

Disorders

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0.1 Excelsior

“Excelsior” seems like an odd title for an essay that’s going to end up being about death-urge. It’s the go-to catch phrase of nerdier sitcom or comic book characters (rivaled only, perhaps, by “Eureka!”). Besides its most famous use as the signature signoff of Stan lee, it makes notable appearances in college mottos, songs from the 1920s, and the odd crossword puzzle. A little etymology: “excelsior” is actually unchanged from Latin. It’s the comparative form of the adjective “excelsus,” which itself means “high.” So, “higher.” Better yet: “higher still” or “ever upward.” You don’t hear the phrase “ever upward” often in your everyday life; you would think that you would hear the Latin version even less.

But it “excelsior” is catchy enough that we feel the need to use it, even if it produces comic levels of irony. For example: in 1958, as U.S. Military aircraft reached higher into our atmosphere, the Air Force became concerned about their pilots. They realized that the ability of their craft to reach ultra-high altitudes was outpacing their understanding of the effects of the same on the human body. There was no contingency should a pilot be forced to eject from the craft. They needed to figure out what they could do to make that sort of fall survivable, or else they needed to know that there was nothing they could do. The USAF commissioned scientists to design a chute system that would allow for safe ejection at high altitudes. And how could they resist calling their pioneering efforts in the science of falling “Project Excelsior”?

Tests with mannequins had not gone well. Even fitted with the experimental parachute system, every single mannequin that was launched from the balloon entered flat spin at speeds north of 200 revolutions per minute. For a mannequin, this results in tumble-based wear and tear. In a human, this results in almost immediate unconsciousness and, when maintained, death. The scientists decided that, instead of discontinuing the project, they needed to take their tests

to the next level. they needed live human subjects. Their guinea pig was then-Captain Joseph Kittinger of the United States Air Force. At first gloss, you may count Captain Kittinger unlucky. But the partnership between Kittinger and the crew at Excelsior turned out to be mutually beneficial. Excelsior received the kind of airman who would do anything that he was asked without any regard for personal safety, and Kittinger attempt suicide incognito.

I'm going to ruin the ending of this story straight away. Joseph Kittinger did not die during Project Excelsior. In fact, he's still alive and, at the age of 82, an active aeronautics consultant and barnstormer. But the fact that he is alive and happy today does not dissuade me of the opinion that, in 1959, he wanted to die. I'll say right now that I have no proof of this, insofar as I can't produce a video tape of Joseph Kittinger repeating the phrase "I am suicidal, this is not a joke" into the camera over and over. What I do have, though, is an argument, complete with evidence.

I'll concede that there exist men who risk their lives for the good of their country every day, at home and abroad. But there are two large differences between Project Excelsior and a day in Afghanistan. The first is that there was no urgency in Kittinger's action. There was no reason that this testing had to be done now. It could have just as easily been done tomorrow, or the next day, or when technology improved a bit more. Kittinger, in interviews, alludes to a sense of urgency that didn't exist. For a warzone soldier, it's very real: our country or her interests are in danger, and the soldier protects them. At best, Kittinger was contributing to the construction of a device that might save the lives of some pilots in a highly unlikely situation. At worst, he was jumping out the balloon so that some scientists could see what happened.

The second difference is much simpler, but, for me, more important. The question, "Why did Captain Joseph Kittinger choose to risk his life?" is itself flawed. "Risk" isn't a word that applies to this situation. There wasn't a chance

that he would die, in the same way there isn't a chance that gravity was going to stop working the moment he left the balloon. Remember the preliminary tests, with mannequins? Each one that hit the landing zone during that preliminary testing might as well have been a corpse. Joseph Kittinger knew this, and he went up anyway. Inherent in that decision is a self-destructive motive. It wasn't even indirect enough to be called a suicidal gesture; it was full-fledged attempt.

Let's skip ahead in time to the third and final test jump. I'm going to pull my description of this jump from Kittinger's own description, as given in an interview that he did with Forbes(!) Magazine for the 12/08/03 issue. Joe Kittinger has an uncanny memory for numbers and measurements. For example, he doesn't merely refer to his balloon as "large," but "35 to 40 feet wide and 200 feet tall at sea level." Also notable is that he chooses to share any part of his emotional experience. When asked the question "What were you thinking as you took that step?" he talks about the perspectival shifts that occur when one loses recognizable reference points for size and distance. The only kernel of positivity that is salvageable from this account is the sentence "We were elated." Even this is not exactly a personal statement; it's too to the point, too businesslike. And I'm pretty sure that his wordplay was unintentional.

