

**DAYDREAMED: A CREATIVE REPRESENTATION OF MALADAPTIVE
DAYDREAMING**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

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May 2020

Major: English

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ABSTRACT

daydreaMeD: A Creative Representation of Maladaptive Daydreaming

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Each day, we might find our attention drifting to somewhere else: the things we need to do, the things we shouldn't have done, or a fantasy that popped into our heads. For most people, mind wandering happens in fleeting moments of boredom or lack of focus; however, for some individuals—including myself—daydreaming can be both time consuming and addictive to the point of becoming maladaptive. Maladaptive daydreaming is “defined as an extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002). Those with MD daydream for hours on end, replaying the same storyline or characters in their head and becoming consciously and completely immersed in their daydreams. These individuals will physically interact with their daydreams, through activities such as speaking or pacing. Relatively little research has been conducted on MD, and it is not yet classified as a psychiatric disorder; however, there is a large online population of self-proclaimed “maladaptive daydreamers.” There are forums, websites, and YouTube videos all dedicated to discussing the experiences of MD. For some, daydreaming is an outlet; for others, it is ruining their life.

Through my research, I seek to mix psychology and creativity in order to answer the questions: What is maladaptive daydreaming? What does it look like? How can this be portrayed through fictional characters? Although daydreaming has been seen numerous times in literature and film, never has it been labeled as maladaptive nor addressed as MD. My novel entitled “daydreaMeD” follows the lives of three teenagers who experience maladaptive daydreaming: Ally, Jeanie, and Edgar. The three meet on an online MD forum, where they chat about their lives, ambitions, and daydreams. Each of them experiences MD in a different way, which I based on my survey of numerous MD qualitative studies and narrations. I hope to show readers what MD looks like daily and how this condition can alter one’s life. By presenting a creative work of this understudied condition, I hope to shed light on the subject and create a further sense of validation in those who experience the same thing but have not found the words to tell their story quite yet.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to Mom, Dad, and
to all those with a world inside their mind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my faculty advisor, Dr. Jason Harris, for not only being my mentor during this entire process but for giving my story a chance and for helping me find my voice.

I would like to thank my entire Aggie Creative Collective group (Amy Guzman, John Heselton, Rae Seguin, Grace Hough, Hannah McNease, Kyrie Garlic, and Zoe Sherman) for giving me a safe place to share my writing, for inspiring me to create, and for making me feel like a genuine writer for the first time in my life.

I would like to thank Bea for helping me off the ground and for all the continual encouragement she has given me throughout this process.

I would like to thank Camp Raborn and Camp Head for teaching me, loving me, and supporting me whether they realized it or not.

Thank you to the University Writing Center, especially Flo Davies, Rebecca Goodson, and Shelby Mathews for helping me along this journey. Also, thank you to all my UWC co-workers who have listened to and supported me unconditionally.

I would like to thank all the teachers that got me to this point, especially Shea Buchanan for helping me find my love for writing and showing me it was something I could pursue.

Thank you to my family and friends for loving me and supporting me in everything that I do and for being the reason all this is possible.

Lastly, I would like to thank God. For the words, and the courage to share them.

KEY WORDS

MD Maladaptive Daydreaming

MDS Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

My research began long before I knew it had a name. When I was little, I had recurring daydreams with complex plotlines. These fantasies were extremely immersive. I would flap my arms wildly as I daydreamed. My parents thought my “flapping” was just excitement, while kids at school would wonder, “Why is she doing that with her arms?” With a sense of shame, I daydreamed in private, often sitting on my bed, listening to music (which triggered the daydreams), and taking myself into other worlds: a superhero, a celebrity, or a member of a close group of fictional friends. I took elements of my real world and lived them out in my head for hours at a time. One day, wondering if there really was something wrong with me, I decided to Google my habits. What I found surprised me. There was a word that closely aligned with what I was experiencing: maladaptive daydreaming (MD). Several online MD communities popped up, filled with individuals who daydreamed in almost the exact way I did. Nonetheless, I never discussed my findings because no one knew what it was, and a sense of shame still lingered within me. Eventually, I realized there exists a need for literature that describes the experience of MD and what it looks like in everyday life, thus leading me to the question of my research.

The following research seeks to answer the questions, “What is maladaptive daydreaming?”, “What does this condition look like?”, and “How can this condition be brought to light and described in a creative format using fictional characters?” I used a survey of different psychological studies on the matter—spear-headed by Dr. Eli Somer—in order to give an explanation and clear understanding of the generalized experience of MD. I chose a psychological lense for my research, rather than taking a literary focus, in order to gather the best

in-depth understanding of the condition. I felt presenting psychological research would help the reader and myself better understand the characters. Additionally, I chose this approach because, while studies have been done to understand and portray the narrations of MD, there is very little to no creative literary acknowledgment of MD. Daydreaming has been portrayed many different times throughout film and literature, but not as a psychological condition. Daydreaming is most often used as a device, and a character never refers to it as “maladaptive” in the sense that is described in the research. This lack of portrayal is one reason for the lack of knowledge and awareness of this condition.

The motivation for my project is to give a voice to the members of the maladaptive daydreaming community. By presenting research that describes the MD experience and portraying characters that live it, I hope others might find validation in the fictional depiction of others, as has been seen in internet forums. In every online MD community, including websites such as “<https://wildminds.ning.com>” and “<https://daydreaminblue.freeforums.net>”, there are hundreds of users commenting in relief at having found a way to understand their experiences. Numerous videos have been created with comments sections filled with relief: “I experience this!” or “I feel understood.” These sites are filled with posts describing daydream plots or triggers. The existence of communities adds to the need for a creative work that dignifies experience.

As a kid and an adult, I felt weird for daydreaming so often and in the way that I do. It is my hope that through this research and my creative work, I can provide a better understanding of what MD is and what it looks like. Being given a lense could potentially help others to understand their habits and experiences, just as my Google search taught me so many years ago. My narration presents an outlook on the daily life of an individual experiencing MD, which also

helps a general audience understand what MD looks like. This creative approach is what makes my project unique. While psychological studies have been published that present narratives of MD and the many experiences of individuals, there is not creative work that is able to bring this information to a larger audience, apart from online postings and communities. It is my hope that the creative work will provide a narration of characters that showcase what daily life is like with MD, what its characteristics are, and how it impacts the lives of those who experience it. I also hope to provide information that will continue the effort to get maladaptive daydreaming classified as an official psychiatric disorder, and I hope the information will be found intriguing by all audiences so that the experiences of so many can be validated in the eyes of the public.

