INVISIBLE CHALLENGE

JUST PROMISE ME YOU'LL READ THIS LETTER

MATTEO ESPOSITO

JANUARY 17, 2024

Wednesday, January 17, 2024

Dear Matteo,

I want to tell you a story.

It is Thursday, December 5th, 2019. Around 5:30 in the morning.

The last time you laid your head on a pillow and fell asleep was earlier in the week, Monday night.

You're about to call Mom and Dad to tell them you cannot live like this anymore… that you need to leave school and get help.

You will throw in the towel and admit things have gotten out of your control.

Helpless. Hopeless. Powerless.

I'm getting ahead of myself… let's wind the clocks back a couple years.

* * *

I hope this letter reaches you in time for your 20th birthday, January 20th, 2017.

I desperately wish I could prepare you for what is about to happen. However, no amount of ink on this letter can save you, let alone stop what is about to happen.

I do not want to scare you, but you are about to have a bad dream. The tricky part is, when you wake up in the morning, it does not end.

That is when it begins.

It is not just a bad dream though. This will be worse than your wildest imagination could ever create.

A few years down the road, this living journey through the depths of hell will give you night terrors that wake you up in a freezing cold sweat because you unconsciously soaked your sheets, night after night.

Before I dive into the details, I want to say congrats on your commitment to play NCAA Division III hockey at Wesleyan University. I know your dream has been to play for a Division I program since you lifted your first weight at age 14 with Luke and Mark in the garage, but I am proud of you for this accomplishment.

Despite your excitement on the surface, I know deep down you feel like a failure. I also know that it will hurt you to read this, but I wish you would cherish this achievement. It is one of the last inklings of success you will have in your favorite sport… ice hockey.

You have three starts between the pipes left and will step on the ice in five games in the next five years. 199 minutes and 20 seconds of playing time remaining in your career.

For the last 20 years, you have been living a pretty solid life. A life before anxiety. Before depression. Before mania. Before mental obsessions and physical compulsions. Before addiction.

Buckle up. You are about to lose control.

Over everything.

* * *

In a couple weeks, you will get an MRI on your injured left shoulder. The one that keeps getting more painful every practice or game. The scan will indicate a torn labrum, the result you wanted.

Now you can leave.

After loading up yet another car filled to the brim with your excessive and over-packed belongings from your fourth "home" in the last five months, you're going to drive to the rink to clear out one last junior hockey stall.

This time will feel different though. The unknown is going to cause a paralyzing fear and an indefinite amount of pain. A new loss of identity, purpose, and self-worth will soon ignite a turbulent and unstoppable spiral. Even though you know that you will play hockey again, a big part of you is listening to the terrifying voice in the back of your head whispering, "Maybe you're wrong."

Maybe the stall you're about to clear out will be your last. Maybe the teammates you're about to hug will be your last. Maybe today you'll pack your last bag, say goodbye to your last home rink, and never play for a team again.

To continue telling this story, I will attach an essay below that you have been working on recently…

Just promise me you'll read this letter,

Matteo

Mental health is a subject that has changed so dramatically for me over the last seven years, I do not even really know where to begin when attempting to tell my "story." I have learned so much in such a short period of time, my ideas and thoughts surrounding the topic of mental health have evolved so much, and for that, I am very grateful. I think one very important thing I have learned and will attempt to convey before this story begins is that it is not necessary or practical to compare people's struggles. Everybody has hardships in life, and, in my opinion, it is not right to value or measure one's journey just because maybe "on paper" it was harder to go through. It is very rare, or more likely unheard of, that someone has never had something challenging to overcome. Rejection, disappointment, failure, pain, setback, defeat, divorce, the loss of a loved one… a mental illness. Nobody gets through this life unscathed.

Between June 2017 and February 2023, I was diagnosed with the following: bipolar disorder (type I), combined type attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD-C), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder (SAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), cannabis use disorder (severe), alcohol use disorder (moderate), amphetamine-type use disorder (mild), and three sleep disorders. To explain my mental health journey, I will detail how these diagnoses developed and how their manifestations have affected and continue to affect my everyday life.

After graduating high school in 2015, I decided to take time off from school and play junior hockey in Canada in pursuit of accomplishing a lifelong dream of playing NCAA Division I hockey. In my second gap year, the 2016-2017 season, I was cut after preseason from the Lloydminster Bobcats of the Alberta Junior Hockey League (AJHL) and traded six weeks later from the Bonnyville Pontiacs (AJHL) to a different league further east. I found myself on my third team of the year by November 1st, living with a third family in a third town.

In my first start for the Dauphin Kings of the Manitoba Junior Hockey League (MJHL), I injured my left shoulder. I finished the game and continued to play through the injury for months. The team was in last place on a seven-game skid when I got traded. I started four games in a row, and we extended our losing streak to 11. We eventually found a little mojo and won a few. After a home win in our last game before

Christmas, I went into my coach's office and told him I would not be returning after the break. I lied and said that a different team in the U.S. would give me a better opportunity to play college hockey.

I eventually worked up the courage to tell him that the real reason I was quitting the team was that I had no interest in the everyday off-ice activities some of my teammates were partaking in, which were clearly affecting our chances to win games. Most players had no aspirations or potential of playing at a higher level, and the consistent alcohol and other drug use, even the night before big games, caused me to resent the program, town, and even some of my teammates. I needed to leave.

Back in the U.S., things only got worse. For the first time ever, I felt out of place on a hockey team. My fourth of the season. I was close with a few teammates, but overall, I was not happy. My shoulder weakened until I eventually could not get through a practice or game without feeling like my labrum was tearing more. In my first weekend with the Wilkes-Barre Scranton Knights (NAHL), we played a new team in their inaugural season. I backed up the first game. The first-year program was something like 0-26-3 heading into the weekend and beat us to pick up their first ever win. I got the nod the next night and picked up a shutout in a 5-0 victory. After that, I only played four more games during the six long weeks I was in Pennsylvania. All losses. The shutout was the last junior hockey win I was ever on the ice for.