The date of the third jump was August 16th, 1960. Kittinger and the rest of the flight crew had already been through over 100 grounded test runs. The crew got up at 2 AM and inflated the balloon up to capacity. Kittinger, when he arrived, was secured into his flight suit. The suit was pressurized, and had climate control built in to make sure Kittinger didn't freeze or sweat, as the sweat would itself freeze. Joseph breathed pure oxygen for the next four hours, in order to remove nitrogen from his bloodstream. This was to prevent the bends, a decompression-related disorder that normally affects divers on the way back to sea level. As one leaves the troposphere and crosses into the stratosphere, one actually experiences an increase in temperature. but even at its warmest,

the temperature won't get higher than about 90 degrees below zero. And did you know that, in a non-pressurized environment, blood in the human body will actually boil at 63,000 feet?

But when you're 20 miles high, you can see 400 miles of Earth in each direction. When I used to imagine the ascent to space, I observed, in my imagination, a gradual darkening of the sky, from the bright blue that we know to the perfect black of a vacuum. One thing that I learned from watching video of the third Excelsior jump is that this is not the case. There's a line that must have been drawn by God—on one side of this line, blue, and on the other, black. Kittinger had been watching this line rush away from him for 11 minutes before he turned his back away from it, said, "Lord, take care of me now," and let himself fall.

Kittinger still holds three world records: highest parachute-assisted jump, longest free-fall, and fastest free fall. He jumped, as the reader knows, from 102,800 feet—that's about 3 times as high as the redevye from Boston to Baton Rouge. His speed at the end of the free-fall phase of the jump was 614 miles per hour. He was in free fall for four minutes and thirty-six seconds, and, adding on the post-parachute time, the entire jump comes out to about twelve minutes. The jump, of course, was a huge success. Kittinger hit the ground relatively unscathed and completely alive. In other words, the Lord didn't take care of him; at least, not in the way that he wanted.

But the third Excelsior jump was the third, and I want to return to the first. After the long and complicated preparation process, Joseph Kittinger entered the balloon and ascended to a height of about 20 kilometers. At that point, Kittinger jumped, and at *that* point, Kittinger's stabilizing chute, which was designed to prevent the aforementioned and fatal 200 rpm flat spin, deployed. This was a much earlier deployment than planned, and it caught Kittinger both by surprise and by the neck, snapping his head back violently in the middle of free fall.

Here are the emotions I choose to project onto the Joe Kittinger who is rapidly

losing consciousness: confusion, followed by fear, followed by the certainty of death. This, followed by an unexpected but large relief. The feeling of falling (which he was too high to be experiencing in the same way that we experience it near to the ground—imagine watching a car speed away from you, and then imagine that that car was the only solid thing for miles) and then, by my estimation, Joe Kittinger lost consciousness as a free and happy man, with a balloon rushing away from him and a planet rushing toward him. I imagine that this, to him, was a kind of “dying as he had lived,” and that this was a moment of profound satisfaction.

The parachute system, however, didn't require a conscious operator—most processes were automatic, cued by a built-in altimeter. Kittinger survived uninjured, and regained consciousness shortly after hitting the landing site. Notably, then-Capt. Kittinger has said nothing in any interviews to confirm any of my wild conjecture re: his thoughts at 20,000 meters and falling. In fact, all Kittinger did in response to this experience was report for duty the next day. And it is in this moment that Kittinger's death urge becomes concrete and undeniable. For one moment, Kittinger's experiences in the air were, to him, indistinguishable from death. For all he knew, he was going to die. This was true before the jump, and during the jump. To come so close, to feel death, and to not for one moment reflect on what happened or consider backing away, can mean only one thing. Kittinger, whether he knew it or not, wanted to feel that death again.

Either way, we're left with this question: does it matter that Joseph Kittinger was in all likelihood suffering from undiagnosed depression with serious suicidal thoughts and tendencies? Or, for that matter, do you even buy this? Have I been convincing? Ultimately, great men are defined as such by their actions, not their motivations. In general, we really don't care how the sausage is made, and American heroes are no different. But just because what we find out may be ugly doesn't mean that we have nothing to gain from learning and thinking about

great men. In the case of now-Colonel Joseph Kittinger of the United States Air Force, what we gain is humanization against a backdrop of superhuman accomplishments.

I'll admit that my attempts to bring the colonel to our level have been disproportionately aggressive. But when I heard the story of Project Excelsior, and then read the interview with Kittinger, and then watched the film of his jump, all I was thinking about was a day spent at the community pool in Southfield, MI, in 1998. My brother and I were splashing around in the shallow end of the pool, and some of the chlorinated water got into my eyes. I thrashed around with my eyes closed, trying to find some purchase while my brother dove into the crowded pool to hide. Then, everything was out from under me, I had hit the deep end, and I was underwater, and I was falling.

