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FICTION | FALL 2015

## I See Sky

By Jessie Roth

Dear Jordan,

I've been sitting in the same stiff-backed chair for two hours now and I've never wanted to go home more. Do you remember when I said I never thought I'd find myself here? Yet here I am, here we go again. Men and women clad in white lab coats and stern expressions pace up and down the corridor. They carry clipboards and stir up unease in my stomach because it is up to them who will stay and who will go. The question is whether or not they want Sky, if she is right for a place like this.

Sky is my sister and probably the best human being I know. I never met a person who didn't like Sky. She doesn't know how to pick a fight and her favorite color is blue. She wears geeky nightgowns spattered with cartoon moons and stars to bed and shamelessly loves Avril Lavigne even though it's not the nineties anymore. If you ask, she'll happily draw you a crude cartoon portrait of yourself, guaranteed to resemble a stick figure with wild afro-hair even if your locks are long and straight like mine. Sky dresses strange like she doesn't care what people think and she really doesn't. She loves tuna fish and hates all kinds of nuts, which I honestly think is kind of nuts. Sky and I like playing card games, War and Spit are our favorite kid-age past times, and sometimes she lets me take her picture even though she thinks the hobby is just another one of my fads. We have staring contests that are more like straight-face contests because the first person to break is the real loser. Sky always wins because she can do this thing

with her eyebrows that makes me laugh until I have stitches in my sides. “You crack up like an egg,” she says, which is technically too literal of a phrase to make sense but I love her for saying it.

The doctors say my sister is sick, they say she’s crazy, but I don’t think so. I have a voice in my head sometimes and that doesn’t mean a thing. Right now it’s reminding me to breathe and I still feel saner than any of the anxious white-coat clad practitioners wheezing past me. What do they know anyway? Who are these strangers to waltz onto the scene and slap a sticker on my sister? Mistakenly motivated and uninformed, that’s who. “Schizophrenia” doesn’t mean a thing to me and “Sky Adler” doesn’t mean a thing to them. Where I see my multi-faceted and capable human being, they see a basket case. I don’t think I will ever see eye-to-eye with these people.

Thank you for keeping up this correspondence, by the way. Most days, I don’t feel like talking much at all but I can almost always compose a letter. Still, I’m sort of scared to write anything down for fear that my writing will be used against me. I hate having the realization that Sky’s privacy could be gone because that means mine is, too.

Mom just came by and told me she’s admitted. Crap.

*November 24, 2011*

Dear Jordan,

I am an expert at unconventional holidays.

In observance of the Thanksgiving of 2010, my best friend Mary and I packed a bag full of food and trekked two miles in the pouring rain to an empty parking lot on the other side of town. We pooled the contents to create “world’s saddest Thanksgiving feast.” Mary

supplied two zip-loc bags of stale chocolate espresso crinkle cookies, one for each of us, and I had a handful of string cheeses in my fist because they are my favorite. Our haul was so appropriate because everything about that night was so sad. Like I said, it was storming.

There are two types of people in the world: people who eat string cheese by pulling it apart and people who bite right into the stuff like it's no big deal. I get along with almost anyone, but I can't stand the second group of people. My mom insists that I am crazy for caring, but I think this is an appropriate means of passing judgment on a person. Mary eats string cheese the first way, the right way, so we get along.

The "unconvention" of this particular holiday originated with a fight in my family. I thought that holidays revolved around warm relations and love but my house held nothing but cold communication and hate. Mary's parents were away on business and her house was actually empty, which wasn't a whole lot better. That Thanksgiving evening, there were very few thanks to give and a whole lot of drama to deconstruct. We had nothing better to do but walk.

Today's festivities ended up upstaging those of 2010. I couldn't possibly think of anything stranger than a drenched Thanksgiving in the rain until I experienced one literally doused in insane.

Earlier this afternoon, I find myself seated around a table in the communal dining area on the sixth floor of EVH. Sky is across from me, dragging a plastic fork through a bowl of instant noodles. There is a neon-green bracelet wrapped around her wrist, proof of how she was "admitted" yesterday. I'm inclined to call a place like EVH the loony bin but mom says the correct term is "psychiatric hospital." Mom and I are allotted about an hour to sit in the dining room and watch Sky eat dinner while she tells us about her day. She doesn't say much. I hold

her hand as she speaks, sort of, in half whispers between mouthfuls of ramen. I think this place is devastating her already.