My creative artifact is a novel entitled, “daydreaMeD.” It follows the lives of three teenagers who experience MD: Ally, Jeanie, and Edgar. Each one of them has and continues to face hardship. Each also spends hours and hours of their days daydreaming. Ally uses characters from fictional pieces to play out violent, elaborate fantasies. Jeanie daydreams of celebrities, romance, and upcoming social interactions. Edgar daydreams of a life of power and ease at his own company, where he has full-on imagined relations with fictional people. These three characters became connected through an online MD community, like those in real life, and often chat about their experiences with MD. The novel follows them as they conquer external and internal struggles both related and not related to MD. Through their lives, I seek to give readers a vivid and everyday look into the lives of individuals who experience MD. I also seek to synthesize research done on this condition in order to present it in a creative way that still accurately describes what psychological studies have proven. I also seek to open a new doorway to more creative work about this subject and potentially inspire more people to be open about discussing their experiences. My primary goal is to inform, but the greatest goal is to continue to

build a community and validate maladaptive daydreaming experiences so that no one must daydream in shame—just as I did.

SECTION II

HISTORY/INTERSECTIONS

History

The term “maladaptive daydreaming” was first defined in 2002 by Dr. Eli Somer as “an extensive fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and/or interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning” (Somer, 2002). Before introducing the history of MD literature, it is important to note what makes MD different from other daydreaming activities, since “daydreaming in and of itself is not maladaptive” (Somer, Somer, and Jopp, 2016, p. 22). MD differs from typical mind wandering because it “focuses on intentionally-generated fantasy narratives, whereas mind wandering is broader and includes fleeting thoughts and imagery” (Marcusson-Clavertz et al., 2019, p. 2). MD daydreams are complex, immersive, and can last hours at a time, with individuals interacting with their fantasies through kinesthetic motion. Series of qualitative studies and a Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS) have all been used to identify and understand MD.

Dr. Somer’s work, “Maladaptive Daydreaming: a Qualitative Inquiry,” was the first to describe and consolidate narratives of the MD experience. Although studies had been previously done on the purpose of daydreaming, dissociation, and “fantasy-prone” individuals, Somer noted daydreams had not yet been “recognized as significant subjects of psychoanalytic inquiry, or psychotherapy research,” nor was there “normative information on what constitutes pathologically elaborate or abnormally extensive daydreaming” (Somer, 2002). In this seminal study, Somer noted that MD was not yet fully defined, and a qualitative approach was needed to

understand the “themes, dynamics, and meanings of the maladaptive daydreaming” (Somer, 2002).

The test group consisted of 6 individuals who had been preselected for showing signs of engaging in maladaptive daydreaming. The instruments of the study were “two structured diagnostic interviews, two quantifiable questionnaires, and an open-ended interview” (Somer, 2002, p. 200). Following the experiment, Somer broke the MD experience down into three meta topics including functions, themes, and dynamics (Somer, 2002, p. 200).

Functions of MD were found to consist of two elements: disengagement from stress and pain by mood enhancement and wish-fulfillment fantasies; and companionship, intimacy, and soothing. Subjects described using their daydreams to escape adverse life situations (both present and previous) as well as to find a sense of comfort or longing they might be missing in their real lives. For example, one participant described his ongoing fantasies of having a romantic companion constantly with him, which he mentioned happened after a rejection in his real-life (Somer, 2002, pp. 204-205).

There were five main themes found in the participants’ daydreams: violence, idealized self, power and control, and captivity, rescue, and escape. For violence, some participants described their daydreams as including “aggression” and “bloodshed.” One woman said she “used to imagine America and the West at war against the Communist Block” (Somer, 2002, p. 205). Idealized self daydreams were described by participants as “picturing themselves as the persons they would have liked to be,” such as becoming a womanizer, gaining the ability to levitate, or taking on the role of the main character in a movie” (Somer, 2002, pp. 205-206). Power and control daydreams involved participants’ desire for “authority and domination,” including becoming a political mediator, being a leader of helpless followers, or tying opponents

up (Somer, 2002, pp. 205-206). Similarly, themes of captivity, rescue, and escape were common among daydream plots. Participants described feeling entrapped in their own toxic environments and using daydream sequences as a means of relief. For example, kidnapping a terrorist leader or being the prisoner in charge of negotiating with the captors (Somer, 2002, p. 206). Lastly, themes of sexual arousal included fantasies of flirting or making love (Somer, 2002, p. 207).

There were two dynamics found in the participants' daydreaming experiences: onset (adverse circumstances) and kinesthetic elements. Many of the participants were found to have had adverse childhood circumstances which they linked to being the cause of their MD. Though, it is important to note that later studies concurred that such circumstances were not required for the development of MD (Somer et al., 2019). Almost all subjects described movement or kinesthetic involvement as a part of their daydreams. This included acting out daydreams through speaking out dialogue, pacing, or tossing an object in their hands (Somer, 2002, p. 208).

Somer's study opened the door for further research, which his research concluded was needed. One of the next, and most notable, MD studies was performed in 2011 by Bigelson and Shupak on a set of "90 self-identified non-normative fantasizers" (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011). The purpose of the study was to gather a larger sample of those who categorize themselves as "maladaptive daydreamers." The study, like Somer's, took a qualitative approach and asked a series of open-ended questions in order to find similarities in daydreaming experiences (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011).

There were several shared characteristics of MD fantasies, some similar and different to Somer. One commonality was the "intricate and elaborate detail embedded in the fantasies, sometimes involving plot, character, and background," with some individuals going so far as to conduct research for their daydreams. (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011). Triggers were found to be

another similarity, with many saying “music, television, books and other media” were common in inducing their daydreams (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011). A percentage of participants, similar to Somer’s report, used kinesthetic movement, such as pacing and handwaving, to interact with their daydreams. One subject reported, “I have to pace when I’m daydreaming even if my feet ached or if it is two in the morning and I’m already in bed (#36)” (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011). This desire for motion was reported to change, however, upon discovery and input from others in their lives. Some reported that “their fantasizing was accompanied by pacing and movement as children, but that as they got older they learned to fantasize without the movement, especially if someone had previously noticed or commented on the pacing” (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011).

The conclusions of the study noted an intense desire to daydream, so much that individuals will go out of their way or shape their lives around daydreaming. This continual desire to daydream, and live in these fanciful fictional worlds, mixed with the shame at being discovered by others, was found to create a strong sense of self-isolation among MD experiencers. There was also a strong sense of fear among participants that their daydreaming was taking away from their real-life relationships and experiences, and that their habits would be discovered (Bigelson & Schupak, 2011).