Here are some of the emotions that I felt as I began to lose consciousness: confusion, followed by a frantic understanding of my situation. The desire to make some movement to save myself, coupled with a fear/exhaustion cocktail that made those and any other movements impossible. A feeling of being compressed. More than anything, I felt certain that this was the end of my life. Then my back hit the bottom of the pool and I started to black out.

We might, at this point, notice some parallels. All told, it's pretty similar; at least similar enough for one account of Excelsior to cause a rush of memory and emotion. The divergence of our stories comes after we regain consciousness. Joe Kittinger took his step again. For my part, my brother dived down into the pool, pulled me out, and threw me onto the pool deck. I, as of this writing, have not entered deep water since. Whether or not this essay convinced you that Joe Kittinger was suicidal, the writing of this essay has convinced *me* that, suicidal or not, Joseph Kittinger is a much greater man than I am or ever will be.

Because instead of reporting for duty the next day, as it were, I instead decided to go AWOL. I ran away from everything, and I conquered nothing; in fact,

this incident planted the seeds of what has become severe aquaphobia. When I read about Kittinger overcoming certain death for the sole purpose of discovery, being brought to the absolute brink and forcing himself back up into the air, it reminded me of all the pool parties I skipped as a child and all the nightmares I've had as an adult. And, worst of all, instead of using his story as the impetus for real change in my own life, I decided unconsciously to bring him down to my level. I argued that he must be suicidal, that he must have some sort of equally crippling deficiency or mental problem that led him to do what he did. Just as my actions had been motivated by fear, his must have been motivated by depression. I get off scot-free, and courageous behavior becomes a symptom. I'm not backing off of my claim entirely, but I will say this: I'm hardly an unbiased source.

Joseph Kittinger did three tours in the Vietnam War after Excelsior. He served courageously, was shot down near the end of his third tour, and spent 11 months in the infamous 'Hanoi Hilton' military prison. He was awarded medals for distinguished service before, after, and for his efforts in Excelsior. A few summers ago, I learned how to swim at my local pool, in a class with seven and eight year olds, in shallow water. When I was forced into a swim test at my college, the water at the test site was much deeper, about seven feet. I turned around and walked back to the locker room, without even dipping a toe in the water or bothering to check in with the proctor of the exam. Swimming, for unknown reasons, is a requirement for graduation, and now, in the middle of my 4th year in college, I have yet to retake the test.

But I have gone to Promontory point to look at Lake Michigan, in the daytime. The horizon line was straight, like it had been drawn by something divine. On one side was the gray sky, and on the other side was the gray-blue-green lake. I was struck, rather unexpectedly, with the strong desire to see what the world looked like from the other side of that line. And whatever is pulling me across that line is that only hope I have for being any greater than I am now.

0.2 Goulash

My father could only see his kids for six weeks every summer. Even now, I can't account for why, in the Summer of 1999, he chose to send my brother and me to sleepaway camp for two of those weeks. He came into my room late one night and told me that, this time tomorrow, I would be in a wood cabin with no electricity, surrounded by water vapor and strangers. He told me to pack a bag. He told me to put insect repellent in the bag. I, with fifth-grade logic, decided that now would be a great time to hide under the bed and pretend that I was dead. But despite my most sincere objections, Dad drove us the three hours or so up to the Michigan boonies, threw us out of the car, and executed a three point turn before I even had time to ask if the enormous signpost in front of me really said "MUCC Camp."

At Michigan United Conservation Camps Camp (sic), we learned how to shoot, then how to aim. We learned how to cast a line, and build a fire. That was the bare minimum. Dathan, our cabin leader, was not impressed with the bare minimum. Dathan was bald on top with a long, platinum blond ponytail. Dathan carried garlic powder with him everywhere and put it on everything that he ate. Dathan's name was really Dathan. And Dathan sought to teach us a little more at camp: something about people, and how to get along with each other. The first step toward world peace, according to Dathan, is camaraderie. And the first step toward camaraderie is nicknames.

He doled them out with what I considered then to be a little too much enthusiasm. Pretty Boy, for the kid who brought hair products with him in a bag wrapped in a sock. Senior, for the kid two years older than the rest of us inexplicably placed in our cabin. Shaggy, for that kid that looked just like Shaggy from Scooby-Doo. Clone, for the kid who looked just like Pretty Boy. For my brother, Gary: Coleman. For me, Wynn. I made the mistake of asking for an explana-

tion, and looked around the cabin to make sure everyone was listening before he explained that Erin Wynn was the name of his first girlfriend. Laughter rolled across the cabin, lingering a little longer with a heavier, sweaty kid who hadn't received his name yet. He gave me a look that made me understand what a gift feels like before a five-year-old tears into it. I had seen it many times before. I had found the bully. Unfortunately, the bully has also found me.

