I can't promise chronological continuity. And it may seem like it doesn't make sense. For you, the beloved reader, these disjointed accounts of my life may seem to be rather random. But if you're going to understand, you need to experience it. For me, this lack of continuity is a way of life.

BLINK

There was a time when my life was killing me with boredom. I was taking the easy roads. But I wasn't a failure. The easy roads were somehow still lucrative and rewarding. As a result, so much of my life went by while I wasn't paying attention. But I want that to change. I'm still young. Well, relatively. It's not too late for me. I'm finally waking up.

I need to write this out, and figure out how I got here.

But first, I need to chase away the people who expect a nice neat little story, wrapped in a pretty package with clever metaphors for life. This is not a collection of rules to live by. This is just a story, written by someone who

isn't a writer.

Normally, a story is about the battle between good and evil.

Normally, it's about standing triumphantly above adversity.

The bad guy will die, go to jail, or somehow redeem himself.

This isn't about that. If anything, this is a battle between blame and excuses.

In the end, it's always about winning. The consequences of that win are the only variable.

The battle between good and evil is boring, and not just because victory always goes to the righteous. That only applies if you're a kid and you've got nothing but a head full of ideals, boundless energy, infinite passion, and if you're lucky, a dab of creativity. But unless you're fortunate enough to die before this wears off, you will eventually realize that “good” is a relative term. It's a transition, a subtle change in verb tense. In your youth, it's “may the best man win.” After you grow up, it's “the best man won.”

Think about every football team that wins the Superbowl. Every year they get a hero's ceremony, they have an epic tale to tell about how they worked so hard and wanted it so bad. About how they *deserved* it soooooo much. If you root for that team, you eat that shit right up. The best team won. If you root for a team that didn't win, you start with the blame, and the excuses. You start looking forward to next year. Time for some improvement. Time to... evolve.

Fuck evolution.

It's always used with such a positive connotation, when in reality it's quite brutal. I wonder how it became such sacred ground that any hack of a science fiction storywriter can make a “profound” villain by loosely tying some evil maniacal scheme to his or her concept of evolution.

How do they keep getting away with this?

Maybe there's something deep and profound underlying this whole thing, but it's such a beat and tired concept these days. Evolution is not about being the best man or woman, at least not in the pious sense of the word. Survive, procreate, multiply, and make extinct. That is evolution. There is no magic to it.

Evolution made us what we are. Hooray for us. Hooray for evolution, what a marvelous thing. It's a rare person that hasn't seen some version of the frame-by-frame depiction of how we became human.

Here, we have a mindless ape.

Here, we have an excessively hairy brute, dragging one set of fingertips on the ground, the other wrapped around some oversized animal femur, ready to pound on the ancestor of the fuzzy rabbit that you swerved to avoid the other day while you were driving home. WHAP! Dinner is served.

Watch him stand taller over time.

Watch him shed that hair and clothe himself.

Here, we have Tarzan.

Obviously, this is just a subsection. Before there were apes, there was something else. After us, there will be something else.

Maybe that's why we spend so much time fighting evolution.

Think about plastic surgery. Make-up. Zit cream. Miracle diets. Ab-flattening torture devices. Appetite suppressants. Stair climbers. Rowing machines. Treadmills. Are we really human, or just hamsters, running in a wheel that goes absolutely nowhere?

But this is our curse, our eternal conflict.

In each of us, on some level, is the desire for a simple life. Live off the land, be productive, and die. Serve the world, serve your species, and pass on to whatever is next.

In each of us, on some level, is the conflicting desire for control. It's not really about beauty, riches, or even fame. It's about control. Beauty is control over your body. Money is control over property. The most dangerous of all, fame is control over ideas. Control others, and get closer to being the king of the world. And to gain that fame, that money, that beauty, we will take any shortcut we can. Well, at least on some level. Because even the honest hardworking farmer will use a power tractor and plow. If he doesn't, some other farmer will come along and wipe him out. He needs that tractor, that plow, because that gives him the control he

needs over his own destiny.