I guess there are really three types of people in the world if I include people who don't eat string cheese at all. I don't know how I feel about them. Everyone I know likes cheese, at least a little bit. People who don't eat string cheese must operate differently. Who is in that third group, anyway? What happens to them? I look around at the people in the dining room and steal glances at the patients slouched on the couches in the hallway. Some are coloring in computer-generated images of turkeys with crayons and some are staring blankly at their provided crafts materials. One girl, Louise, is chewing on her sheet of paper. Maybe a lot of the people who don't like string cheese end up here.

My thin frame shakes against Sky's smaller, yet sturdier build as I hug her goodbye and register my own progressing weakness. I'm supposed to be happier by now. My train of thought barrels straight back to Sky and I worry that the same fate is in store for my sister.

*December 28, 2011*

Dear Jordan,

I miss my old house a lot.

I miss the shitty yellow shingles at the base of the foundation that were destroyed by our yellow lab pup and her annoying yet endearing tendency to ruin everything. I miss the collapsible wooden laundry rack next to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the dining room and the way it would fill up entirely with idiosyncratic pairs of socks belonging to each member of the family. I miss the peculiar-looking spread of fresh raspberries laid out to dry across paper towels on the kitchen counter. I miss tracing the banister down the second-story stairwell with

my fingers and reading it like Braille to help guide me into the pitch-black lower level for a past-midnight snack and cup of tea at three in the morning when I could not sleep, which was often.

“It’s passive action,” dad would say about letting the raspberries air-dry rather than opting to pat them dry with the towels. “Socks still need to dry,” mom signed impatiently when I asked her the same question. This is the only real comparison I could ever draw between mom and dad – the way they laid things out to dry.

Mom is what a lot of people call a “yogi.” Her hair, once an easy-to-maintain bob of dark curls, is grown out and tinted red. She used to run a meditation class but she gave up doing that around when she started to grow her hair long. I still don’t see how the two correlate, but I like her new hair so I don’t dwell. Mom also detests traditional medicine, which wouldn’t be significant if she hadn’t married a doctor.

So dad is almost the exact opposite of mom. First of all, he is an “internist” by trade but I have no idea what that means or what he does when he goes to work. I don’t know much about my dad. I only know he is an internist at all because I have to say something when people ask me what my dad does to make a living, which is a question I get asked a lot. One time he brought me to a pro basketball game where I held his hand and beamed at each person I passed, pretending I was a cog in some great machine. Pretending was probably as close as I got.

One night, one of their fights got really bad and the police ended up coming to our house at two in the morning. The cop call was unnecessary, no charges were made, but mom and dad started sleeping in separate beds after that night. Mom moved into a twin cot

downstairs and dad kept the king to himself in the master bedroom. Do you know how sad a king-sized bed looks with one person sleeping in it?

The divorce led mom to develop a random aversion to dark devil's food cookies, the slightest mention of sports, and doctors. Mom had a bad outburst at the hospital earlier last week and said she isn't going to visit as often anymore.

So it's just the two of us today, Sky and I. I pull up two chairs to our usual dining room table, take my sister's hands in my own, and look her straight in the eyes. They are the deepest brown, exactly the color of my favorite 72% dark chocolate, and equally as warm and comforting.

"What's new, sis?" I prompt with a spastic wink and a nudge. "Do any neat activities lately?" She stares at me and says nothing for a minute before opening her mouth to let a whisper slip out. "What?" She speaks so softly sometimes, especially around other people or in public. "I'm pregnant," Sky states matter-of-factly. Ugh.

This always happens. I should be used to it by now but I can't help but tense up in response to Sky's damn delusions. They are two hundred percent of why she landed a one-way ticket into the loony bin so they piss me off. Ever since she was twelve years old, Sky has been fixated on the idea that she is pregnant. It's unfounded and irrational, sure, but that's why it is called a "delusion." It hasn't subsided in the slightest since then – the only detail that changes is by which man she is pregnant and that fluctuates with respect to where she is and who she is with. This month, that man is dad. Maybe her hospitalization makes more sense to you now.