I had been picked on my entire life. I was the first kid in my age group to get glasses, the last one to stop raising his hand in class, the first one to understand algebra, the last one to understand that making friends with teachers wasn't nearly as valuable, socially, as playing sports at recess. Being bullied had become just another condition of my life, like hating the outdoors. In second grade, Darrington flushed my homework down the toilet so regularly that I just started copying it down twice. In 4th grade, Scenario taught me, in his own way, how to open a locker from the inside. And now, this kid was going to teach me about something I hadn't thought about before. He was going to teach me about blood. His name, as handed down by Dathan on that very first day, was Goulash.

Goulash started with the normal bully fare. He would flat tire me in line on the way to the mess hall, or push me into walls as he passed by, or rat me out to counselors when I fled to the trees with a book to escape physical activity. Goulash couldn't go much further than that; unlike school, at camp I was able to stay close to my brother most of the time. Gary is only a little older than me, but much bigger; big enough to keep Goulash, who was actually slightly younger than both of us, at bay. In the beginning of the week, before Gary made other friends, we were inseparable. Goulash had to keep his distance. But my brother is an extremely outgoing and gregarious person. He spent most of the first day drawing a map of possible locations of the girls' section of the camp and by the third day he was making daily and nightly excursions, leaving me to fend for myself. I hid in the cabin, I varied my routes to and from activities, and I never

talked to anyone about what was happening. I did what I was supposed to do.

By Wednesday of the second week, Gary was barely around and Goulash had taken notice. That was the day that he took the kid gloves off. First, he held the shower door closed while I was inside, so that I couldn't get to my clothes. He convinced, maybe coerced, some of our cabinmates to move one of the bunks to hold the door while he went to breakfast. I, of course, had to wait until the cabin was empty before I attempted to climb out, naked. By the time I got to the mess hall, there was no food left. Later, at lunch, Goulash knocked my tray on the floor, spilling mac and cheese (the only food I was eating at the time) all over the tile. I had to stay to clean up. When I finally got back to my bunk, there were no sheets. My pillow was gone. My towel was gone. My luggage was gone. My insect repellent was gone. Everything I owned was gone. It took me a while to figure out that they had been hidden all over the cabin; in the bathroom, in other peoples' bags, even outside under the cabin stairs. Goulash was up in his bunk, watching me. He seemed nervous, like a pitcher during a perfect game. Goulash laughed whenever I bent down to look under a bunk. In an uncharacteristic outburst, I whispered, "Why do you have to be such an asshole?" I meant for my voice to be unaudible. It was not inaudible.

Like any game, the tormentor-tormented relationship has rules. They were there to make the game more interesting and, more importantly, to make sure no one got hurt. As a bully, you don't leave marks. You take care to avoid keep the injury level low. This ensures that no punitive action is taken against you. Adults are just as lazy as you; they don't want to do work if they can avoid it; as long as you don't give parents anything to be concerned about, none of the teachers that see you punch your target in the back of the head in class are going to do anything about it. As a victim, you keep quiet. Don't tell any adults what's going on, don't talk back to the bully in any way. Stay down. Don't fight back. Your average playground tyrant doesn't beat up nerds because he hates them.

He does it to feel powerful, and he does it for fun. As long as you don't make him angry, he has no reason to end his fun by putting you in the hospital. Calling the bully an asshole under your breath is the perfect example of giving him a reason.

Goulash moved very quickly for a kid named Goulash. He was on top of me before I even got up off of my hands and knees. He lifted me up and threw me back to the ground, repeatedly. By this time, we weren't the only ones in the cabin. Pretty Boy, Clone, even Shaggy had dripped in, but they knew better than to intervene. No matter how one-sided an altercation appears, when you're eleven, it's never a beating. It's a fight, and every kid knows what to do when there's a fight going on; you make a circle of bodies, you chant, and you wait for it to be over. Notably, my brother was absent. Notably, Dathan was absent. This wasn't like school, where you were surrounded by adults, where it was only a matter of time until a teacher saved you. There wasn't an end in sight. Luckily, I had enough experience to have developed the ultimate defense: escapism. I went to a different mental place. While I curled up on the ground, I thought about anything but Goulash throwing all of my possessions at me. I thought about what I would do when I got home, or how Dad managed to execute such an insane three point turn without clipping me, or anything except what was happening to me, and how everyone was watching, and how no one was doing anything, and how no one ever seemed to do anything.

Eventually, Goulash had me by my collar, off my feet and against the wall between two bunks. This is usually the part where the bully gets bored and lets up, but something happened this time that had never happened before: we made eye contact. It was completely accidental, and neither of us wanted it, but neither could look away. His face was filling my entire field of vision. I held my breath. His eyes were green. I had no idea what was going to happen.