Bigelson and Schupak determined that there was indeed a significant and identifying population of those who experienced MD (2011), which led to a call for a means of measuring the condition. This need for definition was furthered by the online communities of self-proclaimed “maladaptive daydreamers.” These communities meant there was a need for a clinical definition of MD, leading to the development of the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS). The purpose of creating the MDS was “to develop a self-report measure of MD, the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS) in order to provide a tool to assess MD related

symptoms in larger groups of individuals” (Somer et al., 2016). The final result was “14 items assessing five key characteristics of MD: MD content/quality (2 items), MD compulsion/control (4 items), MD distress (3 items), perceived benefits of daydreaming (2 items) and interference with life functioning (3 items)” (Somer et al., 2016). This scale gave a score in order to measure MD. The validity of such a measure was then proven in both large Italian and Arab samples. However, it is important to note that the 14 item scale switched to 16 items in order to include questions on the involvement of music in one’s daydreams. The suitability of this test amongst samples was tested both an Arab sample (Abu-Rayya et al., 2019) and in an Italian sample of 468 individuals. These tests showed that using the MDS to measure MD has proven so far to be reliable and that the daydreaming questions describe a very real phenomenon. Other studies using the MDS-16 have focused on continuing to gather MD narratives and descriptions, with one study asking participants to describe their experiences both verbally and pictorially (Somer et al., 2019).

Though a test has been developed to measure MD, there is still very little known about the condition, which has not yet been registered as a psychiatric disorder. However, internet presence, with continued research and exposure, has become a strong determining factor in validating MD. While scores of people have created petitions to get MD registered as a disorder, the strongest vindication of the condition is best found on online forums with the presence of like-minded individuals. However, it is reported that the biggest problem facing maladaptive daydreamers is “they alone cannot produce credible knowledge about effective treatments for their condition” (Bershtling & Somer, 2018, p. 1998). Meaning, without continued clinical research, the exposure and understanding of MD could continue to be limited.

In terms of clinical treatment for MD, there continues to be sparse recognition of MD among psychiatrists. Many psychiatrists are not aware of the condition, just as many patients are afraid to mention their daydreaming in fear of being laughed at or shamed (Pietkiewicz et al., 2018). However, continued research, as well as the aforementioned online presence and discussion, has paved the way for mental health professionals to recognize and treat MD, with some in the field acknowledging that there is a great deal of value in analyzing daydreaming habits (Debrot, 2019). Recent studies have been done on the effects of medication and recreation drug use in treating MD; however, it was found that no current recommendation for either could be given (Ross et al., 2020).

Intersections

Studies show that there might be connections with maladaptive daydreaming and other disorders, including anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, depression, and addiction.

One open-ended survey reported that MD overlaps “and co-occurs with, a number of different DSM-5 disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorders, and major depression” (Somer et al., 2017, p. 186). Early reports also show a positive correlation between the frequency of daydreaming and anxiety symptoms (Singer & Rowe, 1962). This research was confirmed by a recent study which, in a given sample, found that “on days which MD was more intense and time-consuming, individuals reported higher levels of dissociation, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, depression, and negative emotion. They also experienced more anxiety and social anxiety on days in which MD was more intense” (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018, p. 8). Though there exists overlap with MD and other psychiatric disorders, the strongest intersections appeared to be OCD and obsessive-compulsive

symptoms (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). However, it was not found that MD was completely dependent on or independent of such disorders. The relationship is not yet fully defined.

Addiction is another intersection suggested to exist with MD, as the condition could be classified as an addiction in and of itself. Many with MD explain a recurrent urge to daydream, a desire so strong that he or she might actively seek situations in order to keep daydreaming and feel annoyance when they are disturbed or unable to daydream (Pietkiewicz, 2018). This behavior is similar to that of a smoker or alcoholic who might constantly find a way to get a “fix.”

Additionally, MD was found to be linked to “aggravated personal distress for others, poorer emotional regulation, and reduced creative behaviors” (West & Somer). Descriptions of these intersections help to gain a better qualitative understanding of the experiences of MD and help me in my creative work to create characters that reflect such depth.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

There were two venues in which I presented my work. The first occurred during the summer with the Aggie Creative Collect. Though it predated my membership in the Undergraduate Research program, the presentation had a large impact on my research and project. The other venue, this one more formal, was the Texas A&M Undergraduate Research Symposium. Both experiences refined my speaking skills as well as my research process.

At the conclusion of the Aggie Creative Collective this summer, I briefly introduced my work and presented a portion of my novel to a general audience. The reaction to my presentation was completely unexpected. Following my descriptions of Maladaptive Daydreaming, several people, including friends and family, reached out to me saying that they either believed they had it, or they knew someone who experienced it. Eventually, I posted a video of my presentation to Facebook, where I got additional feedback. My ACC presentation marked the first time I ever introduced my work in a public sphere, and it greatly shaped both my drive to complete my thesis as well as the general content of my thesis.

My second, and primary, presentation, was at the Texas A&M Undergraduate Research Symposium in College Station, Texas. For this event, I was given a ten-minute presentation slot along with three other students. There was a general audience and a panel of faculty members who served as active listeners. I decided to begin with a general background on my research and project. Then, I performed two excerpts from the first chapter of my creative work. Whereas other researchers had PowerPoints or visual tools, I felt mine needed to focus on my speech.

I was extremely nervous prior to the event. I was worried I wouldn't be prepared, or that I was secretly under-qualified and everyone would notice, a feeling known commonly as "imposter syndrome." As people began to move into the room for my presentation time, I became increasingly nervous. The research fair presented all different kinds of research, but—in a world with math and science— I wasn't sure how my creative research would be perceived. I felt strange being in the same event as those presenting for more technical areas. However, through the experience, I saw and felt the value in my research. There was no distinction between fields, just an appreciation for research and exploration.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

For my novel, I knew from the very beginning that my greatest focus was to create an accurate portrayal of the life of several individuals experiencing maladaptive daydreaming. In order to do this, I felt a survey of psychological studies on the condition would create the most well informed and reflective representation in the characters. To begin my research, I focused on the qualities of MD and establishing a clear definition. I started with the work of Dr. Eli Somer, then did surveys of other studies (as is reflected in my ‘History’ section).

There are numerous ways that my research was incorporated into my creative work. First is the presence of a fictional online community. The opening profiles of each of the characters reveal different elements of MD. We see everyone describing the contents of their daydreams. This content is based on the experiences described by Somer and other researchers through their qualitative studies. There are also “triggers” that showcase the kinesthetic elements of MD, as well as external stimuli (such as music and television). Lastly, we see different intersections with disorders (such as anxiety) and feelings of addiction and shame. We also see the adverse circumstances that, though not required for the development of MD, lead each of the characters to retreat inside their heads. I used the profiles and conversations of the characters to not only portray what these communities look like but also to give insight into how the characters experience their MD.

