Anna Hupp

Professor Zibrak

English Thesis Full-Book Summary

5 May 2022

Full-Book Overview:

The piece I submitted for my English Thesis and Honors Capstone is a chapter of a book that doesn't yet exist. This would-be memoir covers my health journey between the ages of 14 and 21. During these years, I became sick with a rare condition called Amplified Pain Syndrome. After about four years of searching, I found a diagnosis and began treatment. By the time I was 22, I had nearly recovered. The "chapter" I have written takes place in the middle of this imaginary memoir, which might go by the title of Name Tag. It follows my senior year of high school, when my health dipped the lowest it had ever been, and I finally found a diagnosis. Like the rest of the memoir, this chapter -- which has the working title of "The Pit of Despair" in reference to The Princess Bride -- centers not only on the topic of health issues, but also of identity. I started realizing the role identity played in my life and health after I first started feeling sick. I began to realize how much mental and physical energy I devoted to "damage control," or making sure my thoughts, emotions, and actions were generally positive in order to compensate for an unspoken belief that there was something uniquely wrong with me. The results of my efforts made me a "perfectionistic, performance-oriented people pleaser," in the words of the psychologist at the clinic where I was diagnosed. The psychologist said those qualities were a commonality between the patients she helped treat. Throughout my health journey, I began to reframe my sense of identity. Instead of seeing myself as someone with a missing piece, I recognized that I was a joyful person who uses her words to help others. Plot Summary: The unwritten memoir begins the summer before my freshman year of high school, about six months before my condition began. I was reading a book called How the Irish Saved Civilization, which briefly touches on the life of St. Patrick. The author wrote that slaves in Ireland were often shepherds who spent their time in total isolation for months, without even the warmth of clothing. For some reason, those words impacted me on a personal level. I found myself saying, "Something's wrong with me. I need that. God, give me that." For over an hour, I walked around the neighborhood repeating the phrase. As I neared home, I suddenly imagined that a giant wave was headed my direction. I could stop the wave if I wanted to and learn whatever I needed to learn gradually, but I chose to let it come. About six months later, I got what seemed like the flu. I was exhausted, headachy, and nauseous. I had other, stranger symptoms as well. My brain was foggy, and I had trouble remembering basic events. In addition, I felt strangely alert and on edge, like I was constantly anxious about nothing. Finally, my body resisted movement in a way I couldn't quite recognize or describe. I wasn't in constant pain, was I? My primary care doctor was nearly as confused as I was, but she thought I could have mono, which might last several months. As those months extended past the normal timeline, I visited more doctors, who were all unsure what was going on. During these months, I attended class roughly half the time, managing to finish ninth grade largely because my teachers excused some assignments and let me work from home when I needed to. When the next school year began, I was still unwell, and I continued attending class about half the time. My friendships had slackened and dropped off over the preceding months, and I started meeting with a new friend, who was a drug dealer and football player. I felt confused about where I fit socially because floated between groups. More troublingly, I didn’t really trust any of my friends. I felt lonely, and I started to wonder if I was somehow a mistake. One day, a family friend offered to pray for me. I was initially skeptical, as I had found the overtures of other praying friends mildly to severely annoying. This prayer was different, though. The words of the friend resonated with me in a way I thought could only be true if he understood my thoughts better than I did myself. The friend said he was listening to God as he prayed, and that was why his words were accurate. One of the first things he prayed was that the sickness, whatever it was, was not my identity. He also asked for God to continue to heal me over time, rather than for me to suddenly be well. I recorded prayer and memorized it in days. As my junior year of high school approached, my parents and I decided it would be wise to rest my body and gain strength. The tactic seemed to work: unlike the previous years, I never “crashed,” or left school to study at home, the entire year. I kept visiting doctors during this time, but never arrived at a diagnosis. I also grew increasingly isolated from my friends. The anxious, “in danger” feeling was strongest at school, and I found myself obsessing over social situations and even the layout of my classrooms as if I was afraid that someone would hurt me. I felt like I was in danger, though there wasn’t an apparent threat. To counteract this tendency, I tried to swallow my feelings. I was experiencing more than my fair share of feelings, I thought, and that seemed pretty self-absorbed. I decided to quiet my own sensations as by remembering that I was just one drop in the enormous pond of humanity. I would remember that some people were starving and some people had just gotten married, and I would tell myself to feel how those emotions cancelled each other out and get back to work. A few times, this tactic produced a bizarre side effect. When I closed my eyes, I saw a visual analogy of the pain I tried to "stuff." As I was typing, for example, I would close my eyes and see a picture of hands dripping blood on the keyboard. Though I rested during my junior year, I had a sneaking suspicion that I would still "crash" as a result of the more difficult classes I enrolled in my senior year, and I was right. I had only a medium-small "crash" during my first semester, but I hit a breaking point second semester, when I started sobbing in class and didn't return to school for the rest of the year. My nausea was so bad during these months that I only ate about five different foods, and my energy was so low that I spent hours over a few pages of homework and watched TV the rest of the time. I felt certain, now, that I was Sick, which was both a burden and a