I started to slip. I was showing clear signs of depression and had no idea. Getting up in the morning slowly became more difficult and I felt more alone than ever before. I called my dad on the way to the rink almost every day, which gave me something to look forward to and helped me get out of bed. All I wanted to do was go home. The team trainer and I decided I should get an MRI on my shoulder and looking back, I was secretly praying for a tear. A tear meant I could go home. After the scan indicated a torn labrum, I packed up the house I was living in.

I still remember my drive to the rink to go pack up my gear. I still remember the mixed emotions I had in the locker room while I was clearing out my stall… feeling utterly defeated but also feeling the weight of the world lifted off my shoulders, as I was finally put out of my misery from trying to salvage a disastrous hockey season. I still remember holding back tears, saying goodbye to my teammates and

goodbye to hockey, maybe for good. I needed to get out of there, but I did not know when or if I would ever play again.

When I left, things continued to decline. Two weeks after I left for preseason that year, my family moved from Connecticut to Massachusetts. As I learned in my time away, a house doesn't make a home. My lack of purpose and the disappearance of personal connections in my new environment caused me to slip into a deeper depression of complete isolation and darkness. I was lost and my identity was gone. I was a hockey player. I didn't know anything else.

My days would not start until two or three o'clock in the afternoon and my new life without hockey or much meaning at all started to take a toll. I did not know what was happening. I had very little energy and was almost always tired, yet I had no idea how much worse my depression symptoms would later get. This was, to my knowledge, my first ever experience with a serious mental illness.

One thing that made me feel less depressed was visiting my older brothers at their colleges. Mark was a freshman at Amherst College and Luke was a senior at Harvard University. I would oversleep and accomplish very little during the week and then I would drive to Amherst or Cambridge every weekend. At first, it truly was helping me crawl out of depression. I became close with my brothers' teammates and started to smile, feeling a part of something bigger than myself once again. However, it quickly became problematic. Excessive drinking, smoking, partying, and late nights were an every weekend thing.

April 28th, 2017.

It would be several months before I understood what was happening to me, but anytime I look back, it is clear to me that this was the first time I encountered clear hypomanic symptoms of bipolar I disorder. My oldest brother, Luke, got surgery on his left labrum, the same shoulder that I injured in November. Due to complications, he was not able to be released from the hospital, so I drove into Boston to relieve my parents and take care of him for the night. I did not fall asleep on the bench next to him until 8:30 in the morning and woke up with a lightbulb in my brain at 10 am. After 90 minutes of sleep, I felt unusually energetic and euphoric the next day. I still remember sending my dad a text saying that I felt different. Over the next month, the partying escalated and so did my symptoms.

By late May, I was in a full-blown, undiagnosed, and untreated manic episode. Although you can describe the symptoms to people, it is impossible to articulate in words what mania truly feels like. Even though it is the "high" or elevated side of bipolar I disorder, there are still so many ups and downs. By June, my misunderstood anxiety was unmanageable, and I was getting high nearly every day to cope with and heighten my manic symptoms. I do not even have full memory of these months and would later learn that mania destroys brain cells. I often fought with and screamed at my parents as they tried to protect me. I was experiencing almost every common symptom of mania. I could sleep only a few hours a night, or not at all, and my energy would be limitless the next day. I was talking so much and so fast; a motor was running through my head, and I could not stop it. I wanted to, but I couldn't. My ability to make good judgments was gone. Anxiety, sleep deprivation, overactivity, excessive exercise, and nonstop movement caused massive changes in my appearance, weighing 159 pounds at the peak of the episode. I unintentionally lost almost 20 pounds in two months. My ADHD, anxiety, and manic symptoms were so intense that I effectively could not sit still. Lack of fear diminished my need to factor in risk as my mind convinced me that I was invincible and untouchable. My life felt like a movie and flights of ideas and unrealistic, grandiose plans took over. I was on top of the world. I lost touch with reality. I lost control.

I finally started seeing a specialist to figure out what was happening. Reckless roller skating landed me a broken wrist that would later require surgery. On June 24th, 2017, I was hospitalized at the psychiatric unit at Mass General Hospital in Boston. Although I did not know at the time, this was truly rock bottom for me. I was lost.

My parents drove me to the hospital to get some blood drawn and have my broken wrist looked at. After the doctors heard about my recent activity and life-threatening behaviors, they told my parents that I could not leave. I was so consumed by the mania and out of touch with reality that I had no idea what was really going on. I was in a room with a hospital bed, a chair, and a TV behind glass for almost three full days.

I was then strapped to a stretcher and transported by ambulance to a psych ward at McLean Hospital. I was still only sleeping a few hours a night but was put on medication to attempt the seemingly

impossible task of tranquilizing the unstoppable motor that infected my brain against my will and gained total control. After four nights at McLean, I made a small amount of progress and was released, recommended to start an outpatient program where I only lasted a few days. I still remember my first night out of the psych ward. I was on so much prescribed medication to decelerate the revved-up engine running my compulsive actions that I could not even make it up the stairs by myself. It was hard for my family to watch all of this. As challenging as this time was for me, I cannot imagine what it was like for my parents, brothers, and sister either. My family lost control, too.

When I look back and relive these moments, I often think about my mom and dad. Specifically, when the doctors told them that they could not take me home. The state of Massachusetts imposed control over my individual rights and my parents' guardianship. I became a ward of the state. Although it is impossible to know exactly how they felt and inconceivable to describe their heartbreak using only ink on a piece of paper, the first word that comes to my mind is destroyed. The insurmountable pain they felt on their drive home due to my mental illness hurts me to the core of my soul. Even though the suffering my family and I have endured is no one's fault, the thought of completely letting go of the guilt I carry from moments like these seems impossible and will be a life-long process.

