

Dark Ice

By Michael W. Paul

"If your light refuses to shine, make it your life's work to stab at the darkness of others."

--Unknown

May 30, 2013:

Road to the Batcave Journal, first entry:

I received my welcome packet from the League of Shadows and will soon be under the discipleship of Ra's Al Ghul; I'm so psyched! All this black clothing will finally pay off!

Ra's once said, "To manipulate the fear in others, you must first master your own."

The Batman's fear was bats; he was terrified of bats, but under the training of Ra's Al Ghul, he embodied the bat, lived among them, and now he isn't afraid of bats; but the heart of criminality is terrified of him.

My lifelong fear has been women, women who run with my heart and disappear, making life a sinkhole of despair in a frozen wasteland of hopelessness. This is my greatest fear and the greatest obstacle to my success as a crime fighter.

I must make haste in purging this and all fears. Therefore, I have ordered a bulk shipment of inflatable girls along with an adequate supply of helium. Mannequins are impractical and would raise eyebrows should I ever develop a thriving social life again. I would not want my guests to think I'm crazy. I shall do warfare with these inflatables, taking great strides to disable them without a mortal blow, as the Batman would never outright kill a foe, simply destroy their ability to prey on the weak and fearful.

June 8, 2013:

My first shipment has arrived.

I stand in front of the kitchen mirror asking myself in a mysterious, otherworldly voice, "Are you ready to begin?"

Things are off to a rocky start. Two inflatables, I shall call them floaters, snagged in my rotating ceiling fan and sprung slow leaks--slow, high-pitched, lasting minutes, and sounding like Fran Drescher caught under a snow plow. A third was attacked by my dog, Floppy while trapped

under a kitchen overhang near his food, and since I taught Floppy to bite down hard and hang on 'till the screaming stops, he inhaled more than a healthy dose of helium during the kill. For a few minutes this angry little Yorkshire Terrier's bark sounded like a field mouse in heat, something I'm sure was humiliating for a dog bred to hunt rodents. It was then I noticed a tag on the inner upper thigh of a flat floater, *Not recommended for helium*.

I shall conceal the surviving floaters in rooms and closets, under beds and floors, in toilets, conditioning myself to be on constant alert to my hidden enemy, and train myself in the art of crime fighting. In an ideal situation, a third party would hide the floaters to maintain the element of surprise, but when I asked the UPS delivery man to help me inflate these and hide them while I took a long walk, he handed me a clipboard.

“Sign please.”

June 19, 2013:

I was startled by a spider who wove a web across my back patio door, an Orb-weaver, *Diadematus*. I'll name her Webber. I was releasing Floppy into the night so he could fertilize the back yard and demand the neighbors get off his block, something he does every morning at about 2 am. My heart had been at 45 beats per minute, just enough to drag my semi-conscious carcass to the door, nothing more, trailing Floppy as if headed to my own lynching.

I flicked on the light and there she was, the size of my tongue, bouncing to the rhythm of the gentle breeze blowing through my great room on her own vertical trampoline, two inches from my nose. She was the color of dry dog food, with a map of hell on her plentiful, crest shaped butt. I only noticed this because in my arachnophobic “*Ahhh!*” life went into slow motion, typical of a near death experience.

This blood-sucking, eight-eyed, eight-legged Webber, who spent her life feasting on things I spray with poison was happy as a vulture on possum entrails when I discovered her. I let out a scream that could have toppled that rotted oak tree on my hill and killed us all! Except for the spider. I'm sure she would've survived. After all, hell is eternal.

My freak-out sent me into oxygen deficit. I woke moments later on my back, sore, covered in web, passed out next to Floppy. The web tickled my airways like blowing a bubble when gum sticks to my nose. I had survived.

Then my blood jello'd when I felt Webber sitting on me, just below my sternum. I fought her paralyzing trance with every ounce of ninja discipline in me, relaxed my body, and peacefully watched. With grace, the Webber controlled each leg independently, as if each had a mind of its own, carefully devoured her home, then moved on to a quieter neighborhood. If I had her dexterity, I could walk six dogs at once and use the remaining two legs to walk myself. She had talents that just might pay off for a crime fighter. I must study under her.

July 3, 2013:

Wednesday is counseling day. I dread this, sitting in a room across from a strange woman and telling her all my troubles for two hours. Doctor Danchari Bluwboding, Dani, she likes to be called, has treated me for a year now. Perfectly fitted for the counseling service, unremarkable in appearance and objective in observations, born to be the librarian of mental disorders, she is sharp, intuitive, responsive, logical, and genetically designed to blend into the background.

Today didn't go so well, as Dr. Bluwboding rambled on endlessly about actions feeding the intellect, controlling emotions, something about blah blah blah, I don't know. I scanned the room and my brain went on vacation:

Nice window up there, I wonder how such an important person got a basement office. Could I reach that in a fire? Must have been a sale on beige paint, clock, Dani looks mad, framed diploma, another framed diploma, clock, antique coat rack, purple penguin pencil holder (I hate the Penguin), is that a tiara? One, two, three, four, five fingers, my feet aren't the same size, why is that? Is that clock slow? Three Musketeers! Dani's eyes are brown...

“Hey!!! Hey!!!” Those blaring pipes of hers could mix paint. *Did she just ask me a question? Don't say it, don't say it.*

“Yes, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one.” *Did I just say that?*

“Hey!!! Hey!!! I just asked you if you had any plans for the Fourth of July!!! How are you going to get better if you don't get out and meet people? Are you listening?”

“No, no plans,” I replied, bowed in shame. Our time was up.

I felt bad about not paying attention during our session, so when I scheduled my next appointment, I tried to make Dani laugh,

“Hey, I'm not going anywhere tomorrow because fireworks bore me. I mean, really, if you've seen one fireworks display, you've seen them all. I'd rather light things on fire and watch them burn.” Dani's tired old eyes strained towards me, “My parents called me Ar-son.”