Control over our own destiny... wasn't that God's job?

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I hope I'm not coming off too preachy. I want control too, otherwise why would I write this shit?

It's not like I'm an expert on history and evolution. A real writer would go out and do research on these subjects. They'd prove their statements with real facts about how we evolved. But if I did that, I'd just be regurgitating something that someone else wrote. I've had a sheltered life, and assemble my own reality as I see fit. I'll fill in the details myself.

Now you know why you found this book filed under “fiction.”

This is really the story of how everything went wrong because I took a few shortcuts. Some might say that there is a moral to this kind of story. But that would be an easy answer, and I don't have any of those to offer. It's not like you'd give up your modern conveniences anyway, so I'm not going to sit here and tell you that if you don't give them up, you're going to lose your humanity.

This is not some fairy tale cooked up by some hack sci-fi writer.

In the first person, your voice will always sound preachy when you express yourself. You are the creator of your own universe. And it will piss off everyone who disagrees with you. So when I piss you off, try to remember:

this is not your life. This is not your mind. These are not your rules. If I have to spend any more time on apologies, I'll never get done with this fucking first chapter. So just accept that I'm an asshole sometimes when I go on a rant, but it isn't always because I'm a self-righteous prick. I'm writing this for a reason, and it has nothing to do with saving your soul.

BLINK

Where was I? Ah, yes. Money. Beauty. Fame.

Control.

If I ever got rich, I would buy one of those health clubs. I would toss out the weight room and install rows of aerobic machines. I would hook them up to electric generators, and power the whole place with the juice produced by people. I'd give discounts in the monthly fee to people who come often and pump out serious wattage. Imagine it, a gym that costs less when you use it more! You'd actually *want* to go work out to save yourself a few bucks.

Members would be motivated to get healthy, because it would save them some cash. Finally, a productive hamster.

Any excess I would sell to electric companies. I'm not sure if that's possible, but it sure sounds pretty lucrative.

All that energy spent doing things that we naturally did before we “evolved.” We invented the elevator, then invented a machine to simulate steps. We used to do physical labor to get our daily bread. Now we look

down long noses at people we consider peons, and pay them to do the labor. Then we pay more to do artificial labor.

When did it become better to do artificial work?

Ah, evolution.

Fuck evolution.

I used to work in a beer distributor in Pennsylvania. The Beer Aquarium, it was called. The owner was obsessed with sea life. He had stuffed animal fish all over and a real swordfish mounted over the register. Caught it himself, or so he claimed. He was a sarcastic bastard and I could never tell if he was just fucking with me. My job was to unload pallets of beer cases and sort them into neat stacks for sale. Beer, especially domestic stuff, is like most food products. It goes bad after awhile, so you can't just stack the new stuff on top. First you have to remove the old stack, put in enough new cases to fill it, then put the older stuff on top so that it gets bought up first. This is especially important in the cooler room, because the stuff at the bottom is cold already, and customers want cold beer, so it has to be brought up to the top.

Promoted, so to speak.

Once or twice a week we'd get the kegs in. Those are heavy fuckers, the quarter and half barrels. I've never seen a full barrel, I hear they exist in some states, but they're illegal in Pennsylvania. I can't imagine trying to lift one of those alone. I tried once to lift a half barrel in each hand, but fucked up my shoulder.

These kegs have to be kept cold, and follow the same “rotation” rules as the cases. We had a tiny cooler room, with a normal size door, which meant two things: one, you had to stack kegs up to three high to fit them all in, and two, you couldn't fit the forklift in there. You learn to maneuver those kegs around pretty well after awhile. Some companies use kegs with built-in handles. Those are nice and easy. You grab both handles, and lean back sideways so that it hangs over your hip. Then swing it back and heave it forward. Get the bottom lip over the next keg and tilt the rest up. Some are even coated in rubber on the outside, which cuts down on the noise and is very easy to stack. Some kegs are rounded on all ends. Those suck. I kept those against the wall, because the only way to stack them three high is to roll them up the wall and carefully shift them sideways.