My first ever manic episode lasted more than the length of that summer, and eventually, my symptoms came to an end. By August, I was slowly transitioning from mania to depression. Over the next few months, the depressive symptoms I saw in January, February, and March were back and much more severe. After committing to play hockey at Wesleyan University, the consumption of this disorder forced me to defer for a year to give myself time to attempt to learn how to live with my new diagnosis.

At "home" in Andover, Massachusetts that fall, I was battling to get simple daily tasks done and never felt like doing anything during the week. Due to lack of exercise, poor eating habits, and medication side effects, I gained weight. Quickly. I went from less than 160 pounds in the summer to 190 pounds by September. I only had energy to party on the weekends because I could use weed and alcohol to feel something. After limited improvement with physical rehabilitation over the summer, surgery was inevitable, and my shoulder was operated on.

2017 was the darkest time of my entire life. When I hear someone mention that year in everyday conversation, it just sounds different to me… automatically triggering an emotional response to "2017." The ups and downs were beyond my wildest imagination. I hope I never experience anything like it again.

After Christmas that year, I moved to Michigan to live with Luke in an effort to shake things up a bit. He was playing professional hockey for the Grand Rapids Griffins in the American Hockey League (AHL). Once again in a new city, loneliness took over, and I could not snap out of a seemingly endless depression. To date, I have had countless months of depression symptoms; however, I have never seen anything like these months following my first manic episode.

I was still on a high dose of two prescribed mood stabilizers to prevent mania from reoccurring, and I was exhausted. All the time. I smoked weed every day, only to make things worse. I just wanted to feel better… I just wanted peace. I have always taken great pride in my work-ethic and my physical health, yet I lacked motivation and energy to stay in shape. It was literally impossible. My fatigue was so extreme that sometimes I fell asleep at Luke's games, watching my brother play my favorite game in the world. Even watching TV or playing video games on the couch with Luke was draining and I was often dozing off. I could sleep 15 hours a day if I wanted to. This went on with minimal change in severity for about seven months. It was hell.

In the summer of 2018, my depression symptoms were relatively manageable, and I started to finally find some stability with medication adjustments. I still smoked weed every day to feel different and combat the severe fatigue I was battling. Getting out of bed in the morning was the hardest thing I would do all week. I continued to work, and with a repaired left shoulder and right wrist, found some love for the game of hockey again.

I felt healthy enough to return to an educational setting and attended Wesleyan that fall after three gap years. Looking back on my first year at school, although I was able to avoid another manic episode, I was battling depression the whole year. Morning classes were extremely difficult as I constantly overslept. Finding balance was not easy.

On December 18th, 2018, I got a voicemail that would change my life forever.

After I graduated high school, I dated a girl named Grace. Although our time together was short and we were very young, it was an amazing connection. We spent every day we could together that summer. We were best friends. After I traveled across the continent for my first year of junior hockey, we did not continue dating but remained in contact almost right up until the day I got this voicemail. Her older sister told me that Grace was in the ICU, and I should come see her.

Grace had an eating disorder and fought depression, anxiety, and compulsive over-exercising. She was very open about her struggles and had the courage to get all the help she could. A fierce leader in making a dent in the mental health stigma, Grace made it known that she was not ashamed or embarrassed to talk about her battles. Her beautiful spirit was an inspiration for me and many others who admired her courage to be different and stand up for what she believed in.

One day, the demonic voices in her head became unbearable and inescapable. Something inside her made the decision that she could not live anymore. Grace was in a coma for two days and died by suicide on December 19th, 2018.

When I went to the hospital, I saw Grace on life support. She was surrounded by her family. I returned the next morning, just hours before she passed away, and broke down in her father's arms hysterically crying. I was broken.

I have feared losing my life to suicide at times. However, even through the most heart-wrenching moments of grieving Grace's death, I did not feel close to acting on my intrusive suicidal thoughts. I now know the hurt of losing someone to suicide and am grateful I have not instilled such pain and suffering on my family and friends. It really is life's greatest tragedy. I want to live and have so much to see in this life. That is what keeps me going and has kept me from losing complete control to my darkest thoughts.

In my opinion, suicide is a result of a deadly disease or disorder that has completely, 100% taken over someone's mind and gained the ability to control actions. Like pulling a trigger, jumping, or kicking a stool.

I want to quote some insight from ex-NHL goaltender, Corey Hirsch. He is a mental health advocate and is open about his own struggles. His Instagram, @coreyhirsch72, is full of information and inspiration

to end the stigma surrounding mental illness. My mom sent me one of his posts on why we no longer say, "commit suicide." It has changed my outlook and the way I talk about suicide.

The post says, "The term "commit suicide" was presented in the 20th century when it was considered a *criminal act* in many places in the world. It has now been decriminalized in many places (though not all), yet we still use this language. Furthering this, suicide and ideation is considered a serious sin in certain religions. People commit: fraud, infidelity, murder. People do not commit: suicide, anxiety, depression, mental illness. The day we quit viewing suicide as a moral failing to be "committed" and shift towards an approach of mental illness and sensitivity, is the day that we will begin to save more lives. Instead of "committed suicide," "successful suicide," or "completed suicide," try "died by suicide" or "death by suicide." Instead of "failed suicide attempt," try "non-fatal suicide attempt.""

In his caption, Corey writes, "I ask you all to please help me change the terminology of the words "committed suicide." It shows disrespect for those that died and is embarrassing and shameful for those left behind. The terminology makes it as if this person committed an immoral crime, and was a terrible person when they were actually suffering inside more than you can ever imagine. By the time a person has taken their own life they will have come to the point of exhaustion as a prisoner of their own brain and saw no other way out. They did not wake up one day and just decide to do it. It would have been years upon years of pain. I guarantee you none of them wanted it to end this way. So the next time you hear someone use the term "committed suicide" please respectfully correct that person by not embarrassing them, but gently letting them know the proper terminology. The word suicide needs to not be a taboo word or silenced anymore. We need to let people know that if they are thinking in this direction that it is ok to not be ok and that help is available. There will be no shame or judgement. I personally use the term "took their own life." I thank you all for helping me with this."