The hidden truth behind bullying is that it's just as humiliating for the bully as it is for the victim. The bully feels compelled to bully, but doesn't really want

to. Maybe he has problems at home, or maybe he was actually the target at his own school. But bullying isn't something you choose to do. The only kid in that cabin who had it worse than me was Goulash. The scrawny kids all feared him, thinking that they would end up like me. The older kids called him a fuckup, called him fat, made fun of him for picking on someone so small. The force inside him that caused him to lash out at me just fed itself. He can't help but pursue me, even if it means making everyone else hate him. And I simply wasn't strong enough to stand up for myself. We could have kissed, our faces were so close. I swallowed.

It was Goulash that broke the silence. "What are you gonna do, spit in my face?" He pushed these words through his teeth. "Come on, I *dare* you. I *dare* you to spit in my face."

It was the eye contact. It had forced me to come back to reality. If you don't know where you are or what's happening to you, it's easy to do nothing. But now I could feel the eyes of the cabin on me. I knew they heard him. I knew what they would think, if I did nothing. In that moment, I saw them all as bullies. They were all just waiting me to show weakness, to prove that I was really nothing, before they would all pounce on me. Things would just get worse. All of a sudden, there were stakes. I had something to prove. Before I knew I was doing it, and long before I knew that it was wrong, I spit as hard as I could into Goulash's left eye.

I instantly regretted it. I noticed that Goulash's face was bright red. I couldn't tell what was sweat and what was spit. And maybe he was crying. I was crying. Somehow, we had tumbled together into this impossible situation. It was like neither of us had a choice. I cried because I realized that, whatever I did, neither of us could have really won. Goulash looked betrayed. I had broken the rules that kept us safe, and we both knew what had to happen now. I had fought back. I had stood up. Goulash had to show everyone he wasn't playing around. Goulash couldn't just take that from a fag like me. Goulash would have to punch me right

in the face, as hard he could, maybe twice. He would have to break my nose. There would have to be blood. He would probably get sent home from camp, and I would walk around, nose off-center, for the next couple weeks, but everyone would know how things had happened. I shook my head back and forth until my glasses fell off—my parents really couldn't afford to replace them. Goulash pulled his right fist back.

Senior came up behind Goulash and grabbed him. Nobody expected this to happen; not even Senior expected this to happen. He tore Goulash off of me and threw him onto the bunk to his right, my left. I slumped so that I was seated against the wall, and instinctively grabbed for my glasses, so they wouldn't get trampled. Goulash screamed, which was normal, but it was too loud to be driven by frustration, and too guttural to be triumphant. He wasn't getting up. I looked over to the bunk where Goulash had landed and noticed that the a dark red stain was spread across the white sheet. Who had Kool-Aid? No, it spread to slowly to be Kool-Aid. I put my glasses back on.

Goulash's head had scraped against an exposed nail on the bottom of the top bunk. His face and his hands were covered in blood. I looked at my hand, and there was blood there too. I thought about the eye contact, and the betrayal, and the rules, and about how I had broken the rules.

Pretty Boy had enough presence of mind to get Dathan, who had been outside the cabin the whole time smoking a cigarette. I had no idea that blood made people move so fast. He cleared everyone out except for Goulash and Senior. I left before anyone could give Dathan the story.

Ambulances came and went. I had stuck my neck between the posts of a gate, not far at all, as it turns out, from our cabin. For the first five or ten minutes, the rest of the kids were gathered around me, trying to get me to explain exactly what had happened. They thought it was cool. I reconsidered the wisdom of lodging my neck inextricably between two fence posts. On the one hand, the pain

it was causing me was making me feel like I was in some way making up for my betrayal. On the other hand, the other boys wouldn't stop asking me about what happened, and all I wanted to do was to forget. Once I started thinking of them as part of my punishment I felt better. As a kid I stuck my head into fenceposts, loose chain-link fences, and stair bannisters at every opportunity, but at this moment it was particularly appropriate.

Eventually, everyone filed back into the cabin. Goulash was gone and the sheets were changed, I wasn't talking. I stayed in the fence until my brother came back from another afternoon spent in the girls' cabins. He pulled me out.

"Why are you outside by yourself?"

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

"I spit in Goulash's face, then he fell, then he started to bleed and I came out here."

The popular view on bullying is black and white; bullies and victims, evil and good. But the passage of time has only destabilized my own perspective. All I'm sure about now is that I'm not innocent. Bullying has always and will always happen whenever you put people, especially kids, together. When a practice is so commonplace, it's pointless to try to place blame on any individual involved. For bullying, we can blame society or we can blame no one. But if we're trying to understand what went wrong here, what made this day different from every other day, the answer is simple. I was the one that broke the rules. I was the one who put the relationship between Goulash and myself into unfamiliar and dangerous territory. Whether or not the rules of our game were fair, they were there for a reason.