Never, *ever* do this if customers are in the cooler. Sometimes they come over to help you out, and let's just say that can lead to bad things.

BLINK

This was the best job I ever had, and I knew it. I was getting paid five bucks an hour to move boxes from one end of a room to another. It was completely mindless, except for the kindergarten math of figuring out how many new cases to put down before stacking the old cases on top.

I used to have a job where I dealt with customers, serving food to people in an amusement park. These people were awfully nasty and miserable somehow amidst all these rides and clowns and cheery music and laughter. I hated that job, and I vowed at that point never to serve the public directly again.

In the Beer Aquarium, I only dealt with customers who needed help finding something. They were happy as hell to get their ration of sweet beer, and

always said “thank you” when I helped them find their brew of choice or dug something cold out of the cooler for them. And I would always say, “Thank you for shopping at the Beer Aquarium.”

It's easy to be nice to people when you feel appreciated.

I was appreciated. I was productive. I was in the best shape of my life. I was seventeen.

Now I have a machine that I use to lift my own fat carcass up on a rolling platform with pulleys. This is exercise. I never exercised when I was a kid. I worked, or played sports. But that was a game. I was built like an ox, short but stocky as hell. I played soccer, but my first coach told me I belonged in football. He nicknamed me “truck.”

When I started putting on weight, I was lucky enough to have a chest that held out my shirt and hid my gut. Now, the only beer I lift is in increments of twelve, sixteen, or forty ounces. Or the thirty-packs that I haul home. And my chest no longer hides my gut.

Now instead of being thankful to get five bucks an hour for moving kegs around, I'd pay five bucks an hour to do it. Now I get paid a lot more than five bucks an hour, and the only things I move around are abstract electrical signals, clicking keys on a keyboard.

And all I do is complain. This is growing up.

This is my evolution.

Here, man is a helpless infant.

Here, man is young and full of ideas.

Here, man hunches over a keyboard, rotting his eyeballs as he stares at a screen and often forgets to blink. When you do what I do for a living, you have to remember to blink. Everything else tunes out. There's a simple trick to it, you just watch the cursor. On screen, the cursor tells you where you are when you are typing. While you type, the cursor is a solid box or a solid line that represents your current position. But nobody types constantly, non-stop. When you pause, the computer assumes you looked away for a moment at something else. Perhaps some printout, or magazine, or your whiteboard, or just to speak to someone who popped in to say hello or deliver some mundane news update.

BLINK

When this happens, the cursor is still, and

BLINK

it doesn't necessarily stand out anymore. It has to

BLINK

get your attention. It arduously awaits your next keystroke and while

BLINK

you ponder your next move, the cursor will

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and call attention to itself. I use these peaceful pauses to

BLINK

and when I have gathered my thoughts, I instantly know where I

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left off. How convenient.

I get to thinking that we're fucking up somewhere as a species. In some ways we are evolving into abstract entities, yet are made of matter that demands attention. So we build ways to appease our flesh, and keep it happy. And where those fail, we turn to chemical and surgical solutions.

Personally, I think we should pursue genetic solutions, but for now it's too controversial a subject. Science fiction can take a lot of the blame for this, making it seem like you can create a duplicate entity, with a duplicate soul. Or worse, an entity without a soul. These people forget that identical twins are nature's clones. They are genetically identical, and yet are different people. Their fingerprints are similar, yet distinct, as are their lives.

In reality we are more afraid of creating superior people. I'll bet when

plastic surgery and artificial limbs were new, people were afraid of an engineered super-race. Didn't happen, because we didn't change any genetics.

With genetics though, we are getting at our real structure. We could in theory make things “better.” But to make those decisions, to decide “better” and “worse,” implies a responsibility that most people would rather reserve for a higher power. For that reason alone, you'd think that the manipulation of our genetics would remain science fiction.

