

The Procedure

The skin around her green eyes was shrouded in a sickly blue while undertones of black hung heavy in the deepest parts of the sockets.

“Don’t worry, dear, the swelling goes away after a couple of days. You won’t even know a bruise was there once you’re done healing!” the nurse explained. The two women looked at one another in the mirror of the hospital bathroom, unable to maintain eye contact because of the harsh white glare from the overhead lights.

“Christ almighty! They can put men on the moon and cure diabetes, but they can’t make these lights somewhat bearable,” the nurse exclaimed. She turned towards the doorway of the room and walked away while shaking her head.

The year was 2078 and memories were now arbitrary. Missy Nolan stared at her reflection, dazed and unable to keep her black eyelids from falling shut every ten seconds. It was as if the bruise added five pounds and taunted her to keep them open for as long as she could. Missy slowly made her way back to the bed where she’d been for the past two days. The Procedure was the answer to all problems and here she was, on the other side of it. It was the reason she was here after all and, although she felt like death warmed up right now, she was genuinely relieved she finally went through with it. At least, she knew she would feel that way once the amnesia, pain medication, and whatever else they shot her up with wore off. The thought of ingesting multiple illicit substances made her nose scrunch in disgust. *Drugs were bad, right? Why would anyone willingly do them?* she thought. Then she realized that there was no need to

dwell on things that would resolve themselves, like a bruise. Missy returned to the hospital bed, climbed under the covers as her eyelids succumbed to the heaviness, and slept harder than she ever had.

That same day, about fifteen miles away, a boy named Jacob ran frantically through a suburban neighborhood looking for answers. He had woken up around seven thirty, like any other morning, except this was not like any other morning. Hell, he hadn't felt a sense of normality in months, not since some of his friends, even a few family members, signed up for the Procedure. *It was self-mutilation*, Jacob thought. It was insanity, crossing a line beyond all lines. And yet, people he once considered ordinary, and practical had opted towards it. Before his race through the streets, he had wandered into the living room and found his sister sitting on the sofa in a daze, knees tucked up into her arms and remnants of tears on her cheeks.

"Tina? What's wrong?" he asked her.

"It's Missy. Jacob... she went through with it."

As the words left her mouth and hung in the air between them, the boy furrowed his eyebrows and attempted to ask just what the hell she meant by, "she went through with it." Then the terrible reality clicked in his big brain. He stood like a statue in his childhood living room, dumbfounded and sober as a nun. He didn't say anything back to Tina. For the first time in his twenty-six years of life, he couldn't find the right words to string together to concoct a reply with which he'd be satisfied.

Images of sterilized medical equipment, white lights, and green scrubs swirled around his head, and he felt dizzy. *The green scrubs*, he thought. *Way to ruin a perfectly good color by associating it with something so depraved.* But perhaps they meant to do that, to take a universal shade most people associate with vitality, resurgence, and overall healthiness, at least in nature, and embed their own version of health within it. Green means good. Green means a fresh start, and who wouldn't want a fresh start? That was the punchline for the Procedure, an innocent enough idea that a passerby seeing it on a billboard would think nothing of it. They might even call the number that always accompanied the catchphrase. The phone call would start with curiosity, a simple inquiry into what the Procedure might entail, with no commitment necessary in the beginning. After all, it's just a phone call, right? And no one ever died from that, unless you consider every call made by the U.S. government to release nuclear codes, unleashing fresh hell on an anonymous village across the ocean. There was a lot of that these days, but with the Procedure, the heaviness of the world's war crimes, famines, natural disasters, and brutality were out of sight, out of mind. Literally.

Jacob returned from his thoughts and glanced over his shoulder at the clock. He knew he had to run fast because, in the year 2078, eight o'clock was the designated time for erasing memories forever.

Neighbors watched from their windows and porches as the boy ran past their houses in nothing but his boxers and moccasins, knowing all too well he would never make it in time regardless of his pace or pleas. This was a scene all too familiar to neighbors around the nation. It never got easier to witness someone repeatedly calling a phone number they know is out of service, just in case a voice answers one day. Whoever the

person was, the assumed loved one this boy was racing to get to, any memory of him would be gone from their mind by the time he reached the hospital doors.