She handed me the clipboard.

“Sign please.”

July 14, 2013:

I wore my gauntlets to bed last night, growing comfortable with the feel, taking special care not to injure myself with the razor-sharp talons. If I am to be a crime fighter, I need to handle dangerous weapons without injuring myself or the adoring public.

Floppy woke me again for his nightly routine. I was careful to ensure the Webber hadn't rebuilt her home in front of my face, lit my yard and was relieved to find no spider. I hugged my tired body to the doorjamb and watched my little friend do all that was necessary. I brought back the night with the flick of a switch, and pirouetted right into four floaters! I thrust (*paappop!*) and parried (*kaablaam!*), engaging the unseen (*ouch-chair!*) enemy (*sis-boom-bop!*), battle blades blazing from my formidable forearms (*bwaap!*). Four girls exploded in my kitchen.

I'm shot! flashed through my mind as Floppy squirted across the tile like a stick of warm butter from a whale colon. A fifth floater died a slow, annoying death (skreeeeeeeeee!), leaked her helium of life into my private bat cave, and gave up her spirit.

I surveyed the damage, apologized to Floppy with deli turkey, and told him it was okay. We were not targets of a mob hit.

He is extremely timid now but can snatch a piece of ham from my hand at a distance of 10 feet before I can say, "Do you want some...?"

He also has high blood pressure and a nervous tick that makes his tail wag in one direction, really fast, like he's directing traffic for a coffee drinker's convention. My veterinarian has repeatedly asked me to stop giving him bourbon.

July 25, 2013:

I ran into Dr. Bluwboding at Walgreens pharmacy tonight, and she was not impressed when I couldn't remember her name.

I was practicing my ominous voice and the cashier kept asking me, “Silence?”

“Sylas”

“Mr. Silence?”

“Sylas, my first name is Sylas!”

“I'm sorry, sir”

“Sy—”

“Sir, you'll have to speak up, I can't hear you.”

I wore a lengthy trench coat so I'd be prepared when I needed to wear a long cape. However, it snagged in the automatic door, and I was caught. Every time I stepped on the triggering floor panel, the door punched me in the face. Dani approached me.

“Mr. Silence! If you can remember my name, I might be able to help you there!”

She freed me, assisted with breathing exercises in the parking lot, and stressed the importance of meditating on something of beauty every day. Dani has been so supportive.

She was a determined, type-A personality who typed everything, who presented such a professional image, I found myself asking her how to improve my own. I must leave no stone unturned if I am to make an impression on the prestigious League of Shadows. I started a fitness program, by Dani's advice, and once in peak shape, began work on my mind. She was especially helpful in this area.

She was the one who said, “Join the League of Shadows,” when everyone else said, “Get help.” I credit her with saving me.

I was so apprehensive about this shadowy organization, I confided to Dani that my fear of failure was holding me back.

After months of this, she wisely asked, “Would you rather not try to join the League of Shadows and spare yourself the hassle? Or, would you rather try and fail?”

The answer was obvious. Since I lost my job and career prospects, I'd fallen apart. I needed hope, I needed movement in a positive direction, and Dani pushed me through this period of paralysis. She found addresses for me and since the Post Office was on her way home, she mailed my applications. She was a court-appointed psychiatrist with a true servant's heart.

July 31, 2013:

Floppy ate my psychotropic medicine, I'm sure of it. He's a tornado with hair and teeth, tearing around the house. Last I saw him he was in hot pursuit of a group of bunny rabbits, and

when the little Hasenpfeffers disappeared into a burrow, he tried to chew through my driveway. By the time I pulled his head out of the ground he was the huffing and puffing mud monster of Macon County, Illinois, spitting fire and fury. I don't think we'll have to worry about bunnies for a while.

What's in those pills? I examined the prescription carefully. Dani's signature looked vaguely familiar. I phoned her and left a message, for I am now without medicine. I dripped bourbon into Floppy's water, and he calmed as he lapped the copper liquid, reassuring me with tiny licks.

I lifted his brassy little head and whispered, "Hey buddy, don't ever chase anything that isn't running away from you."

His ears flapped, doubling the size of his head, his butterfly-blink tail tickled my elbow, and his wide eyes strained to meet mine, two waning crescents revealing the innocent beauty in my arms. Those eyes have delighted in me at every glance, took every opportunity to approve of me, since he was a pup, a wind-up toy with no off switch, little pause, but always my perfectly adorable angel. He acknowledged my warning, but I somehow knew he'd be on the prowl again tomorrow. His motto was *I'll eat anything once*. His black licorice lips and rice smile created a chivalric grin as if to say,

"Sleep, old friend. I'll watch out for you."

Floppy sighed; all was well in the world because he felt the warm blood flowing through the veins of his best friend; love with no eyes, no ears, no touch, no smell, no rational thought. Undeniably, this was love.

August 14, 2013:

Counseling today. Yuck. The session was a snoozer except that Dr. Bluwboding replaced my medicine without a prescription! She said because of my situation, a paper trail of prescriptions might keep me out of the League of Shadows. Good old dependable Dani; she thinks of everything!

Last Wednesday's session, however, was particularly productive. I am beginning to see that Dr. Bluwboding is a remarkable psychiatrist. I can't quite figure her out, but when I think of her, there's a dark cloud that sucks in sunlight and somehow beams it straight back to me. I enjoy

the attention and now see that my problems are not my fault. I'm starting to feel better about myself and after all, isn't that what's most important?