Goulash didn't come back. There were only two days left of camp anyway. Before I finished packing my bag, I went back over to the bunk and checked for the nail. I wanted to check it for evidence, something to assure me it was real. I

thought maybe I'd keep the bloody nail. Of course, they had removed it. There was nothing left of the blood on the bunk, or the ground, or anywhere else.

0.3 The Onychophage

Here's a quick list of excuses that I have used to explain the appearance of one or more of my fingernails:

- "I slammed it in a door."
- "Guess I clipped that one a little too short!"
- "I was bitten by a dog."
- "When I sleep, I scrape my nails across the headboard."
- "Oh, you know, it's just one of those things."



I've been putting my fingers into my mouth since birth, and I've been biting them ever since I've had teeth. My mother says she passed her habit on to me. When I decided to try to quit, she was my first source of advice; she had kicked the habit somehow, before I was old enough to form permanent memories. I asked her for her methods and she gave me what she refers to as a fail-proof two step process. 1) Start wearing Lee Press-On Nails, and 2) schedule a biweekly appointment with a nail technician at Lifestyles Nail and Hair Salon up the road so that you have someone to shame you into good behavior, finger-wise. It was clear from the start that this fail-proof two step process was non-viable in my case. All the same, I did consent to one trip to Lifestyles. My NT's first glance at my middle finger prompted in her a visible start and some sort of sharp verbal expression, like "What happened?" or maybe just "Oh, my."

Options for self-rehabilitation, given the restriction of not wanting to deal with high-level cosmetology, were limited. The most common suggestion by far is of the bitter-tasting nail additive variety, clear polishes with names like Nibble-no-More or, my personal favorite, Control It! I've heard of these before. I've tried

them before. They served less as an impetus to change my habits than as a barrier to the execution of my daily routine. Over time, I stopped even relating the two. The application of the additive became as common and mindless to me as the application of socks. The bitter taste became as ubiquitous as the nail-biting. After about a month of this, it occurred to me to call my doctor, in order to explore the cause of this constant bitter tinge in my mouth. I took one second of silent meditation, then decided that “Control It!” was not working as well as I had hoped.



I find the explanation that most textbooks give of the fingernails’ form and function severely lacking. For example, most diagrams don’t even indicate the free edge, which is the part of the nail that extends above the nail bed. I haven’t had a free edge on any of my nails for as long as I can remember. Instead, for all of my nails, the first centimeter of nail bed is exposed. The top of the nail is uneven and ragged. The skin around it is red and raw; it’s too new to be the outer layer. Dried blood accumulates on the edges of my nails from time to time. It’s a dark enough red to register at first as black, as if my finger had become necrotic. Although I don’t experience as much blood loss as you may expect from tearing into my own flesh daily. I’ve learned how far down my finger I can go before I start to hit blood vessels. Even if my vigilance wavers, it’s nothing major. I worry more about my white clothing than my fingers. I do fear, though, that I’ve lost some feeling in my fingers, notably the tips, where they’re supposed to be most sensitive. Recently, a friend of mine managed to glimpse my left index in an especially brutalized state. “Doesn’t that hurt?” My response: “No. Should it?”



There are some obvious consequences of nail biting; generally speaking, they’re cosmetic, and I’ve learned to live with them. Hiding the fingers themselves was

more a matter of misdirection than anything else. For example: at restaurants, diners, bars, I always hold my glass with fingers curled inward, with my nails touching the glass itself, to that no one drinking across from me would get a substantive look at them. This sort of approach, though, didn't fly when it came to obfuscating the actual act of biting. Shoving your fingers into your mouth gives off an air of childishness, as if you've just been called into the principal's office. Nothing kills a job interview or date faster than reminding whomever it is you're trying to impress of their little brother.

When it comes to trying to quit, I've had no success with any method that I would consider to be viable in the long term. If ever I have stopped biting my nails for any significant amount of time (a day, a week), it has been because I have replaced onychophagia with another compulsive behavior. My first serious attempt to quit centered around a large box of mint toothpicks. I was eleven. The box went with me everywhere, even though it was about as large as a Gideon bible. A toothpick was in my mouth constantly for a period of about a month. In school, at home, in bed, while I ate or brushed my teeth. The toothpicks were both inconspicuous oral distractors and pointy instruments of penance in case I gave in to temptation. This went on for about 6 months, until my mother intervened; I had started swallowing the toothpicks whole, as opposed to throwing them out. This, according to Mom, posed a serious threat to the linings of my digestive system.