The Procedure was first introduced to the public eight years before, after a young man went viral on social media, claiming an injury he got while surfing had cured him of all mental illness. This was, at the time, just another sensational allegation taking the internet by storm with its fifteen minutes of fame, fading out after something better came along to take its place. But the kid refused to be silenced and, eventually, he gained medical professionals' undivided attention.

The story goes that this young man was out surfing one morning with a friend and the Velcro safety strap came undone from his friend's ankle in the waves. As it drifted towards the shore, the point of the board hit the young man in his left eye and knocked him unconscious beneath the waves. He woke up the next day in the hospital and, after a few days, realized that his depression, anxiety, OCD, and ADHD had ceased to exist in his brain. He no longer avoided talking to his friends, suffered sleepless nights of insomnia, or felt compelled to throw away a pair of pants because someone else folded them incorrectly. He could enjoy sunny days without calculating where the nearest bridge might be. His accident occurred around eight o'clock in the morning, thus making it the universal time which the Procedure would take place.

Doctors related it to a modern-day lobotomy but, since that word had soured for the public over a hundred years before, they went with a much softer narrative; they claimed there was a specific "procedure" that could cure various mental illnesses and

guarantee almost one hundred percent improvement in quality of life. In addition, painful memories faded from the patient's mind after a few months.

With the suicide epidemic affecting about twenty-five percent of the population each year, it didn't take long for people to sign up for the Procedure.

After it was approved by the government, appointment books started filling up. It was about four months later that patients and their loved ones started noticing cases of "brain fog," as they called it. It appeared that the catch and this was a dealbreaker for many, was that there was no guarantee the patient wouldn't forget their good memories along with the bad ones.

Over time, some of the people who had undergone the Procedure started to forget just about everything and everyone that made up their life. In response to this, the United States government created communities for those patients. A place where forgetting was the new normal, like a town occupied by souls ridden with Alzheimer's. Entire lives slowly flickered out of existence as time went on, human candles with cursed wicks. Many of these communities grew into neighborhoods and even small cities, each one populated by zombified versions of those who signed up for the Procedure who, hoping for the best, received otherwise.

How is all this possible, you ask? It's not what you might imagine. The world hadn't fallen into complete dystopia, exactly. No, people still walked their dogs, fought over what color to paint the bathroom, sat in traffic, said their prayers each night, attended graduations and funerals and participated in all the mundane things that made up our silly existence. What seemed to turn in the last forty years was the incessant need for

instant gratification and seize the endless opportunities that would grant it.

Consumerism became so fervent that companies who didn't offer same-day delivery became obsolete, and small businesses were a thing of the past. Quantity overrode quality in every aspect and that bled into everyday life, as well. Instead of waiting for an artist to commission a painting, people typed in their idea to an AI generator and got exactly what they wanted. No waiting, no worries. But this greed allowed for human ideas to no longer be vital. The minds of poets, artists, musicians, writers, and creators were second-rate, leftovers that rotted in the box until they were finally thrown away. The complete disregard for humans' place in art impacted society in a way no one saw coming until it was too late. From local musicians to pieces of classic literature, nothing could compete with a computer-generated song or story. So, the ones who ached for authenticity turned away from the world and hid in the corners, surrendering to substances or suicide because they knew a spurious life was no life at all. Then the Procedure started making headlines and it mirrored a silver lining for those conflicted by the technology-oppressed rat race. If you no longer struggle with depression or anxiety over the reality around you, then that reality is much more bearable, even delightful, as long as the ambivalence nullifies the dread.

The shine of that silver lining dulled once the public learned of the memory-loss side effect, though it didn't entirely defer people from signing up. Hope will make you do crazy things like risking all your memories for a little peace. Hope will drive you insane.

These communities thrived due to another common side effect that doctors could not explain: many patients created false realities that lasted one day or two, causing them to be someone different than the person they were the day before. It was an inexplicable

phenomenon, one that had the majority of the public rioting in the streets. However, it was irreversible and, albeit reluctantly, accepted that people with this ailment didn't benefit from riots or protests; the damage was already done. The next best thing was to make the rest of their existence as comfortable as possible, like a terminal patient reaching the end days.

So dear readers, this leads us back to a morning when a boy named Jacob screamed through the streets in his blue boxers and worn-out moccasins, panting the name of the girl he loved over and over, praying it wasn't too late.

