

Abbey Anders

## Abbey Anders

### I. In Which Abbey Wishes She Were Sicker

Abbey Anders was wishing she were insane. No offense to true-blue sufferers, but at the moment it seemed an easier row to hoe. The insane had bursts of euphoria, yes? Fantastic blips of bliss, wild sensorial hallucinations, misfiring neurons that brought visions and radical insights, epiphanies and infusions of grandeur. What could be better for enervated self-esteem than a first-class infusion of grandeur? Insanity: the lows were low, sure, the valleys dark and deep, but the mountains must be high and lovely, and with one wave of mania she might find herself delivered atop some summit somewhere, glimpsing a wider horizon. Delusion, schmelusion. Anything different had at least something to recommend it.

Rationally, Abbey knew that mental illness had many genres — phobic paranoidal, pathologic schizophrenical, psychological dysthymical, dissociative bipolarity, disorders general and specific — and all were hell unlimited. Only rationality and Abbey Anders were not much on speaking terms these days.

Her hell was close, confined, hell as a studio apartment, an efficiency, hell as a sleeper berth — a roomy hell was hard to imagine. There were no peaks for Abbey, no vistas, the impacted space of her brain strictly horizon-less. And instead of seeing that which was not there, she saw all too well what was. Dismal and humdrum it was, this anemic world, banal and quotidian. Hell for her consisted of futile attempts at distraction, frenetic activity, anxiety rampant. Stomach cramps, jittery fatigue. Creating chores for herself to make another quarter hour, ten minutes, five minutes, one, serviceable for living. Never had so little laundry been in

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the hamper, never had the bathroom tiles shined so. But there was never any satiation or relief; no sooner had one task been discharged than next up in the queue came despair, refusing to be put off any longer. And now she felt herself stumbling, faltering, motivation fleeing along with her powers of concentration, and yet the relentless tension continued to tighten. She was tumbling down the rabbit hole. Insanity, here I come.

## II. In Which Abbey Was Buried Alive

Her problem was Finter, or really, her problem was that she was not Finter's problem, not anymore, if she ever really had been. She believed she had been once, for a not insignificant length of time, though that seemed a long time ago now. How long? Well, the seismic shift had occurred little more than a month previous when Finter mentioned — off-hand, oh so casual — that he was seeing someone. Someone else. “Abbey, hey. Don't look like that. I'm sorry. Hey, c'mon. I'm so sorry, Abbey. I had no idea you would react this way.”

Abbey hadn't either. It was like looking up and seeing an avalanche suddenly charging downhill towards you and realizing you are armed with nothing but a parasol. She felt ludicrously unprepared.

And, she felt stupid. It was part of their arrangement, you see. Always had been. For two years, two months, one week and a day now. An open relationship. No obligations. Abbey had never once availed herself of this freedom. Neither had he, she didn't think. Not until now. Yet recently there had been signs, obvious and tell-tale in retrospect. Finter had seemed lackluster,

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kind of disengaged; he called a bit less, texted a bit less, responded to her own calls and texts with something less than Finterish fervor. Showed no particular urgency about seeing her.

All this she'd been fine with at the time. Had not even thought to suspect anything. She hadn't wanted more. Not then. Not necessarily. Not before the avalanche.

### III. In Which Abbey Considers Slaughtering Her Co-Worker

"Abbey, you are *so* Type A." Lizbet said this in the Humanities Department's teachers' lounge, as Abbey observed her colleague sloshing coffee over her cup. And then dab up half of it. And then leave the soggy piece of paper towel just laying there. And Lizbet then bringing the dripping cup over to where Abbey sat, setting it down and stamping a brown ring on the yellow formica. How Abbey yearned for the days when this would have incensed her, those carefree days when this kind of thing would have mattered.

"Type A, right-brained, OCD, anal retentive," said Abbey, deftly dipping a bag of black currant in the steaming water of her own cup, "these terms are just too trendy to even apply to anyone anymore. Just a verbal shorthand of cliché. You show the least bit of conscientiousness or a taste for organization, and you get tagged with the Type A thing. I mean, is it a diagnosis? Look at my car sometime if you think I'm Type A. The back seat. Type B, B minus, at best."