But here's something even scarier: think about every advancement in medical and cosmetic science up until genetics. We exploited a science that was intended to repair our bodies, and instead tried to improve them. Not one person's genes were changed in this process. We have only preserved the weak and mutilated those we made feel ugly. Get a nose job, but you still have the genes of that unwanted nose. Get braces, but you still have the genes of crooked teeth. And so will your offspring, your precious children.

At this rate, I predict that before the end of the next century, plastic surgery will be offered and commonplace right after birth, much like circumcision is today. Everyone will need it, because we are fighting our own evolution by hiding our unwanted genes, rather than letting “nature” take its course.

We all say, fuck evolution.

This silly belief that every human deserves the right to be beautiful, rich, and famous. It's cancer on the scope of the population. It's communism masked by bleeding-heart idealism.

America is not the land of opportunity anymore. Opportunities are not guarantees. These days, everybody wants a guarantee. A bumper-to-bumper warranty that someone else will fix all their problems.

Could someone, with the right amount of control, really fix our species?

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I can only control my own evolution.

BLINK

I am okay, for now at least.

I am not the mad scientist of this story.

I am not the villain in some sci-fi hack's movie-of-the-week.

I am all talk.

So who the fuck am I? Why the hell should you care?

I warned you.

Maybe if I'm lucky, I come out the other end of this as an *anti-hero*. You know, one of those likable bad guys that does things just right enough to make people root for him? It's hard to tell at this point, when you tell a

story in the first person, your subconscious has to hide things from your conscious mind, otherwise your conscious mind will fuck it up and jump to the end too quickly.

I must stick to the truth, and at the same time I have to lie to myself a little, or this will all go bad.

So for now, here's what you've got: a short, overweight geek who hates his job and weaves complicated rants together about things he really doesn't know much about. So much for that “likable” bit.

Or maybe I just watch too many movies. That must have played no small part in my recent weight gain.

Some things are easier to see coming than you might think.

II.

Ask anyone that I work with. I've got a reputation. Multiple, I should say. I've got quirks. Most people do. However, some might say that I've got more than my fair share of them.

I work for the world's largest manufacturer of computer hardware. Everything from laptops to desktops to servers to mainframes. My job is to maintain, debug, and improve the software that runs the mainframes. We buy up other companies to make the software that runs on those little personalized machines that you're probably more familiar with. That has little in common with what I do.

This is the software that runs the real world.

This isn't some fancy-pants little application running in a window that takes the red-eye out of your digital pictures.

This is the software that makes sure your checking account is there when you stick your bank card into the ATM. This is the software that makes

sure everyone around the world is aware of your rapidly declining mutual fund. This is the software that connects your phone calls. This is the software that tells you that you've exceeded your credit card limit. This is the software that helps a company decide when it's time for layoffs. This is the software that reports your flight is delayed. This is the software that directs the operation of the power grids. This is the software that absolutely can not fail under any circumstances. This is the oldest and most anal code ever written, touched by thousands of hands, and started on little punch cards.

It has evolved. It runs the world now. Without it, you would be fucked. You may as well knock out the power, because we're talking mass panic and a return to the Stone Age if it ever went down. Your history would be erased. Your bank accounts would vanish. Your cash would lose all value. The world economy would implode. The internet would be history. You would be reduced to your word, your possessions, and your raw ability to protect them.

You might remember the whole Y2K fiasco. Then again, you might not. It went away with little more than a few blips on insignificant regions of the technological radar. It was a problem that my company helped to create by being short-sighted. The media helped create a frenzy about it that caused noteworthy public concern. I can tell you that the problem wasn't nearly as big as they made it out to be.

In fact, it was exponentially larger.

Fortunately, we didn't panic. People like me worked countless hours to hunt down every instance of this gruesome mistake. And we had layer upon layer of checkups and backup checkups and insurance checkups. And then we went back through it again just for kicks. And we nailed the

problem everywhere that it mattered.

The year 2000 arrived and nothing happened. I did my part to aid in fixing a problem that could have fucked the world, and the world never said “thank you.” But then again, we didn't deserve any thanks, since we created the problem in the first place. So, the blame is ours. And I'm sure we've created other problems just like it that have yet to rear their ugly heads. And we'll take the blame for those, too.

