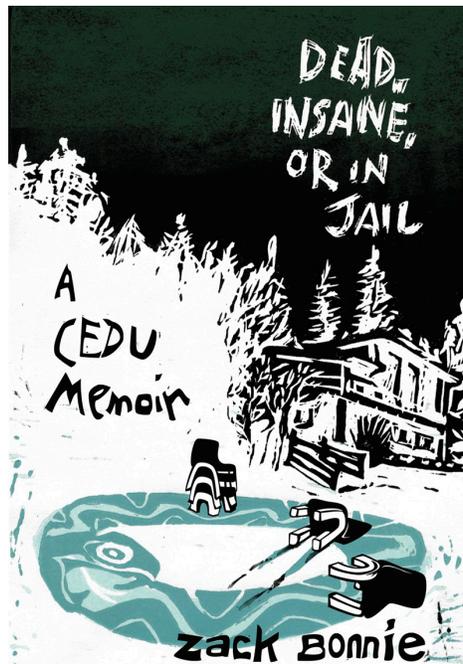


Excerpt, Book One

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Chapter 2

Andrew Oswald had been inside, waiting.

He grabbed me and pulled me up the single step, across the high threshold, and into the dark room with him. The quickness with which he pulled me to his large, hairy, body scared the shit out of me.

Keeping his weighty hand on my shoulder, he veered me past him through the massive doorframe. The darkness inside, and the noise of people upstairs, muffled and distorted my focus, like when I tried on Dad's thick eyeglasses as a child. Then my eyes began to adjust, although the sounds kept fading like the boot clunks upstairs. The room was sparsely furnished. I noticed a desk and a stack of black chairs.

Andrew Oswald's head breached the doorway as he reached out to take the metal stirrup door handle. He had to stoop to get back into the tiny room. His balding head was flecked with black and white wisps of hair. These peppered hairs seemed to be sweating, as they clung to his shiny scalp. The head rose back to a human position atop Andrew's neck and my world darkened as his fleshy body stood between me and the thick door that shut behind him. The latch clanked into place.



“Did you have a good tour?”

His voice was nasally and smaller than it should have been, emanating from that big sweaty, hairy body.

“This is an interesting school, hunh? Did Tim and Paul take you to see the sauna?”

“Yeah, that was alright.”

I wanted to talk to my father.

“Where is he?” I repeated, in part because of the muffle, “Where is my father?”

There was a woman in the room too. I observed a small, country-looking woman with falsely curled, streaky, stringy blonde hair. Her diminished presence was perfectly invisible to me until after the door closed. She stood meekly in the corner, her hands behind her back.

Creepy.

With her eyeballs directed into the bridge of my nose, the woman whipped her hands forward. She had been hiding something. My eyes were stuck on her serene face.

Wait. Was that.... Something sharp?

Some sunlight glinted through the window in the heavy door. A magical slow-motion moment elongated exponentially. I turned into Andrew’s body, which blocked my escape. Andrew was still looking at the woman with a sense of mysterious urgency. I’d have bet the moments were flying by rapidly from their perspective.

“This is Kelly Grainger. Kelly.”

I looked back at Kelly. *Who is this woman and why do I need to know who she is?*

Kelly’s hands hugged the shiny object to her abdomen. She turned and willed me to follow her gaze through the window.

“Where’s my dad?” I demanded.

Something was happening and I didn’t see it coming. Through that dingy little window in that closed wooden door I could see the rental car driving away. A wake of wind flicked gravel and dust from the bouncing back wheels of the white Mercury. The car I had been snoozing in an hour before was leaving without any ceremony. Down a long driveway, it left a bumping trail, dry as bones. It was still very early.

The word “Dad” went dry in my mouth. It all snapped together in my mind. I began to turn decisively toward a new threatening sound, but I was too late. I tried to prevent the attack.

Raise your hand! Dammit!

The silvery beast had my wrists. They were immobilized! Long graying mustache hairs reached up and out triumphantly from Andrew Oswald’s nostrils above me. Andrew wore circular shaped spectacles. The red frames had little horns on them, and set off his iron gray eyebrows. With bushy eyebrow-hairs peeking out from above the red frames, he appeared like an overgrown and deranged lemur.

What he was wearing in between his scraggly head and furry toes wasn’t formal. He didn’t even have shoes on. Instead, he wore enormous sandals. His toes were huge. I was mesmerized by Andrew’s feet. Those stately dogs – that big toe was as big as my whole foot! I began to get very scared as the threatening words and sounds came into focus behind my lagging vision.

Andrew Oswald's peculiarly nasal and rounded words floated around in my light head. "Program," "processing," "clothes off."

Whoa. Back up. Clothes off?

I know I didn't hear that right.

I couldn't move.

I'm trying to, but my wrists are bound to this stranger. I'm trying to back away. Simultaneously, he is demanding that I take off all of my clothes. And there's this woman. From out of the shadows with something sharp!

I wish I had woken up.

I wish I was running, and was being chased and THEN woke up!

But I didn't.

I won't exaggerate. I will be as plain as I am able about my "processing."

About my "orientation" and my admittance into Rocky Mountain Academy on July 11th, 1988.

I was fourteen-and-a-half years old.

†

Dear Zack,

This is going to be a hard letter for me to write, and, I suspect it might be a hard letter for you to read. During the past two years, I've written you a lot of notes but some of them, you didn't read – or at least you read part and once you got the drift, you didn't finish them.

I asked you on Saturday when we were playing gin, if you doubted that your parents loved you. You thought about it and said, "Well, I doubt it, sure. But I know you do." Zack, that's one thing – one condition of your life that you don't ever have to doubt. Daddy and I love you more than you can ever know.

—Letter from author's mother 11 July 1988

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