Returning to school after Christmas break was agonizing for me. I cried almost every day for weeks and could not handle the reality of the situation. Some days, I wanted to tell my coach that I could not practice, as going to the rink and pretending I was ok was too much. It was just so sad for me to think about. It still is today. These were some of the hardest days of my life. I try to think of Grace every day.

A few weeks later, I got another call. This one from my dad. My younger sister, Sophia, had a non-fatal suicide attempt.

I was on the team bus headed up to Maine sitting next to my roommate. I did not know what to think and didn't know how to react. It took me a few days to grasp the magnitude of the situation. I got off the bus as soon as I could to go help Sophia and my parents. Like Grace, Sophia has also been diagnosed with an eating disorder, depression, and anxiety. However, Sophia was given a second chance.

When I got to the psych unit with my parents, it was devastating seeing Pia in this condition. I was still in shock. I looked around and said, "She doesn't need to be here." My dad looked at me with a face I have never seen before. I can still see the inescapable fear in his eyes. He was terrified. But he also heard me. I had been where Pia was… my parents trusted me. We found somewhere else for her to go.

She courageously attended and successfully completed a nine-week wilderness therapy program in Utah and Colorado. She lived outside in the middle of winter for more than two months. At one point in her life, Sophia's mental illness controlled her, but it does not anymore. She is one of the most amazing people I have ever met, and I will forever be grateful that she was given a second chance. Her experience, strength, and hope are invaluable and have created wisdom so far beyond her years. Sophia is a warrior and the biggest inspiration in my life. I will always look up to her.

Fast forward to August 2019, right before my sophomore year at Wesleyan. For about a year, I noticed unusual behavior in my heart. Specifically, I would get palpitations when I would smoke weed. The more I smoked, the harder my heart pounded and the higher my pulse went. I mean really high. One morning after two heavy nights of drinking at Amherst, I took my prescribed 40 mg of Adderall and then hit a bong as hard as I could. 193 bpm.

I did several tests including an EKG, a stress test, and an echocardiogram. Nothing from these tests proved to be abnormal; however, after the cardiologist reviewed the results from my two-week event monitor, he was concerned. I was diagnosed with supraventricular tachycardia (SVT) and ST-elevation. Getting high put me at risk of a massive heart attack.

The end of my third semester at school saw my second manic episode. Looking back, I progressively became unhealthy as the fall months went on. The partying and binge drinking ramped up like never before. I was able to abstain from getting high for 77 days after my heart condition was diagnosed in August, but eventually, for reasons that are too complex to understand, let alone explain, the threat of a heart attack was not enough to stop me. I would later be diagnosed with a severe substance use disorder for cannabis and meet a monster named addiction.

About a month into my sophomore year, fatigue throughout the day was heavily wearing on me. It was hard to function. I was prescribed a wakefulness promoter, called Nuvigil. It can be used to treat narcolepsy and is different than a stimulant. It really did help, as I was able to stay awake throughout the day and participate in class; however, it quickly became one more problem on a rapidly expanding list.

I still remember the exact feeling I had on November 30th, 2019. I had been experiencing symptoms of hypomania throughout the fall semester, but that morning, one hour after taking double the prescribed dose of Nuvigil, a lightbulb went off. It is nearly impossible to pinpoint what exactly can cause such a major shift in a person's brain, but, certainly, there are factors that contributed. Stress, lack of sleep, and misuse of Nuvigil were all undoubtedly causing problems.

We had a game that day in New Hampshire against St. Anselm College, my first start of the season. The drastic, sudden shift in my mood was more intense than anything I have ever felt before. My focus was exponentially higher than usual, and although my thoughts were coming fast, my brain was able to keep up, operating at an indescribable pace. The pucks flying at me in warmups were in slow-motion. I could literally almost read the writing on the pucks, coming in at speeds upwards of 80 mph. It was one of the craziest things I have ever seen. The "on top of the world" feeling was back and after the game, my pupils were more dilated than normal, due to the adrenaline and energy running through my body. While hyperfocus and high energy can be useful in many scenarios, the other symptoms and problems that come along with mania are far from sustainable.

I still sometimes check my eyes in the mirror because mania can cause pupils to dilate. Mania has poured so much trauma and insecurity into my life. I cannot articulate it. The anxiety, the reoccurring, sweat-drenching nightmares… the damage is immeasurable. It affects me every single day.

Some people in the past have asked me, "Do you know when you are manic?" It is a complicated question to answer. The elevated mood can be difficult for me to see early on, as there is a gap between reality and my perception of the world around me. Even though my thoughts and actions are distorted, they are my reality. Eventually, it becomes clear that something is off.

The following week, my sleep disturbances became increasingly problematic. After getting limited sleep for days, I called my mom and dad on a Thursday morning around 6:00 am. I had not slept since Monday night and was terrified. Getting sleep actually made me more tired because it would counteract the mania. If I got a good night's rest, I would feel slightly less manic, which would decrease my energy. It was a dark place to be and there was no end in sight. I needed more sleep, except the lack of sleep is what fed the unlimited energy from the mania. Everything was backwards.

I did not know what to do. I remember feeling so defeated and powerless over bipolar disorder. I accepted that I could no longer sustain my behavioral patterns and that I needed serious help. The next few days were some of the most challenging of my life and realizing that I needed to take more time off from what had become my dream school was heartbreaking. Saying goodbye to my 30 teammates, who I developed such a deep love for, was awful. They became part of my family, and we had something special that year. I will never forget their support. After our team meeting in the locker room, I broke down crying in my captain's arms. I did not want to leave, but I knew I needed to. I had battled bipolar disorder for almost three years at the time with little success. The rollercoaster of extreme highs and lows was too much to handle.

My parents and I decided that a full-time inpatient treatment program would give me the best chance to succeed, and to survive. My family had helplessly watched me suffer for years. I needed to get better.