Every mistake generates blame. Blame seeks responsibility. Responsibility implies control.

In the end, it's all about control.

You'd think that a mistake like this would cause the world to lose its faith in you. But when you take responsibility for your mistakes, you can turn the situation into a net gain.

Y2K was a mistake that only tightened our grip on the world. It will continue to tighten until the day that we lose control of the beast we have created. It is my job to help ensure that such a meltdown doesn't happen anytime soon.

And I'm damn good at it.

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This may sound like a lot of pressure, but I have it easy. The people who have it tough work a few halls over. They are the people who actually talk

to customers and deal with their bullshit. They have to deal with people who are screaming because their software has been down for a full minute and thirty seconds and in that time they have lost approximately fourteen million dollars.

Yes, occasionally our marvelous software fails. People pay us ridiculous amounts of money just so they will always have someone that they can yell at on the other end of the phone. No matter what time of day, someone in service will be there, and let you to scream at them. These poor people pry the details out of the raving lunatics and quickly relay all the necessary information to me.

I call these people the punching bags.

I would never want that job. I've taken enough crap from people in my life. I much prefer getting my hands on a problem and working through it. It is up to me to scan thousands of lines of code and pages upon pages of data to pinpoint where things went wrong.

People look at me and think, "I would never want that job."

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Picture the creation of man again. This time, picture the creation of a "soul." Now mind you, I'm not completely sold on the concept of a soul, but even those of us who are reluctant to subscribe to a religion still find the term "soul" to be extremely convenient. When I use the term, I refer to whatever it is that makes us unique, and separates our existence from that of all others.

When I do this, sometimes I find it amusing to picture us standing in line, waiting for the various things that will build our personalities. My father used to always say, “Son, where were you when they handed out brains?”

Me, I must have skipped the usual lines and went back for extra quirks.

Most of them were pretty benign, like the fact that I hate to travel. I bought myself a house because I don't want to go anywhere. I have a meager 1336 square feet, not including the finished basement, and I'm still finding new shit in here every day. People with wanderlust amuse me, they always tell me that there's so much of the world that I'm missing.

I bought an old house, built in 1942. New homes have nothing to explore. Everything is clean and has one layer of white paint. If something is cracked, broken, loose, detached, or otherwise malfunctioning, you can call someone and have it fixed for you at no charge. Where's the fun in that?

My house, being so old, is always coming up with new problems to fix. That's what I do for a living. I pinpoint something wrong, and fix it.

I don't want to see the world. The more of the world I see, the more it reminds me of how culturally ignorant I am. And nobody wants to feel stupid. I'm quite content with my blissful ignorance. It lets me jump to any conclusion I want in this consequence-free environment.

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It's time for me to try describing this quirk of mine that really set my life on the path I now follow. This won't be easy though. It is best described with

examples that I can only hope you will relate to.

Have you ever had to do something dull, repetitive, and boring? Something like manual labor. Something like studying for finals. Something like folding a ton of laundry. Something like digging a deep hole. Burying yourself in it.

Something like a long drive on a clear night on a highway that hardly has any scenery to it.

To get from my parents' house to my college, I had exactly 190 miles of Pennsylvania turnpike.

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You check the odometer, and it's only been 5 miles.

The radio goes out of range.

You change the station.

BLINK

You pause for station identification.

BLINK

It's only been 10 miles.

You have a choice, country music or gospel. Two radio stations and a busted tape player.

Every tree along the turnpike is different. And yet they all look the same as they whizz by at seventy miles an hour. Identical in their uniqueness. It makes my head hurt.

BLINK

It's only been...

BLINK

It's been 125 miles.

I missed a few exits and rest stops. Not that I needed them or anything.

Has this ever happened to you? Where does that time go? Where do you go? How do you get back? Did you sleep?

Next rest stop, get some coffee. The nasty shit with powdery cream substitute and artificial sweeteners.

One Nutrasweet-laden packet is equivalent to two sugar packets.

Kindergarten math.