Through the first chapter, we see what MD looks like as we watch Ally’s daydreaming habits unfold. We see her pace her floor, daydream using complex characters, repeat daydreams for hours at a time, and use music as a trigger. Additionally, there are themes of violence in her

daydreams, one of the common traits of MD. The unsettling, shame-filled childhood of Ally at the hands of her father shows the precedent of adverse childhoods that many MD experiencers describe. There is also a continual feeling of shame that her father casts, another feeling common among MD. This shame comes mostly from being “caught” daydreaming or feeling as though one is wasting his or her entire life by daydreaming. Overall, by taking note of the narrations described in psychological research and common MD experiences, I created characters with storylines that mirror those of real individuals. I felt I was able to tie together academic research with creative works by transforming data and trends into a fictional storyline.

One of the key moments in my research was presenting at the Undergraduate Research Symposium. Following the presentation, I received feedback that shaped the rest of my writing process. I learned that I needed to more heavily study the lineage of literature and where my place in it is. Additionally, the active listeners pointed out that I didn’t define my methodology clearly. There were also several key questions about the severity of maladaptive daydreaming and how it is defined. In regard to this, I planned to put more of a discussion of the maladaptive daydreaming Scale in my literature review. I realized the importance of jumping into the literature and started to finalize the scope in which I wanted to present all previous research. The experience encouraged me to consider joining the larger field of academia. I have never felt confident in my ability to present or research, but through this project, I have seen my capabilities in being committed to a longer project.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

DaydreamersCatalogue.forums.net

Username: _not_your_ally_

Triggers: Music, pacing, tv/movies

Daydreams: I go into plots from books/movies/tv shows. I become one of the characters or reinvent myself. I tend to replay the same scenes over and over again, especially if I am intrigued by something a character did or if there was a romance scene or an action scene. I'll latch onto characters for a while sometimes, and give them plots I feel should have happened in the actual story.

How long: For as long as I can remember.

Why: There's a lot to escape. Tons of family drama. I guess I'm the classic case of "daddy issues."

Effect: I don't talk to really anyone outside my family. I function, go to school, do the bare minimum. Most of the time I'm awake I think about daydreaming or am daydreaming. When I'm not, I miss the characters. I miss who I am and how I feel in that world. I need it. I crave it when I'm not there.

Username: jeanie.in.a.bottle

Triggers: Music, flapping, swinging, walking.

Daydreams: It used to be celebrities and stuff when I was in highschool. I'd imagine myself having a little friend group with members of my favorite band, talking and laughing. Now my daydreams tend to focus more on real life events and people. When I like a guy, I fantasize how

our lives could be together. I replay moments when I'm going to talk to him and fix the ones that went wrong. It feels good to have that companionship, to have the confidence to speak.

Why: I've always believed what my anxiety has taken away, daydreaming has given back. I've had social anxiety for as long as I can remember, which has always made interactions hard for me. I've had 1 or 2 close friends but I was never the "social butterfly" I wanted to be. In my daydreams, there is control. I get the attention and security I've always wanted.

How long: It's hard to pinpoint the start, but I was a bit later than some other users on this site. I would say it started when I was 8 or 9?

Effect: I'm about to graduate college. My grades haven't been great, since I've found it hard to focus due to my daydreams. In general, I feel like I've given away my life to daydreaming. I continue to live scenes that will never happen. I set my expectations too high, only to watch them fall. I'm a writer who can't write because she's stuck in her head (an irony I've grown tired of). It feels like I can't ever be happy with the reality I'm living, so I retreat more intensely into my head. I want to feel satisfied and complete in the real world.

Username: edgar_allen_hoe

Triggers: Driving, music, shaking

Daydreams: In my daydreams I am always the CEO of a corporation I started. The details of the company have never been quite clear, but all my fantasies revolve around this life. There is a whole set of recurring characters, including my assistant, my team, and even my partner. It's like an entire different life that I've been building for several years now.

How long: The storyline didn't start until about six years ago, but I was always a pretty imaginative kid. I would sometimes get immersed in daydreams and start shaking, often while sitting in the car or alone in my room, but there wasn't a complex story just yet.

Why: It lets me live the life I want. I am free from all the pressures of my family, school, and the "man" I'm supposed to be.

Effect: I feel very stunted in terms of socialization. I'm in college, and my roommate always seems to be going out, partying, bringing girls back, while I stay in the room and daydream my nights and days away. I feel like I'm setting myself up for failure. The more I daydream, the harder it is to focus on my studies. My grades have slipped. I feel like I'm spiraling, and the only safe places are my fantasies.

Chapter 1

Ally

When I was eight years old, I was told daydreaming was a sin. This sermon on the mount came from my dad—back when family mattered more than his vision of Jesus Christ. My mom, brother, and I would sit at the front by the altar in our pastels, while dad waved his hand and anxiously fixed his tie. He always wore a purple tie. Said it represented “God’s Mercy.”

That late summer Sunday he gave the usual spiel to his cheaply-constructed chapel and all the eager-eyed Christians it held. The First Church of Christ in Lonewood, Texas sat two roads behind second street, and its grass parking lot always seemed to be filled for the ten AM service.

I don’t remember the beginning of the speech nor the Bible verse that gave it context. All I remember is, “Don’t let your mind be fooled by the daydreams. Don’t get lost in your desires. To be consumed in fantasy is to be consumed by the desires of the Devil. Too much wandering will send the soul down a dark road,” then there was silence along with a couple *Amen!*’s.

My hands traced the top of the choir books. How dare he. I was a good Christian. I loved Jesus more than my own Mama. I said my prayers every night. Yes, I’d lied to my teacher a few times, and coveted my fair share of items. But *damnit* I was a good Christian.

Why did it matter that I let myself go to a world I created? I spent hours in my room daydreaming. I paced back and forth, back and forth, immersing myself scene to scene. I had conversations. I acted in plays. I was a superhero for a while. Each scene was a movie, one that I could feel. How was it a sin to wander?

After his anti-fantasy sermon, I went up to my dad and asked him if I was going to hell for daydreaming. What was left of his paternal empathy lingered for a second, and he gave me a look of pity that turned into a gentle smile

“Darling, Jesus loves you. But if you disobey there are always consequences.”

God sent those consequences in the form of divorce about a year later. Dad felt he was called to more ‘righteous’ work on the west coast. Of course, this announcement was made several days after my mother came clean to him about her bisexuality. *I love you*, my mother had begged, *this is just a part of who I am*. A week later dad stepped down from his position, then left behind his over imaginative daughter, his blameless son, and his wifely abomination.