Most recently, I've been flossing upwards of a dozen times a day. I keep a bag of pre-strung floss picks in my desk drawer, and I usually grab two or three whenever I leave my room. At first, the floss would come out of my mouth with as much blood as plaque, but now the bleeding has all but stopped. This is, my dentist tells me, a sign of very healthy gums; its reassuring that this new compulsion, at least, has independent utility. The downside is that flossing anywhere but the bathroom makes you appear even more mentally unwell than biting your

nails. The only thing more repulsive to a potential employer/romantic interest than someone thrusting their own fingers into their mouth is seeing the inside of that same mouth being probed by a piece of string. Gum health is a non-factor. Additionally, I'm almost positive that I removed a filling during a battle with some insidious food product, an apple or a strip of beef jerky. All this to say: placeholders were never the solution to the problem.



I decided to do some quick calculations: adult fingernails grow at an average rate of about .9 inches per year. I've been biting and consuming my nails since I was about 6 months old. I assumed that all of my fingernails were, on average, about an inch wide. So, .9 inches per year per finger \times 21 years \times one inch thick \times 10 fingers = $189in^2$ of keratin consumed by me over my entire lifetime. I've never been able to visualize measurements like that in my head, so I went outside with a tape measure and drew a 9 \times 21 inch rectangle on the sidewalk in sidewalk chalk. I imagined laying a thin sheet of myself over this rectangle that I had drawn. It was big enough for me to set a nice meal in. I was horrified to find that my sharpest emotion was disappointment. I expected it to be bigger. This was, after all, my life's work, and I wasn't satisfied with a rectangle almost exactly the size of two pieces of notebook paper. I started to do some quick recalculations. I hadn't taken into account the faster nail growth rate for children, which could increase the results by something on the order of 85%, nor had I taken into account racial or gender or hereditary or diet or seasonal issues, nor did I take into account the significant amount of surrounding skin and cuticle that I've also consumed. I would imagine that, given these outside factors, the amount of biomass that I've actually 'phaged is about 2.5 times what I had drawn on the sidewalk. This realization brought an immediate feeling of pride, with a strong what-kind-of-ill-individual-is-proud-of-this aftertaste.



I was sitting on the Green Line train in Chicago, looking to get a sense of how common nail-biting is. My initial finding was that I am the only person in Chicago who bites their nails. I had to stay on the train for half an hour before I found even one other onychophage, and it was a little boy, maybe 7 or 9 years old. He was playing his Game Boy with one hand and eating the other. His mother was with him. I kept waiting for her to slap his hand, like my own mother would have done, and did do, in this exact situation. I never once thought that she wouldn't put a stop to it in some way. Maybe slapping was too old fashioned; a strong word, or maybe she would remove the Nintendo from the boy's vice grip. After 5 minutes, I just wanted her to get it over with already. After 10 minutes, I was wondering whether it would be acceptable to approach Mom about maybe having a word with her son. After 20 minutes, I was overcome with the strong compulsion to walk across the train and slap his hand myself. I was never given the opportunity, because the two of them were only on the train for another two or three minutes anyway. Mom took one of the Tiniest Compulsive's hands in hers as they walked off the platform to the stairs, and the boy chose to use his free hand for gaming, not sustenance.



Are there support groups for people like me? I want to walk into room 108 of the learning annex and say, Hi, my name is Aaron, and I'm an onychophage. I want a sponsor, 17 years clean, to call whenever I get the urge, to tell me to take it one day at a time. I researched potential places to get this sort of attention, and, not surprisingly, came up very short. There exist all-BFRB support groups, but none of them are particularly local. And besides, I feel uncomfortable about being lumped into the same category as the certifiably ill. Going to their meeting space and attempting to identify with them (and, worse, having them identify with me)

would force me to face something that I don't think I'm ready to face. That I may have a disorder, that I may be some sort of -maniac.



After a little bit of research, I was able to put a name to my constant companion: onychophagia. From the Greek -phagos, meaning “one who eats”, and the Latin onych-, meaning claw. I hated the name. It sounded barbaric. Onychophagia is one of those compulsive disorders that isn't dangerous or common enough to have earned its own classification. Instead, onychophagia is generally accepted to be a sub-disorder of a group called BFRBs, or body-focused repetitive behaviors. BFRBs as a category are correlated with body-dysmorphic disorders, or BDDs. A BDD sufferer sees something wrong with their body that they can't fix, and this self-perception threatens their ability to operate in society; sometimes, a BDD sufferer develops a BFRD as a coping/compensation/perceived-body-rectification mechanism, to take action against their perceived flaw. There are a theoretically infinite number of different kinds of BFRDs, but so far only three have names. There's the aforementioned onychophagia, trichotillomania (compulsive hair-pulling), and dermatillomania (compulsive skin-picking). I'll be the first to admit that nail biting is the tamest of these three by far.

The idea of trichotillomania is sort of hard for me to handle, so I was lucky that all of the images of victims that I perused just looked like men and women with relatively advanced cases of alopecia areata. There's nothing in the static image of a person with a large section of their hair missing that suggests that they're pulling it out themselves, or that it was pulled out at all. Trichotillomaniacs may or may not consume the hair upon removal, but most psychiatrists agree that any consumption that does take place is more of an evidence removal/embarrassment issue than of any deeper, possibly oro-sexual motivators.