My life is like this all the time. Plenty of time with nothing but my thoughts to keep me occupied. But when it's like that, who's at the wheel?

Just in case you've led a perpetually exciting life, and have never been subjected to something like that, then just picture me in the beer distributor. My job was to move boxes from one end of a building to another. Cases of bottles are taller and heavier. Six, maybe seven at most on the dolly each trip. Cases of cans are shorter and a bit lighter, so you can get about thirteen of those onto the dolly. Bigger beer distributors just pilot a pallet around the store with miniature rechargeable electric forklifts, but the Beer Aquarium didn't have the luxury of wide aisles, so the forklift was confined to an area in the back.

Load up. Move across the store. Unload. Go back. Repeat as necessary. Ten times. Fifty times. A hundred times. I was in the best shape of my life.

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Got the picture? Got your own example?

How do you get through this? Any moderately intelligent person would be thinking that they are above this. They don't need to focus on it. They drag their heels.

“I don't get paid enough to haul ass.”

My fellow employees were often heard saying that.

Most people will let their minds wander, as the repetitive motion of what they were doing will sort of take over, albeit a bit slower than they were when they were fully... conscious. A bionic autopilot of sorts.

This is where I get quirky.

You see, I get just as bored as anyone else. But with me, when the repetition kicks in, I can completely... tune out. It's like daydreaming, but more intense than that. Time and space warp. I will start pondering whatever high concept my mind thinks is the flavor of the month. Things like evolution. When I get into that state, it's like being naturally stoned. Not a higher consciousness, just an alternate one that is somehow completely free from shame or self control.

A consequence-free environment. Nirvana. Xanadu. Asylum.

One might argue: So what? Everybody daydreams. Everybody drifts off and just lets things happen. What's so quirky about that?

Well, when I get into that zone, my body in the real world picks up where my mind left off. Where most people slow down or completely grind to a halt, I barrel along at the same pace that I started at. I become a specialist at busywork, arduously devouring the repetitive work. And when it is done I

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and I am back in reality. The dream is over and the work is done. Either I get to go play, or I get someone else's bullshit.

It doesn't really matter which, because either way, I win.

Of course, win-win situations are usually too good to be true, and that's about as many clichés as I can cram into one sentence.

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With a computer, if you leave it alone too long, usually a screensaver will come on. A slide show of pretty pictures. Dancing rainbow-colored lines. Starfield simulations. The ever-popular marquee, scrolling your favorite quote across the screen. Anything is more interesting than the screen frozen still. If it stayed frozen too long, it would burn into the screen. Permanently.

Busywork is like that. If you do it too long, you may get stuck with it forever.

But me, I have a mental screensaver. Better than dancing lines. So what do I care?

I have something that helps me bury the competition effortlessly.

My fellow employees found their hours dwindling. It was simple economics for our fish-loving employer. I could do the work it normally took two people to handle. People started quitting. I wish I could say there were no hard feelings.

Most of the time, this quirk of mine seemed like a blessing. I could work for hours, but to my conscious mind, only minutes of daydreaming would pass. But before you think I've had things easy, I must tell you that it took years of practice to develop my quirk, my

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to its current level.

You've probably heard that the first step towards getting over an addiction is admitting you have a problem. In a similar vein, people who develop abnormal abilities must first recognize and admit that they are abnormal. My quirky ability manifested itself at a fairly early age, but I never really accepted it until I was at the tender and unlucky age of thirteen.

Before that age, I was already hugely unpopular, but was blissfully unaware of it. My memories of my first seven years of school, from kindergarten on up, are spotty at best. I don't remember learning to read. I only remember knowing how to read. I remember *Green Eggs and Ham*. I remember my mother reading me that book every day. At some point later in time, I was reading that book every day to her. I had a few other books. *The Pokey Little Puppy*. *Ten Apples Up On Top*. Books with big illustrations, few words, and everything rhymed. At some point, I just knew how to read. But if I ever have kids, and have to teach them to read, I wouldn't have the slightest clue where to start.