Following the Great Divide, the eyes of our small town were quick and persistent with judgement. My father had been the biggest preacher in town, and as the effects of his absence arrived, so did the judgment from the holy folk. At school, at the grocery store, at soccer games, there was always someone there to greet us with a fake smile and demeaning eyes.

In moments like these, when their snickering voices chimed praises of my father and questions of his wellbeing, I retreated back to my fantasies. There, I was always in charge. I kicked ass, and every single line of dialogue was crafted to give me the power. In my daydreams, I ran the show. Always.

I hadn’t thought about Dad or the church in a long time, but finding my old, lime green church dress had sent me spiraling down a rabbit hole. Having been tucked away in the back of my closet for ten years, my childhood wardrobe was finally being cleaned out as part of one of my mother’s sporadic cleaning episodes.

Rumbles came through the wall adjacent to mine. My brother was digging through his closet, searching for buried treasure under his mound of jerseys and faded Cowboys hoodies. The boy's love of football was one of the other lingering effects of my father.

After those same Sunday services, my father would take his seat on one end of the, at the time new and polished, leather couch while my brother eagerly perched on the other. The only interactions would be about fumbles or stats or onside kicks. Football jargon that, carrying on to the present moment, I'd never taken interest in.

“Josh, see that man right there? That's the greatest damn quarterback that's ever lived!”

“The ‘boys are called America's team for a reason, son.”

My brother absorbed as much information as possible. He learned what a passing percentage meant before he could read the word “football.” The image of the game soaked into his mind until, when asked to draw a family portrait in second grade, he drew us each with helmets and shoulder pads (portrayed as large orange bubbles around our heads and arms). This ritual was also the only time dad dared use the Lord's name in vain.

“Jesus fucking Christ!! He was all over that receiver!!”

“God damnit hold the D-line!”

The two sat until the game was finished. If it was an evening game, my mother would bring them TV dinners while reloading my father's beers every thirty minutes. His eyes never left the screen, except to cut whatever microwaved pork dish had been placed in front of him. The holy ghost of football breathed fire into my father's tongue, while the son sat at his right hand.

During the Sunday services that overlapped with the ‘boys, my father would hand Josh our silver portable radio and tell him to “Listen in. Give me updates.” My little brother, with his

hair slicked back and tiny hands clutching the speaker, would hold the game to his ear the entire time. He never let his focus waver, even during the sermon and passionate worship songs. His mouth half open, and his eyes narrowed in focus, he listened to every moment of the game, making no expression even when the Cowboys scored. When my dad approached him, he'd recite nearly every play to a tee, like a soldier taking recon.

The first Cowboys game after the divorce, my brother sat silent in front of the T.V. The blue light of the screen shaped his sullen face in a way I'd never seen before. It was like watching a plant wither in a windowless closet.

"You don't have to watch that Bubs," My mother told him, attempting to change the channel.

His eyes didn't leave the screen, "The boys are playing." I half expected the five-year-old to ask for a beer and start yelling at no one, but he sat there the entire game. On a usual night, I'd go into my room and daydream. But that night I sat next to him, watching his face with every play, and there was nothing. There was just a boy, who'd lost his first god, refusing to lose his second.

I looked back at the lime green dress in my hand. The sequins on the collar still shined a bit too obnoxiously for the eye.

"Ally! Josh! Clothes!!" Mom called from the living room, "I'm not waiting any longer."

"Yeah! Here." I shoved the dress into a black garbage bag. The Hefty bag was stretched to its maximum, adding even one more shirt would've caused it to burst. I tied it and lifted it up strenuously, my arms awkwardly dipping at the weight. Waddling my way to the living room, I plopped the load onto the patch of tile by the front door. My breathing was hard and heavy. We should have given away these things years ago.

“Where did all that come from?” Mom chuckled from the kitchen table, her eyes confused but her face forming a humored half smile. “Is that why your room has been a hell hole for the last ten years?”

Her curly hair was pulled back loosely, and she wore her perpetually faded Meatloaf t-shirt. Ever since I was a child, I’ve thought my mother to be the most beautiful woman on this Earth. Her olive skin was just a shade darker than mine, reflecting the Native American roots that still bled through her spirit. Even the wrinkles on her face seemed to accentuate the curve of her nose and the hazel of her eyes. If there was ever a cartoon character personified, it was her. Or it once was.

She’d been a free spirit in the 80s, reflected in the daisy tattoo on her ankle, which she carefully overlaid with socks and pants. Fabric did what it could to contain the wildfire of rebellion that marked her skin so many years ago. Despite my continual attempts, we knew little about my mom’s life pre-dad. Every time I went to grandma’s house, and I saw pictures of a young woman, with features that could cut stone and jet-black hair to the end of her back, I asked who my mother used to be. Grandma never told me. She just said, “Your mom is a wildflower continually in bloom. You’ll see it.”

During the church days, Mom was the life of the party. At the post-service mixers in the community center, she pumped everyone with punch, hors d’oeuvres, pancakes, water, whatever the volunteers conjured up. All eyes were drawn to her, and laughter followed whichever direction she went. Her greatest gift was her ability to make a somewhat broken down, mold smelling banquet room feel like a royal ball.

My earliest memories were of her dancing from table to table, fluttering around with questions and quick remarks: “How have you been?”, “Susie that new coat is exquisite!”, “Now

Steve what have you been up to?”, “C’mon Joan now another donut never hurt no one.” Even the older women, who kept their noses held up in continual judgement, had a soft spot for Delilah Montgomery. Until the fall of Eve, that was.

Her biggest critic was Dad. He hated how everyone seemed to enjoy her charisma just a bit more than his. Even his fiery sermons couldn’t out due the warmth in my mother’s smile. The master bedroom in the old house was on the other end, but every night, as my brother and I attempted to fall asleep, we heard their shouts. Their taunts. Their screams and echoes. This was the only other time my father would use the Lord’s name in vain. Dad always seemed to have one foot out the door. My mother’s sexuality was what cleared his path, taking himself away and plucking the wildflower from her roots.

I resumed my battle against the bag until I was able to toss it in the backseat of the Chevy Malibu. Behind me, Josh had a handful of two shirts.

I glared. “Really? That’s it?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I mean, I just didn’t have much stuff. Besides, don’t you like thrift shopping. I don’t know why you’re donating so much when you’ll just try to buy it again.”

“Alright I love you two,” Mom slammed the back door shut, kissed the top of our heads and opened the driver side, pausing for a second to look at us. “Get your work done or clean the house, no other options.”

Josh and I nodded.