On December 15th, 2019, I was admitted to Red Oak Recovery in Leicester, North Carolina, and was released on February 27th, 2020. I wanted to leave almost every single day for nearly three months. The constant back and forth between doing what I wanted and doing what was best for me was debilitating. I spent Christmas, New Year's Eve, and my 23rd birthday with strangers in a treatment center. I will be forever grateful and in debt to my family and friends for their support and encouragement; I would not have made it through this time without them.

Exiting Red Oak, I was the healthiest I had ever been since I turned 20. Leaving school and accepting help was the bravest thing I have ever done. It's what I needed. Finding the courage to accomplish this insurmountable feat changed my life forever. To this day, I still consider the completion of Red Oak my greatest achievement. Before I left, half of the team, including 10 from the freshmen class, sent me amazing messages, showing unconditional support. One of the boys said that I was "the heart and soul of this team and the definition of an unbelievable teammate." After playoffs, a couple guys said that we would not have won without the lift I brought the team. I will never be able to describe in words what this means to me. 10 days after finishing treatment, I watched my Wesleyan teammates win the program's first-ever conference championship. Although sitting in the stands watching was painful, being able to return to read the starting lineup and be a part of the group again was something I will never forget.

Following 75 days in treatment, I went against medical advice and did not stay sober. I drank two days after I got out. I wasn't ready. I had short periods of staying away from weed, but I was still binge drinking. I did not have the support of my parents to return to Wesleyan in the fall of 2020, which pushed back my return another 12 months. In the fall of 2021, I had saved up enough of my own money for one semester at Wesleyan. I went all in. On September 3rd, 2021, I went back to my dream school with my best friends who had become my second family. I was able to go three months without any weed, a huge accomplishment considering the drug was life-threatening. Despite that progress, I was still drinking a lot and blacking out. Hard. On November 6, I got high again.

Despite the mental warfare I was going through in my final semester, I felt great on the ice. Looking back, I don't think I was ever a better goalie than I was at this time. I was ready to go to war and win the

boys a game. I dreamt of it. I dreamt of what I would say when I got the player of the game fireman's helmet. It kept me going for so long.

When my coach told me I was scratched for the season opener, I was so defeated. It crushed me. I was actually shocked. I grinded more than I ever knew I was capable of grinding to get back to Wesleyan. The letdown of being slotted as the fourth of four goaltenders after the work I put in to get back on the roster was a massive disappointment. After not dressing for the first game, I sat on the bench and watched the next six games. I was minutes away from not going to the rink for our last game of the semester. It was too hard to show up and pretend I was happy to backup when I knew I was good enough to help the team win games. Seven games into the season, I had not played a minute.

In my first two seasons at Wesleyan, I backed-up an All-American and NESCAC Player of the Year. I took pride in being the best teammate I could possibly be. I always have. I loved hyping the boys up in the tunnel before games, even though I wanted to go into battle and be on the ice more than anything. When I returned to Wesleyan for the 2021-2022 season, I could not hide the hurt inside me anymore. After getting through Red Oak and doing the work I needed to get back, I couldn't accept the reality of the situation. I couldn't handle not playing. I couldn't be the teammate I wanted to be. That really was devastating… it took everything out of me.

Within a couple weeks of fighting my addiction that I knew so little about and the turmoil at the rink, I made the call again and finally knew I could not manage college. I think returning to Wesleyan and going through it all over again was part of my journey… another chapter in my story. To move on, I had to know. The dream of returning to school after Red Oak and suiting up for games with my teammates again pushed me to get through the 75 days of isolation. Before final exams, I left school again. This time was a little different. I sent a short message to the team and told my coach that I packed up my gear. I can still vividly picture my wooden stall after I cleared it out, sliding my nameplate off for the second time. My dad watching it all… once more.

I needed to get help again and find inpatient treatment. I put it off for almost a year, and eventually checked myself into another place in North Carolina. My substance use disorders needed to be addressed;

however, HopeWay, in Charlotte, NC, mainly treated cognitive behavioral issues. Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, self-harm, suicidal ideation, negative core beliefs… basically trying to keep people alive. It was essentially a psych ward and although it helped me crawl out of severe depression, the focus was not where it needed to be for me.

My addiction voice eventually got loud enough that I snuck off campus and bought edibles. I literally could not stop my body from walking to the smoke shop. I can still clearly hear my voice of reason saying, "It's not too late to turn around. This is a bad idea. It is only going to make things worse. You can still turn around. You can still turn around." If my addictive voice could talk that day, it would sound something like, "Yeah, right. I am getting what I want. I don't care how it will make you feel. I don't care how much guilt, shame, regret, and remorse it will cause. I don't care that I just put you into a hospital. I don't care that it's not that first time. You are my prisoner, and I am in charge here. Keep walking."

I was hospitalized because I could not stop risking my life to get high and spent my last weekend in that hospital high. I was truly a prisoner of the addiction… a monster living inside my head with the ability to control my actions, move my body, and get me high against my own will.

On November 16th, 2022, I was released from HopeWay and started outpatient treatment from home, to address my substance use disorders. A little over 72 hours after I was released from HopeWay, I went out to a bar in Charlotte, where I had been living since July, to meet up with a men's league teammate named Craig (shoutout Pounders). A girl I had never met before had a THC wax pen and was happily willing to share. After having six or seven beers in under an hour, I hit the pen like I was never getting any more of the drug again. I do not know if it was laced, but something happened in my brain, and I had what I think was a psychotic break.