I showed for my 6pm appointment, sank into the overstuffed leather couch, and contemplated my exposed knee. I hoped it would go quickly. Dani had me purchase party balloons and write my problems on them in permanent marker. I hooked them to my exposed, sandaled toes, and waited. Dani was prompt, as usual, this person I spent more time with than anyone else, but knew little about. She lived to swim, swam all her life, and when she approached, she pushed a bow wave of chlorinated air.

The door opened and in came that familiar burn on my olfactories, followed by her low, "Hmm," typical of all doctors, who want the rest of us to think their brilliant minds are working all the time.

"Let's get this over with," I thought to myself.

The session was pretty normal and just before two hours were up, I asked,

"So what am I supposed to do with these?" pointing to my toe balloons. "I feel like a parade float."

"We were supposed to go outside, but it's raining too hard."

"Why would rain stop a swimmer?"

The corner of Dani's plain face rose. From the side I caught a look of mischief, and for the first time ever she looked genuinely intrigued, she looked surprised, she looked—I can't describe it any other way—for the first time she looked human.

"Let's go!" she said.

We scurried from the basement towards the forbidding crash of thunder and into a fire hose! The absurdity of it all left furrows in her brow, but a grin on her face. She loved the scent of freshly fallen rain on concrete, she said, how it absorbs the earth that dusts the pavement and evaporates into a mist in a mystical marriage of solid, gas, and liquid.

We released the balloons into the sky. I saw happier days as they vanished into the clouds, overhead power lines taking out a few, but I got the message. Dani has an eye for what works, what's practical. The balloons went up, up and away--rain and sparkles of smoldering Mylar came down, down to the ground, and there we were, my first laughter in a long time. I almost cried in the rain, unashamed of being seen. It was as if Dani had ordered the storm with

her mysterious powers of persuasion. Although I had a ways to go, I knew this wizardess of woes was behind the scenes with her secret potion of happiness. I had hope.

August 18, 2013:

I have such a surge of energy this past week! Tonight I'm rappelling from the rotted oak in my back yard, building a repertoire of crime fighting skills! I dangle from my sawtooth talons surveying my kingdom, a sizable, peeling cottage on an acre of land at the end of a gently rising, thickly wooded, battered cul-de-sac. From my perch, I savor a vast expanse bathed in moonshine known as Lake Decatur. Homes on the far bank remind me of money. High on my right, St. Mary's Hospital with resplendent lighting and heliport beacon, looks more like a palace than a solace for the sick and dying. It smears its emerald luster from far to near shore, transforming Lake Decatur into a bejeweled chalice of hewn gold. Soon I'll look down and see children chasing dogs chasing boy ducks chasing girl ducks chasing children who chased them first, dogs on dogs, lovers leaning on trees dreaming of families as cardinals loiter for picnic scraps for their hatchlings, and the first flowers of spring radiate in ripples of life from this source of new life, Lake Decatur.

I catch myself stretching toward the water, convinced I can dive right in from this distance, another momentary lapse of reason. Wake up, Syllas! However, once I get this rappelling down, I'll swing from tree to tree and eventually...cannonball! I've been up here so long, if I look up too fast I think the stars are falling.

Floppy has raced to the base of the oak, pursued me as he would pursue a squirrel, sits on a root and demands I come down so he can eat me. The longer I stare at the funny face of my unaware comedian, the more his lips pronounce words. I'm sure he has mastered English.

I've lived here 13 years and most of my neighbors don't know me, with the exception of Mr. Lochardt, who is too busy trying to afford a home on the other bank to notice my odd behavior, and Mr. Higgs, who frequently forgets where he lives and is often seen trying to groom his pet turtle; I'm not worried about them. With the aid of zero-light imaging, I conduct all training in the cover of darkness. I must make as few daytime appearances as possible to conceal my identity. I can train from dusk 'till dawn on only two hours of sleep! I am the night!

August 21, 2013:

Dani entered the room this Wednesday morning with a calm determination I have not seen in her before.

“Sy, how has the new medicine worked for you?”

“Well, let me think. I see colors more, they seem to brighten things--sunshine, light, they do wonders for my moods. I see things I never saw before. It's like the color in life has, well, life has come back to my life! I was fascinated with Floppy. I meditated on him for hours. He sat on my lap and watched me; He told me he loved me. What's in those pills?”

Dani looked pleased, then in her cracked-crystal voice said, “Good, good, I'm glad.” When she turned away to smile, her chin was a boot heel. “How's your progress been with the League of Shadows, have they replied to your request?” she continued. Was her eye contact more intense today? There's something different about her—she's not mad? No, that's not it.

“For drill, for information? For my application?” I asked. “I don't know if you remember, but they accepted me weeks ago.”

“Months”

“Huh?”

“It's been months,

“Didn't I tell you?” *I'm sure I told her.*

“It's been months, Sy.”

“Oh”

Dani's mooning eyes closed and opened in slow motion today, and to an inattentive eye, one would think she'd fallen asleep, such was the sloth of her blink.

“Good, very good, I'm glad.”

I never noticed her appearance before. She's just been a healing machine in a skirt, could've been transparent for all I cared, but her mouth, her eyes, her hands seem to move with a lazy strobe effect today, giving me time to savor every inch of her shape-shifting into a living, breathing human being. She's purples, blues, and forest greens, dark, deep and colorful, a fairy tale castle buried in the black forest. She's wide-eyed, wacky and, sometimes, even wonderful. There are dimensions, depth to this tool, and she's a real woman. My worksheet assignment received, two hours are up. I can't shake the thoughts from my head.

September 11, 2013:

The floaters are defeated, deflated, lying on the floor, their little vinyl faces look like they died sucking lemons. Three months with them--I was starting to think I lived in a bouncy house. They started grabbing me in the shower, and I knew it was time. I dumped forty in trash containers and hung the rest high on my patriotic *NEVER FORGET!* banner to keep them from the reach of stray dogs, with a sign, *For Wednesday Trash Pickup*. How embarrassing it would be if dogs shredded them all over the neighborhood, and it was my fault.