"Well I've seen your syllabus and your lesson plans. Definitely Type A. Every day of the semester planned out to the minute."

No one's ever seen yours, thought Abbey. "I enjoy making those. I don't expect them to come off exactly so — I'm not naive. I just like doing them."

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“Exactly,” said Lizbet, looking at her with a little smirk and smacking after she sipped her coffee, very self-satisfied. First, thought Abbey, I’ll throw the hot water in her smug face. Then brain her with my chair, smash the coffee pot over her head. Next I’ll grab duct tape and an extension cord from Mr. Edney’s office, stash her in the supply closet till nightfall. I’ll come back and get down to work with the bunsen burners and harsh astringents. I’m so Type A, they’ll never find a speck of DNA.

Then, unaccountably, Abbey heard herself saying, “I think my boyfriend broke up with me.”

This startled Lizbet, who spilled some more coffee. On the table. And some more, on her sleeve. “Oh Abbey. I’m sorry, girl.” A pause. “What do you mean, you ‘think’?”

“Well, he hasn’t yet. Not fully. But he’s seeing someone else.”

“He is? You caught him?”

“No. He told me.”

“He told you? Well shit, you should be breaking up with him.”

“I can’t. You see, we have an arrangement. We aren’t exclusive. We have...have an open relationship.” Something was melting in her sinus cavities.

“An open relationship. For how long?”

“The whole time we’ve been...been together.” Her bottom lip, quivering.

“How long is that?”

“Two years...two years and two months and....” She gave way.

“Oh Abbey. Come here girl.”

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#### IV. In Which Abbey Phones Her Sister Nine Nights In A Row

Lilla lived in the Pacific Time Zone and Abbey in Central. In the wee hours, the post-midnight hours, Abbey still stood a good chance of catching her sister awake and coaxing her to talk, as she had nine nights running.

It was mostly a monologue by Abbey framed as a dialogue. Awful pressure would build up over the course of each dreadful day, and the phone calls were to vent these poisons, in the nick of time Abbey felt, before her soul cracked like an overheated reactor. Lilla on the other side of the country was a sympathetic audience; also Abbey relied on her to vet the situation, her sister as doctor who was to listen to the symptoms of the situation and make a nightly prognosis of reassurance and solace.

Abbey was very thorough. She took Finter quotes and relayed them to her sister. Finter said this, Finter said that. Many of these were appended with questions of Abbey's own devising: what do you think he meant by that? Do you think he's telling me everything? He's always been honest before, don't you think? Maybe he's just using this girl for sex. Nothing wrong with that, I guess. Using is the wrong term — I don't mean that pejoratively. I'm not judging. He called me today, out of the blue. It was a nice talk. Fluid, you know. Our old rhythm. Has to still be somewhat interested, don't you think? And he almost always responds to my calls. Always calls me back eventually. Does it sound like he's stepping back to you? Please be honest. I mean, we have an open relationship, yes, but it's still a relationship. Even with this other girl in the picture. We still see each other, almost as much as we used to. Monday nights, and Thursday nights. Weekends are still in the mix. God, don't I sound stupid to go on and on

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like this. Pathetic. I'm sorry, sorry to keep bothering you like this. You have got to be bored by now. It's just, it's just that....

Mostly though she didn't really hear what Lilla said, not until well after the conversation was over and they had finished for the night and Abbey was left alone in silence once more. Lilla gave a few opinions, offered up some advice. But Abbey found all of it maddeningly vague, non-committal. There were rare moments when her sister said something concrete — "I am sure he still loves you. That doesn't go away overnight." — and Abbey clung to such comments like the pronouncements of an oracle. Of course he does. I'm being foolish. Then though she would continue to parse Lilla's words, and if there had been anything which sounded ambiguous on the chances for a happy resolution, i.e., tramp deposed, formerly devoted couple reunited, Abbey would be seized by the urge to reach across the country once more and make her sister elaborate, give specific and ranked reasons for saying such and such. If instead it sounded positive — "I am sure he still loves you..." — it was still never enough to keep Abbey upright for long; she sank under the platitudes and consolation, what she was sure were only condolences meekly offered under the auspices of encouragement. She is trying to shield me, Abbey thought. Doesn't have the heart to give it to me straight, when it's so obvious, so laughably obvious. Abbey did virtually the same thing after any of her talks with Finter. In both cases she heard more what was not said — and what was not said was a great deal, it spoke volumes.

