

Autobiography

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Dr Shepherd thinks I should write. He says it's an important part of the recovery process. I don't have to show him everything, but I can if I want to. He encourages me to be as open as possible, to not be embarrassed. The more I show him, the more he can help me.

'Writing is a highly effective way of building a narrative. Think of it like you're writing an autobiography,' he said in our first session. He called me Catherine. His eyes were dark grey. He showed me a scan of my brain, highlighting the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex. There were a few days of stubble on him. I noticed it because I was watching his jaw, his mouth, his lips, the shapes they made when they said the words, 'significant traumatic brain injury.'

The pain has mostly faded now. There's just a kind of tingling numbness in my head, but the medication helps. When I woke up, the pain was so intense I screamed. I didn't recognise my own voice. The nurses shot something into my veins but their eyes were hard. I could hear them from the corner. 'Might as well just smother her,' one of them said.

I told Dr Shepherd about it in my first session. I didn't mean to, but he was asking how I was feeling and I burst into tears. Until then, he'd been cold with me too but he softened and got me some tissues. 'It's normal, Catherine, to be feeling as you do. Your body has been through a serious shock.' He kept repeating my name like he didn't want me to forget it.

I told him what the nurse had said. He listened curiously. He asked me how it made me feel. Confused, I said. Hurt. He nodded, made these little thoughtful sounds, taking down notes.

I didn't see the nurse again after that.

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There is a routine. Every morning, I wake up at 7 o'clock to write. There's no limit to how much I can write, but I have to do at least fifteen minutes. It's part of the recovery plan. 'I don't know what I'll write about,' I said, when he gave me the notebook.

'Start with your dreams and go from there.'

He says that dreaming is the brain's way of making sense of itself. The dreams I have are very *dense* – I don't know how else to describe it. There's one in which I'm in a black room, and the blackness is closing in around me. I can't breathe properly. I can't move either. Sometimes a door opens and Dr Shepherd comes through. He's dressed in a surgical gown and mask. I can only see his eyes. He's filling a syringe with a clear liquid. He keeps saying my name, telling me to relax. 'There's nothing wrong with me!' I keep trying to tell them, but there's something over my mouth. They're holding me down. The needle pierces my arm, and a cold spreads through me. Cold, unimaginable cold, like the bottom of a frozen pond. Cold like the other side. Then I wake up.

I had no intention of telling Dr Shepherd about it; it just slipped out. I don't know what his methods are but he's very persuasive. Maybe it's the attention, the way he's focused purely on me. When he's listening to me, when the cool grey of his eyes are on me, it's like nothing else exists. It makes me want to tell him things.

He found the dream very interesting. 'How does it make you feel?' he asked. 'Do you think I'm a good guy or a bad guy?'

I didn't know how to answer.

'You mustn't worry about offending me. It's important that you're honest.'

'I don't know,' I said eventually. 'Maybe you're bad.'

He smiled wryly. 'Well, I'm not. You don't need to worry about that.'

There is a logical explanation to the dream. He said my brain has retained a vague memory of the surgery and has reformatted it into a nightmare. The anaesthetic, the feeling of not being able to move. 'These are frightening sensations, and it's natural that your brain has processed it this way.'

Actually I don't think he's bad at all. He has a kind face, even if he always looks tired. I think you'd be able to tell if someone was intrinsically bad; it would somehow show. There'd be a wickedness in their expression, a hard set about them. You'd know. *I'd* know. I'm a good judge of character. Dr Shepherd is soft. He listens. He's thoughtful and his smiles are genuine. He's smiling more and more each session.

I'm not sure how old he is – maybe forty? I'm not sure how old I am either, they haven't told me. I don't *look* all that old. There are some greys in my hair, so I'm probably past thirty. I'm thin and pale and my ribs stick out, and there's a white scar across my belly. I look like I'm recovering from something. But I think I'm pretty too (I wonder if Dr Shepherd thinks so?). I like my eyes. They're a watery green, like a river in the forest when the light comes through the trees. Maybe I used to go walking in forests a lot. I've got a dark blue tattoo on my wrist that says *Aodhan*, though I have no idea who Aodhan is.

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Dr Shepherd is married. I know this because he wears a gold ring on his finger, not because he's told me. He tells me nothing about himself. I don't even know his first name. He comes in at nine and he's never here past six. I watch him drive away in a little red car. It's just me and the nurses then. There's something in the way they look at me, but I'm not scared of them.