I'm becoming truly invisible. Ra's Al Ghul taught the Batman that this valuable skill was a matter of *patience and agility*. Invisibility training was not in my League of Shadows welcome packet, but there's no point delaying. Soon, the criminal element of Decatur, Illinois will fear me!

The League of Shadows hasn't replied to my request for training instructions, yet I did receive a very sloppy handwritten letter which acknowledged my questions and promised an urgent response, signed *Ra's Al Ghul*.

My intuition tells me there's something about this letter I must investigate. I took handwriting analysis in college, so I need to put it to good use. Gotham's Commissioner Gordon once said that for a detective, there are no coincidences.

Floppy pouts in the corner, staring holes through me as if I were already invisible. He wonders why I'm not paying attention to him. I'm sure I can be completely invisible, just like the Batman. But when my gaze meets Floppy's, his ears go, "Oh! Call on me! I know the answer!" Perhaps I need a different color if I want to disappear against these desert-rose walls.

Ra's Al Ghul doesn't know I am a huge fan of the Batman. This makes me fearful. Ra's trained the Batman in the mountains of Bhutan and intended to use him to destroy Gotham City. Yet, when he finished training, the Batman escaped the League, destroyed the camp, and nearly killed Ra's. He was Ra's greatest student but his biggest disappointment. I mustn't let him know I am a fan. Lots of bad blood there.

I booby-trapped my home with buckets of water over doors, heavy duty rubber bands on doorknobs and cabinets, fish nets over exits, some methods so secret I dare not put them in writing. I must be prepared for anything at any time.

November 27, 2013:

Dani looked somehow different today.

“Focus! Focus!” the empurpled Dani popped at me for mumbling, but I was distracted by her very presence.

“As I was saying, Doctor Bubbling, I've been using your worksheets on my faulty thinking but,” I went blank. My mind was thought bubbles blowing into a fan. ”But which ones are you talking about again?”

Her eyes are a magnet to mine, blue when I listen to them, brown when I don't. I notice every nuance, every movement, the colors, so many changing colors! She's a Fruit of the Loom, an orchard attacking me with hands and arms, the opposite of charm when I lapse into attention deficit or lack motivation.

“Your sheets were empty, Dingbat!”

Her face is a caricature and when she laughs, it comes alive like a roller coaster loop and I'm unable to dull my senses. Is this a fear I need to face or a face I need to fear?

“Pretty purple pen...”

“Stop saying purple penguin pencil holder!!!” cracked the Blue Meanie.

“But, I forgot, I didn't take them with me.”

“WHY? You forgot what? I handed them to you!” *Oh no, she's coming over!*

There's a recklessness to her walk, two steps forward, one step side to side, another step forward, a woman who commands an enormous personal space.

“I was accepted by the League of--”

“I know that! Come back to the present, Sy!”

When Dani moved closer to explain this stronger medicine, I couldn't help notice her voice had gradually softened from cracked crystal to wet fingertips lightly rubbing the rim of my stemware, stirring me, drawing me in like a siren.

She leaned in and her violet floral silk blouse fell open a bit. I lost track of the conversation. Our session was over. What just happened? What did she say?

December 16, 2013:

I found my lost journal, I'm back, and spring is here! I mowed over some aggressive Annabelle Hydrangeas that choked out my rare blue flowers and blanketed the neighborhood.

The bunnies would eat them anyway, and now the joke's on them. I just have to be careful to take Floppy with me into the lawn as a deterrent. Those bunnies must be really ticked off after the slap-down he gave them. I know they are cute little fluffy bunnies who chew the cud, but they'd eat through that driveway, into my crawlspace, bust up under my bathroom, pin me down and kill me softly with duct tape if they knew I mowed over all those delectable delicacies. These high power transmission lines give the bunnies unthinkable powers and short tempers. Beware.

I dipped Floppy in Pine Sol and pushed him around the kitchen. His hair is so long, I think I stuck his medicine in the wrong hole. He's been hiding all day, probably because this is the coldest spring we've had in years.

My fuchsia body armor arrived. I asked the UPS man where I could dump the thirty-seven bags of mulched hydrangeas that littered my lawn. He yanked the clipboard from my hand and fled so fast he tripped over my trash can. What spilled out was something, something elemental, something terrifying—floaters! No! I fled as quickly as possible, but the image haunts me. Something isn't right. I haven't slept in four days. I really need to phone Dani. I think about her all the time, especially when I'm awake.

January 11, 2014:

They took my car. I met a mental health board of advisors (BoA), and they brought up an arrest from last August at the Decatur Celebration. I'd been studying the behavioral patterns of clowns and was caught sneaking into a tent. I was arrested for unlawful carnival knowledge. The National Clown Association of America didn't even press charges, so now they took my car!

I wore a pink feather boa to the BoA and sat there, invisible. I giggled a lot and that's how they knew I was there. But I wasn't all there, I was invisible!

When I spoke they shook their heads and sighed and I said, "That's me!"

I answered all questions with songs, music, glorious music! My humor went right over their shiny little bobbing Weeble heads, doo dah, doo dah. Since I'm invisible, they treat me like I don't exist, oh doo dah day! Invisible lives matter!

So they took my license and didn't issue a new one with a photo of my new invisible self with glasses. I didn't tell them Dani was treating me. She said it's our secret. If they found out she worked for free, they'd want her too.

Dani does house calls now! She comes twice a week, Wednesday and not Wednesday. The counseling center decided it was best after a restraining order was issued forbidding me to go within 100 feet of any party balloon outlet. It was worth it!