There was a maw of silence all around her in the night, and into this cave came calling some animal, an ugly thing with teeth, always hungry and ready to feed, devouring any hope she tried to hold to. Abbey contemplates, Abbey debates, Abbey broods, Abbey thinks and thinks and thinks while the animal adjacent chews on the hours, masticates the minutes, swallows seconds one at a time.

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## V. In Which Abbey Gets Details

Nicolette. “Niki.”

“Niki.” A brand identity developer at the same software company where Finter worked. Abbey had know idea what a brand identity developer did. She looked it up on Wikipedia and learned basically no more. Sounded specious, sounded specialized. A technocratic argot of streamlined nonsense, cool, confident and current. The two of them probably spoke an idiosyncratic language Abbey wouldn’t even grasp, a nomenclature of cutesy, coded shorthand, unbearably hip, infuriatingly relevant.

“Thank you for telling me, Finter. I presume it is getting more serious, then.” How the words and her own tone rang bloodless in her ears, repressively poised and shrewishly clinical, dry as wafer and unattractive in the extreme. Anemia of the heart.

So they saw each other every weekday, Finter and “Niki”, co-workers turned couple. Surely there were all sorts of snags and pitfalls inherent in that, opportunities for overexposure, professional complications, a situation that could very soon burn itself out for any number of reasons. I just have to be patient. I just have to be patient. I just have to be patient. I just have to be patient. I just have to be patient.

## VI. In Which Abbey Shocks, Mortifies Herself

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Finter lived 4.6 miles from Abbey's house. South on McCleod, right onto Burnham, stay on Burnham until the right onto Lancaster. A full mile on Lancaster, then a left onto Norfolk. Fifth house on the left, the cottage-style one with the hedgerow, taupe siding, white trim, front porch with lattice work knee-high around the columns and a fern hanging on each side of the steps.

Tuesday nights, Wednesday nights, and maybe/probably the weekends. She had pinned down with fair certainty that these were the times he saw her socially. These were the nights Abbey drove by; not directly in front of the house — what if they'd been on the front porch? — but around it, circling the block like a buzzard or a surveillance drone, scavenging clues. Abbey and Finter still saw each other, but their times together had not been going well. Suddenly estranged, an abstract but untraversable distance, lots of second guessing, restive smiles, forced casual conversation, passive-aggressive questions, stilted groping, and every now and then a curt, ugly exchange. Still somehow the real matter was never dealt with, and they were unmoored from each other, the bows of two vessels adrift in the current bumping clumsily, then drifting further away, one from the other.

Tonight was a Tuesday. No cars were in Finter's drive. Fine, a date. Restaurant, movie, knowing Finter a documentary. Stings, but ok. Abbey drove by again around 10:30. And there was only Finter's orange Prius, no other car. Couldn't have gone that well.

There were unsettling possibilities. Abbey had not witnessed the return, so couldn't swear this Niki/Nicolette was not in there with him. Perhaps she was; perhaps he'd take her back to her place in the morning before work. Or maybe they were shameless enough to just saunter into the workplace bathed in last night's indiscretions, the cheeky pair. Nonetheless, she doubted it. Instinct told her Finter was in his house, and his bed, alone. This was altogether the best outcome her reconnoitering could have brought back.



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For that night, sweet relief. She felt liberated, momentarily reprieved from having to think about faithless Finter and the detestable Nicolette. It was the next best thing to being with him — for tonight at least, on par with it. Tension uncoiled. Her appetite had been sketchy at best since the whole ordeal began; she cooked up a late dinner of spinach and ricotta pierogies and scarfed it down. Not much of a drinker, she slurped down two glasses of slightly corked Chianti to celebrate. It was a glorious few hours. Into the next morning, even with the ruby of a headache lodged behind her left eye and her mouth feeling freshly upholstered in naugahyde, the carefree feeling persisted, only beginning to wane around lunchtime, when it occurred to her that she should have been bold, knocked on his door, dumped out the contents of her full and cluttered heart before him and begged to be loved anyway.