I don't remember how I learned to read. My autopilot took care of that for me. But I was unaware, and I didn't care. I brought home slips of paper with A's on them, and my parents would smile.

Well, A's in everything except that big C. Conduct. C is for Conduct, I remember that much. I always got a C in Conduct. This was a wildcard sort of grade that teachers could arbitrarily hand out to make the well-behaved kids feel better about lousy grades they got elsewhere. Me, my other grades were fine but I was a pain in the ass to have in a classroom. So I'd get that big ugly C four times every year for all seven years of elementary school. I remember my first twitch of envy, seeing an A in Conduct on some other kid's report card.

I remember the numbers. The report cards we received had a numerical list of comments. This was a list of problems and compliments that the teachers could choose a-la-carte style. Some were nice, like “4. Excellent comprehension.” “7. Leads the class in discussion.” “9. Demonstrates creativity.” “10. Follows directions well.”

I always got number 17. “Creates disturbances.”

It was always last on the report card. A after A after A but always ending in C.

My parents didn't mind too much after the first few years. They figured the good grades in real subject matter would get me the good jobs someday. A doctor. A lawyer. A mad scientist. They were always thinking ahead. Everything else was just a phase. College entrance exams didn't look at Conduct, at most they'd look at my extracurricular activities.

Thanks to my autopilot, those formative years are a blur, and I can only recall the good and the bad things. Everything in-between was just filler material, and not worth talking about, or even trying to remember.

I'm guessing you can relate to that.

Our brains naturally dictate that the bad things resonate much more than the good things. I know that good things happened to me, and I even remember a few of them. But the bad things really stuck with me. They make for better stories, at least.

I remember kindergarten. I had to pee so badly. Really badly. We were only allowed to go one at a time. It's a hot day. Put thirty-five kindergarteners in a crowded room with little ventilation and no air conditioning. Give them lunch at the same time, and give everyone a nice long turn at the water fountain. They are all bound to have to pee an hour later. Thirty-five chubby little hands waving in the air. But we were only allowed to go one at a time. And little me sitting in the back, I was easy to miss with my hand up every time another kid came back.

I swear some of those little fuckers went twice.

I finally get to go. The hallway is really only about fifty feet long, but it looks like ten miles to me as I waddle to the little boys' room. Left, right, left, right, please oh please don't let me pee my pants.

Pissing in my pants would have been getting off light. It happened to other kids sometimes. Worse things can happen.

I make it all ten miles to the bathroom, and waddle over to the special elementary school urinals that reach all the way to the floor. I have to pee so fucking bad. And now I'm trapped.

See, my mother had to make me look so fucking cute. She had to buy me these stupid denim overalls. These things were supposed to be “easy button.” Instead of inserting the button through a slot in the fabric like normal buttons, these things had these wire clasps that had to be lined up and slid out of place. The genius who designed these things put the buttons high on the chest. There are two of them.

I try so hard to hold it in, but the first squirt comes out. I can see the fabric get just a tad bit darker. But I stop it somehow and continue trying to get these damn buttons off.

When you're five years old, you're still learning the advantages of opposable thumbs. Your hands are still inflated with baby fat. You have no dexterity whatsoever. You doodle with a crayon grasped in your fist instead of gracefully manipulating it with your fingers and thumb.

I can't get the damn buttons open.

I might have a chance if these things were hanging on the wall, where I could see what I was doing. But hanging on my shoulders, these buttons are barely visible at the bottom of my frame of vision with my chin buried into my breastbone, straining to see what the hell I'm doing.

Fire two. Darker denim. It grows like those evil clouds you see in fast motion in some movies.

Through some miraculous mercy of whatever, button one slips out. Here I try to get smart. I try to shimmy down enough to get my little bald pecker out and drain my juvenile walnut-sized bladder. I can see it, I'm so close.

And here comes squirt number three.

Since I don't quite have my little prick out yet, it hoses all over my shirt and gets a good bit on the walls. I grab and squeeze it, doing anything to make it stop. It's running down my legs. Huge patches of wet denim stand out darker than the rest of the fabric.

