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Opening extract from

Survive

Written by

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Published by

Electric Monkey, an imprint of Egmont UK Limited

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Survive
First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Electric Monkey, an imprint of Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN

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ISBN 978 1 4052 6413 6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.electricmonkeybooks.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

52578/2

Typeset by Avon Dataset Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

Chapter 1

It is ten minutes before ten, and normally I'd be staking out a chair for Group. That's the kind of thing you worry about in an institution like Life House. I guess that's good, in a way. The challenge of Group is to find a chair as far away from Old Doctor as possible without sitting too close to Big Stink, otherwise secretly known as BS. BS is Ben, and he's the only boy on Life House D, which is specifically for cutters and suicides, and he smells like urine baked at three-fifty for forty minutes. You don't want to sit next to BS for an hour. I mean he is extra sweet and all and we've had some nice conversations, but an hour of inhaling his fumes can cause brain damage. Sometimes the logistics are tough, so I get there early and wait. I'm a planner.

But today I'm not participating in Group. Instead, I'm

flying home to New Jersey for the first time since arriving in Idaho three hundred and forty-five days ago. My plane leaves in exactly six hours, nine minutes, and thirty seconds according to the pocket watch my father left me. It is old, but I trust it. He's dead, but I still trust him more than anyone else I know, and I certainly trust his pocket watch a lot more than I trust the airlines and the schedules they almost never keep. But I can't worry about that now. The fact remains: I'm leaving Life House, my home away from home for the past year, in six hours and nine minutes flat. Ticktock ticktock.

I'm here at Life House because a year ago I had an "incident." The professionals, otherwise known as my doctors, have labeled it an *attempted suicide*. Me and Old Doctor (he's the chief of chiefs around here and my doctor too) haven't agreed that that is what actually happened. I might have just been cutting or maybe I just wanted attention from my mother. These are two theories we've considered during the last year.

"And until we agree on what happened," he has said many times, "you may call it what you wish."

In two hours, 12 p.m. to be exact, I will board a bus and leave here forever. Over the past six months, I've been accumulating *Progress Points*—speaking in Group, two points; mentoring other girls, three points; sharing and

communicating during non-required social activities, five points—all acts of good faith in pursuit of one goal: freedom. The points added up, enough to earn me this week-long trip to celebrate Christmas with my family.

What the doctors don't know is that it's all been a lie: everything I've done, every "hello" to Drs. Crimshaw and Gallus, every perceived act of kindness to my suite mates, Beth and Sam and BS, every faux revelation delivered with a tear or two to Old Doctor has been in service of a secret plan.

Here's what you need to know: When I get on that airplane tonight, I will never arrive home. My body will land in New Jersey, but me, the airy part that lives inside my body, my soul if you must, will not. When the lights go down and all the people nod off for a short nap, I will unfasten my seat belt and quietly walk back to the restroom and take a handful of kryptonite and go to sleep. Forever. And when the plane lands, and everyone is scurrying to find their luggage and looking for signs for ground transportation, I'll be on my own flight to oblivion.

Chapter 2

Deceiving my friends and doctors isn't devious or selfish; it's just pragmatic and necessary to achieve my goal. I'm a planner, as I've said a few times already, and if I don't know exactly what's ahead of me, I lose my shit. That's probably why I'm here. Life is impossible to plan, so I'm constantly losing my shit. One minute things are good, the next somebody dies or gets sick or stops being your friend. You can't count on anyone or anything, which makes life difficult if you're a planner.

Actually, that's the best part of tonight. I know exactly what's ahead of me. Planning it, anticipating its finality and precision, is the best sedative I've ever taken.

How did I come up with my plan?

It came to me a little over six months ago. One night

I dreamed I was in a plane flying toward the milky blue lining that separates the earth's atmosphere from space. It looked like a little square of heaven itself from the airplane window. The me in the dream was thinking, *God must be there*. The flight lasted forever as we hurled ever closer to space but never actually left our atmosphere. There were no other passengers on board the plane. The cabin was empty of attendants, and all the storage cabinets were flung open and empty. The captain's voice came on repeatedly, asking flight attendants to prepare for landing. The plane flew higher and higher and began to shake—just a bit at first, then faster—but I did not scream and I wasn't scared. In the dream, I was constantly cinching my seat belt while I watched that horizon of milky blue heaven before me, just out of reach. I felt safe, like when I was a happy little kid before everything changed, before my father killed himself. It felt like the plane was just going to coast like this forever, and then suddenly the plane dropped into a downward spiral back toward the earth and I tried to scream, but no sound came out. Just before impact, everything turned to black.