I don't have any memories of being in a hospital, but I know what a hospital should look like. This isn't it. It's more like a country house. There are wooden beams across the ceilings, paintings on the walls. The ceilings are decorated with Italian frescoes (*frescoes*, I learned that word from Dr Shepherd the other day) and the furniture is old. There's a big garden full of roses and white flowers, and there are lots of trees. There's a pretty little lake in the middle of the grounds. It's spring now and everything feels soft and alive out there.

I'm allowed to walk outside during the day, as long as I'm accompanied. Dr Shepherd himself walks with me. He's the only one I want to walk with anyway. I hate it when we have to go back inside. 'You like walking, don't you?' he remarked. He says it's a

good quality to have. When I'm better, he'll take me on longer walks – the coast, forests, maybe some hills. But I'm not strong enough for that just yet.

Now that the weather's better, we take our sessions by the lake. There's a nice spot under the willow tree, where the sun shines a golden green through the leaves. No one can see us from the house. It feels private. We were sitting like this the other day. I asked him if I was allowed to take my shoes off and dip my feet in the water. He said yes. The water was lovely and cool when it rushed between my toes. He asked me how I was feeling and I told him I was happy.

'Happy?' he said, and smiled. 'Most people rarely are. What is it that makes you happy?'

'You being here with me. I'm happy every morning when you arrive and I'm sad when you leave.'

His expression was thoughtful. 'Why do you think that is?'

'Maybe I'm in love with you.'

The confession surprised me. I hadn't even thought of it until then.

He paused. A bird flapped its wings as it landed on the water. 'That's a reasonable thing to be feeling, given the circumstances,' he said. 'Of course, you understand that our relationship can only ever be that of a doctor and patient, don't you?'

I nodded, looking at the water.

He added gently, 'Which isn't to say that what you're feeling is wrong. Such infatuations are actually very common, if not especially advisable.' He laughed a little. 'I appreciate you telling me all the same, Catherine. It's best not to keep secrets.'

He changed the conversation after that, asking me for my opinions on the last few chapters of *Frankenstein*, but I wasn't really listening. My pulse was racing and I was waiting for him to come back to what I said, but it didn't come up again.

I prefer true stories to fictional ones. I have to know that things are real, not that they've come from someone's head. Dr Shepherd says it's important to read fictional stories though. He said they're like little mirrors. 'Consider them a starting point,' he said. 'Even though they're not true stories per se, they can reveal something true about *you*. Pay attention to how they make you feel. What thoughts occur to you. That's what I'm interested in.'

My heart fluttered, as it always does when he expresses an interest in how I feel. It's the way he looks at me. He's so clinical with his words, but his gaze is soft and runny. It lingers. It's like he really wants to be saying something else, using different words. Like the words are just a mask and he thinks I can't see through them, but I can.

He knows a lot about books. He's the sort of man who knows a lot about everything. We've been reading *Frankenstein*, a few chapters every afternoon. I found it boring at first, but I'm slowly being drawn into it. Sometimes it's too much. Yesterday, we read a chapter in which an innocent girl was found guilty of murder. The evidence was stacked up against her and she was sentenced to death. I was so sure something would happen – someone would save her, someone *had* to – but the judges wouldn't listen to the appeals and she was hanged. I cried at the injustice of it. I don't know where the tears came from. It was visceral. I said I didn't want to read anymore. Dr Shepherd watched my reaction curiously. He took some notes.

We continued reading today. We've just read Chapter 10, when Victor encounters the monster in the mountains. I love the descriptions of the landscape. As I recited the words, I wanted to be there myself. To walk along *ravines of snow*, to see the *glittering peaks* shining through clouds. Even the descriptions of the rain were so appealing. I wanted to be swept up in a storm. I asked Dr Shepherd if he would take me to the Alps one day. He laughed. I love it when he laughs. He said if I recovered well, we could look into it.

I could barely understand the language the monster used. I read slowly, 'I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me.'

‘Very good,’ smiled Dr Shepherd. ‘Very good indeed.’

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There are no other patients here, and nobody comes to visit. I have no memories of family, but there’s a part of my brain that *knows* that every person should have one. It’s a definition, a condition of being alive. I asked one of the nurses, ‘Why does no one come here?’

‘Why would they?’ he retorted.

‘Don’t I have any family? Anyone who’d visit me?’

He smirked. ‘Ask Dr Shepherd.’

‘Why can’t *you* tell me?’ I said, my voice rising. ‘You *know* why. I see you all whispering about me in the corner, keeping your secrets from me.’