Missy and Jacob met during freshman year of high school when their bodies still held onto baby fat and their teeth hadn't yet been straightened by metal. The public's introduction to the Procedure was still four years away, AI had become more popular in the last ten years, but appreciation for manmade craftsmanship prevailed. This was especially true for Missy, a lover of all things vintage and out-of-date. Her bedroom was a shrine of all the objects people seemed to discard or consider useless. Old movie theater stubs, lighters that no longer worked, vinyl records, dead flowers in empty beer bottles, stained glass made by her neighbor, the baby teeth she left for the tooth fairy that never came, taxidermized butterflies in broken glass frames. Missy felt how you treated these things, things that served no real purpose to you, and asked for a little acknowledgment, attested to the character of a person. She refused to forget what came before her; an irony not lost upon her now. Jacob found her smoking a cigarette and reading a Kurt Vonnegut novel on the football field after school one day, purple streaks of her hair highlighted by the September sunshine, making her look like a deviant fairy.

He'd never smoked a thing in his life at that point, but he didn't mind breaking that streak for her that afternoon. Anything to be near her, the girl with a stubborn grin, smoke-filled lungs, green saucer eyes that tempted you to ask just what they had witnessed. And there was that color again, green, and the vast spectrum of meaning it held; vivacity, health, greed, jealousy. And now it was also the color doctors wore to erase the soul's blueprint. What word is there to describe such an action? Jacob could see how content Missy was with herself and how she appreciated originality to a fault, like resolving to smoke cigarettes instead of vaping. Plus, cigarettes were much harder to find those days since big tobacco companies started dropping like flies amidst the swell of nicotine devices that could be made with a 3D printer in minutes. That incessant hunger for instant gratification bled into all corners, especially the vices. He walked over to her, initiating what would eventually lead him to bang his fists on the entrance of a hospital years later, on a sunny day in September, not unlike the day he met her.

On days when the Procedure took place, hospitals across the country were required to lock their doors as a protective measure against disgruntled, manic people who came looking for their loved ones. Mothers and fathers, sisters, children, or friends always came looking, and always too late. This was the case for Jacob although he didn't believe it yet. He happened to be the only one begging at the doors that morning, though, the last white knight outside his damsel's castle. There were days when you had to do things alone and, sometimes, you had to fail trying to do them. His knuckles left bloody marks on the steel doors and the pavement where it dripped at his feet. He was out of breath, his voice was hoarse from screaming, and he didn't know what to do next. The boy sank to his knees and crouched against the brick building where his best friend chose to die.

That is what the Procedure was, after all. A blank canvas but not without bleaching away the art that had been there before, all those miraculous colors now a sickly white.

Would Missy forget him entirely? Would there be remnants of him? Could the Procedure actually take away her suicidal tendencies and anxiety but leave the rest of that gorgeous mind alone? Thoughts crashed against one another in Jacob's brain as he wiped the snot from his nose and slowly got to his feet.

The first time Missy tried to kill herself was about two years into their relationship. Neither of them had ever seriously dated anyone before so there were a few growing pains when it came to being a girlfriend, and vice versa for Jacob. These pains seemed to weigh on her more, though, and she knew this because he never took anything as seriously as she did. What started with dismissing crude comments or a picture of another girl on his phone morphed into much heavier matters. And isn't that the big elephant in the room? The things we love about someone turn into our pet peeves, extra baggage, and burdens that make us wonder how we ever appreciated them at all. The unwashed dishes in the sink accumulated to a point where you'd think Missy was collecting them, and the dust bunnies under her bed were no longer endearing signs of a girl who doesn't clean often, it wasn't cute anymore to neglect herself the way she did when she was sixteen, when people can blame it on angsty girlhood. That was always it, youth being an excuse for aberrance, and everyone expects you to grow out of it. But what about the ones who never grow out of it? Where do they fit into the rat race? Missy was almost a grown woman now, which meant the world replaced its pity with blame towards her for not brushing her hair for a week. It would go on this way until it didn't. The guilt of being ungrateful for the air in her lungs loomed over her and she would,

eventually, find the will to go through the motions of life. During these times, Missy felt like she was giving her best impression of someone who can do life. The peculiar thing about depression is that it doesn't mean people don't want to live, they just don't know what to do with all the hours in a day.