I disassociated and almost jumped off the balcony in my apartment. I did not want to kill myself. I already had. My body was getting cold if I walked in the opposite direction of my apartment. Something was pulling me to my death, and I had images of all the people I would hurt after I died. It was the scariest thing that has ever happened to me. I did not think I was going to die. I already had. I was just watching it happen. After hitting the pen, my indescribable paranoia turned into hallucinations. I have vivid memories

and I do not know if they happened or not. The bar was a simulation. My pulse must've been almost 200 bpm, and my out-of-body perspective watched me have a heart attack on the ground. When I made it onto the street alive, my fear of having a heart attack transitioned to a fear of getting jumped or killed. Within minutes, that fear turned into suicide. I did not have control. I called my great uncle Victor a little after 2 am, and remember saying, "Something's happening," over and over. "No, not yet… I can't go yet. It's too soon. I need more time." After taking over an hour to walk a quarter of a mile, Craig was able to get me back into the apartment where my brother, Mark, was sleeping. He was visiting for Thanksgiving. The thoughts and visions of dying continued. I thought Craig and Mark were secretly trying to kill me so I would not drink the water they offered, even though my throat was killing me because of how hard I ripped the pen. My internal thoughts of suicide included taking all my pills to overdose, hanging myself, cutting myself, and jumping off the balcony. After three hours, something in my brain turned off and I luckily snapped out of the episode.

I had heard that high levels of THC could trigger psychotic episodes before… but naturally I never thought it would happen to me. I genuinely do not think I would be alive without Craig, my brother Mark, and my great uncle Victor, who was on the phone for over two hours. I was high a week later.

My addiction peaked after Christmas that year. I was eating an edible before I brushed my teeth or ate breakfast. Risking my life every time I did it. It was bad. I did not know how to stop.

I met a hockey teammate named Danny on the first day of our freshman year at Wesleyan. He quickly became my best friend. After graduation, he got a job in Charlotte, North Carolina. He immediately asked me if I would go with him, and I said yes the same day. Since the day we met, there is no one else I have spent more time with. He has seen my addiction at its worst, and it has put a lot of stress on our relationship because of how much we care about each other.

On January 16th, 2023, he said, "I'm going to find you dead." That was it for me. The final straw. My addiction and other co-occurring disorders have destroyed me at times. They have damaged and permanently changed my relationships with my parents and siblings. When I heard Danny say that, it triggered something in me. I thought about someone finding me on the ground just about every time I got

high but hearing him say it out loud was different. I knew how deep into the addiction I was and knew what it would do to Danny if I wasn't breathing when he got home. I still couldn't stop.

I had finally had enough. I was ready for the madness to end. I was ready to throw in the towel once again. This time was different. I made the decision to not get high on January 17th, 2023, and checked into Fellowship Hall in Greensboro, North Carolina the next day.

Many years ago, my mom said something like, "I think you accepted your bipolar disorder diagnosis well, but you did not accept the necessary changes required to live with your condition." I thought about this a lot at Fellowship Hall. In recovery, I think the difference between admitting and accepting is simple. Admitting looks like… "I have a problem and I know I need to stop, but I do not know how and am not willing to do what it takes to stay clean." Acceptance is getting honest, open-minded, and willing to do whatever it takes to get clean and stay clean to change your life… complete surrender.

When I went to Red Oak in 2019, I admitted that I had a problem, but was not willing to make the necessary changes. In my time at Fellowship, I surrendered. I surrendered to the disease living inside my brain, which for me, meant accepting that I had become powerless over my addiction… that my life had become unmanageable. I transitioned my admitting to accepting. I accept that I have a problem and am willing to go to any length to change my life for the better. I will do whatever it takes.

When my parents dropped me off at Fellowship Hall, the three of us hugged before they left. My dad said with tears in his eyes and a tremble in his voice, "You can do it." I believed him. Today, January 17th, 2024, marks one year clean for me.

When I think of my relationship with my parents amidst active addiction, I think of isolation, hurt, pain, unknown, doubt, and fear. So much fear. Our anxiety-fueled relationship lacked communication and transparency. It was damaged and has been changed. Forever. We were distant and there was a lot of anger, frustration, and confusion. That has all changed now. While it will never be the same, our relationship is not broken. The unconditional love we have for each other will never go away.

* * *

I have proven to myself countless times that I cannot moderate any kind of substance use. I will always want more. Living a productive and manageable life while trying to use drugs or drink alcohol is not an option for me. The highs of getting messed up, with or without friends, are not worth the lows. That is why I do not drink or use anymore.

When it comes to alcohol… I miss the social aspect of drinking. I miss partying. I miss lowered inhibitions, increased confidence, and a night free from anxiety. When it comes to weed… I miss a lot. I miss the feeling. I miss the temporary relief from crippling anxiety and the break from constant, immobilizing depression. I miss the manic symptoms. The supreme confidence with no anxiety. The improved mood with endless energy and massive rushes in motivation. Sometimes it feels like I can do anything and be anyone when I'm high.

I can tell you what I don't miss. I don't miss the paralyzing fear of having a massive heart attack every single time I got high. Every single time. I don't miss the guilt, shame, regret, and remorse. The sneaking, lying, cheating, and stealing that comes with active addiction. Addiction is selfish. The only person I help by getting high is myself.

I did not do a whole lot of "social drinking." Usually when I drank, it was hard. And usually when I drank hard, I would either be the last one up, doing my best to convince others to keep the night going with me as I did not want it to end. Or I would get so messed up for so long that I would pass out. Drink until I literally could not drink anymore. I did that at least once a week for a long time. I don't miss that.

Despite the isolation and darkness that addiction led me to, I also made countless memories and cultivated a lot of amazing friendships along the way. Teammates who turned into brothers. I do not regret my decisions. I miss those times and the feelings that accompany them, but I do not miss them enough to go back. I cannot guarantee that will ever change, but I am not going to drink or use, just for today. I want to get high, but I want recovery more. That is the bottom line.

Humans thrive and prosper in routine, in structure. I need routine and structure in my life to survive. That is not an exaggeration or dramatization. Some people can sleep five or six hours a night and function at full capacity. I cannot. Some people can sleep 10 or 11 hours a night and manage a healthy

lifestyle. I cannot. The margin for error is so small. The window for maintaining healthy sleep hygiene is narrow. There are many other things I am required to work at every day due to the disorders that affect my circadian rhythm. I am still not sure how many hours a night is ideal for my functioning. It is a work-in-progress, as is the rest of the process.