‘Calm down now,’ he said, grinning. He took a step closer. ‘Calm down or we’ll have to —’

Dr Shepherd came into the room, and the nurse took a step back. He flashed him a look, a warning. It was subtle, thunderous. I had never seen him like that. The nurse averted his eyes. I felt a warmth inside me, a ripple of pleasure.

After the nurse left, we sat on the bed. He looked tired. The rings under his eyes were dark. I noticed his wedding ring had gone. ‘Catherine, you should try to be nice to the nurses,’ he said. He spoke like a father to his favourite child, trying to be fair.

‘Why should I?’

‘They’re doing their best. We’re all doing our best, aren’t we?’

Then he added, ‘You’ve been doing so well.’ He pushed a strand of hair behind my ear. It was unexpected; he never touched me. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to pull him by the collar and kiss him. Could he sense it? He moved away, walked to the window.

‘Where are my family?’ I asked him. ‘Why am I here all alone?’

He looked uncomfortable. I could see him thinking about what to say.

‘There was an accident,’ he said slowly, ‘but I don’t want to go into the details too much at this stage. It’ll do nothing to help the recovery.’ I asked him how old I was. What was my full name? Where did I come from? Was I married? Did I have children?

He said he was still figuring out the details. ‘In truth, Catherine, we still don’t really know who you are. This is why it’s important to write. You might start figuring things out for yourself, and it’s very important that we know what you know.’

‘If you don’t know who I am, how did I end up here?’

‘I found you,’ he said. ‘I saved you.’

After he left, I stood at the mirror and looked at the scar on my belly. I traced the thin white smile of it, wondering what had happened to me.

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There is a new dream. Let me write it down while I remember. I am in a nightclub, somewhere underground. There are dark figures dancing around me, glittering light slicing through them. I am looking for someone. I catch a reflection of myself in the mirror. I’m wearing a leather jacket, a green dress and silver heels. The tattoo on my wrist is shining. Somehow I feel that Aodhan is close. He is the person I am looking for.

I ask the dancing figures if they have seen Aodhan. Their faces are covered by surgical masks. They turn away without speaking. I am sifting through the bodies, and there is blood on the floor. Something terrible has happened. Nobody has noticed. Do I tell them? Someone puts a hand over my mouth. It’s Dr Shepherd. He whispers in my ear, ‘Don’t speak or they’ll think it was you. They’re listening. They’re looking for someone to blame.’

He says we need to get out of this place, and he points to a white door in the corner. 'Don't draw attention to yourself. Walk quietly and don't look back.' I do what he says, but when I reach the door, it's locked. Dr Shepherd isn't beside me. I can't help it then, I look back. The music has stopped. All the figures have stopped dancing. They are motionless, staring at me.

When I told Dr Shepherd about this dream, his eyes sparkled and he drew a book from the shelf. He read out a passage. 'There was one condition: Orpheus should walk in front and not once look back until they had left the Vale of Avernus. In silence, they followed the slope of the valley upwards. The path was obscured by black mist. They were nearing the peak of the valley, where there was a cave. What a light shone through! But Orpheus felt suddenly alone, afraid Eurydice had fallen behind. He turned, and immediately, his love fell back into the darkness.'

I looked at him blankly.

'You know your myths, Catherine. The question is, do you see yourself as Orpheus or Eurydice?'

'I don't understand the question.'

'Perhaps you are trying to save someone,' he murmured, mostly to himself.

I looked at the tattoo on my wrist. 'Who's Aodhan?' I asked.

He hesitated. A small, significant silence. 'I don't know.'

For the first time, I knew he was lying to me. 'We'll have it removed,' he said briskly. 'I think that would be best.'

I closed my fingers over it, protective. 'Why?'

His smile was placating. 'A fresh start. Whoever he is, he's not here anymore.'

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I suspect the place is bigger than I think. It's hard to get a sense of its boundaries, where it begins and ends. Most of the doors are locked, and outside the house, only certain routes are permitted. There's nothing else around us, only forest. It slopes upwards from the house, covering the hills in all directions. We could be anywhere in the world.

'Where are we?' I asked Dr Shepherd.

'A safe place,' he replied. When I said it was vague, he smiled and said it was better that I didn't know.

'Why do the nurses lock me in at night?'

'For your own safety. You're still very weak, Catherine. Your brain is recovering. If you were to wander and anything were to happen to you, there'd be no one around to help.'

I said I could look after myself. He said it wasn't about that. The brain can behave unpredictably during the recovery process. I wouldn't necessarily know what I was doing.

'So I'm a prisoner?'

He laughed a little. 'That's a strong word. Soon you can go wherever you like, by yourself. But please, for now, just be patient.'