I woke up breathless and in a cold sweat, alone in my room, still weighted with the haziness of sedation. (I probably should have mentioned that the day before my dream, I had had another "incident" and they had loaded

me up on sedatives to keep me calm.) It was as though God, or someone or something, had delivered a message through my dream: no more "incidents." In my heart, I knew the first and second "incidents" were halfhearted, non-attempts at hitting the switch. That's why I'd never let the doctors tell me otherwise. Suicide requires true intentions, and mine never were. The first time, I wanted my mother to find me with the carving knife and I wanted her to cry and bemoan my fate, like she did my father's and grandmother's. But I never intended to die that day. The second, well, let's just say, some of the staff got a chuckle out of my lame efforts. But they won't be laughing tomorrow morning, and they won't think my efforts were without genius.

I come from a family of depressives and suicidals, beginning with my great-grandfather, then my grandmother, and then my father. At the time of my first incident, I desired the specialness their lives took on after they offed themselves, how everyone talked endlessly about their struggles and their dramatic ends, but I didn't know then if I had the courage to follow their path. The first two dry runs told me I did and that I just needed a plan that didn't allow me to be saved.

When I woke from my dream, I knew I had found one. I knew exactly what I had to do in order to escape Life House and my miserable, painful existence.

It was simple, so simple. I remember a little smile sneaking onto my face, feeling conscious of my muscles stretching in unfamiliar ways. It surprised me, the joy of knowing, of planning it. I still don't know why I had never thought of it before. But I started working on my plan that morning and it was as grand and simple as any other.

I would be good. I'd be great. I'd be better than any patient ever stuck inside the walls of Life House. I'd smile; I'd talk; I'd comfort; I'd reveal; I'd comply. And I'd compile enough points to earn a trip home. It didn't matter if the trip home was for a week. Once on board the plane, I'd be free: of doctors, nurses, attendants, patients, my mother, my memories, anxieties, and fears. Free to move about the cabin. Free to enter the bathroom and lock the door and pill myself to nowhere. Free to die. Free to live in oblivion.

As I lay in my bed that morning six months ago, I knew I had stumbled on a plan that would work.

Chapter 3

"Hi, my name is Jane Solis. I'm flying home."

I'm standing at the nurses' station at Life House. I have a couple of things I need to do before I can get on my flight. *Five hours and thirty-seven minutes.*

Every time I look at my father's watch, my stomach flip-flops, but I can't help myself. My body is in a state of perpetual contradiction, alive with anticipation and simultaneously dead of all other emotion. The desire to see this through is propelling me forward, but inside I am cold and dead like a slow-breathing fish hoping somebody cuts my head off. *Stay upbeat and positive, Jane. Upbeat and positive, all day long.* That's what I keep telling myself over and over.

First, I need to pick up my pass to leave campus.

Hence, my stop at the nurses' station. Second, I need to have one last session with Old Doctor, who never misses a damn appointment. His unflagging punctuality and reliability bug me even though I think that's why he gets me so well. I'm sure he counts the minutes too. (He wears two watches; what's that about?) As usual, I'm dreading our conversation. What if he figures me out? What if he's been waiting this whole time to expose me? *Stop the thoughts, Jane. Upbeat and positive.*

"What a pretty name," says the nurse, a ragged-looking woman in a white uniform. She's new, or substituting over the holidays. Her name tag says *Nancy C*. That's common around here; it makes me think the staff don't want any of us to know their full names. I don't blame them. No telling what some of us might do when we get out.

Nancy C. is overweight, with an inch of gray roots showing at the part of her blond hair, but she has warm green eyes and is trying hard to connect with me.

"Jane Solis," she tries again, "that's a name that belongs in lights."

She spins in her chair and types my name into her computer. I look above her at a glass-covered print of Cézanne's *Apples* and I see my reflection hovering there like a ghost. My brown hair hangs ragged over my shoulders. It was shaved short when I arrived. Now it's an unkempt mess

of waves and half curls. My slate-gray eyes are barely visible against their pearly backdrop, but they are haunting nonetheless. I never look in mirrors anymore, so my reflection seems much older than what I remember. That's such a weird thing to think. I am worn thin around the cheeks, like death is creeping up from inside me. It spooks me, and I let out a tiny yelp.

Nancy wheels her chair around to the filing cabinets and pulls out a pass. She gives me a long stare. I look down, annoyed by how much I'm slipping in these last few hours. *Pull it together, Jane.*

The printer spits out a card with my name and a thousand different numbers and symbols, and she signs her name on the back and then tucks it into a laminated pocket that has a lanyard attached to it. She hands it to me and tells me not to lose it.

"Thanks."

"Have you left campus before? Do you need a review about how to get to the airport bus? Do you need any special assistance, Jane?"

"Yes, I mean no, I don't."

"You know the rules, right? Until you reach Newark Airport, and are in your mother's care, you are still under our supervision. You have a pass to use the hospital bus to and from town. From there you will take the airport bus

at Grove and Main Street in town to the airport. You don't need to take any other transportation, and your supervisor will place you on that airport bus. If for any reason you miss the bus or get separated or even just get nervous, there's a number on the back of the card. Don't hesitate to use it."

I have had all of this explained to me at least three times, but I nod pleasantly.