Calling 28 places "home" in my near 27 years of living has not exactly been conducive to a life of balance. I have been unhealthy since I turned 20. I did not know what it felt like to be healthy as an adult until after I turned 26. That's not to say it's all sunshine and rainbows now because I don't use anymore. Getting and staying clean has been the hardest thing I have ever done. Due to the years of suppressing different emotions and feelings, my co-occurring disorders have manifested intensely since the unhealthy coping stopped. Having said that, I'll take crippling anxiety over active addiction. I'll take chronic fatigue over active addiction. I'll take severe depression over active addiction. I'll take debilitating OCD over active addiction.

I would never wish the diseases I have endured on anyone. I could write a book on my experiences with mental obsession and physical compulsion to use drugs. I pretty much did whatever was in front of me… anything that could maybe change the way I felt. As I said in the beginning, there is no point in comparing struggles. My battle with mental illness and addiction destroyed my life for a very long time. I have gone through mental warfare. I still go through it. That is my battle. I am always working on something.

At the same time, I consider myself very lucky. I have always had a roof over my head. I have always had running water and a clean bed to sleep in at the end of the day. I have always had someone to call even when I did not want to because I felt so alone, as the disease of addiction and depression told me to isolate. I have always had a family who loved me unconditionally, supporting me no matter where addiction took me. I have always had a beating heart.

I am fortunate to have had these luxuries through the beast of addiction. I have never had to manage poverty. These parts of my life are rare on this side of the tracks. A lot of addicts lose everything… and I mean everything. Money, cars, schooling, jobs, homes, husbands, wives, children. A lot of addicts die.

From a common outside perspective, getting clean is just, "Oh wow, he doesn't drink or get high anymore." It really is not like that at all. A lot of days, I really want to get high. There are two parts of my brain though. The piece of me that wants to get high is the addiction voice. Some days that voice is louder than others. The tricky part is, that voice is in the same tone as the other part of my brain, my rational voice. Sometimes it can be hard to know which one to listen to.

Every morning I wake up with untreated addiction. Every day is work. Every day is a battle. Some days are just an easier fight than others. Some alcoholics and addicts eventually lose their desire to drink or use. I am not there yet. No one progresses through the stages of recovery exactly the same. Addiction is giving up everything for one thing. Recovery is giving up one thing for everything.

The OCD symptoms I dealt with during the first few weeks and months of recovery were truly debilitating. The undiagnosed, untreated disorder had interfered with my life and daily functioning for years. Getting high, drunk, and partying suppressed a lot of symptoms of co-occurring disorders. It pushed things down, deep underneath the surface that I didn't even know were there. All those emotions, thoughts, and behaviors – including non-substance related mental obsessions and physical compulsions, such as time-consuming routines and rituals – rose to the surface quickly. I was forced to face them head on when I surrendered at Fellowship Hall.

At one point in my life, the hardest thing I did all day, week, and month was get out of bed in the morning. That was the case for a very, very long time. I never thought I would get "better"; I was just always going to be depressed and in active addiction. I thought I was going to be a prisoner of my own brain forever… a slave to the monster of addiction. I don't feel that way anymore.

A very recent counselor, who has years of clean time under his belt, explained to me the importance of recognizing that nothing in this life lasts forever. Everything is temporary. I think that this awareness can save lives. For me, that is what cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, is all about. Challenging negative beliefs. Beliefs that are unrealistic… maybe a belief that says, "I am always going to be depressed." "I am always going to suffer; this is never going to get better." "I am always going to be in active addiction." In my opinion, this mindset takes a lot of lives. These unrealistic, untrue beliefs can

create a vision with no end in sight. It can seal off the cracked door with a sliver of light at the end of the tunnel.

THC was my "miracle drug." Until it wasn't. My addiction completely took over and told me to keep using it hundreds, if not thousands of times against my own will. It cut my depression temporarily, and at times, probably kept me alive. My anxiety decreased; my confidence increased. And my energy increased. A lot. For a while, I finally felt at peace when I was high.

True mania is a different animal. Imagine the best high you've ever had. Or the most euphoric you've ever felt. Now multiply that by 200. For me, mania was like that. Except when I woke up in the morning, it wasn't over. During my episode in 2017, my mood was so elevated for so long, it really did feel like I was in a movie. I was overly friendly to complete strangers. The concept of feeling truly invincible without substances is legitimately impossible to explain to anyone who has never experienced it. Although distorted, the false sensation I was feeling was real to me. I could do anything and be anyone I wanted to be. In the beginning, I was having a blast. Unlimited energy, elevated mood, supreme confidence in myself. However, less than a month into my first episode, the people close to me recognized such abnormal behavior and began to really worry about me.

When I decided to get clean, I did not just decide to give up getting high, partying, and blacking out. Every day I decide to give up THC, I give up an on/off switch. That on/off switch gives me instant access to substance-induced mania. Instant access to grandiosity, motivation, and exponential increases in productivity, creativity, inventiveness, and energy. So much energy. It's fleeting and short-lived, but boy does it feel good.

My using went from fun to a habit. That habit eventually turned into work. I mean a full-time job. Plus overtime. Every week. Getting weed, spending money, thinking about getting high, actually getting high, and then trying to act sober and cover my tracks. It stopped being fun so long ago. I cannot count nor tell you how many times I have smoked or taken an edible when I did not want to. I was using against my own will. Addiction was getting me high against my own will.

Sometimes when I'm high I want to sit on the couch, listen to music, or play video games. Sometimes when I'm high, I want to change the fucking world. I feel a rush of motivation to turn my life around. To swim out of the deepest, darkest part of the ocean called depression. Then I come off the high and feel depressed again… there goes the cycle.

There is no oxygen in severe depression. No end in sight. Getting high made the tiny light I could barely see just a little bit brighter. It knocked on the door for me. Some people only see one way out and tragically never come back up for air. Fortunately, I have always been able to come up for a breath. Suicide is not an option for me. It never has been, and it never will be.