relief. I wasn't making this up, as I had previously feared, but I felt increasingly depressed about my future, and increasingly lonely. One day, though, I began to feel a bit less alone and more hopeful. A few strangers offered to pray for me, and, despite my initial skepticism, I their words encouraged me. The strangers prayed that this sickness wasn't my identity, and that I would have a healthy, friend-filled future. A few months later, I finally found a diagnosis. Doctors at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City diagnosed me with Amplified Pain Syndrome, a rare, newly-discovered condition. Amplified Pain caused many symptoms, including constant physical pain, brain fog, an everpresent "fight or flight" response, and more. The treatment, like the condition, is unique. Amplified Pain cannot be treated with medication, but physical and mental therapy retrain the body to operate regardless of pain -- and, eventually, the mind stops sending pain signals to the body. One key element of treatment is therapy, as patients navigate their emotions and direct their attention beyond pain. The doctors recommended I attend a month-long clinic designed to jumpstart recovery. When a spot became available that summer, I attended Children’s Mercy’s Rehabilitation for Amplified Pain Syndrome in Kansas City for four weeks. During those weeks, I spent the majority of my time exercising. In order to graduate the program, patients must beat the exercise times they hit the day before, and they must do this each day. Because I was in constant, global pain, exercise was so challenging that I found myself screaming and grunting, making sounds akin to the cries of a woman in labor. Navigating my thoughts and emotions was actually an even bigger challenge. The most critical thing I learned at RAPS was to acknowledge my emotions instead of stuffing them down. At the same time, I learned that emotions didn’t have to dictate my thoughts and decisions. This became real to me about halfway through camp, when the therapist told me that emotions become “moldy” if ignored for too long. At that moment, the sadness I had rejected the previous months and years flooded my body. I was sobbing when I worked out after therapy, but my exercise times were faster than they had been before -- and they were also easier to accomplish. After RAPS, I was well enough to work about 30 hours a week at Goodwill, and I tried to gain the strength necessary for college. Before starting work, however, I went on a family vacation to California. We were driving home on I-80, and I was raving about the Wyoming landscape, when my dad suggested we stop at a college town just off the highway, “since you like it here so much.” As I toured the campus on our spontaneous pit stop, I had a gut feeling: this was where I would attend university. Out of state tuition at the University of Wyoming was comparatively cheap, and the distance from my hometown was a bonus. In January, I was well enough to attend a church conference in Kansas City, which was a milestone because there wouldn’t be a bedroom I could retreat to when I hit a breaking point. The speaker at the conference had been a DC police officer before he began working to befriend Muslim extremists. The speaker learned to solve conflicts with the people he worked with by asking God to speak to them about their identity. They would pause, take a few deep breaths, and see if any thoughts came to mind that seemed different than the names they would have called themselves. When I listened to the speaker, I felt like I had been given words to a concept that I had gradually become familiar with over the previous years. At the end of his talk, the speaker asked us to pause for a minute, quiet our minds, and see if a thought emerged that felt like it came from outside us. One way to know whether this thought was just from your own mind, the speaker said, was to consider whether it was something you would have come up with on your own. When I "listened," I imagined a flower being pollinated by a bee, and I felt that I was a person who used her words to strengthen the ecosystem. After my gap year at Goodwill, I attended the University of Wyoming. At the moment, I am unsure how much I will cover these years in my memoir. My time in college was physically intense, but I continued to gain new ground. By the beginning of my senior year, I was free of pain, though a few minor symptoms persisted. One reason why I'm not sure when and how to end the memoir is that some other events would complicate the narrative. My mom was diagnosed with cancer during my junior year, and I took online classes, lived at home, and cared for my younger siblings while my mom and dad went to Arizona for treatment. Around a year later, my mom passed away, and I continued living at home and taking online classes to help my dad care for my brother and sister. My chapter was influenced and inspired by Marie Mailhot's Heartberries, Ann McCutchan's Where's the Moon?, Claudia Ranke's Citizen, Robert Pen Warren's All the Kings Men, and Betty Smith's A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. In terms of my own writing, Heartberries was the most directive. The memoir showed that a stream of consciousness point of view can unify a story, even as events shift from one setting to another. Similarly, I learned from Citizen that abstract writing can be effective when the writer has grounded it with a few concrete images. Where’s the Moon gave me an example of a story that gives attention to characters beyond the speaker and doesn’t strain too hard to “wrap things up,” I re-read All the King's Men for this project because I remembered some quotes that I wanted to include in my chapter. As I read, I took notes of those quotes, though I didn’t end up including any of them in my own writing! Finally, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn showed me that growing up in a specific environment can be enough plot to sustain a story as a character ages and evolves. My discussions with Val and Ann clarified and focused my writing. As I worked on each draft, I was never certain what was already clear and what readers needed to know, so it was a gift to hear the perspectives of experienced writers. When I felt tied up over a paragraph or section, Ann or Val untangled my knots with a few choice words. I probably could have done this without the help of my readers, but it would certainly take longer to write – and be less compelling.