"You're not pregnant, Sky. You know that." She shakes her head violently and takes it upon herself to start a staring contest with the musky-carpeted floor. "Look," she offers as she places my hands on her lower stomach. "Don't you feel a kick?" I do not feel a kick. "Nope,

nothing. You're not pregnant," I repeat. Sky crosses her arms and pouts like a teenager throwing a temper tantrum. She is clearly upset and I end up feeling guilty so I extend an open hand as an offer of pacifism. The gesture is not reciprocated but Sky signifies forgiveness with a slightly sickened smile instead.

I drop my arm and walk over to the hot water dispenser and fill two tiny Styrofoam cups to the brim, almost burning myself with the steam. There is a shiny, silvery tray of teabags on the table, from which I select two: orange blossom for Sky because she is a fan of citrus and chamomile for me because it calms me when I am anxious. I set the cups down on the table space between us and resume my staring, waiting for Sky to speak. She swirls a plastic spoon through the water, creating clouds of orange-tinged fog. At this point, her expression is about as blank as the abandoned Mad Libs activity booklets on the table next to ours. She looks up, shakes her head at me, and goes on stirring her spoon through the water.

I let Sky write in my journal before I leave and she takes up an entire page with "I miss Theo." That's me. Then she pushes the pen into my palm and curled my fingers into a fist. "Are you angry?" she asks me with wildly curious eyes. I didn't answer her, but I am.

*January 1, 2012*

Dear Jordan,

Back to unconventional holidays, the lone continuity in my life.

Happy New Year, Happy Prolonged Hospitalization. Today is New Year's Day and I welcome 2012 in that same communal dining hall full of crazies with Sky.

Sky and I mostly hang out in the lounge today. I don't like to stay in the dining room for long periods of time because the nurses are usually in there and they give me funny looks

and click their teeth disapprovingly at the notebook I carry around with me. Around 3:45 PM, a nurse on her afternoon rounds manages to track us down in the lounge with a clipboard tucked under her arm and a plastic prescription box in her grip. “Sky,” she calls softly, shaking her hand through the air a bit so the pills rattle around in their container. Sky obediently gets up off the couch we are both sitting on to swallow her cocktail of capsules while I roll my eyes. The nurse glares at me through her glasses; they don’t like it when I “involve myself in administrative practices” either because I am “biased,” or something. I only told Sky not to take her meds once, but they’ve been on my back about it ever since.

I’d like for you for to try something for me, Jordan. Imagine for a moment being uprooted from your current residence. An unfortunate roll of the dice of life has torn you out of a familiar house and placed you into one of these acute-care psychiatric facilities.

Your home is now a square room containing nothing but a bed, dresser, and nightstand. The mattress on the bed is broken, the drawers in the dresser too tiny. It wouldn’t matter, but you don’t know how long you’re staying or how much personal crap those drawers might have to eventually hold. Your neighborhood is like a suburb in that everything looks the same. All of your neighbors are the same, too, because they share the same diagnosis: crazy. Your street is a long, barren hallway with white walls, lined with couches that are usually empty except during visiting hours. Visiting hours are like a vacation because they break up the monotonous schedule you have adapted as your new life routine. Not by choice, of course. You have a new set of parents. Mom and dad are no more; the hospital stay entitles you to a “team,” which is really just a fancy term for a set of mental health professionals: one social worker or therapist, one psychiatrist, and a whole host of nurses. They wear nametags on their stiff uniforms and phony smiles on their harsh faces and they have your best interest at heart,



they swear. There is no substitute for home-cooked meals; you are instead served heaping masses of steaming mush for dinner. The weight gain is inevitable; don't bother complaining about your changing figure. For dessert, your new parents pour candy-colored tablets down your throat and if you don't cooperate, prepare for war. PS: Prepare to lose.

Home is meant to be a place of safety, comfort, calm. I don't feel at home here. I feel at hell. In a hospital, home becomes a one-size-fits-all shirt that you have no choice but to wear. It's the wrong size, stained and torn in an awful lot of places, and you know it has belonged to a ton of people before it reached you. What a shit deal.

It has been four months of hell for Sky. I laugh manically on the inside when I recall the nurse who once assured me that the average stay in this prison is seven to ten days. It is important to spend time with my sister but it just hurts more each time. Her eyes are dead and she barely speaks. Last week she told me she wants to go home for the thousandth time. She's hardly a human being anymore at this point. I remind her: "Sky, the moment you stop being a victim, you become a survivor." She doesn't respond. I think they've practically killed her.

