

O is for Zero

Did you know that before you get involuntarily committed, they ask you if you understand your rights? They—the nurse-people, the caffeinated zombies just looking for a reason to call you crazy—ask you, the supposedly incompetent person, if you are competent enough to be involuntarily committed. This feels like a paradox to me. I feel that way about almost everything now, but this is probably not the right time to discuss paradoxen. I don't know what happens if you say you don't understand your rights, because I said I did.

See me in the ER a couple hours before this question is asked? I'm staring at my Macbook, writing feverish emails to Mimi—she's my new lover and soulmate. I am also emailing ex-lovers I'd like to be cool with now. What am I saying in these emails? They are very brief, things like *"Eye iz millennial joker."* *"Triple entendre double fudge single me."* *"3, 9, 11, 27; & we r 13."* *"Do u c me yet?"*

To me, it all checks and I am calm, bathed in the fluorescent light of the waiting room.

I have my red power scarf around my neck and a perpetual cup of coffee, though I have to say this mud puddle hospital stuff is no bueno. It's gotta be some Kirkland brand signature stuff, maybe even decaf. It doesn't have that white-bitter taste that's indicative of caffeine.

I can taste all the chemicals in all the things now. I can tell Coke from Pepsi, pick out preservatives in popsicles, and identify the sharpness of high fructose corn syrup. The foodstuffs of this mad culture are fanged and I am soft, lint-soft. I bet someone could line up all the different colors of American Spirits (my flavor right now is orange, super duper light) and I would be able to discern between them. That would make a cool commercial, actually.

There's a running document on my Macbook which holds all of my ideas. So far it is five pages long, single-spaced. In between sending emails I click into the document and write "American Spirit multicolor comparison test ad," trusting I will understand what I mean by this later.

Also significant to some degree: I am a man, or rather, that is how I present in this form. Someone—the being known as my mother, Phyllis—has named this body/mind Otto. The last name is Daboni. The middle name is Cornelius. Yes, I received a due amount of shit for this in my grade school years. It doesn't help either that my initials are OCD. This body/mind is 29 Earth-years old.

There are women in my past who have said I am attractive even though I am much shorter than the guys they normally go for. I am told it is in the way I walk, as though I have few concerns, and I suppose this is accurate. The women like this. It falls short of something off-putting they call "swagger," but my way of moving is still trademark Otto. And I *do* have few concerns. I am healthy, I am of Spanish descent, I am smart. In the summer I get freckles and my biceps jut from t-shirts I've torn the sleeves off of. I still ride a skateboard and refuse to allow adulthood to take this from me. What's there to be concerned about?

Even more significant, though: I haven't slept in two days. This is because sleep is not actually a requirement for human beings. It is only Western conditioning that has compelled us to believe this. I am living proof. My eyes are fresh; I am not even tired. This is what self-actualization looks like, my friends.

So yeah, by the time I'm handed over to the mental health expert guy, I have no idea what question I'm answering. All I know is I've been up all night and someone should check me

out. Things have been getting steadily weirder for about three weeks, and Mimi has stopped texting me back. Perhaps I should take this as a sign that she is no longer interested, but I can't believe that.

She's just not where I'm at yet, but she will be.

Day 1

Shooting up from a mattress without springs. Springs could be weaponized, so they're a no-go. Also they took my shoelaces and my phone and all of my other belongings.

Is it daytime? What is a day? What is time? How cliché can I get?

I sound like I'm on mushrooms. I *feel* like I'm on mushrooms. It's been a long time since I've taken mushrooms, but I remember this, the cavern of the skull like a chain of Egyptian mirrors lit up by the sun in a pyramid. Light to light to light to light, the whole room and its contents visible and far larger than I could have ever guessed. Patterns, patterns everywhere. Neon spiderwebs, a Native American-style lizard outlined in sparkling green; it all just keeps going in and in. A black backdrop, a lacquer black deeper than any black you can fathom, an enormous fractal casually spinning and spitting out new matter—that's what this whole thing is.

And sleep; what is sleep? If defined as going unconscious, I have not been asleep for weeks. I know there have been times in the past 24 hours where I *appeared* to be sleeping but that is false. Just because the body lies still with its eyes shut does not mean one is *asleep*.

Perhaps we become temporarily manageable because we have ceased moving, but let's get real. I am not ever asleep.

On top of that, I see it all. Do you understand what I mean? *I see it all.*

One day Mimi will be pregnant with our child. We will name the baby Mariana, after the Mariana Trench. Yes, our baby, just like the ocean, will have depths that are untraversable by any commoner. Our baby will probably require a self-destructive musician with wood-brown eyes whose nerves have been fried by generational trauma in order to even come *near* our girl. Even then, Mariana Glover-Daboni will chew him up and spit him out. She won't be able to help it. Our baby will be heavy like mercury, dense like osmium. She's going to be fair-skinned and have a mess of dark Spanish hair.