Anna Hupp

Professor Zibrak

5 May 2022

English Thesis Final Project

Working Book Title: *Name Tag*

Chapter Title: "The Pit of Despair"

It's my senior year of high school, and I'm sitting at one of the tables that scatter my classroom for AP Lit. The literature course is one of the few "real" courses I'm taking this semester. But I am taking a few, at least.

Last semester, I took exclusively easy classes in order to conserve energy. One of them was an online, remedial course I took in the basement of the high school. The kids in that cement-walled classroom didn't appear much above ground, and I was never sure how the others got there. From what I gathered, they had either failed their courses last semester or were seeking "a less stressful work environment," as the teacher reminded them when they talked too much. Probably, both were true.

About half the kids talked most of the time in that class. It made sense to talk, because the work was insultingly easy. During the first ten minutes of each Monday, I clicked through the slides and took the week's quizzes. For the rest of the time, I colored in a coloring book.

The other kids in my table were mostly silent, but the ones at the table next to me weren't. I was pretty sure that was the cool table, where a black kid, a dyed redhead, another black kid, and a dyed brunette sat. Overall, about half the students in the remedial class were black, even though they made up about 10 percent of the student population -- a racist reality I hated and wanted to blame on someone. But I liked my classmates here better than I liked the seemingly-friendlier students upstairs. The students here were more direct. One time, after I was fed up with the ringleader ranting about who all was a bitch (it was pretty much every female he had dated or talked to), I stood up and said, "Enough with the sexist shit." We argued for a few minutes even though it was the middle of class.

"That's what happens when you talk in class," the teacher commented to the ringleader. A couple of weeks later, the ringleader complimented me on my outfit. I smiled at him shyly, glad to be friends.

In a way, it's more dangerous in the world above the basement, where no one can relate to public displays of personal crisis. I know a crisis is looming -- I feel like a damp paper towel, about to break under pressure. I've broken just about every year since my fourteenth birthday; "crashed" and gone home, where things are physically easier but also isolating. I can feel the symptoms of the crash. There's the stale, detached feeling, the way food has no taste, how I want to cry for no reason.

If no one looks at me, I can postpone the crash. I'll be fine, I repeat to myself, if no one talks to me; if I don't feel any pressure at all.

I don't like my AP lit teacher, Mrs. Robertson. She's too interested in life. Mrs. Robertson wears hip clothes and belittles our generation for never being taught mental math. She's too quick to try to help, too prone to overstep the way kind people do accidentally. Then, Mrs. Robertson oversteps, and ruins it:

“Anna,” she says, stopping mid-lecture, “Are you okay?”

The screeching builds, the nerves strain. It’s like a dam of dirty blue water has been building over the coming weeks and years of my body being exhausted and somehow wrong in a way I can’t describe. It’s like I’ve never been able to release the pressure.

I can’t hold it in anymore, and eruptions fill the room. I’m sobbing. I can’t look up, but the shiny wood floor reflects back at me. I haven’t cried like this in years. I’m crying like I'm alone, even though I can feel the invisible eyes of the friends I don’t trust and the classmates I don’t know.

How long have I been crying?

“Do you want to go outside and get some water from the fountain?” Mrs. Robertson asks, leaning in close. Her face is a map of lipgloss, a few fine wrinkles, and deep concern.

I know what Mrs. Robertson is asking. She wants me to Get Away from the classroom. Her words mean, “Please, for your own sake as well as for everyone who is trying to learn -- and me, trying to teach – please leave the room quietly.

But I can’t go. I guess I technically *won’t* go, but the compulsion to stay feels like a gun to my head. I can’t go. If I do, everyone will think that I’m crying because I’m sad. Or, worse, they’ll think I’m embarrassed that the teacher called me out. It’s too hard to me to explain and too hard for them to believe that I’m crying because my body is at its max.

“Are you okay, Anna?” Mrs. Robertson repeats. A pale, attractive face, framed by funky English-teacher glasses. Mrs. Robertson looks like who she is: a kind woman, her face slightly vulnerable in the way female faces over 40 can appear.

“I’m sorry I called you out,” she says for the third time, and I spare just enough compassion to feel sorry for her. Mrs. Robertson probably remembers the email my mom to explain my health issues at the beginning of the semester. She probably blames herself for the misstep.

“I’m not upset; I’m just tired,” I say. Even to me, I sound like I’m lying.

“Do you want to go to the nurse?” Mrs. Robertson asks.

Finally, she said the right words in our strange, symbolic dance. My mouth sighs and my legs lurch toward the door without my conscious command. I don’t bother to quiet down much, though. I know my sobs will automatically soften when the door opens and we hit the hallway. We walk side-by-side through the wide, locker-lined hallway, the giant cafeteria -- the door to the nurse’s office.

The bed on the far left of the nurse’s office is my favorite, especially when the nurse has drawn the navy curtains around the little cot like she did today. (When she doesn’t, I fear it’s because she knows I eat on the bed even though you’re not supposed to. When that happens, I leave the curtains open even though I’d so much rather they be shut). The thin, blue blanket carries a surprising level of reassurance. I slip the blanket up over my eyes, and shut my lids against the outside.