She put on her seatbelt and started the car. The sedan backed out of the cracked driveway with a gentle bump. My eyes followed it to the end of the street, where it paused for a moment at the stop sign, then took a right. I thought about the lime dress again and all the fabric that had once been the scenery of my life, now to be brought into someone else’s. My hands traced the

edges of my denim jacket, thrifted from the same Goodwill, and I wondered what life the fabric had lived before.

Josh let out a heavy sigh, “Alright, I’m going to the backyard to do some strength training. Coach told me I gotta keep building muscle mass.” He turned and made his way back into the house. I smiled. The one hundred-forty-pound, six-foot, scrawny boy would never stop trying to match his teammates, despite being the kicker.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

I looked two houses down to see several men installing black tiles to a half-naked roof. They wiped sweat off their foreheads with white towels. Even in late October Texas managed to be ninety degrees. Becoming suddenly aware of my own sweat, I headed back inside. Our thirty-year-old, shot-gun style, three bedroom home had only one redeeming quality: air conditioning.

Josh would be busy for several hours, and with my mom out and about, I knew it was the perfect time to daydream. Not that they ever questioned me. My brother and I had an unspoken agreement to never question what the other did alone in their rooms. Mom did, however, know what I was doing and actively referred to my pacing and daydreaming as my “thinking time.”

My room was still a mess from pulling down the box in my closet and knocking down all the junk that had been stockpiled. Old teen magazines were scattered in one area of the floor, while school papers littered another. I closed my door a little too hard, causing the hanging mirror on the back to slam into the, already scraped up, white wood.

On my desk was another mess of papers and my laptop. Senior year, despite my lack of effort, was filled with plenty of school work. Though, rather than taking the Saturday to finish any of it, I’d decided to daydream for several hours then watch a couple episodes of *Hitman*, the fifth crime drama I’d watched in the last several months. Detective Florence ruled with an iron

fist, refusing to let anyone get away. Her antics were violent and clever. No one messed with her.

Characters gave my daydreams depth, and, even after I'd watched, I'd enter myself into the world and dive into whatever scene I desired. Sometimes made up, sometimes something I'd watched minutes before, the entire fictional universe was in my grasp. Watching was not so much entertainment, but content for my next daydream.

I'd pick my room up later. I'd finish my essay later. Everything would happen later. I had to get to daydreaming. Immediately.

Kicking miscellaneous items, I cleared my usual pacing path: my dresser to the mirrored sliding doors of my closet. No more than four feet. It had been the same since I was a kid, which explained the slight wear on the carpet that the eye could only notice if it were looking.

I picked up my black, wireless headphones and put them in. Music had always been a trigger to daydream. Sometimes, I would be in public and hear an old tune that took me back to a daydream. The other week I'd found myself pacing the cereal aisle because Beyoncé's Love on Top came on.

I tapped on my music and shoved my phone into my pocket. The pulsating rhythms were like instant sparks to my mind. I began to pace. Back and forth. Back and forth.

The man stares at me from across the brick lined room. His brow is furrowed; his hand is squished up against his face. He's trying too hard to show how deeply he's thinking. I look at the name on the badge he'd handed me, "Hartman, Issac. NYPD."

Just a second ago I'd asked him where he'd been the night of Annie Conway's murder. This question was the result of months of exploration and examination. When I'd been given the case, I was told it was unsolvable. Her body was found in a crystal clean apartment. No forced

entry. No struggle. The only mess was the pool of blood dripping from the knife in her chest, the sole imperfection on her white silk sheets.

Isaac was good. Spectacular I'd say. He'd left me nothing but a single fingerprint. A single spot, like the last speck of dust on a freshly cleaned mirror. Here I am, staring into the eyes of the murderer.

"You know what I am going to ask you." I stand and begin to walk around him.

"My sister's game night. I've told you this. She hosts one every single Thursday, just like she's done for the past few years." His eyes are calm, and his face is stoic. I notice him steal a quick glance at the framed photos on the wall to his left.

I nod. "Yeah. I know. You said you played Sorry and that the night was uneventful, except for your brother in law getting a bit too excited and busting the wheel in Life."

He smiles, "Exactly, my sister made a big deal, but everyone busts that damn wheel."

"Yes. Indeed, they do."

"It's really very flimsy."

"A piece of shit."

We are locking eyes again. He looked at the left wall, now his cool brown gaze is matched with mine. I tuck away the one piece of my black hair that always gets in my face.

My voice is cold, "You've told me all these stories. You told me that you fell asleep on the couch that night. But what you haven't told me is what you did that next morning."

His eyes look right, "I didn't have work that Friday, so I went to Waffle House with some friends."

"What friends?"

"Two coworkers, Alex and Tim." Once again, his eyes go right.

“What did you order?”

“The scrambled hash with extra cheese.” Eyes right.

I walk behind my desk once more, then pick up the ballpoint pen I used to write condolence letters to Annie’s family.

He’s still staring at me, his eyes begging me to find some sort of hole.

I chuck the pen at him. He catches it with his left hand.

Now, it’s my time to smirk. “You’re lying.”

“What.” His brow once again furrows, this time in confusion. “I’m sure as hell not.”

“First off, you are left-handed. When you told me the first bit of information, the stuff you’ve already told me, you looked left. You were recounting information. When I asked you a new question, you looked right when you answered. You were creating information. ”

His head goes backwards as he springs out of his seat, “This is ridiculous. What is this one of those personality mind trick tofu shits? I have been on the force for fifteen years and you are going to put my life in the hands of a bogus body language assessment?”

I sit and reach for the file folder hidden in the drawer of my desk. A deep breath escapes me. “I think you killed Annie Conway shortly after your game night. Then, the next morning went back to her place to clean everything up, knowing very well that she was scheduled to be on a flight, so no one would notice that she was off the grid.” I slide the folder across the desk. “You were smart, getting your tech buddies to wipe the security cameras. I really don’t know how you did that. But here you are, failed because of a single thumbprint and an overexcited tourist.” He opens the folder, revealing a smiling couple in front of a red brick building with him on the steps.

He stares for a moment. Then, with a jolt, sprints for the door. I tackle him before he can reach more than two feet. "Officer Hartman, you are under arrest-"

Knock! Knock! Knock! Through the chorus of a Britney Spears song, I could hear my brother's fists on the door. I jerked my headphones out quickly, "What?" I yelled. He opened the door and nonchalantly walked in. He was wearing a Cowboys tank top and the same pair of adidas shorts that had followed him from fifth grade straight into ninth.

"Check your phone, mom's picking up dinner from Wendy's and needs your order." He shut the door again, not waiting for a response. I pulled my phone out of my pocket: an hour and a half had passed. I texted my order. I went back in.