Now I'm angry. You could say I was pissed, but I'd have to punch you.

I wrestle the second button off and my pants hit the floor with a gentle flop. Somehow I still have something left in me, and even though I'm soaked in my own urine I have a brief moment of peace as I let loose the rest of my payload. For a brief moment I forget that I have to go back to class and face everyone smelling like piss and visibly stained.

If that was all that had happened, it would have been merciful.

But once reality set back in, so did fear. With my wet overalls binding my ankles I hop to the sink. I get the brilliant idea to try and wash my clothes. Just get some of the smell out. It's much less embarrassing to have an accident with the sink than to have, well, an accident. These faucets were well known to spray too forcefully and occasionally ricochet out of the sink and onto your clothes.

Believe it or not, this was somewhat successful. Diluted piss dripped from my shirt and overalls, which I took off quite hastily over my sneakers in an effort to save time.

Efficiency was always one of my strong points.

The scent on my pants dissolved away to almost nothing. I could blame the wetness on the stupid faucets. Maybe I'd get to go home, oh joy of joys!

I'm home free. I just have to get these overalls back on. I plop my ass down on the cold institution-green tile and shimmy both legs on at once, and I meet with some resistance. My sneakers are not cooperating with the plan here. I kick with every last bit of might that I have, but I'm getting nowhere. And what's worse, I've now reached the point of no return. I try to pull my feet back out, but they are now stuck in each pant leg.

I am so trapped.

I am so about to create disturbances.

From the elementary school bathroom, an exit was across the hall.

I was still learning to read, but I knew that if I pushed that lever, the door would open to the outside world and freedom.

And it did.

I could have just gone back to the room, revealing that I pissed all over myself to my whole class, half of whom had the same problem at some point already that year.

Instead, I tried to be smart, and I ended up tumbling down a set of stairs as

I tried to run away from school and go home to change.

I was half naked. Worse, the bad half was naked. I was wet. I was covered in dirt. I scraped up both knees, which were bleeding slowly.

I was face down in the patch of grass that broke my fall. When I lifted my head, I saw the third grade. I rubbed my eyes, only to see the fifth grade and the sixth grade. I twitched to my knees, and after grunting from the pain I saw that every class, every teacher, and the principal of the school were all outside. They were lined up like we did for fire drills, because the fire alarms were hooked up to the exit through which I thought I could escape.

And they were all looking at me.

I would have wet myself if I already hadn't.

You can't run with your feet stuck halfway down your pant legs. They don't teach you these sorts of things in school. Well, not intentionally.

I don't remember how I learned to read. I do remember when I learned to cry. That's the only thing I remember from kindergarten, aside from the whole can't-run-with-pants-down thing.

BLINK

These are the important lessons of my formative years.

I hope you're laughing. I'm not looking for pity here, sheesh. How pathetic that would be. I am a firm believer in wearing the scars of youth like tattoos. Sometimes the only way to get over something is to talk about it so much that nobody cares about it anymore. In this case, I would be a liar if I tried to convince you that I was some kind of innocent victim. It was my own stupid fault, and I deserved what happened to me.

It's funny. Go on and laugh it up.

If I can't be honest with you, then this whole book is nothing more than a big waste of my time. Same goes for you, beloved reader.

The biggest difference between scars and tattoos is that scars usually tell better stories. Tattoos are like cheat sheets by comparison. I have my fair share of scars, and a tattoo to boot.

My only tattoo is a black line-drawing of a bucket on the left side of my chest. I've been thinking about getting another on my right shoulder, one of those wind-up chattering teeth toys. Tattoos are cliché enough these days that it's tough to think of something original. The tattoo artist loved the bucket. I think he was tired of doing skulls, roses, and overly flowery lettering. Countless iterations of "I <heart> MOM."

Me, I have a bucket on my chest. It's a scar with ink in it so that everyone can see it.

I wonder if that's the story I should be telling.

Thank you for previewing this book!
Purchase the book or find further information online at:

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