A tiny voice whispers: even though it’s more comfortable here, it’s still scary. The voice and the chaos behind it whisper louder when I’m alone. Something is wrong with me. I can’t let my mind meander, because it will choose seemingly benign, slightly spooky places to rest -- places that seem fine and picturesque but are also tinged with a nasty taste I can’t identify . I’ve been this way forever, but it’s been worse since I got sick. What are my classmates thinking? What will Nicole, my supposed best friend, and the other kids say? Will my friends in the class be able to explain what happened? I bet everyone will assume it was embarrassment, and I bet my friends won't know to explain otherwise   .

What kind of call did the nurse give my mom? Did she say what she normally says when kids need to go home, or did she say what happened? I bet it was something a bit vague like, "Anna was a bit overwhelmed today…"

My parents' kitchen table glosses like caramel fur. I glide my finger over the polish; I need something to do with my hands.

How did I get in the kitchen, exactly? I know I mentally checked out in the nurse's office. (That was a mistake, but I'm not changing.) I've been home a while, right? I think I was lying in bed upstairs before I came down. What was I trying to tell my parents just now, anyway?

"You know in *Inside Out* when Riley makes a sad core memory?" I ask. I look up at my mom's face: stark cheekbones, the same vulnerable softness as Mrs. Robertson, slightly slanted eyes.   Behind her, my dad fixes an elaborate salad. In the past, he's laughed about it, saying the reason he doesn't cook is that he wants to eat all the fresh fruits and veggies we have. By the time it's all gathered, the rest of the family has finished eating.

But I was thinking of *Inside Out,* the scene where an 11-year-old girl starts crying when she introduces herself to her new class. The memory marks her future decisions -- is that wrong? Am I ruined now?

The kitchen table is the color of a toasted marshmallow. Mom's seen the movie, so I know she remembers.

"I don't think I'll be able to go to school tomorrow," I sigh out. I'm not making an emotional statement, I tell myself fervently – no, I tell myself dispassionately. This is a weather prediction.

The silence feels like it lasts a long time. Will the words resonate? I'm being honest.

"Okay," Mom says. I don't look up, the silence means that even Dad doesn't disagree.

If this crash is like the last ones, I won't go to school for a couple of months. It'll almost definitely be longer, though. What I really sense, but am scared to say, is that I won't be back for the rest of the year. I feel almost certain about this, but I bet Dad would call it giving up.

A week later, my friend Nicole comes to visit. I feel stately, lying in my bedroom with my head propped up on a pillow. I should fold my hands over my chest, complete the picture.

Nicole hands me a piece of paper and catches me up on the news. She smiles when things are funny and frowns when they're serious, because she's really present. But her face holds a rigidly tense expression, whether she's smiling or frowning. Of the two of us, shouldn't I look the most anxious?

Nicole's rigid self-control makes her ethical, in a slightly cold, stale way.   She doesn't ask me how I'm feeling, physically or emotionally. (Nicole once told me we shouldn't talk about health issues.) I'm grateful for her silence because it's easier to be friends this way. But I can feel contempt souring my gratitude like an aftertaste.

Before she leaves, Nicole stops and says, "The day you left school, were you embarrassed Mrs. Robertson called you out?"

A dead weight: “No, I was just really tired.”

Nicole doesn’t come back for weeks, and I’m on my own. And the quiet feels white, relaxing, clean. Being alone is better than being fake, I tell myself while lying in bed, with a wisdom that feels silly. It’s better to be lonely than fake, I think, and giggles pour from my mouth.

But it’s hard to get comfortable on my bed. I guess it was never really comfortable. When I try to take deep breaths and close my eyes, my body fidgets. Something high is playing in the background of my mind. And I can’t trust that my mind won’t think something icky when I let myself relax, like what an idiot I am and what an idiot people are and how there’s never enough of anything. But I can’t do that. It’s like my wrist is clenched around the kites flying above me, and I have to keep them all from hitting each other. I have to remain in control, grasping the string hard. So I can’t relax, but the white walls of silence and emptiness and time alone do the work of relaxing for me.

Last summer, I read Carrie Fisher’s *Postcards from the Edge*, and the novel’s last lines split my chest: “That night in the emergency room, do you recall if I threw up something I needed?” Fisher writes. “Some small but trivial thing that belonged inside? I distinctly feel as though I’m missing something. But then, I always have.”

Life during this crash is both better and worse than other crashes. I feel more sure of myself and what's going on -- but what's going on is bad, and also I feel vulnerable. I've never understood busyness like I do now, with my non-schedule. I spend about 50 percent of my "free time" hours in front of the T.V. -- the hours besides the two it takes for me to get ready in the morning and prepare for bed at night. The rest of the time I slowly tackle my scanty homework, talk with friends, and occasionally try to reread a children's book, which is an escapade that ends in tears every time. I work out three or four days a week too, which is important because I want to stay as strong as I can. My mind feels loose and fragile. I don't know how to focus it, but the movie my teacher assigned helps focus it for me.