In addition to the whole future-daughter thing, there are Pixies lyrics I can't let go of. I need to get my "Wave of Mutilation" tattoo: *You'll think I'm dead, but I sail away.* Yes, those lyrics.

I have so many plans, I see it all, and yet I am burning away in a psychic fire within these miserable hospital walls.

Day 3

The scene at the hospital is just as bad as you think it's going to be. Yes there have been improvements since the 40s and 50s, when the crazies were shackled to walls and given meds that made them drip slobber all over the floor. Here, no one is visibly in shackles, though I've

heard rumors that there are isolation rooms you can get sent to. I am curious about the isolation rooms, and I'm curious to see if I can end up in one of them.

It's better than it was, but the other elements are still in place. There are people shuffling down the linoleum hallway talking to themselves. There are people in chairs staring at the television, rocking back and forth, occasionally releasing donkey noises from their noses. There's the sound of a woman screaming—it is guttural and filled with true, unexaggerated horror—coming from somewhere in the annals of this wing. It also seems we're shuttered away. They tuck the crazies somewhere difficult to find. Granted that spacetime has gotten extra abnormal for me lately, we did seem to make an inordinate number of turns through the hallway on my way up here last night.

One guy's got his belly protruding from a fraying polo shirt. His lips are floppy in a way only bad drugs can do to you. He's muttering to himself or perhaps he's trying to mutter to us all. I can't tell.

Yeah, it's all ugly, but you know the worst part about this? The sickness on display here, it is not actually sickness. We're just living on other side of the looking glass, you see. And none of us want to be here; we all want to be *out*. I don't even think anyone here would stay if you told them for sure they'd die on the streets within a day.

The attitude is as such: Let us roam our tunnels until we hit the light, will you? Maybe upon release a car hits me or the guy with the floppy lips and the belly. Is that so bad?

Someone with cancer or a third-degree burn, they're not thrilled about the hospital either, but at least they're okay with sitting around. This is because they know letting the doctors call the shots will probably help. None of us are under that illusion. This is a sham. Every other

patient knows this and so do I. There is no helping us. Pretty much all of us feel like this “illness” is strictly between us and God. We’d like it if everyone else kindly got out of the way.

Day 5

Let’s talk about Mimi. She was married before I arrived on scene and broke her world apart. She’s older, with two children already. I will make an excellent stepfather to them. Yes there is guilt that arises when I think of the husband she has decided to leave for me. I hold myself half in contempt, but let’s look at the facts: Her husband, a tall and skinny man with a hook nose named Alan, is no match for Mimi Glover. She’s a redhead, for starters, and she likes sex even more than I do. And there’s also another fact which has become blindingly obvious to me. I make no excuses and I say what is true, and the fact is that *I am Shiva the destroyer of worlds*.

Shiva destroys illusion. This hurts to those who prefer their illusions, as Alan did.

Last week, after the first time we made love in my car, she unraveled a bit of her history with Alan. She suspects he poked holes in the condom nine years ago because he wanted her to mother his children. She did not want children. She got pregnant, and that was that. And really, my shame over all this is so thin in comparison to my love for Mimi. My love for her is gargantuan and sun-sized; nothing has ever been as big or as real or as true.

I think of her in here, Mimi, who won’t return my calls anymore. Sweet Mimi, with the delicate pianist fingers and the strong legs she wrapped around me while sitting on a desk in a motel room not long ago. It was a Motel 6 right off the freeway—all we could afford. I think of

me pummeling into her over and over. She with her back arched, mouth open in a long oval O. If she'd had fur it'd be standing on all its ends.

I think of me. And her. Together, perfect.

Day 4

Everything is three. Does that make sense to you? Do you not see that *everything is three?*

There's the holy trinity, of course. It feels like three days, this one day; or maybe it's that one day feels like three. Being, doing, seeing. Three manifestations of the One thing. Ice, water, steam. The Father the Son the Holy Ghost. It makes sense, all those parables, and Jesus with his silken hair traipsing through golden fields of barley, talking a bunch of nonsense people struggle to decipher even today.

Still I retain enough insight to know I can't come out and *say* I'm Christ. Inside, though, I know I am. Instead of making these kinds of sweeping proclamations—which would no doubt result in a lengthier incarceration—I opt to sit right here in the common area and do multiplication.

