

Rachel Berman  
**Schizophrenia**

“Listen, things haven’t been working out between us for a while now. I will always love you, but I think that we should just take some time apart and see how things go.” The boy looked at his iPhone in his hand and almost deleted the text that he’d just typed. But then, before he could stop himself, he hit the send button. He watched, transfixed, as the text sent, but as soon as the word “delivered” appeared under the message, he felt guilty about breaking up with his girlfriend of nearly eighteen months through a text message. But he was too cowardly to tell her in person that the real reason that he did it was because he had been cheating on her for nearly three months. He really did love her, and sometimes, he’d felt as though she was the only one in his life who truly cared for him. His mother surely didn’t. All she ever did was yell at him for just about everything that he did or failed to do. But when he was with his girlfriend, he could be himself because he knew that she loved him unconditionally. She would listen to him when he vented about a fight that he’d had with his mother, and she would let him cry on her shoulder when his life became too much to handle.

But the boy’s fear of losing his girlfriend, like he’d lost his mother’s love and attention so many years ago, grew stronger with each passing day. And so, when the new girl started going to his high school, the boy was powerless to resist her. Almost from day one, the new girl showed interest in him and pursued him, regardless of the fact that he already had a girlfriend. When she asked him to go to the movies with her, he agreed. When she kissed him, he let her. And today, when she asked him to break up with his girlfriend for her, he did. The boy stifled his guilty conscience by telling himself that his girlfriend would have left him soon enough anyway. *That’s what women do, he thought, they abandon you and they stop loving you.* And this new girl really loved him; he could tell. He just knew

that she would be the one who could finally fill the sadness and loneliness that he felt in his heart.

The boy never really knew his father. He'd only heard stories about him from his grandparents, but they rarely talked about their son. The boy had seen a few scattered pictures of his father around his grandparents' house, and from them, he could tell that he looked just like the man in the pictures: same dark hair, same prominent nose. The boy took pride in this, though taking too much after his father terrified him.

The boy's mother rarely mentions his father's name. She'd probably say that the reason for this was because she has a new boyfriend, who recently moved in with her and the boy. But when she is really drunk – which was increasingly more often – she gets a wistful, faraway look on her face and reminisces about her marriage to Michael. She describes her relationship with him as the kind where two people are absolutely perfect for each other and are totally and completely in love.

Schizophrenia. It's not an everyday word, but the boy had known of it since he was young. It is a mental disorder in which the person diagnosed has hallucinations, delusions, and/or hears voices. The boy's father had been diagnosed with the disorder when he was in his early twenties, after he'd suffered from all three of the main symptoms. He had had been taking medication for it ever since. According to the boy's uncle, the medication did its job and made Michael seem as though he didn't have a disorder at all. That is, as long as he kept taking it, but no one had any reason to believe that he had stopped. However, sometimes those who suffer from schizophrenia begin to think that they don't need their medication anymore and, therefore, stop taking it. More often than not, the effects of doing so are detrimental.

Michael worked with his brother at their family's business, and the two had done so for several years. His brother knew about the schizophrenia, of course, as did the whole family, and he knew that Michael needed to take his medication everyday. But Michael had seemed so much

like himself for so many years that no one even associated him with schizophrenia anymore. So, how was his brother supposed to know that Michael hadn't been taking his medication for a whole week now? How could he have known that the voices were growing stronger and more demanding? He didn't even think twice when Michael took the rest of the day off because he wasn't feeling well, but soon enough, not stopping him would become the greatest regret of his brother's life.