I don't trust the nurses at all. I'm certain they want to hurt me. The male one especially. He *stares*. It's aggressive, some kind of power thing. I just stare right back, and eventually he looks away. I'm not the sort of woman who'll be easily intimidated. Not that I know what sort of woman I am, but I know that much. I don't care if he's a man. I'll fight back. There's strength inside me, a strength to bruise.

When Dr Shepherd isn't around, they talk to me like I'm a child. They bark orders at me, make me swallow their pills. Once I threw the glass of water at them. I slammed the trolley against the wall and all the little needles and syringes went flying. They strapped my arms with some kind of belt, tied my feet so I couldn't kick them. One of them held my head back while the other forced the pills in my mouth and made me

drink. They left me like that all night. I could hear them laughing through the door. How, exactly, am I meant to be nice to these people?

Dr Shepherd was furious when he found out. I listened to him shouting at them through the wall. There was something wild about him. He roared. It was thrilling, shocking. He's always so controlled. I couldn't have imagined him raising his voice at anything at all.

Afterwards, during our session, he was severe. My heart quickened. 'I'm disappointed in you, Catherine,' he said.

'It's not my fault,' I said. I refuse to apologise for standing up to bullies.

'You shouldn't have provoked them. Every action has consequences. This is a lesson you must learn.'

I wanted to bite him. It was an intense, animal urge. I wanted to bite his throat.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said. 'I am not your enemy. I am trying to help you.'

'You're on *their* side.'

'I'm on *your* side,' he said. 'I've always been on your side.'

I couldn't help it then, I smiled. He softened then too.

'The next time you feel your temper rising like that, step away from the situation. Look at it logically. Don't let your emotions rule you. You're better than that. You're better than them, aren't you?'

He put his hand under my chin. He asked me if I understood. I said yes. I would have said yes to anything he asked.

He proposed a challenge. 'Overall, you've been doing very well. You're getting stronger. I'd like you to focus on building a good relationship with the nurses now. As a start,

you can go for runs in the forest, as long as you're accompanied by one of them. How about that?'

He explained that they'll follow behind me on a bike. They'll take it in turns to accompany me. He thinks that our relationship will naturally improve from time spent together outdoors, and the exercise will do me good. But I must stick to the agreed route.

'Why can't *you* run with me?' I said.

He smiled. 'There are more people in the world than me. Sooner or later, you're going to have to deal with them. It's good practice.'

His lips looked very soft. I reached out and touched them. He said my name. His breath was warm on my fingers. Then, gently, he took my wrist and moved my hand away.

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My strength is growing by the day. I am good at running, good at using my body. The world is filling out around me: the woodland that rises to cover the hills; the smells of pine and earth and wet leaves. I am edging closer to my freedom.

A different nurse accompanies me each time. We speak very little. I don't mind the company as much as I thought I would. They are better by themselves, and they leave me alone. They are kinder to me in the evenings now too. Dr Shepherd is right. The method works and there is a rapport between us, of sorts.

He's very pleased with the progress we're making. 'I'm proud of you, Catherine,' he said in one of our sessions. He touched my shoulders and I felt warm. Does he know what impact his words have on me? How much I love to hear him talk like this?

'Soon,' he said, 'I'll take you to see the sea.'

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That nurse. I do not know his name, and I do not care to find out. From the look in his eye, I could tell that he had no intention of playing along with whatever instructions Dr Shepherd had given him. I could have turned around and refused to go. But I am not one to run away from a threat.

I ran up into the forest. He kept closer to me than I would have liked. I sped up and so did he, until he was right behind me. I knew he was doing it intentionally. I tried to ignore it. *You're better than them, Catherine.* I imagined Dr Shepherd was watching me; maybe there were cameras in the woods, maybe he *was* watching. I liked the idea of it, that he was sitting back in his office, his eyes following me on a little screen. I ran faster, faster.

Then the nurse rode into my heels, and the fantasy gave out. I turned around. 'Just fuck off, would you?'

He smirked at me. 'Chill out.'

'You really get a kick out of it, don't you?'

I kicked dirt at him and ran down a track in the opposite direction. A steep, forbidden route. He called after me that I was going off-limits. He was calling me the usual names. Nothing new. I wasn't listening. Then –

'Murderer.'

I stopped running. When I turned around, he had a nasty grin on his face. He reached into his bag and pulled out a taser.

I stared, not understanding, not believing.

'Look at you. You have no idea who you are, do you?'

There was a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. The feeling of missing a step in the dark, falling through empty air.