Not multiplication tables like a third-grader, but longform equations: 1674×33 . 27894×946 . They—the nurse-people, the weary ghouls whose minds have been whittled down to diagnostic criteria—do not let us have pens. As a one-time published poet, I find this humiliating. All I want is a nice jet-black fountain pen; I'd even settle for dark blue under these

conditions. Instead its Crayola markers. They're fat-tipped and come only in colors that children would use. This is what I have to do my equations with. Head's up: Doing math in a frenzy with a tangerine-scented marker makes you look crazier than anything you could ever say.

Something about the math is comforting. Maybe it's because math is supposed to follow the same rules all the time, but actually I know this is not true. If I try to explain it, I'll sound confused and wrong and like a lunatic, so I am not going to do that. But I will say that math *can* change if you stretch far enough into another universe with different rules. Math is *not* fixed, my friends. Nothing is fixed.

Once I read an article by some astrophysicists who were explaining what might happen if you went through a black hole. Should I start talking about the black hole yet? Maybe after this. The point of the article is that physical laws change if you go into another universe. And that's what has happened to me. I am somehow going through dimensions and universes too fast, so fast I can't stabilize in just one reality. Obviously the piece they're missing is that the body/mind does not have to physically *move* into a black hole in order to go through a black hole. Being that all of reality is generated by my (your) consciousness, it is possible that I'm going through a black hole while everyone else thinks I'm losing my shit.

Actually, it is possible that both of these things are true. It is possible that everything is true.

Speaking of "incarceration": They—the nurse-people, the dead-eyed drones all dressed in Earth tones—believe this is the wrong word, and that using it is a sign of my "decompensation." Do you realize these people have an entire lexicon built around judging people? They say it all with such conviction, such authority, when you can tell just by looking at them that they know

nothing at all. Then they have the gall to turn around and say this kind of language is *medical* and everything they are doing is *for our own good*.

This makes me so angry I bite the tip of my tongue just to taste my own blood. This kind of fury only pairs well with this taste. I suppose it would go with whisky, too, but whisky is definitely not allowed even though it would absolutely help. In order to best deal with us, what we really need is weapons-grade liquor in here. I don't know why they're messing around with the lorazepam and the olanzapine when several shots of Jameson would do the trick.

Sidebar: Being forced to take olanzapine is like wearing a badge of honor in the mental hospital. Sure, everyone gets on quetiapine or trazadone or an antidepressant, but olanzapine? That means you were really off your rocker there for a minute. You weren't just playing around and pretending like you might jump off of a freeway overpass. You were very, very far away. Bonus points if it was an emergency injection.

My point was that this word—"incarceration"—is *exactly* right for my actual situation. I am an American with rights who is being denied these rights. I am being confined to an absurdly small space; I have no freedom of locomotion. They will not let me use the internet; I have no freedom of information. They will not let me go outside to worship, which is where I would worship because truly I am closest to God amongst the weeping willows and lilies; I have no freedom of religion.

Even if they say I was a grave danger to myself (I wasn't!), the fact is that I am trapped in here and the practical result of all this is that I am incarcerated. I am a prisoner. In fact, the only difference between me and a prisoner is that *I* haven't actually done anything illegal, and still I am severely restricted. They made this choice to lock me up based on assumption alone. And

okay, I'm not going to say it verbatim, but you know what they say about what happens when we *assume*.

I say "incarceration" because what else am I supposed to do? Fake like I'm grateful for their rescue? Act like I believe in this? I'm looking around at a group of individuals whose genius is being aborted by psychopharmaceuticals; I'm seeing healers emerging from cocoons and getting being beaten right back in.

So as far as feigning to be okay with this scene, no way. I'm not about to do that yet. Probably in some amount of time—if they do not understand that this is all a huge mistake—I'll sit down in front of the dumb psychiatrist and say "gee, thanks doc, for making me see my disorder clearly. I *truly understand that I am ill*." I will put on a flat, shit-eating grin. I will ignore the fact that my heart is ready to break through my ribcage and punch him right in his round potato face. It's not time, but if it comes down to it, I guess I can lie like that, but only in the name of freedom.

Day 2

They will not let me smoke. Their reasoning has something to do with not letting all of us loose canons outside. First of all, being crazy generally means you're a nuisance to the general public. I know that, but the general public? They're all screwed, and they need to fix that like yesterday or this whole ship is going down right quick.

In any case, they can't have us outside yelling our conspiracy theories. They can't have us trying to convince people on the street that we're starting a company for quantum computing

(but faster!), or that we are secretly the greatest artist alive (rest assured, we are), or that the staff has been drugging us against our will to control our minds (but really). And they can't run the risk of us tearing off into the city.