The boy's mother came home from work to find her son asleep on the floor of the living room. Her husband normally picked their son up from daycare after work, but never this early in the afternoon. She couldn't even imagine why her husband would leave their son unattended long enough for him to fall asleep on the floor. She picked up the boy, put him in his bed, and closed his bedroom door without waking him. She walked slowly throughout the entire house, looking for her husband. She could feel that something was wrong. Finally, she walked out onto the patio, terrified of what she might find, though not really sure what that might be. Once she stepped out onto the patio, it took a few moments for her eyes to fully comprehend what they were seeing. The gun was lying in a pool of her husband's blood, which was slowly seeping through the floorboards of the patio that they had just finished building. The gun was still grasped loosely in her husband's hand. For some strange reason that she could never really explain, the single thought that went through her head at that exact moment was the fact that they had only bought the gun for protection. She had almost forgotten that they still had it, stored away in the dresser drawer, but there it was, clutched in her husband's lifeless hand.

The only memory that the boy can truly call his own from the event comes from a small window in time after he woke up that afternoon in his bed. He can recall frantic voices slowly waking him up from a dream. The voices were coming from outside his room. He slowly got up, left his bedroom, and followed the sounds. It seemed like the voices were outside, so he crept closer to the back door, which

led out onto the patio. There had been men at their house, working on that patio for the past few weeks. The boy's father told him that they were going to have fun parties out there when it got warmer outside, and the boy couldn't wait. He was too small to see out of the windows that overlooked the patio, which undoubtedly saved him from seeing more than his four-year-old mind could handle. With his ear pressed up to the door, he could hear his mother sobbing hysterically, but he couldn't imagine what could possibly upset her so much. He'd never heard his mother cry as hard as he could hear her crying then. He didn't even think that adults could cry that much; they were adults after all. He can recall how much it terrified him to hear her crying like that. He could also recognize his grandfather's deep, strong voice out there, too, but it wasn't the way that he remembered his grandfather's voice sounding. Was he upset? Was it possible that he was crying too? The boy couldn't imagine how that option could be true. Next to his father, his grandfather was the strongest man that he knew. But now, looking back, the boy knows that, of course, his grandfather had been crying.

The boy could hear a third voice mixed in with the others. At first, the boy thought that it was his father. If it was, he would no doubt be trying to comfort everyone who was upset. He was good at that. But after listening for a while longer, the boy realized that it was his uncle, not his father, and that his voice was not calm at all. It was also hysterical. The boy can remember wondering where his father could have been. Everyone was at their house, and obviously something was very, very wrong. Why wasn't his father there? The boy wished he were there so that he could explain everything and make it all better, just like he always did.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the boy's uncle walked into the house. The boy quickly crouched behind the door so that, from his hunched position, he could watch his uncle without being seen himself. The boy can still remember the way that his uncle looked that day; his face was stained with tears and his eyes had a crazed, terrified look in them.

His uncle looked around the kitchen frantically until he saw what he was searching for: the phone. He ran over to it and dialed. The boy wondered who his uncle could be calling, and if maybe he was calling his father to tell him to come home so that he could fix everything. Gradually, his mother's sobs grew louder and louder until the boy couldn't listen any longer. It scared him too much. He slipped out from behind the door and ran back into his room and hid under the covers.

Fifteen years have now passed, and the boy and his mother have gradually changed from the poor widow and her little boy into the angry woman who yells at her quiet, brooding son so much that he despises her and everyone around him.

The boy's mother is no longer the loving woman who struggled to protect her little boy from the pain that her husband inflicted upon their family. Somewhere along the way, she morphed into an angry, drunken woman who yells at her son when he doesn't do things exactly the way she wants them done. At some point, she began to inflict fear and pain upon everyone around her as a way to cope with her own pain, which never, ever lessens.

The boy has grown up and is no longer the innocent child who couldn't understand why his father did what he did. He has become an angry, mean, and untrusting young man who hates his mother, and, therefore, has developed an underlying hatred for all women. Nevertheless, he constantly searches for love from a woman in hopes that it will fill the void that his mother has left empty. He lies compulsively, sabotages his own relationships by cheating on his girlfriends, and everyone he knows fears him because of his unpredictable fits of rage.

The boy's mother rarely mentions his father's name, except when she talks about the love of her life. She never, ever mentions what happened that day. But the boy is still haunted by what he's only heard stories of, and he fears the day will come when the voices are in his head, too.