"Officer Hartman, you are under arrest!" I tackle him. His body is bigger than mine, shoving me off. He attempts to open the door, but it's locked.

My hand lands a punch directly on the back of his head. It does nothing.

He moves quickly and soon has his arms wrapped around my torso. They move up to my neck. He's strangling me. I gasp for air.

Gaining sudden strength in my arm, I elbow him in the stomach.

He recoils from shock. My foot moves to his balls. He's back on the floor with his gun two meters away. He'd tried to pull it out.

I pick it up and aim it at his head. The murderer was going nowhere.

My partner Steve enters the room, he stares down, "You got him, Florence."

I smirk.

Ring! Ring! The music on my headphones suddenly stopped, replaced by the chime of a phone call. Mom. I answered quickly, "Hello?"

“Come help me with the bags. I don’t feel like taking it all in,” she said shortly and hung up. Something was off.

I pulled out my headphones, tossed my phone on my bed, and turned off the light as I skated through my door and back out to the front.

Outside, the sky had just faded to black, with tinges of blue still highlighting the edges. The roof a few houses down was finished, any sign of work had disappeared. There were only jet black tiles quickly fading into the skyline.

I opened the passenger side door, “Hey, Mom.”

She finished typing a message on her phone then looked up at me. Her eyes seemed startled. A puff of air left her lungs, “Hey.” She unbuckled and grabbed the drink carrier from the seat next to her. “Take the food.”

“You got it Sergeant,” I said with a mini salute, then followed her into the house, the screen door nearly closing on me.

“Josh! Dinner!” She yelled, heading into the kitchen.

Swift and emotionless, she set the drinks down on the counter and reached up to grab plates from the cabinet.

I peered into the grease stained fast food bags, pulling out the top layer of napkins and taking a fry. Then, I took a seat at the round table, which perfectly sat three. and crossed my legs. There was only ever a few minutes of comfort when I sat like this, until my calves became sore from the hardwood, and I was forced to readjust.

Mom returned and plopped the plates down. The hair that had been pulled up hours before was now back down to her shoulders. The curls were more defined than usual, and light shined off of it, meaning she hadn’t washed it in a while. I continued to pull out my nuggets and

my brother's bacon cheeseburger. As she sat in the chair to my right, I watched her eyes stare blankly at the illuminated living room T.V screen. Another positive about this house: the open floor plan.

"I didn't know the cowboys were playing tonight." Her eyes stayed locked on the screen as it quickly shifted from men high fiving to a colorful beer commercial.

I dumped my nuggets and fries onto a plate and reached for the ketchup she'd set out. "I guess so."

Josh walked back in, his hair wet from the shower. He went straight for the bag of food.

"Can I eat on the couch and watch the game?"

"No," Mom said sternly. "You can watch the game from the table. We're eating as a family tonight." He shrugged and peered into the bag, pulling out his fries. "Where's my burger?" I pointed to where I'd left it on the table. "Oh." He unwrapped it and put it on a plate, then nestled his fries right next to it.

He sat down and started to shove food into his mouth, keeping his eyes glued to the Cowboys game. We ate in silence for several minutes. Then, Mom cleared her throat.

"At Goodwill I ran into Eliza Carol. I don't know if you'll know her, but she's still a member at First Christ."

I remembered her perfectly. Second row, right side near the choir bench. Blonde hair that had started to go grey (though she bleached it every chance she got), the same wide brimmed turquoise hat (assumably to cover up said hair), and a smell of apple cinnamon. She had a son named Zeke who still went to my school. We sat two seats away in English. Sometimes he smiled at me. He did not smell like apple cinnamon, unless they decided to make that into an Axe body spray.

I couldn't remember ever seeing a father, but I liked the two of them. They always listened intently to my father and sometimes sat with us at community breakfasts. Neither of them was unkind to us after the divorce, which as far as I was concerned was all that mattered.

"Oh, Zeke's mom, right?" I responded.

She nodded, her eyes getting glossy, "Exactly. Does he still go to your school?" Her tone was filled with feigned interest. I took a bite of nugget. Josh grabbed another fry. His attention was on her now.

"Yes." There was an awkward pause. We each took a bite and looked down at our food. The silence persevered through our chews.

"What did she say?" I asked.

Mom took a napkin from the center, wiped her lips, then placed both elbows on the table and balanced her head on the tops of her fist. I noticed they were shaking, just enough for me to notice. Her eyes continued to look down, but this time they were filled with thought, as if she were recalling a memory from her previous life.

Josh took another bite from his burger. I ate another fry.

The silence was going on for too long. Typically, Mom was quick on her feet. Any witty or snide remark my mother could counter without losing a single beat. I always joked she was our biggest fan and our biggest critic, because no one could roast the Montgomery siblings like the woman who birthed them.

But the wildflower held no sign of humor in her eyes. The silence continued for a few seconds more. The commentators' dialogue leaped from the television and filled in our conversation gap. After what felt like a lifetime, even though only one play had been run, she spoke.

“She told me the church is having a full three months of guest sermons.”

Josh rolled his eyes, “Glad she could keep us updated. Who’s the guest? I will only go back if it’s Chuck Norris or John Cena.” I cracked a smile at him, but Mom’s mouth stayed frozen. She looked at him with razor eyes I hadn’t seen in years.

“It’s your father.”

My entire body froze, like the feeling before jumping into an icy swimming pool. I felt myself back in the church pews, watching his emerald eyes glimmer out into the audience.

“Too much wandering will send the soul down a dark road.” Guilt and shame swelled to my chest. I dropped the fry in my hand. It didn’t make a noise. The man who’d both condemned and put us through hell was coming back. The king returned to the castle. I needed to daydream. I needed to leave this table.

“Why?” Josh spoke first. Like my mother, his eyes showed no emotion. From the television, I could hear the Cowboys score. Josh’s eyes stayed locked. Mom matched his gaze.

“They invited him, that’s all I know. I didn’t want to pry; the conversation was awkward enough.”

“Have you talked to Dad since he left?” I stammered. It was something I’d meant to ask for years and years, but it was never the right time, for any of us.

“No.” She looked defeated suddenly, as if that single answer had taken the rest of her life. “At first we had to figure out child support, but any communication I had really was through his lawyer. I’m pretty certain he’s still in California. Must be doing well, considering the checks haven’t stopped coming.”

The silence returned again. At this point none of us knew what to say. We’d spent an entire year in group therapy trying to disassemble the shattered pieces my father had left. We’d

moved houses. We'd sat and talked. We'd made memories to replace the old. Josh had turned to video games and football. Mom had turned to whatever gin-based cocktail she could get her hands on, and I had turned to my daydreams.