The black and white scenes of *The Glass Menagerie* flicker on the basement TV, and the couch sags beneath my butt like an untrustworthy friend. Most of my teachers practically hand me homework passes and A's for the rest of the semester, but Mrs. Robertson assigns me plays or poems to discuss on the phone each week for credit. It's a bit annoying, but also good.

When I watch *The Glass Menagerie,* my mind relaxes into the rhythm that I'm pretty sure is what they call a flow state. It's funny that I've fallen into the flow now, because I tried so hard to squeeze that gift out earlier in the semester, when I was actually in class. *Catcher in the Rye* didn't make any sense to my exhausted mind, I doubted my first impressions, and I went to SparkNotes and got C's on my quizzes. But now, when I'm not even trying, the gift has returned.

The Glass Menagerie flickers past, but my mind flickers past it. But I'm fine; I really am. If nothing goes wrong I can cover the mistake in me, the missing piece. And I will get better. Because this is real and I'm not making it up, despite the fact that my symptoms make no sense and none of the doctors I've seen over the past four years know quite what do with me. They've given me useless medications and supplements, and they've told me that I probably have a GI problem, using their authoritative doctor voices as if they are providing something of value. Nicole told me years ago that she didn't think anything was wrong -- after all, my first mono diagnosis had long since expired. Even though I still tell people I have mono when a false answer is better than none at all. Even though whatever's going on isn't extreme enough to kill me or at least sever my limbs and therefore be legitimate. Even though my dad routinely asks me how much of this is in my head, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I will be okay. I will be okay.

There's a feeling surrounding me, seductive and purple feeling, tangible enough to taste. I want to ride in it.

The Glass Menagerie is over. I was too tired after watching it to do anything but watch something I've seen a million times before. On the screen, Michael and Oscar spat about foreign policy. Off the screen, I waver between two worlds. There's the immediate world here, where the overhead lights emit a plastically yellow and I continue breathing, a sordid mass. But there's also the world I can't see, the seductive, purple aquifer.

Or maybe it's an ocean, not an aquifer. It's washing at my ankles and I can hear the roaring.

The next day is Sunday, which is the day I let my body crash. I don't attempt work of any kind on Sundays, and, because my defenses are down, the week's onslaught always hits me. Sundays set the ugly, supercharged feeling on high, like I'm going to snap a any second. I lie on my bed, lounge on the couch, sit at the table, my nerves sounding alarms. They scream when my younger brother by two years plays his countercultural music on high, stomping up and down the stairs. I would snap at him if I wasn't sure of losing the argument.

Right now, though, the house is silent. Dad, Mom, and the kids are on the fifth floor of a boutique hotel near campus, where their church meets. I'm so glad to be absent from there, where overhead lights blur my vision and I can't track what the happy faces are saying. In general, everyone is a bit too happy at church. The women chat in clusters before worship, exchanging takes on Jasmin's infinity scarf or Gemma's new combat boots. (The boots are actually pretty great, though.)

But I feel so alone in the living room. As usual, I attempt to read National Geographic, but, after a few minutes, I put the magazine down. Its glossy pages gaze up at me, as if they still hold onto a bit of hope that I'll take the magazine up again. National Geographic should know better, though. I rarely take a magazine back up, at least for long. The crying normally follows the first attempt.

It's starting now. It's a bit early today, with sobs choking out like mini explosions. The only thing that relieves the pressure is pulling my hair, which I do like an instinct. I'd heard people talking about pulling hair as a metonym stress, but I always thought it was a silly, unproductive thing to do. A few years ago, I read about pilots pulling their hair out at high altitudes to relieve the pressure. I knew they couldn't help it, but I decided that if I was a pilot I would resist the temptation as long as I could. But now, pulling my hair does release the feeling that my head is crammed too full.

I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want to be here anymore. And God, I’m just not strong enough to tell anyone. I know I should let someone know, but I’m just not strong enough. Please just let it happen.

The familiar sounds of family chaos approach, and an invisible hand swings the front door open. Instantly, I take up National Geographic again. (The magazine is my front. Mostly, I just hold it open, staring at the pictures while I listen to people talk. The snatches of sound are better than silence.)

They’ve probably gotten their food by now -- enchiladas or nachos, if this is like most Sundays. Papers shuffle; voices are dull: they’re reading the Sunday papers.

Mom stands in the doorway to the living room, her brown hair fitting into the angles of her cheeks. She strides over and crouches down so our eyes meet. Mom’s eyes always look like they’re filled with water, even when they’re not. She looks like she’s concentrating hard.

“Hey,” she says, in a thin voice she lets stream out. “I know this all has been really hard for you, and I had a weird feeling at church today. Can I just ask you a question…”

A few Saturdays later, my math homework looks up at me from the table. I should be too smart for this class, but it’s taking me a while to solve the equations. Thirty more minutes, I silently reprimand the homework. Give me thirty more minutes, and I’ll be done with you.

“Want to go with me to the nat in an hour and a half?” Mom asks. She occasionally swims laps at the K-State natatorium a couple of miles away.