So instead of me getting my Spirit oranges out of my bag and lighting up underneath a pine tree, as is my wont, they keep offering me nicotine lozenges. Like, what the hell. A lozenge in place of a cigarette? I cannot even comprehend how they decided two of these things are equitable, why they've figured that you can just swap out one for the other.

There I am talking to some nurse. She's actually quite nice and I do not find her condescending, not like the others who think that because I'm a mental patient, I must be stupid. Her name is something like Hannah or Sheila or Sarah. Whatever it is, it ends in "-uh." She's got high hair, like she used some hairspray from a different era on it. It is short and poofy and high, and honestly even though she's sweet, she's kind of coming across like an alien. She's one of those bird-type aliens. I can't explain that statement any further; you either get it or you don't.

"Otto," she says, "you cannot have a cigarette. We've been over this."

I refuse to accept this rule applies to me, because this ordeal is one big error on the part of one psychologically shallow (and physically balding) designated mental health professional. His name is Tom and I fully intend to write a formal complaint about him in the future.

"Come over to the window here and I'll give you a nicotine lozenge?" Says the nurse.

Right. That's where our pills come from: One of those doors that's cut in half so they can open the top and give us meds while continuing to reinforce the separation between the sick folk and the normal folk. The nurse takes her bird-body over in the direction of the half-door but I do not follow.

“It’s not about the nicotine,” I say.

I am trying to be very calm about this, but it just seems so self-evident how one is *not* a substitute for the other. I don’t have an addiction to nicotine. I have a smoke ritual wherein I commune with the Great Spirit.

“Oh no?”

She is clearly frustrated with me, not even trying to hide it. I respect that. All this time, I’ve been able to see through the compassion-masks the staff wear. They know compassion is a virtue but they know nothing of true compassion. If they did they would not be here because within this paradigm they are not allowed to exercise true compassion. They also know judgment is a bad thing and so they have to make it empirically valid to judge us, because academic papers and theories say it’s okay. The high-haired nurse crosses her arms over her front.

“What’s it about then, Otto?”

I like her anger because it is real.

“The smoke!”

I’m clutching my forehead, and the nurse has her eyebrows raised. She clucks her tongue and finds a clipboard, flips it to my name. Did you also know they record our exact movements every fifteen minutes? She jots something down on this clipboard, pausing to glance up at me now and again. That’s the other problem. All of this goes down according to *their* side of the story, and no one ever believes us. I can only guess that she’s written “pt states ‘it’s not the nicotine, it’s the smoke!’” and this will be used as some kind of ammunition to confirm my insanity in coming days.

For the love of God, *it really is about the smoke.*

“Sorry,” says the nurse.

She takes her clipboard and blinks her avian eyes and walks away like a robot. Somehow, some way, I am going to figure out how to get a cigarette. I don’t care what happens. The worst thing has already happened to me—removal of all civil liberties and also, I’m starting to think I might already be dead anyway—so it surely won’t hurt if I break a few rules for a cigarette.

Laura. The semi-okay nurse’s name is Laura.

Day 3

“What you think you know about reality, man?”

Another patient, Jorge, he’s saying this. He’s standing in front of me with his face cut up from shaving, shaking his head. Inside the plastic box that protects the staff from us, one of the nurse-people (this one a man) has a walkie-talkie. The nurse-man mumbles something as Jorge gets closer and closer to me.

I’ve got a pamphlet in front of me that says “Hell: Destiny of the Doomed” on it. It goes on: “There are only two eternal destinies—the blessed abode of the saved and the flaming abyss into which the lost will be hurled.” Where did I get this pamphlet? I think it came from a Days Inn in Clovis, New Mexico. Once I rode with a friend’s band from Austin to Albuquerque. We stopped there for a short snooze and I’ve been holding onto this ever since. Its edges are tattered.

I don't know how it got into my hand. I don't know how any of this unfolded. I don't know anything at all.

What I do know is that Jorge is going to Hell for sure. The blessed abode of the saved is not for people like Jorge.

A team of security guards swarms in. They are swooping Jorge up from the ground. I see the eyes like bottomless pools burrowing into his cheeks. They are two clay marbles getting blasted in the kiln of his mind. He is shaking. He is working something off, something deep, and I am pulling my knees to my chest just watching. I comfort myself with the thought of Mimi's pale pink nipples. Tomorrow she will answer my phone calls. For now I tighten my fist around the pamphlet. I put together a statement of lies in order to get out of here as soon as possible.

The blessed abode of the saved is not for Jorge.

The blessed abode of the saved is.

The blessed abode, the blessed abode.

There's something I like about the blessed abode.