Missy returned home with a plastic hospital bracelet and a headache the morning after her attempt. She and her father stopped at a local cafe on the way home for coffee and glazed donuts, a combo that cures all wounds. Even the ones that need thirteen stitches. It was a Sunday morning and Missy nursed her damaged spirit while kids her age were nursing their hangovers just a few miles away. Jacob was one of these kids and he hadn't known the details of what went on. All he knew was Missy had gone to the emergency room hours ago and she was now home, safe but not sound. He hadn't called her once, just a few short texts asking if she was alright. This is when things turned for Missy. Had it been compassion fatigue that hindered him from calling? Was the party just too good to miss, even for a minute? Was it all so unfair, twisted, and too much for the boy to comprehend and make an executive decision? Perhaps. But if the roles were reversed, Missy would have kicked down the door to leave the party, she would have stolen a car and driven all night to get to him. She would have called.

The days after Missy had the Procedure were hazy with befuddlement and sleepiness. About a month into healing, she finally felt like herself again but lighter and energized. It seemed like it was all worth it, even if she couldn't remember what she took in her coffee or where she got those deep scars on her arms. It didn't matter, that was all behind her, and she knew whatever awaited her arrival was bound to be spectacular. She started writing again, thriving at work, and going out regularly with friends.

Six months later, Missy was moved into a government community for the forgetful. It was her parents who'd first noticed something was wrong when she started throwing her collection of antique novels, vinyl records, and dead butterflies away. Her mother had found them in her trash can and confronted her about it, only for her to respond agitated, "I'm not sure why those things were in my room! They're just dust traps and clutter." This was, I'm sure you can guess, devastating. They knew it was a possibility, but it seemed so far away, a misfortune that happens to others because, surely, the world would never take away a mind like Missy's, would it? It turns out it absolutely would.

Jacob ached to visit her but refused, in fear that he might run into her family or friends and be met with a slew of acrimony and malice. This couldn't be all his fault, right? And it wasn't his fault when Missy tried to end her life, either. Those were conscious decisions made by a distraught individual who no longer had consideration for anyone or anything else. She should have tried harder to get better; she should have gone on different medications or found a better therapist. These thoughts, Jacob knew, were just excuses to stop him from going rabid with grief about the fact that the girl he once loved no longer existed and, even worse, decided that living with possibly no memory at all was better than having him in her dreams each night. *How hopeless she must've been,* he thought. *How alienated and abandoned she must've felt. No, that's wrong. She was alienated by me. She had been abandoned.* Jacob stood in front of the mirror in his bedroom and closed his eyes. Hot tears adorned his cheeks as he packed a bag and found directions to the community Missy now resided.

Jacob swallowed hard and rolled down the car window. He showed his identification to the guard at the checkpoint, waited for the steel gates to open, and drove into the nuclear town he would now call home. Jacob followed directions the guard had given him to locate Missy. She was a painter today, according to the report the guards receive each morning from the community doctors. This allows visitors to easily track down their loved ones and receive a heads-up about what version they will be meeting that day. Yesterday, Missy had been a landscaper specializing in poisonous flowers, and the week before that she was a librarian. It was strangely beautiful how these people could be something different each day without having to switch their entire lifestyle to do it. They just couldn't remember their personalities or who loved them.

Jacob parked his car outside the art center and walked towards the door, stopping to look at a girl sitting outside at an easel, paintbrush, and pallet in hand, purple streaks of hair hanging around her fair face like butterfly wings laid against a piece of glass in the sunlight. She had a stubborn grin that pushed up her cheekbones and she was humming a song she couldn't place, but Jacob recognized it from her record collection. He would recognize that song anywhere. The girl's green eyes darted in his direction and held his gaze for a few moments before turning back to the canvas. He approached her with a careful grace as one might approach a wounded animal, trying their best to emit a safe presence, as if to say, "You can trust me, I won't hurt you like they did." Jacob glanced at the girl's canvas and drew in a sharp breath, holding it there in his chest like a fist. A watercolor portrait started back at him, and he thought for a moment he was looking in a mirror.

Missy turned around and looked at Jacob who stood stunned in the bright sunlight.

“How strange, you look just like him,” she said as she pointed at the painting. “I keep seeing him in my dreams.”