I could ask to be excused. I could go back to my room and pace until everything was gone. I could avoid all of this.

"When?" I spoke again.

"Starting in January."

"Can we move?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why the hell would they invite him back? After all these years?" Josh snapped. I wondered why he felt the way he did. Dad had never once hurt him. He was the glory child, always too innocent or too young to do anything sinful.

"I *told* you I don't know. No more questions." My mother took her plate to the sink, scraping off most of her food into the trashcan on the way. Josh continued to stare down at his meal. His muscles were tense and his expression stone cold.

Mom bumped into the edge of the soft green counter, shattering glass on the freckled linoleum floor. "God Damnit." She screamed. Her hands rose to her face, and she took a deep breath.

"He won't come near us or either one of you." For the first time in a long time, her voice was cracking. "I'll make sure of it-" A sob shook her chest, and she fell to the floor. Without saying a word, we joined her.

After a few minutes, we got up, did away with the Wendy's, and went to bed. My craving for daydreaming came back. I needed to get back as soon as possible.

I wanted to be the detective again. I wanted to slam the bad guy against a cement wall. I wanted to point a gun at his face.

Before entering our rooms, Josh stopped, “Do you think he’ll want to see us?” There was a sudden hope in his eyes.

I pursed my lips and shook my head, “I have no idea. We don’t know the man he is now.”

He nodded, “that’s true. I just don’t see why he would come here.”

“People like to return back to the places that make them feel powerful.”

“I hate him. I don’t care...how un-Christian that is.”

I chuckled, “I still think it’s funny how you chase God’s approval.”

“I wish you would too sometimes.”

“God, glory, and football were never my pastimes.” I leaned against my door frame.

A scoff left his throat, “Stop acting like you’re better than me. You refuse to leave your room. You come straight home, and I honestly don’t know where you are at lunch. People forget you exist. You can’t hate a world you refuse to live in.”

“That’s pretty fucking poetic for a guy who kicks balls and can’t pass a chemistry test,” my tear ducts had been strong all night, but now they were filling with water.

“Fuck you.” He spat, quickly turning into his room and reaching for the door.

“Wait!” I intervened, shifting my weight to follow him. “We can’t do this. You know that.” I looked to see tears streaming down his face. The whites of his eyes had become sickly red.

“He can’t come back,” his voice squeaked, “Ally, he can’t.” He pulled his shirt up to wipe snot. “Goodnight,” he softly said before quickly closing the door, not giving me the chance to hug him.

“I love you,” I said through the door.

“Love ya.” He called back, his voice barely distinguishable.

I knew he’d been lashing out, but he was right. Self-isolation was my only hobby. I had no interest in engaging with others, especially my classmates. The bullies in middle school only grew up to be assholes in High School, so avoiding them was the best strategy. I still spoke to classmates: group projects, random moments in class, when I had questions. It’s impossible to be a loner, and I knew it. But the world around me wasn’t worth it. The people, they changed the second it was convenient for them. People are set in their ways and will politely disintegrate the self-confidence of anyone who challenges those ways. I was safer in my head, and that’s exactly where I needed to be.

I walked back into my room, first reaching for my phone, but stopping myself.

Maybe self-isolation could wait. Maybe I needed to talk.

I grabbed my laptop. A year ago, I’d decided to research my daydreaming habits. I thought, “surely others daydream to my extent?” Following a quick search, I found the term ‘maladaptive daydreaming’. Along with it, I found an online forum, quickly joined it, and somehow ended up in a group chat with two others: Jeanie and Edgar. Despite not knowing their faces or even last names, they knew me better than anyone in my town. At the end of each day, we gave life updates. We talked about our daydreams, our desires, our successes, our failures, nothing was off limits.

not your ally: What’s everyone up to on this Saturday night?

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Throwing a party. Tons of people. We're all getting hammered.*

_not_your_ally_: *So, writing? Or daydreaming?*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Tonight, it's daydreaming. That boy is back again. I keep replaying this scene where he asks me out. Somehow daydreaming about real people hurts ten times worse than daydreaming about celebrities.*

_not_your_ally_: *Daydreaming about imaginary characters is the best, you never have to face them in real life.*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Have you been daydreaming today?*

_not_your_ally_: *Yeah. Six hours, give or take.*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *I had eight.*

_not_your_ally_: *Aren't we supposed to be cutting our hours back lol*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Eh, probably.*

_not_your_ally_: *My mom told us today my dad is coming back*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Holy fuck.*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *You're kidding right?*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *or maybe she's kidding?*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Is he coming back to the house or just back to town?*

_not_your_ally_: *Just back to town. He's doing a preaching series back at the old church.*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Has anyone been in contact with him?*

_not_your_ally_: *No. I literally have no idea what this man has been up to for the last ten years.*

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: *Ally I am so sorry.*

_not_your_ally_: *I'll make it.*

Edgar_allen_hoe: I AM SO SORRY ALLY

_not_your_ally_: Thanks Ed!

_not_your_ally_: Silver lining-- he doesn't start till January

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: Ah yes the best way to start a new year, with an asshole.

Edgar_allen_hoe: Hang in there. Everything will be alright.

_not_your_ally_: Thanks, I love you both. I know we said we would start trying to cut back on our daydreaming hours, but they are the only way I can see myself getting through this.

Jeanie.in.a.bottle: Do what you have to do.

Edgar_allen_hoe: ^Exactly

_not_your_ally_: Love you both! I'm gonna go. Sweet daydreams! :)

I released a sigh and fell back in my desk chair.

The stuff I'd previously promised to pick up was still scattered around the floor.

A photograph, half under the bed, caught my eye. I leaned over to pick it up. Three faces smiled back: me, Mom, and Dad. I looked to be about three years old, dressed in the same lime green dress that Mom had driven away just this morning.

Did the girl in this photograph feel shame? Was she friends with her mind? Did she know that her imagination was a sin?

I could remember daydreaming for as long as I'd been alive. There were always characters in my head, begging me to interact with them. The pacing would happen everywhere, even in the aisle at church. Mom would try to stop me as I waddled off down the red carpeted row. She'd apologize to those around us as she passed through. When Dad saw from on stage, he'd stare at me, then immediately look away.

“But if you disobey there are always consequences.”

Despite the years, I never could quite lose my father's voice. I couldn't shake his criticism, his guilt tripping, his attempts at saving my soul.

He was coming back, and he'd find the same little girl, her mind still lost in fantasy.

I pick up my headphones again. I put them in. I pace. I forget.

I escape.

We are locking eyes again. He looked at the left wall, now his cool brown gaze is matched with mine. I tuck away the one piece of my black hair that always gets in my face.