I don't know where Floppy is, but I feel a body next to mine every night, snoring. I know he tastes my nose when I sleep. Sometimes I feel him on my chest lying still across me in the manner one would throw oneself across a grenade to protect from the explosion of hate in the world. This tiny dog in his naive, yet sure manner has somehow protected me. But I'm afraid he has become truly invisible, or moved on. I miss him, I miss him so much.

January 13, 2014:

I fear I have gone mad. I am sure I disposed of all floaters, yet they cry out to me day and night. I feel them in my head laying their gooey gum eggs, sticking them on my brain and hatching horrible dreams:

My widow lies still in my bed, bloody teeth gnashing, puke-green eyes roll around inside my head. A pillow presses over my face 'til my breath ceases, my cries fall back to me, my legs stop twitching, and my eyelids stop flitting, putting an end to my agony. In the dead of night, they drag me away in an artery of hate, sinking me to the violet underground, the world of the lost and left behind, where the blood oozing through my veins dries to a hard red cake. I'm asleep forever in this world, but in the violet underground forever awake.

I'm sealed in a floater, my plastic-wrap tomb. But I'm not dead! I am suffocating as plastic crawls into my nose and down my throat, wheezing and whizzing grow slower, louder. Surely the Lockhardt's, the Higgs's, Dani, the Batman, God Himself, surely they hear it! Like a thousand angry bees burrowing in my ears, stinging my brain. It won't stop!

I'm startled awake by one thought—*Under the Floor!* Vomited from my bed, I hurl into, through, and around my bedroom door, find a crowbar, and tear floorboards from my bathroom like tearing away burning flesh, sweating, swearing, crying to God, and there they are, dozens of floaters in heinous poses of death! With every arm and leg in my body, I drag them into my lawn until the only whistle I hear is my subsiding frothy whimper.

It's over. Peace at last, thank God Almighty! My bathroom is a wreck, medicine cabinet shattered, all contents including medicine under the floor, the result of my telltale fart. I can finally rest.

My bed is an uninhabitable sweatland, but in my great room I find repose in my cheap burgundy recliner. I stare into my sky. My brushed nickel chandelier lolls like a lily, my oak ceiling fan hovers like a mosquito who sucked an entire elephant, the oblique angles, the maze of white doors, antiquated-meets-eccentric, discombobulates and delights me. Bazooka Bubblegum walls chew on me, and I slide thirsty toes through soothing metallic teal carpet, like a wading pool in a candy factory. With blinds drawn, shadows move on each angle differently, my private Grand Canyon making love to the sun. After all these years I still meditate on the lines, the textures, the death of silence. I planned each angle to reach up and take me with it, fly me high into the cathedral ceiling, with my launch lever engaged, the room tilts around the axis upon which I sit, and I see the world between my feet. The farther down I lie, the harder it is to rise again. In my darkest sorrows, I've reclined here, paralyzed in my comfortable corner, my comfortable chair, the only two certainties of security. If I stay here they'll never get me.

January 20, 2014:

My home looks like it was swallowed up and spit out by a paint mixer. After sleeping two days, I have begun bathroom repairs. I'll leave the medicine cabinet under the floor where it fell, the Pandora's hole of hell. It will soon be boarded over and forgotten. I don't know how to explain this to Dani. She gets so angry her eyes turn into pinwheels. I'll keep it quiet but for now, the nightmares have ceased.

Mr. Lockhardt ignores me. They moved the school bus stop from my house to Mr. Higgs, four houses down. Somehow I feel it will be moved again soon.

I hear scratching, lip smacking, an occasional pant, but no dog. This is weird. I put his food out, it gets eaten, my new doggy door flaps occasionally, but I don't know where he's run to. I don't think he's invisible, but he's close.

January 31, 2014:

I feel much better since I've exorcised the floaters. I am able to track conversations now, yet there are still gaps in my memory. I found Floppy! He'd been a topiary the whole time! And, I have resumed my studies in the art of crime fighting!

Dani had personal issues and took two weeks off, but today we resumed in-house counseling. I decided to see if I could illicit a compliment from Dani, something that had eluded me so far. I vacuumed, dusted, polished, scrubbed, painted, placed stylish mirrors over doorways, removed all clutter, detached booby-traps, and plugged in Glade Hawaiian Breeze air fresheners in my great room. I was proud of myself. She'll be very impressed.

The instant I opened the door Dani's pupils dilated as the picture painted itself across her retinas, her dainty nostrils stretched and contracted to sample the tropical tranquility. She scanned the room then disappeared down the hallway followed by the sound of a door closing. She must have loved it; mission accomplished!

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOUR BATHROOM???”

Oops. Forgot the bathroom.

“I had,” *think of something quickly*, ”plumbing issues!”

“WHAT?!”

She's an air raid siren! Plumbing issues, Sy, stick with that.

“Floaters, there were floaters in the crawlspace!” *Shut up, Sy, she doesn't know about them!*

“WHAT?!” quacked the klaxon, muffled by porous drywall.

Think, quick! Agility! Patience! “Gophers, I had gophers in my crawlspace!”

“I don't think plumbing is your biggest problem, Sy!”

Great, now she's back to insults again. No compliments tonight. Yet, I felt a new lightness to our interactions. We discussed my need to find meaning in life.

I told Dani, “When Mom was dying, it's the most fulfilled I'd ever been. I'd take care of her 24 hours a day, and whenever I could get a nurse to come in and take my place, I'd go out and do things for myself. I could go to the store, maybe see a movie, work out, but I knew if anything happened to me, I'd die doing God's work and go straight to heaven. I was invincible.”

“Well, Sy, so you know how that feels. There are other ways to find fulfillment. If you want to be important, make someone else feel important. It works.”