“Swimming” isn’t just swimming in my mind -- there are many steps to consider. I’ll have to change into my swimsuit, walk the freezing walk from the car to the nat, and wait around for Mom to talk to people there. Then there’s the actual, 30-minute swim, and after that I’ll have to change in the locker room, wait around for Mom to talk to other people, and brave walk back to the car, my wet hair dripping on the snow. But I’ll be done with homework by the time we go, and I don’t have any other priorities today, so it’s worth it.

An hour and a half later, lapping, echoing water shifts my heart to slower beats. The water shields my body from the onslaught of pins and needles that rush in with moving air . Plus, it’s nice that there are strangers here. If I was on my own, I would push harder, hard enough to trigger shrieks and grunts. The social contract is a valid excuse to skirt the underworld of deep, dark pain.

There’s something so intuitive and right about the breaststroke, synchronizing my movements into a rhythm. Snatches of songs echo when I bob my head out of the water: “Giving me a million reasons,” “But baby I just need a good one,” “Set fire to the rain.”

Thirty minutes later, I stretch under the echoing lights, my body zapped but relatively okay. When I walk through the hallway to the locker room, however, the good feeling gushes away – now it’s gone.

Why am I so tense? I know where I’m walking. Just get through the hallway quickly -- and no one talk to me. Okay, I’ll mentally check out.

A few minutes later, Mom pulls the family minivan out of the parking lot, and we're free. Through the window, I see twisted tree branches, dirtying chunks of snow, and blue sky, whitening at horizon. A thought flies through my mind, like a bird you see fly by from the corner of your eye. For some reason, I'm thinking of Cold Stone Creamery.

It's nothing. Or maybe it is something. But I don't have the strength to respond. Or the will? But the thought is gone, anyway -- I'll let it go. Bye, bye.

"Is there anywhere else you want to go?" Mom asks.

Mom is staring straight ahead, looking at the car in front of her change lanes. This is weird -- she never asks if there's anywhere else I want to go. Mom cooks dinner for the family every night because restaurants are expensive, and she only goes out to eat with friends, or with my dad when they remember that it's been a month since their last date night.

"I want to go to Cold Stone," I say.

"I was thinking of Cold Stone too."

The door swishes, the bell jingles, and Cold Stone Creamery beckons us inside. The ice cream shop has always reminded me of a faux-luxurious winter cave, like it was designed to entice customers from the cold.

"I'll take a medium Triple Chocolate," I say, feeling compelled to order the flavor. You can't go wrong with chocolate, after all.

After I dip my spoon into the cup, something magical occurs. The ice cream slides down my throat like forgiveness, like grace. It soothes my nausea down from a raging sea to a low tide. I’ve eaten other kinds of ice cream since chronic nausea began four years ago. What makes this one different?

“The ice cream soothes my stomach!” I gasp out. Through a dazed, pastel filter, I watch my mom buy a quart of Triple Chocolate on the spot. Who knew they sold cardboard boxes of ice cream? Also, what just happened?

My mom keeps the outdoor freezer stocked with Triple Chocolate over the next few months, even though it’s a hassle to drive to Aggieville for it and even though Cold Stone is expensive. Because it’s one of the foods that doesn’t make me want to puke, I eat Triple Chocolate ice cream with my lunch and dinner most days. Or, more accurately, I eat it as part of my lunch and dinner. I think it makes up half my total calorie consumption.

Whenever I eat the ice cream, I feel like I’ve meandered into the neighborhood of physical pleasure, even if I can’t enter one of the houses. The proximity is enough for me to cling to ice cream as a reward and a ritual. There was life before the ice cream, and after.

Once every few weeks, Ian and Amsie chirp, “Can’t we have some?”

My body tenses: why-am-I-different-why-am-I-special-after-all-isn’t-this-pampering-my-body-and-coddling-whatever’s-wrong…

“That’s Anna’s ice cream,” is all Mom says. It’s enough.

“Thanks again,” I whisper, when the kids have gone, like it’s not a big deal. I want to say it is a big deal. I want to say I have been thrown a lovely bone, and I understand this ice cream must cost hundreds of dollars. I want to thank someone for the ice cream, which dropped from heaven like an asteroid.

A couple of months later, I hold the spoon upside down to lick the last of the chocolate before plunging it back in. I'm pretty sure this looks disgusting, but I respect the ice cream too much not to take advantage of each bite, even when there's more left in the bowl.

On the screen above me, Dwight struggles to remove a carved pumpkin from his head. It's funny, but I know from the five other times I've watched this episode that it's also kinda dark. I try not to think about my impending future, blank. Hopefully, if I just kind of suspend my mind in the empty space, my thoughts will sort themselves out.

This ice cream is really good. I better hurry up and finish before the people arrive. They're strangers, these ladies -- Dad said that they told him when they visited church last week they felt like they should pray for me. He doesn't really know them, and I can tell he's a bit apprehensive from the way he lifted his chin slightly when he asked if I wanted them to come over.

Ice cream eaten. Now I better make sure it's not on my face. I have about seven minutes to collect myself and anticipate their coming and try to appear normal before ushering the ladies down to my lair. I should hear them upstairs any second.

Yep, there it is: the cackling noise of laughter. I won't go up until I'm called.