For me, there was always a faint light at the end of my suffering, even though I couldn't always see it. Every time mental illness and addiction dragged me down a hundred and fifty feet toward the ocean floor, I was able to swim up just one foot. Maybe even one inch, at a time. I think that light kept me alive.

As my counselor said, "Nothing in this universe lasts forever. Everything is temporary." Just for today, I am choosing to give up the on/off switch. I am choosing to give up substance-induced mania. Today, I have a choice.

I once described the bipolar disorder and addiction inside my brain to my great uncle Victor. I told him one side is mania. Mania is like a forest fire. It starts out as a campfire that is pleasant to be around and fun at first. The small fire rises and breaks out into complete chaos, burning everything around it to the ground. The other side of my brain is depression. Depression is like treading water… just trying not to drown. When the symptoms get severe, the water is 33 degrees in the middle of the ocean and there is a 15-pound dumbbell tied to my ankles. Then there is a little monster that runs back and forth to either side, doing whatever it pleases. That monster is named addiction.

Somewhere in the middle lies stability. Stability is like a teetering balance beam, typically leaning toward one side or the other. For me, that balance beam tilts toward the depressive side. The idea is to turn the balance beam into a sheet of thick plywood, something easier to balance on. Then eventually, a solid foundation with minimal shifting, turning my larger mood swings into smaller wave lengths, like a

neurotypical brain has. I will still have emotional ups and downs, as does everyone, but the key is doing my best to avoid substantial highs and lows. Getting clean helps.

If you think about it, it is ironic and senseless to take psychiatric medication to stabilize my mood, and then use mind-altering street drugs to feel better, which of course destabilizes my mood and emotions. It is self-sabotage that gets out of control quickly. However, nearly everyone I personally know with bipolar disorder does the same thing. At some point, they don't feel good. Alcohol, weed, or other drugs are an instant fix. They help the person feel better, feel different, or maybe just feel something, within a matter of minutes, or seconds, depending on the drug. Eventually, that temporary fix doesn't work anymore.

If I could start over, would I do it all again? No. I have made a lot of mistakes, but I do not have many regrets. I did what I had to do to stay alive. Maybe getting high and binge drinking to feel something was part of my journey. Maybe risking a heart attack every day and addictively partying was part of my recovery. Maybe risking my life to feel different was part of my recovery. Maybe I would not have been able to get over the Everest of depression without dying by suicide if I had not abused those unhealthy coping mechanisms. I don't know. I do know that I am grateful for the challenges I have faced. It has made me a better person and shaped me into who I am today.

I am also grateful to be alive. I am grateful that no one who loves me found me without a pulse. I have put my life at risk countless times. It is a miracle that I am still breathing. I am grateful for the experiences I have confronted and the people I have met. The perseverance required to make it through hard times has provided me with an empathetic view on life. I can relate to a lot of people. My eyes are open. I have seen a side of the world that I previously did not know existed. I have heard stories and seen struggles that I will never forget.

I cannot count the number of hours of therapy I have done. I cannot count the number of pages of handouts and lecture notes I have on mental health and addiction. Binders full. I don't have a degree, but I do have a doctorate on empathy and caring for others. Not from a university, but from lived experience. I know what it's like to suffer and come out on the other side.

It is still difficult to say or write down, and maybe I do not fully believe it… but the monstrous, incurable disease of addiction has been a gift. It took me some time, but I found myself and found who I am again. I have an opportunity to work on my character and identify aspects of my life that need improvement, a chance that many people never get in their lifetime. I cannot describe the gratitude I have for my younger sister, two older brothers, and my parents. The endless resources we have been fortunate enough to access have kept me alive. Their unconditional love keeps my heart beating.

Nothing is like addiction. It is progressive, and, unless arrested, eventually leads to three things: jails, institutions, or death. It thrives in secrecy and isolation. It's selfish. It's monstrous. It's cunning, baffling, and powerful. It can take over the human body and control physical actions. It is truly unimaginable.

I remember the pain. The pain and horrors of active addiction. The pain of watching my parents look me in the eyes during a goodbye and truly not know if they will ever see me again. The guilt, shame, regret, and remorse that goes with the territory of lying, cheating, and stealing. I do my very best to remember all that agony. That keeps me alive.

It is hard to say that tomorrow does not matter, because it does. However, just for today, I'm not going to use. That is my focus. I am making it to my bed tonight without getting high. That's winning. That is the only way I know how to keep climbing the endless and insurmountable mountain that is the disease of addiction. One day at a time. I am part of the No Matter What Club. I never have to use again. No matter what.

The fear of slipping into another uncontrollable manic episode terrifies me and haunts me in my sleep. I still get so tired that it interferes with my everyday functioning. I still take medication and probably will for the rest of my life. That's ok. I will never be cured of the disorders I have. That's ok. I have put in more work than I ever would have imagined I needed to, and I grind every day to strive for a healthy and happy life. I will never give up.

I did not write this story to gain attention or seek pity. Like I said at the beginning, everyone fights their own battle. This is mine. Normalizing conversations around mental health is something that needs to

happen. Right now. Millions struggle in silence and are too embarrassed or confused to speak up and get help. A lot of these people die. The stigma needs to be broken. This is my way of joining the battle.

Often, behind a happy face is a lot of pain. I personally have had people say things about me like, "Wow, I had no idea. I would have never known he was dealing with that unless you told me." I hear a lot of people say, "It's ok to not be ok." This is true; however, when someone who is struggling says, "I'm ok," they are usually not. Genuinely and honestly checking in on someone can save their life. Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind, always.

If this letter helps one person, I will consider it a success. I do not know the number of people battling a mental illness alone right now, but it is too many. People are dying. Millions of them. It's time to change. It's time to start talking. It's time to make a dent. It's time to end the stigma.

Let's make the invisible challenge visible.

I cannot imagine what it was like for you to read that…

Just don't give up. You're gonna make it.

Still here,

Matteo