Dani encouraged me to find activities I could walk to, even in the bleak mid-winter. She was a master at giving concrete examples rather than concepts. As she prepared to leave, she reviewed my instructions, donned her black-and-white, big-button wool chesterfield coat while I pulled fishnets from it. She fixed her gaze on me.

“Okay, now, what are we going to do this weekend?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Goofy!”

“Try to do something, anything.”

“Remember when you felt a sense of worth, right?”

“Yes, when Mom died.”

“So what are you going to do this weekend to feel like that again?”

We locked eyes and minds. Silence. Then that face of hers lit up like a nuclear flash, surprised at what burst from both our lips,

“Kill--DAD!!!” spilled out in tremors of laughter and left us like a pair of unbalanced washing machines, bracing our bodies against the nearest wall to prevent shaking to pieces.

Dani didn't ask why there were thirty-seven heavy-duty garbage bags filled with compacted snow strewn haphazardly about my yard, balloons in toilets, never questioned my arrest, never questioned when her turkey moved across the floor while we were talking, never focused on the superficial or superfluous, but not in a supercilious way, she listened. She always listened. She left with a smile on her face. I feel fulfilled.

February 4, 2014:

Counseling two days ago. Dani asked more about the *BoA*, but what I most remember from that meeting is Dani, her face. Every perfectly symmetrical element was amplified around her pinched nose; lips in a perpetual pucker like dew-kissed tulips under summer sunrise fireworks splayed across her milky cheek bones in a sensory detonation. What a face! She was an animator's dream without so much as a pop of the pen, a swoosh of a brush, an exaggeration of all I adored so much.

We'd developed coziness in our counseling. I teased her about her compulsive swimming, calling her *Dasani*, after the bottled water. She looked surprised. I'd grown a sense of humor.

I learned to appreciate Dani as a great friend that day. She did all this for me and my eyes were opened: She'd spent her life rationalizing love, understanding touch, studying emotions, memorizing poems about life, while alien to the sensations that made life worth living. The sun was a heat lamp to her, touch was a cellophane sensation, she walked through life with a Pyrex smile, transparent, unbreakable, untouchable. She was dressed like a jelly jazzberry bubble parasol, but colors never traversed her foliated fortress. She was never alone, just safely sealed.

“Sy, listen! Hey! These people are holding you back! You've got to learn to let go! Would you rather impress Ra's or would you rather impress Bill Higgs, or Kerry Lockhardt, or any of these people who put demands on you and don't know you? Choose the best, let go of the rest!” She cackled as she seemed to slide into me.

“But they aren't like that. Did you know Bill plays fetch with his turtle? It hasn't come back yet. Did I tell you...”

“Focus, dammit! Stop following the bouncing ball!”

“Okay.”

“Sylas, you can do this! You've been making progress!”

“I found Floppy.”

“I knew you would! I saw him all along but I wanted YOU to find him on your own! YOU have to do the work!” *Whoa! Too much coffee, Dani? You could fit an entire coffee mug in that mouth and still have room for a biscotti.* “The visions have stopped! You're training for the League of Shadows again, aren't you? Say yes or I'll kick the sh...”

“Yes!”

“Should you care if Lockhardt hates you? Hell no! You're the League of Shadows! Mater Dei!” *If she talks any faster her lipstick will fly off.*

“Hehehe.”

“Look how far you've come! You cleaned up your house!”

“You like it? Really?”

“Of course I do, it looks fabulous!” Dani surprised me with an attempted high-five. “And you didn't do it for any damn body but yourself!”

Our hands hit, “But I cleaned it for you.”

Dani froze in a sudden thud of silence. She looked at me in tragic disbelief, her eyes moistened, like she'd suddenly remembered something sad. She pulled back. What did I say?

“Look, Sylas, I have to go. I have a busy day tomorrow. I, I need to go to a showing at a funeral home.”

“Who?” I asked.

She ignored me. She looked down and reached into her coat for something. I saw her to the door and in a moment of impulse, as she was mid-sentence on the topic of my League of Shadows to-do list, I leaned in and gave her a hug. It was one of the most awkward things I'd ever done to a human being, like wrestling cats; an arm there, an elbow here, an accidental scratch, holding on until I felt a subtle purr. I fought my awkwardness by locking focus on the *A.D.* engraved on her right earring. My face pressed against a cheek so creamy smooth, she could spread it on bread. The Batman does not hug, Sylas does not hug. And yet, here I was. I was Sylas, not the Batman, not yet. She felt good in my arms. I scanned the curb for her car with her stereotypical vanity plate, *Shrink This!* It was missing.

“Where's your car?”

“I walked.”

“But it's 18 degrees! How many miles is that?” I said, in shock.

“I'm fine, Sy, just, thanks for caring. I'm fine, really.” Her eyes lowered to avoid mine. I looked down and noticed she'd been wearing a pair of dilapidated purple sneakers, her feet pushing through. In fact, her entire wardrobe was borderline hobo. What had become of the stylish lady who once taught me the fine art of dressing? Was she in trouble?

“How far away are you?”

“Fine, Sy. I'm just fine,” she repeated, again, looking away. She gave me another hug and was on her way. I watched her disappear down the block, past the monumental brick mailboxes, the grand shrubs, *For Sale by Owner* and *Beware of Turtle* signs, and tumbling trash containers spitting thin clouds of brilliant vinyl slivers blown about like feathers from a pulverized macaw whipping spiral trails around her in a tempestuous red storm, and out of sight.

February 6, 2014:

Sad news--the League of Shadows informed me that they'd reconsidered and decided I'm not a good fit for them. Apparently they found my blog and my secret is out—I'm a fan of the Batman and not to be trusted. However, the letter suggested I try Nocturnal Mine Sweeping with the Balkan Army. It said I could wear black, and although I wouldn't be the night like the

Batman, I could live in the dark. Was this a joke? The League of Shadows is known for many things, least of which is humor. This was the second handwritten letter from Ra's Al Ghul, smudged, shoddy, pretty amateur for such an elite organization.