"Anna," Dad shouts down, and I climb the steps up to the kitchen and slide behind the island. I'm wearing my favorite pink skirt and a sweater that's a bit too drab. I feel like a dressed-up, non-pretty doll, the worst version of a white girl, with broad shoulders, no boobs, and no sparkle in my eyes.

It’s fine if the ladies are even less cool than me, though, which is comforting. On the other side of the island, a twenty-something, frosting-pretty blonde laughs and says something to a forty-something brunette, who smiles but doesn’t laugh as much.

“Well, where do you guys want to go?” Dad asks. “I guess the basement would be the best place -- you want to lead them down, Anna?”

As I walk to the door, my phone’s blank face looks up at me from the kitchen table, where I left it a few hours ago. I am not going to grab it and hit “record.” Probably, whatever they say won’t be worth recording, anyway. And I want to be a critical thinker, assessing whether it’s worth remembering before I hit “play,” not after.

Twenty minutes later, I speedwalk upstairs, grab my phone, half-observe my parents’ apprehensive faces, and speedwalk (skippity jump) downstairs. I have the recorder now, and I’m paying attention.

“I think this is like a sign that God’s chosen you,” says the brunette, who introduced herself as Elizabeth. “You’re like, ‘Am I ever gonna be better?’ And God’s like, ‘Yeah. You just got to hold on a little while longer.’”

That’s interesting, I consider. If someone had asked me if I thought I was going to get better, I would have said yes. I tell myself I will get better when the unnamed feeling floats in like fog. But it keeps floating in, more and more often…

“I feel like God wants you to tell him how you’re feeling,” Elizabeth continues. “He wants to know the good, the bad, the ugly.”

I nod, biting down the marshmallow feeling in order to keep myself presentable. Why do Elizabeth’s words resonate like that?

"I feel like you should visualize God holding and rocking you like you're a small child," the blonde, whose name is Tiffany, says. "Especially when it's hard."

Okay, this lady is nutso. I will not take this hippie, singer-songwriter advice.

But the tears are streaming down my face. Everything they say, except that super weird part, makes me feel seen, I guess. Whatever's going on, a pink feeling warms my belly and softens me.

"We don't wanna keep you -- your mom said you're tired," Elizabeth says. The women's steps fade up the stairs.

And silence. Don't go up for a bit, I order myself. If you act like you have energy by walking upstairs immediately after they leave, no one will believe you're sick.

My parents stop chatting when I emerge from the basement.

"Was it okay?" my mom asks.

"Yeah, it was great."

"Good." She exhales. "I was like, 'we don't really know these ladies…'"

"I'm glad it was good," Dad says, in the soft voice of his that makes me melt. Dad's the best at comforting us kids when we're throwing up, because of that musical voice.

I hug him, in that weird tug between propriety and emotion, as I wonder, "Am I too old for this?"

The steps to my bedroom are quiet and long. I'm gonna rest in bed for a while. I doubt I'll sleep -- I can never nap -- but I want to purge my mind.

The next morning, yellow light glides through the blinds and toys with my eyelids, which means it's seven a.m. Because I'm so tired, it takes me two hours to get ready in the morning, counting breaks. I should be able to go 45 minutes without listening to the recording from yesterday, even though my mind is a barren wasteland and getting ready is physically brutal. Listening before then would be infantile.

But the wasteland defeats me while I brush my teeth, and I hit "play." I need a distraction, something to lift me out of myself. I need an energy source. "Warm, fuzzy feelings" aren't a metaphor, I realize as I listen, but an actual physiological description. It's like someone is pointing their finger addressing them parts of me and my life, calling them out for something good.

Except for the ridiculous part about God rocking me like a small child. Life is hard, lady. I know you haven't learned that, with your high, giggly laugh, but I have.

One day, a Facebook message appears on my phone. It's from Naomi Smith, a friend of my mom's from college. I think she lives about an hour and a half away in Lawrence, though I could be wrong. I haven't seen her since I was little.

"Anna, you have been on my mind today," Naomi writes. "I'm recovering from a c-section so I am forced to rest and have a lot of time on my hands LOL."

Why is Naomi thinking of me? I barely know who she is.

"I was thinking of this season in your life of dealing with sickness," she writes. "The Anna that started out with this sickness is not the Anna that you now are."

Well, yeah, duh. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, though. I think it's okay?

"That is not a bad thing," she writes. "Because of the stillness that God has forged in you, God can drop one stone of insight into your pond, and that small stone can have a ripple effect throughout your whole life and ministry."

So she's saying that I'll have integrity? I had wondered that, too -- but how would she know?

"You will draw wisdom from the depth of what's been forged in you that will blow your parents away," Naomi writes. "You will love the person you have become, and if it feels weird or awkward for a season, it's only because He is recalibrating your sense of position in the world. I hope that makes sense."

I think it makes sense? I think Naomi is saying that I'm gaining a clearer sense of my own identity, and, as a result, I'll interact with the world in a new, better way.

I'm not sure what I feel after reading the message. I think these things rising up are emotions -- man, it's been a while since I felt emotional like this. I'm not sure what the emotions actually are -- happiness? Sadness? According to Naomi, my unrealistic thoughts are actually reality.