"While you're in town, you need to adhere to the rules of your sobriety pledge, obviously, and check in with your supervisor about your plans."

I nod again. "Yes, ma'am."

She looks me up and down for a second. She's assessing my state of mind, like I'm poised to freak out or something. She'll never see that in me. I'm pure ice. Planners are that way. If we have time—and I've had six months—we can pretty much fool anybody. Sure, I have my tics too, minor personal habits the docs like to label and acronym to death. Christ, I think everybody here has them. But that's just my anxiety run wild, like my constant watch-watching and my time obsession and all. If I let it, it could grind everything to a halt. But my plan keeps it all in check.

"Will I have time to shop for a present for my mother before I get on the bus to the airport?"

For example, a little talk is always the bow on top of

the present when it comes to deceiving a nurse or attendant. They get wrapped up in the chatty minutia and become blind to what is standing before them. In this case, a patient who is planning to hit the switch. The nurse studies a sheet on her desk.

"Yes, it looks like you should have about a half hour, but just make sure you check in with your supervisor and carry your pass with you wherever you go." She reaches into a drawer.

"And here's a cell phone."

I already knew this drill, but she told me anyway.

"It only calls this number, and you are to use it if something goes wrong or you need some help. See, just press this button. We'll be right here. You enjoy yourself, Jane. Merry Christmas shopping!" she says with a big smile.

"You too," I say inanely, and she smiles, a little too hard for my liking. I wonder if she suspects something. Did I give something away?

Chapter 4

I walk back to my room, head down as I pass Old Doctor's morning Group session. It's nearly ten-fifty and I only have ten minutes to get everything ready before my final session with him.

As I approach my room, I feel my lungs seize up. My breath rushes out. It feels like all my blood has dropped to my toes and suddenly I'm a little dizzy, enough so that I put my hand on the wall for a second. If I hyperventilate, and it wouldn't be the first time, they will never let me get on that airplane. *Steady, Jane.*

I look back over to Group, which is breaking up, and watch Old Doctor, who is giving his full attention to a private discussion he's having with BS. I close my eyes and concentrate on taking one very deep breath. Then another:

in through the nose, out through the mouth. And I feel my body settle down and the dizziness dissipate.

I pull my hand from the wall and slip into my room and stuff my travel bag with the essentials. Obviously I have no need for a travel bag, but I don't want to be found out by a nosy nurse: "If she's going home for a week, why'd she leave all her stuff here? Doesn't she need a bag? Red alert, put out an APB!" They are trained to spot that kind of shit, but I've trained myself not to give them anything to spin their wheels about. In five hours and seven minutes, I'll have won that battle.

I look around my room and nausea swirls in my stomach. The pink comforter my mother gave me for the winters lies wrinkled and wasted on my bed, full of old sweat and sad energy. Why does every depressive bed always look the same?

I feel a bead of sweat trickle down my back. *Nerves,* I tell myself. *Buck up and buckle down, Jane.*

I look at my window, where I have spent endless hours in manic thoughts about the time I was wasting here at Life House. I walk over to the night table and pull open the drawer and take out a photo of me and my father at Christmastime.

Nobody knows I have this photo. I took it from one of my mother's photo albums. She has millions of photos

all over the house, and mostly I hate them all. I've told her this, and during check-in at the hospital I made a point to tell Old Doctor this in front of her. It made her sniffle, which made me feel sad inside but smile on the outside.

I hold the photo up. I love his face. His skin was olive and smooth, and his eyes were chocolate brown. A big sob rises in my throat, so I kiss Dad's face, and a tear drops onto the glossy finish. I quickly wipe it off and place the photo on the bottom of my bag.

Nurses or not, I do need a few things. A pad of paper to write my mother a goodbye note. I'll tuck it between the netting and upright tray table on the back of the seat in front of me.

I need my wallet to get from town to the airport and to get my plane ticket from the automated ticket machine. My mother bought the ticket on a credit card and mailed the credit card to the hospital. It was given to me with great ceremony yesterday. "Jane, this is for the pickup of your ticket only—your mother is bestowing great trust in you, and I think you've earned it." *Oh yes I have, with every lie and fake tear you swallowed, sir. Don't worry, Dr. Gallus, going wild with a credit card isn't in my plans.*

I open my wallet. I have a hundred bucks in cash. (Money my mother gave me to use, *just in case*.) I pull my

dad's watch from my pocket and check the time. Three minutes to my last session.

What am I going to say to him? It has to be perfect because Old Doctor isn't stupid. If he catches a whiff of the Plan or of anything out of whack, I'm done. No pass. No flight. No oblivion. But if I can give him a faux revelation that's not too big, but not too small, he'll get happy and animated with his own genius and forget about me. He's human, after all. Notebooks out, people: This is how you can fool all adult beings. Make them think they are genius. They are even more vain than we are.

And, frankly, I'm not a genius myself but I am a very good liar.