'What are you talking about?'

‘You’re a monster,’ he spat. ‘A psycho-killing bitch. Everyone knows it except you.’

Something cracked through me. A flash, an uncontrollable impulse. I ran at him. There was no thought process. I ran so fast he didn’t know what to do. He was fumbling around. He’d dropped the taser. I heard him cry out, but I couldn’t see. I didn’t care. A white rage told hold, complete and obliterating.

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Dr Shepherd’s given me some kind of sedative and I feel numb. He won’t take the restraint belt off. He’s furious with me. I wanted to say I was sorry but I didn’t have it in me. Something took over. ‘I couldn’t help it,’ I said. ‘It wasn’t my fault.’

‘It’s never your fault, is it?’ he snapped. ‘That’s the problem with you.’

I felt the usual urge to fight back. ‘You’ve been lying to me.’

‘You knew what you were going in for,’ he said curtly. ‘You consented.’

He reached into the drawer and pulled out a file. It was a contract, signed. I recognised it as soon as I saw it: my true name, my signature. It was all laid out there. He had bought me out of a death sentence. He could do what he wanted with me, because legally, I was already dead.

I looked at him. He was tired, more tired than I had ever seen him. He looked like he’d given up. My gut turned. ‘Why are you showing me this now?’

He groaned, rubbed his face. ‘It’s ruined. You know too much. We’re starting again.’

‘What do you mean?’ My voice choked in my throat. I could hardly get the words out.

‘Believe me Catherine, I wish we weren’t doing this. You were doing so well. And then you flipped, you lost it. You almost killed him. *Why?*’

‘The moron doesn’t know how to use a taser.’

He flashed me a dark, broiling look. I felt it in the pit of my stomach. Everything I thought about him was wrong. He's heartless.

'Why me?' I asked quietly.

He sat down. He said he had been looking for someone. The right person had to be a monster, someone who had nothing left to lose. When he saw me on the news, he knew it had to be me. He'd been following my story for a while, and he became fixated with the idea. A woman, damaged but still young enough to start again. 'Of all the murderers out there, it had to be you.'

My appeal was rejected. The technology took a while to be approved, and he was afraid he was going to lose me. I only had a week left when he finally managed to see me. He explained the nature of the experiment. It came with a high risk but it was *life*. A chance at it, at least. He had been happy to give me more time to think about it, but I didn't want to. I signed the agreement there and then.

'You have to understand, it's a good thing we're doing. If it works, this is a chance at true rehabilitation. It'll change everything. You get to live again.'

I looked at him: brilliant doctor, saviour. Then I looked at the cuffs, the syringe. 'But it doesn't work, does it?'

'It *will*,' he said fiercely. 'We'll keep going until it does.'

He held my face, and I could see the dream, the madness, in him. 'I've put everything into this, Catherine. I've never cared about anything so much. There's nothing left. It *has* to work.'

He unbuckled the restraints and handed me the diary. 'This is the final task. Write down everything you're feeling. Everything you remember, everything you're about to forget. It'll help us next time. Then you'll sleep, and when you wake up, we'll begin again.'

I was too numb to cry, too numb to fight.

He left me then to write. I think I've got it all down now, what is there left to say? I'm a murderer, a psycho-killing bitch. This is my punishment. He'll keep killing me again and again until I get it right. *Aodhan*. It's funny, I remember what it means now. Little fire. A name I'd go to hell for, though it's not going to bring him back.

It's dark, and quiet. Almost a full moon, the light coming through the window. The pain is fading now. The doctor's given me some drugs and I'm feeling a lot better. He keeps calling me Catherine. Is that my name? I don't know. He says I've been in an accident, that my brain is damaged. But my condition is stable and everything will be alright.

There's something about him. He's gentle and good, but he's troubled too – I can tell these things. I want to help him. I want to save him from whatever's troubling him. Maybe I love him? He makes my heart pound against my ribs, it's crazy. I've only just met him.

Earlier, he brought me some water and pills. He sat beside me. 'How are you feeling, Catherine?' he asked.

'Like I've just come back from the dead.'

He laughed. I like it when he laughs. He handed me a diary. He said writing is an important part of the recovery process. 'Think of it like you're writing an autobiography.'

He's still here, asleep. There's no one else here. I could kill him; it would be so easy. I could wrap this cable around his neck and pull. Why am I even thinking this? He's so soft. Besides, I'm not that kind of person. I need him. Somehow I don't think I could live without him.

The skin on my wrist is tender and red. I keep tracing my fingers over it. I don't know why – it just feels like there should be something there.