*March 23, 2012*

Dear Jordan,

Today was crazy. I mean it: really, literally crazy. I caught the vibe of the local color on Sky's unit and not in a pretty way. I can still hear Sky crying and see the other patients looking on in horror as she got hit in the face with a television remote.

Sky and I are sitting in the lounge when it happens. She is coloring and making her art and I am watching her do these thing. Some movie is playing on the screen on the other side of the room but I can't even remember which one. Next to us, a group of residents are

pretending to make art of their own while whispering under the breath something about “those stupid psychotic sisters.” They group me with Sky, which makes enough sense, but it seems we are dramatically disliked here, which I do not entirely understand. I am guessing it has something to do with how we have each other and most of the others are very alone. Maybe they don’t realize how alone a person can be, even in complete company.

All of a sudden, a young woman named Carrie stands up and takes big, booming steps, toward the television. Her frizzy red hair frames her angry face with fire as she begins yelling about how unfair “sharing privileges” are. I almost laugh because what else can she expect from life on a psychiatric unit? Even I know how to share and she should know how to share by now, too. Before anyone has a chance to calm her or stop the situation from unfolding, she releases the remote and hurls it straight at Sky’s face. A shriek slips out of my mouth as the thick plastic collides with her nose, at which point I hurry to cover my ears before I can hear what sort of sound that would produce. What ensues is disgusting; a sickening cracking sound splits the sea of screams as blood spurts from Sky’s nostrils. She only cries harder in response to the pain, visibly worked into the contorted features on her face.

Pure chaos erupts at that point. Security guards stormed onto the scene to hold Carrie down and carry her away, Sky gets transported to a nearby emergency room, and I go back to writing. This place cannot claim to be home to anyone or anything but fear.

*May 30, 2012*

Dear Jordan,

I’ve become a nostalgic, nameless nobody again – proud, but uncomfortable to exist in my own skin. I miss my old life, my old house, and my old self.

Oh, Sky got discharged today. She's "better."

I miss her, too.

*June 8, 2012*

Dear Jordan,

I learned in my philosophy class that according to Aristotle, if you take an arm off a person, it is no longer an arm. If you remove my heart from my chest cavity, it is no longer a heart. So I suppose the second words leave my lips, they cease to be verbatim – forever transformed into a strand of thought, lost and blended into the background with smudged fingers. When my breath exits my lungs, it stops being breath. It's stale air and insignificant particles. I give the parts of myself significance – a hefty, yet honorable duty. To exist is to encompass meaning. And to exist is such a precarious endeavor. Especially here, ironically enough.

It's hard to explain how I feel about happiness beyond the fact that we need it to heal. It's wrong to define a human being by a diagnosis, a disease, or dissonance. I am not: my broken family, my could-be-better health, my tendency to trust too easily, or my overactive conscience. I fiddle with the frayed neon green band hung loosely around my thin white wrist and will it all to disappear; I am not my manic depression.

If I could write the rulebook, I'd define a human being by what makes them happy. Then I would be: a cup of coffee in the morning, the right song at the right time, an appealing cafe menu, or the homeless man on the corner who compliments my smile when he doesn't have to.

Mom tells me I need to stop writing to you if I want to ever get out of here. The nurses say it's a sure sign of psychosis and my notebook is proof. It could be so much worse though! I could eat paper like Louise. I could have chucked a remote control at Sky, like Caitlin did that one time. I could scream at inanimate objects without ever stopping, like Bernie. I could even share delusions and talk everyone's ears off about things that probably never happened, like Sky does. Apparently it is worse to sit sadly in a corner and write, especially to a person who does not technically exist.

My theory is that they just think they have a better chance of fixing me. But I've been here for almost a year now and it's embarrassing. I don't even feel safe in the hospital. I feel like I stick out the most, too, since they're so set on making me better. When you are the "most normal," you tend to stick out in a place like this.

I maintain that everything is going to be okay even though I don't believe that most of the time. I can't tell what I am anymore: an optimist or a pessimist, a cynic or a realist. Maybe I'm just a hypocrite. There's no use in making sense of the nonsensical, just like it's futile to ask questions without answers. But I do it anyway because I didn't write the damn rulebook and no one told me any differently. Truth is, there is no rulebook. Why don't they ever tell you that?

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