I could barely read the darn thing and spent an hour examining it, pulling it apart letter by letter, word for word, just to understand it. I think I have it down, but the clear message stamped across the top was, **DENIED**. Message received.

I also concluded from my handwriting analysis that the writer was private, difficult to understand, and an asshole. A lot of good that does me now. I have been discarded again.

This was my focus since my life exploded on Memorial Day 2012. Dani saved me from wandering aimlessly by encouraging me in my quest to be a ruler of the night, a dark knight. Because of counselor/patient confidentiality, I knew I could count on her to keep my secret. How can I tell her? How can I face myself? I made a fool of myself all this time. I stuffed the letter in my pocket. I'll think about it later.

February 7, 2014:

Not sure how I feel, but Dani is here for Friday counseling. I'll hold my sad news but hey, Floppy is doing well, bourbon free, psychotropic free! I cleaned my yard, and I prepared homemade pizza, using my worthless talons as pizza cutters.

Dani is so startlingly elegant this morning, as only she can be. A white polka-dot dress she calls Fruit Loops looks like Wonder Bread; Dani, my favorite swimmer, with visions of Water Woman dancing in her head. Midnight blue sneakers by Sketchers that would be at home in a *Peanuts* cartoon bring out her eyes as if cut from the same canvas, and burgundy nail polish treats all but one naked nail.

“Why is this one different? Is he the leader?”

“No, no. I only had time to do the one.”

Her answer confused me, yet she glowed and why, I didn't know, it was hard to describe how a lady could look so ridiculously outrageous and so seductively radiant at the same time. She was framed by sterling silver penguin earrings she says are by Annemette Djernæs, directing a rush of Barbie Doll hair around her ear. Sleeping Beauty meets the Joker. Her puffy, watery eyes told me she'd been swimming, that Dasani!

We relaxed under the smoky ambiance of a China blue oriental lamp, put our bare feet on a faux onyx ottoman complete with Bat symbol and concealed compartment. We reviewed my charts. I noticed a melancholy in her voice, like she was expecting me to say something. I didn't ask what she was thinking, I just figured she was surprised at my lucidity. When I shift my weight, I feel the crumpled letter in my pocket, reminding me I'm a disappointment.

We took a long break and I played my *Batman Begins* DVD. I hoped this movie would help me face my fear, fear of rejection from an organization I'd wanted to be a part of my whole life. We reached the scene where Ra's Al Ghul, played by the actor Ken Watanabe, speaks in an unintelligible language. Dani giggled, her little toes wiggled like ten Tweety birds squirming for a worm.

“What's so funny?” *Why was she laughing? She hasn't smiled all day.*

“Nothing. He said...the guy, it's funny.”

“Who?”

“The oriental guy.”

I skipped the DVD back to the scene, replayed it, and as she turned her head away, I saw the wink of an alabaster smile. What was so funny?

“What did he say?”

“It was funny,” she reluctantly replied.

“Who?”

“Ra's Al Ghul”

“You know the language?”

“Minesweeping He told Batman he should sweep mines for...”

Something slurred from her mouth and she trailed off

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

She went silent as if put on the spot. She began sobbing and disappeared into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. What just happened? What did I just do? I pretended I didn't notice what had happened. A woman in my house, crying, I'm not used to this! She knew what that actor was saying, even though—Balkan Minesweeper? She hadn't seen my letter yet. I had an uneasy feeling but found a pile of laundry and spent a few minutes on the daily load, burning nervous energy, rifling through pockets for keys, papers, surprise mouse traps. I felt a large yellow sticky note which had stuck in my trench coat pocket and gone unnoticed. I was

about to toss it when something, some intuition, something I absorbed from those months training to fight crime, told me—go on, open it.

It wasn't my handwriting. Hard to tell if it was handwriting at all. The handwriting was that of Ra's Al Ghul. It said,

Dear Sylas, thank you for inviting me into your home. I was in a world of pain, but you made it better.

I love you,

Dani

She must have slipped it in my pocket when she hugged me. I swear it was Ra's Al Ghul's uniquely poor handwriting. Something was not right. I had that feeling, that feeling in the pit of my stomach like I was falling off a cliff, not knowing what to do, but knowing I needed to do something fast. I heard Dani in the bathroom, still moving about, so I quietly jammed a chair up under the doorknob to hold her while I searched her coat, not knowing exactly what I was looking for. I needed answers before she emerged from behind that door.

I retrieved bottles of blue pills, the same I used, the same Floppy ate, labeled *Ahni Ducard*. Ducard? Who was Ahni Ducard? I found a driver's license cut in half and an expired medical badge, both with the name Ahni Ducard. In fact, only one piece of identification had the name Danchari Bluwboding--the expired badge she wore at the counseling center.

I threw on some shoes, flew to my file cabinet, gathered prescriptions and notes, and spread them on the counter top. It only took 30 seconds to see what was going on. The prescriptions, the letters from Ra's postmarked *Bhutan* with the occasional mysteriously rubbed-out letter or two, appearing as if someone had dripped bleach, CHLORINE bleach. The page, notes, the signatures, they were all—Dani.

The bathroom door opened, followed by a loud, wooden thump as the chair fell in, landing at Dani's feet. I forgot the damn bathroom door opens inward, stupid me. No wonder the League of Shadows didn't want me! I heard a startled Dani,

“What are you doing???”

“Oh, sorry. One of my booby-traps I forgot about. Ha, ha, so sorry. Many blessings on your family, ha!” I blushed.

“What? What is wrong with you, Dude?”