Trich is similar to nail-biting in that the biggest dangers are mental—embarrassment and general obsessive-behavior-related issues (feelings of powerlessness, confusion, etc) are common, but serious physical ailments (outside of, well, hair and nail loss) are rare. This is not the case with dermatillomania. DTM is by far the meanest of the named BFRDs. This isn't just pulling at your skin lightly. A dermatillomaniac pulls the skin completely off (again, with the possibility of consumption). At best, this creates a tender spot and a red mark, and at worst a deep, bleeding wound that resembles a cold sore or a particularly heinous bout of acne. And unlike trich, the pulling here is non-localized; the pictures I saw showed people with 10-20 open wounds on their arms and legs, with dozens more either in the process of healing or of scarring indelibly over.



Nail biting is almost universally considered a nervous habit: brought on by some external stimuli, some way of comforting oneself through an emotionally rough time. This hasn't been my experience. I don't bite my nails when I'm anxious, I just bite them all the time. At least, this was the idea. I've started to think that the ubiquity of my gnawing implies not that it has nothing to do with anxiety, but that I am anxious all the time. It's not a leap to think that whatever anxiety motivates the 'phagia is below the surface; not even the act itself is entirely conscious. Sometimes, I won't even notice what I've been doing to myself until I taste blood. And, during extended periods of stress, my rate of consumption will increase without my notice. I'll look down at my nails and they'll be unrecognizable and I'll have no recollection of when or how it happened.



I do continuous visual scans at intervals of about 7-10 seconds. If a nail is getting long, I'll bite it down. If a dent or bump has formed in the surface of the nail, I'll scrape it with my front teeth until it's smooth. If there's a ragged section of

skin or cuticle, I'll snag it in between my canines and tear it out. This process repeats itself throughout the day (or week or month or lifetime) until the nail in question gets too short or brittle. That nail is left alone until it returns to relative normalcy, at which point a small imperfection will restart the process. At any given time, I'm only really working on 6 or 7 of my nails. For example, my left thumbnail took some serious damage during a recent emotional crisis and hasn't really recovered, and so has earned a respite from visual scans, biting, etc.

I understand that referring to a compulsive disorder as "my lifes work" makes me appear insane. By way of explanation: when I was young I had many chores assigned to me, and I rarely did any of them. I had to change these habits when I came to college and was all of a sudden responsible for my own laundry, room cleaning, etc. The more I forced myself to engage with various cleaning agents and brush-topped implements, the better I felt. This, I reasoned, was the rumored Pride of a Job Well Done. But stranger than this new sensation was its familiarity. It's how I felt after a long, aggressive session of nail biting. Where the two feelings diverged was in the after-effects. Folding a load of laundry is a completely positive action; bringing order where there was once chaos. But the relief I feel from biting the tip of my fingernail is unwarranted, and it has a bitter aftertaste. What have I accomplished? How have I improved myself?

The answer, of course, is that I haven't. But I haven't hurt myself, either. If nail biting could kill you, I would be dead a hundred times. I don't know even know what it's like to have fingernails. It seems almost inconvenient to me. Sure, opening soda cans and removing stickers doesn't involve nearly as much effort for others as it does for me, but I've never scraped my nails against anything unpleasant and had it reverberate through my skull. I have hangnails all the time, but they don't hurt. And the knowledge that, whether you like it or not, your finger will be in your mouth is a big motivator to develop good hand-washing habits. I'm not suggesting you start chomping an index as soon as possible, but

this line of thinking did raise in me another question: how long do you have to have a disorder before it becomes the new order? It's possible that curing my onychophagia would create the same something-is-off feeling in me as developing onychophagia would in an otherwise normal person. Which brings me to a third a final question: wouldn't it be easier to forget the whole thing and just accept myself for who I am, borderline-compulsive disorder and all?



I long ago abandoned conventional quitting methods in favor of the odd and the extreme. My latest ill-fated idea was to carry around with me a permanent marker. Whenever I succumbed to temptation and bit my nails, I made myself put a dot on my hand with the marker. The intended effect was threefold: to give me an ever-growing visual reminder to keep my hands out of my mouth; to provide a little embarrassment as a deterrent; and to play against my own compulsive nature by giving me impossible-to-resolve marks on my body. Instead, I couldn't stop biting my nails, and the dots marched up my hand onto my right arm, and then my left. I looked like I had an exotic disease, which I suppose wasn't far from the truth. The jaguar spots that eventually encroached upon the shoulder/neck borderlands were definitely a symptom of *something*. But I didn't feel sick. I felt nothing short of normal.