Best-case collapsed the following night when a sable-black Accord was parked in front of the house at 7:42. And at 8:38. And 9:14. And at 9:54 and 10:17. At which time the house was dark except for the porch light and a weak lamp burning behind the white curtains in one room. Finter's bedroom. At 10:51 the lamp was still burning. It was off at 11:29. The Accord was still there. As it was at 11:37, and at 12:05, 12:22, 1:36, 2:02....

## VII. In Which Abbey Goes Rogue

Now at the midpoint of the semester, Abbey did something unheard of for her. Radical. She revised her syllabus. The official title for the course was *Modes of Authority and Power in the Later Works of Shakespeare*. Covertly, Abbey was introducing a new theme for study: Jealousy. Really, much the same thing.

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The play currently under study was *Othello*, which fit perfectly well and in any case could not be changed now. What she did however was slow forward momentum on the reading, scale back and slow it to a crawl. She wanted the class linger on the ruthless machinations of Iago and the disintegration of the Moor. She had the feeble but holdout hope that rather than regurgitating remedial paraphrases of the passages, the class discussion would break new ground and Abbey would hear something she needed to hear. One of her student's may break the norm and offer up something vital, profound, some unwitting epiphany to break her out of her situation. At the very least, for ninety minutes every day, Abbey could mandate that discussion around would center on what she wanted it to center on — jealousy and agony, the conspiracy of doubt, sexual madness, the gradual seep of insanity — the only subjects to which she had any time or any concentration these days to devote.

Next — this was the radical part — she dropped *The Tempest* altogether, substituting *The Winter's Tale*, particular attention to be paid to King Leontes's descent into the madness of the sexual maelstrom (though Abbey did really hope that the moment at the end of Act II, the random bear attack on the coast (!) of Bohemia (!!), would still make her laugh out loud, as it had never failed to before).

Most of the students had already purchased, or downloaded, copies of *The Tempest*; Abbey went out of pocket to supply everyone with cheap paperback copies of the new play. This itself was a minor calamity, or comedy of errors, as she was not able on such short notice to locate eighteen of the same edition. So some got Signet Classics, some Folger's Library. The page numbers differed between them. She assigned the readings accordingly.

She kept to the shadows with her change of plan, did not inform the department chair.

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This itself was so unlike her that it exacerbated her already high agitation, and she was in Abby Anders.docx a cold sheen of fear whenever one of the other professors walked by her classroom.

She was studying what she needed to study, desperate for some sort of insight or revelation that could save her. For Abbey had drunk, and seen the spider. Always she'd heard that we go to literature not for answers but for the appropriate questions. Well, she had been a voracious reader since age five, a devotee of serious literature since adolescence, and had been teaching the great works, particularly those of Shakespeare, for almost a dozen years. At this point, Abbey felt, she had earned at least one fucking answer.

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Stakeout. 12:57 in the a.m. 917 Norfolk Avenue. Sable-black Accord in driveway, along with desert orange Prius. No activity.

The porch light on; it never went out. The lamp as yet weakly glowed in the bedroom window. Once and only once tonight had she witnessed them, at around 10:30, two languid silhouettes moving behind the white scrim of curtains. Toward the bedroom. Since then, nothing, no forms in the lamplight, which she knew was on his nightstand. No stray flickers, no passage, nobody leaving. Ensconced beneath her sightline, tucked away together. Maybe at least turn off the lamp now, Abbey thought. Must you see every part of each other forever? Dawn will be here before you know it.