She returned to me, lugging the heavy wooden chair, no improvement from when she left. However, her tears had now mingled with mascara and made her look like a raccoon hooker. She killed the DVD and plopped heavily onto the couch, rubbing her eyes. Then a thought entered my mind, a perfectly innocent question.

“You ever been to Bhutan?”

Dani paused and, tearfully but annoyingly replied, “What the hell are you talking about?” in crumbling words. “Aren't you even going to ask me what's wrong???”

I was caught off guard, not knowing how to react now that my source of strength had shown weakness.

I ignored my discomfort at a vulnerable Dani and repeated, “Have you ever been to Bhutan?”

“You don't know??? You don't know what's wrong! Have you ever been in a freakin' Turkish prison?” she shot back, hoping to illustrate the absurdity of my question. “Focus! What are you talking about? I can't stand that damn movie, dude. We need to get back to your positive thinking exercises!” Her refusal to answer was unnecessary because her expression told me all I needed to know. I'd sneezed on her house of cards.

“We need to talk,” I said in a serious tone, not sure it was safe to look into her eyes.

Henri Ducard was an emissary of Ra's Al Ghul, the man who recruited the Batman from a Bhutanese prison before he was the Batman. Henri had a daughter named Ahni. What was going on? So many things went through my mind. Was Dani a plant from the League of Shadows? Was she a fraud? Why would Ahni Ducard's name be all over Dani's pills, her identification? And now that I have my sanity, why is her coat full of the same drugs she gave me, and why did my dementia go away when the pills stopped?

Dani slid into her Sketchers and eased towards the bathroom again, perhaps for another cry, when I shouted,

”Ahni!” She snapped her head around so quickly, I could've sworn her body didn't turn with it, ”Ahni, Ahni Ducard?”

Her barbed glare reached down my throat and stopped my heart, making my mouth pasty, my extremities numb, and my temples palpitate. She edged toward me with the timidity of a turtle who had dropped her shell.

She leaned on the chair she'd been dragging. In a blubbery mess, she laughed, "Hey, is crazy Mr. Higgs still walking his turtle?" pausing in an abortive attempt at a do-over. Then in a whisper, she looked down, "There was no other way."

I handed her a notepad.

"Sign please"

She shoved the chair into me and blew through the front door so fast, the suction closed it behind her. I wasted no time tripping over the chair, pushing it out of the way with my shin, catching myself on the doorknob and hobbling out into the February freeze.

In a panicked pursuit, I strained to find Dani in the gale, my eyelashes salted with frozen condensation, but I narrowed the gap with each clumsy stride. I didn't want to hurt her, I wanted the truth!

Dani was a shaker of sprinkles, billowing towards her icing destination, Lake Decatur, which after six days of temperatures in the teens had iced over. I knew I could outrun her, but she could outswim me, and as I was about to overtake her, I could not believe what she was doing. Without hesitation, Dani tumbled over the bank onto the frozen lake in a back spin, tottered to her feet and scudded away. She didn't think I'd follow. She was wrong, until...

The ice was unpredictable, and having lived on Lake Decatur my entire life, I knew the danger spots; she was about to find one. I slid to a stop, no more than 20 feet from her. Dani turned and faced me--haystack hair shuttering the face I'd somehow grown to love. For a few moments, nothing was said; we were two wax figures frozen in time, then I broke the silence.

"Why? Why did you do this to me? Why?"

Her whole being was consumed with violent shivers.

With what little breath she had left, she breathed, "I love you, Syllas,"

"I love you too."

Sorrow fell like a veil over the little girl who wanted so much to be loved, but was so afraid to ever hear it. Tears poured ice palms on her windburned cheeks, pooling and crystallizing on her eyelids in sparkling diamond settings for her sapphire eyes, calling to me from her sagging brow. Her mouth was an oval-cut ruby, center facets alternately reflecting freshly fallen snow in a chatter; the rise and fall of her breasts in complimentary rhythm was an angry, bellowing sea.

"You don't want me!!!"

“You don't know that!!!”

“Trust me, you don't want me!!!”

“I don't know who you are!!!” I shouted into the salivating storm.

I had no answers, only questions—Dani had been feeding me hallucinogens, filling my head with fantasies about the League of Shadows, and telling me lies so she could continue to treat me in a sick, self-licking ice - cream cone scheme, and for what, because she loved me? The sum total of it all was an absolute icicle through my skull. Who was Ahni Ducard? Did Ra's even exist? I paused, and what did I see? I saw a beaten, defeated woman, her cherub face, a child who just wanted to be held but didn't know how. We'd spent our lives asking questions and the answers were right in front of us.

“I want you enough to do this!!!”

I put one foot in front of the other, and she was gone. The ice snapped and, in an instant, the lake swallowed her. The frozen wasteland took my heart.

I threw myself at the edge of the ice hole. The water bit at me as I reached in for her. Nothing, nothing left of her but translucent splashes of sapphire from her seraph eyes, crimson from her cinnamon smile, golds, purples, white dreams in forest greens waltzing like drunken lovers in an iridescent dance—all the colors embodied in my beautiful, beautiful Dani.

The wind roared a requiem. Dirges dripped in sleeted tears from Sylas's sad, searching eyes, forming ice-flow lifeboats upon the colors, rippling death sighs from the wounding waters. Sylas reached into the amorphous rainbow pool one more time, kissed it to his numb, trembling lips, bowed his spirit into the wave, and he was gone.

No bodies were ever found, no one looked for them. Ahni and Sylas lived lives of darkness, blind to their own light until it was reflected in one who truly knew them. They found each other and on February 7, 2014, they became one with the greater light, the light that powers the sun, that lights the moon, that brings new life every spring. But all anyone will ever know about them is they once were, and then, they were no more under the dark, dark ice.

--Unknown

June 23, 2005, 9:41am

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