I take a screenshot of the message. Within a few days, I have it memorized.

I'm not sure how I got here, to the doctor's office in Kansas City. I think the process of getting here started a few months ago, when I was in the gastrointestinal branch of this same hospital. What branch am I in now? Oh yeah, pain management.

When I was in the GI branch a few months ago, I told the GI doctor that maybe one of my symptoms was pain. The words flew out like one of those ideas that appear from nowehere in the space between sleep and wakefulness. When I first got sick at 14, the thought had popped into my head a couple of times, but I had known better. If I was in pain, I was in pain because I was exhausted, not the other way around. I knew that with certainty. But I had said it.

If I pull for information, I know my parents drove me here. I don't remember the car ride, and I have only a dim recollection of the waiting room, which was too complicated to even try to understand. Why was there both online check-in and a receptionist? Why did kids' toys line the walls, and why did Mickey Mouse Clubhouse yell from the TV?

To my right, Mom pages through her sloppy notes.

"About how many doctors have we seen now?" Dad asks.

"Oh, I don't know," she responds, in the irritated voice she uses when completely bewildered. "Maybe ten?"

"How many medications then -- about 15?"

"About that."

My skin moans under the breeze of the air conditioning. Ten doctors and 15 medications over four years -- not to mention the psychologist, the psychiatrist, and millions of misdiagnoses.

I notice my legs for the fifth time since I sat here. On the white paper of the doctor's office, my thighs look like wrapped meat. I am wrapped meat. It's kinda funny, and I'll choose to ignore the nagging unease of the feeling for now.   My parents sit below me, like anchors tethering me to reality.   You do all the work and I'll sit here, I think down at them. I can't do anything else.

The door opens, and two doctors appear. My-legs-are-like-meat-on-the-table-and-I-can't-think-and-I-can't-do-anything.

One of the doctors starts speaking -- what is she saying? She and the other are only a few feet away, but my eyes are too overloaded to absorb what they look like. My eyes glance over them, then resist and deflect. The doctors look disproportionally large, blurry. Something I don't want to call Fear rises in my throat when I try to make eye contact. Their eyes prick my nerves.

Too much stimulation -- look away. It's not selfish. It's not weak. (It's selfish and it's weak but I'm looking away.)

The doctor on the left has curly red-brown hair. I can almost figure out what she looks like, and I almost have a grasp of her words. A few moments after she says each couple of sentences, I get the gist, like a delayed, simplified translation.

From what I gather, my body is stuck in a "pain loop" because my brain sends pain signals to my nerves for no valid reason. My fight or flight is also on constant alert, so I feel like I'm in danger, even when completely safe. There are other symptoms too -- I'm not sure what they are yet. But everything is wrapped up in something called Amplified Pain Syndrome.

The doctors don’t know much about Amplified Pain, but they do have a course of treatment.

“You have to retain your body not to send pain signals by performing the activities that cause pain,” the curly-haired doctor says. “It’s counterintuitive, right? -- you would normally avoid doing stuff that hurts. But with Amplified Pain, you actually do what hurts to train your brain to say, ‘Okay, she’s gonna keep doing stuff even when we send the pain signals, so let’s give up sending them.’”

Isn’t this what I’ve been doing, or trying to do, since I was 14 years old? All four years of high school, I’ve forced my body out of bed and into a classroom until it shuts down and I can’t get out of bed. (I can get out of bed, but then nothing makes sense and I fall down or start crying. Am I lying?)

No, I’m not lying. I’m trying really hard. What could I possibly not be doing?

The psychologist speaks up. “There’s an emotional component,” she says. “In order to recover from Amplified Pain, you have to acknowledge emotions and let them go, instead of stuffing them down. At the same time, you can’t let them control your decision making.”

The words fall into nothingness. What. What. Whatever she’s saying, I’m doing it already. What is she saying?

The first doctor speaks again, and I can tell the two of them have done this set before.

“We offer a clinic here at Children’s Mercy,” she says. “We highly recommend it to our patients. It’s basically a month-long day camp. You work out, and you also practice what we call self-regulation -- learning to relax -- and you work through the emotional component. The camp is called Rehabilitation for Amplified Pain Syndrome. We highly recommend it to our patients because it puts you super far ahead of where you would be without it."

"But I feel like I'm pushing myself really hard already," I say. I'll speak up for myself. These ladies are insulting my work ethic. Who do they think they're talking to -- the other wimps they've treated? "I exercise for an hour and a half."

"In the past, it's been really good for our patients to be with the physical therapists at the camp," the doctor says. "They help push you when you're like, 'Man, I can't do this anymore.'"

"But I feel like I'm already pushing really hard."

"One important thing about the camp is that you lose your sense of control," the psychologist says – vaguely, I think. "Some kids tell me it's the hardest thing they've ever done." She looks into my eyes as if she needs me to understand something key.

I want to roll my eyes back at her. Instead, I look back for a second, before the electricity in my nerves gets too strong and I have to look down again. You have no idea, I think, how good I am at managing pain.