By this point in her activities she was a veteran and had come prepared. The furious downturn in the quality of her life had been going on for weeks now, and that was too long to still be abstaining from food. She had already dropped eighteen pounds. Yeah, yeah, I look great,

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she wanted to respond to those who complimented her on the recent weight loss. Just think, I keep up this pace and I'll be dead in no time. However, diminished appetite — read: starvation via anxiety — had eventually surrendered itself. On the passenger seat beside her was half a meatball sub with provolone in wad of wax paper, an open bag of kale chips, a Granny Smith with several bites gone, and an eclair from the bakery at the end of her block. She drank lemon grass tea from a thermos

Also on the seat, a pair of binoculars. But she suspected there would be nothing more to see tonight unless it was one of their hands broaching the frame to switch off the lamp. Maybe there were still engaged in a prolonged congress of sexual acrobatics and lascivious doings, well-shielded by the angle of the window; or else, more likely, they had already fallen asleep (knitted together). Finter was an early to bed, early to rise type. Abbey once had been also.

She had no real purpose in mind with continuing this vigil — read: voyeurism, read: stalking — outside of one. She wanted to see him. Not in the light of investigation, not as a subject for monitoring, but just as Finter. Finter as Finter. Finter with his lanky leanness, his long limbs and long neck, Finter with his chin beard and the tufty hair perpetually in need of shaving along the back of his neck. Finter in his drainpipe jeans, his chinos, the top button of his shirts always buttoned. His ambling gait that was the walker's equivalent of whistling a show tune. She missed him. That simple truth had only recently presented itself, oddly enough, a frail little beacon in all the darkness. Finter's long, slender nose that ended in a tiny nub; when they were first together, the nose presented a logistical problem in kissing, as she tended to come in straight ahead, and was forced to alter that approach to accommodate the elongated Finter schnoz. Awkward the first few times, titling her head to one side to reach his mouth. But how

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quickly it became natural, the right and appropriate angle. How she missed it, missed planting the fine tip of her nose on the bobbed tip of his. Will I ever do that again?

And too the way he draped one of his long legs over her torso in his sleep, like a sloth scaling a tree. And the way he had of popping his knuckles when sitting down to start work on his laptop. How animated his face got when he was reading a book, a panoply of expressions: widened eyes, narrowed eyes, puckered mouth, nibbling on his bottom lip, a grave set to his jaw if the subject matter were anything troubling or tragic (Finter read a a great deal of anthropology, world studies, geo-political tomes about tribal displacement, ethnic cleansing, deforestation, malaria). She missed it. His passion for raisin toast; she missed it, the sweet heightened smell of powdered sugar and cinnamon and toasted raisins that would forever be Finter's smell to her, as official as if he had his own line of cologne.

I might never be around him again, swaddled with him, making breakfast, browsing around the stands at the flea market.

In the front seat of the car tucked away at the end of the block, Abbey Anders was in tears. Crying unfettered, a gurgling spring. Yes, it was heartbreaking, but contrary to the poisonous, unmitigated agony of the last several weeks, it was not a terrible, wasn't abject, didn't feel toxic. No, it was emboldening almost, enlivening in its poignancies, fortifying for all its sadness. It felt like life, yes? The pangs and throb and ache of it all, the beauty in it — this had to be what life felt like at its most authentic, when lived to its breadth, not dodged or anesthetized or mediated, but with arms wide-open to the whole shebang, to all the junk and jagged edges and sharp points and blunt bludgeonings.

She chomped on another bite of apple, bit off a big hunk of the meatball sub. She felt absolutely famished. Time for nourishment, to gorge herself. Eat, drink, be heartbroken.

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There was a thought she wanted to bring up in the next class. Shakespeare being a playwright, a reading of his texts uncovered a simple but subliminal poetic device, assimilable only by dramatists. Stage directions. The entrances and exits, the comings and goings. No matter the edition, these were always uniform, always relayed in brackets and always in present-tense, little clips of navigation, perfect present-tense nuggets lodged between the soliloquies and blank verse reveries, rhapsodies of impossible eloquence, the immortal lines, the stage directions pushing the action along, birthing characters onto the stage, killing them off, provoking event, making something happen. Enter ghosts, exit people.

She started the engine. Buckled her seatbelt. Backed out of her spot down the block, shifting into drive. Exit Abbey down Norfolk, taking the right on Lancaster, pursued by peace.

