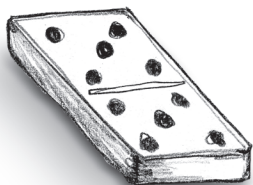


TEN STORIES



BOOK ONE

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EIGHT TOE
PUBLISHING

TEN STORIES

1. GONE IN SIXTY SECONDS.....	1
2. ON SLANTED HILL.....	15
3. THE HERO AND THE TARGET.....	27
4. OF TEETH AND TENDERNESS.....	35
5. NUNS.....	59
6. DEAD BOY WALKING.....	73
7. OUT OF THE FOG.....	85
8. NAKED.....	97
9. CHEW'N AND SPIT'N.....	117
10. ALL NEW PEOPLE.....	125

Naked

The walls of the small room were a sterile white. There were no windows or pictures, and as far as I could tell, the carpet was either green or brown.

I was twenty-two years old and had been in the same chair for the best part of two days. I sat staring at the doorknob, my hands on my lap, palms up, to avoid the chance they'd inadvertently touch the surface of the chair.

After filling in hundreds of little dots with a #2 pencil, I had slipped out, washed my hands, and used a paper towel to reenter the room. I could feel my stomach twirling because any second now the psychologist, a trained "career expert," would turn that knob and give me the answer I'd been searching for my whole life.

My butt ached, but I hesitated to rub it, for fear my hand

might touch the chair, or the psychologist might catch me and think I had other issues.

Staring at the doorknob, I smiled as my mind flashed back half a lifetime to the hours I had spent preparing for my future while standing shirtless on my brother's bed.



At age eleven, my chest had no hair and my voice was high, but I was pretty sure I was going to be an internationally famous rock star. While my older brother was wasting time with girls, I was sneaking into his room to sing along with his Beatles records.

I reminded myself of Paul.

I'd heard John was dating Yoko and knew this had trouble written all over it. I was sure they'd need to replace him any day now, which was a good thing for me.

Sure I was young, but two other kids my age were doing pretty well, and I figured if Michael Jackson – a Jehovah's Witness, and Donny Osmond – a Mormon, could be famous, why not me? I went to Sunday school.

All I needed was my big break.

It came when I was sixteen, and I knew I was ready. My six chest hairs were proof of that. Perfectly balanced, three-per-side.

I was asked to sing a solo at the church Christmas banquet. They had requested a carol about decking the halls with Holly's bowels, and though I didn't understand the words, I came prepared to rock.

I was the headliner so everyone had to be patient while the guest speaker rambled on about his adventures. He'd been flying little planes into darkest Africa and landing on perilous strips in the jungle in order to get doctors in to save lives.

Big deal!

But when he was finished, the place went nuts with applause, which I took as a good sign.

I grabbed the mike, nodded to my sister to start the background cassette, put my left foot out in front, held the mike between both palms, and sang like a blackbird in the dead of night. I arched my back on all the important notes and strained my face to show my passion.

As I hit the last line I raised one hand into the air, fingers spread, just like I'd practiced hundreds of times on my brother's bed. At my final fa-la-la, I abruptly pulled my hand into my chest with a fist, rocked my head back and bowed.

I was amazing!

There was a brief silence, and then my mom and sister clapped. A few old ladies joined in and I knew this wasn't the demographic I was after. The emcee said, "Well that was" -

pause - “pleasant,” and in that instant I knew my calling was to be a pilot.

I never told anyone, but on the way home from the banquet I felt relieved I wasn't going to be a rock star because famous singers have to shake a lot of hands. I'd always had a problem with touching people's hands, and though I knew it wasn't normal, shaking caused me anxiety and the uncontrollable urge to wash.

There were a lot of things like this I kept secret, even as a teenager.

One time, I found myself alone inside a public bathroom standing still in front of the exit in a mock walking position. My anxiety was so overwhelming that it seemed to leak from its place in my chest and fill the tile covered room. The bathroom had air dryers, so I couldn't use a paper towel to open the door, and the thought of using my shirt made me feel nauseous.

I was stuck and felt like I might drown.

I waited in that position for about fifteen minutes, until someone pushed the door from the outside and the pressure flowed out through the opening. As they came in, I pretended I'd just been about to open the door myself, and slipped past without having to touch the handle.

I felt ashamed about all this because I couldn't control it,

so I got pretty good at hiding things. No one had ever caught me standing with my head against the back door after my parents went to sleep, trying to stop myself from checking the lock again, even though I'd already checked it ten times. No one knew that I felt compelled to count all stairs and to always start climbing with my right foot. And no one understood that my need to line objects up in perfect parallels came from such an unhealthy place.

People didn't talk about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, so I spent a lot of energy concealing these kinds of thoughts and behaviors, and pretended to be normal.

I thought I was the only one.

This pilot-in-Africa-thing seemed great because even if people figured out my struggles, it wouldn't matter because who was going to make fun of me over there? Was a baboon going to laugh at me? If one did, I'd just make a comment about his funny colored butt and he wouldn't bother me again.

Flying into jungles excited me, so at eighteen I went to the same college that the pilot from the Christmas banquet had attended, and two years into it, signed up for flight school.

Things were looking up. I was twenty, had at least twelve chest hairs, and a plan for my future.

To get into flight school I had to take an eye exam, and

because I couldn't see the numbers hidden in the circles with colored dots, they told me I couldn't fly.

"Colorblind people can't see the color coded lights on runways," they said. When I asked if that was important, they suggested that I'd end up crashing into other planes, which is apparently frowned on around airports.

This seemed a bit picky and I felt sad until I decided to become a professional soccer player. I was doing pretty well on the college team so it felt like a great fit.

I'd learned from the singing and flying thing that it's good to have a backup plan, so I figured if soccer didn't work out, I'd just move to California and become a professional surfer.

But then in my last year of college I got gout, which eventually led to the amputation of two toes. And although my feet were still perfectly balanced, four-toes-per-side, this meant that even my backup plan was out.

No one ever got famous hanging eight.

My grades were average, but I'd always suspected I was just a misunderstood genius, so for a brief time at the end of college I considered being a surgeon. People would say, "Wow, Dr. Durman huh?" and girls thought I was cool.

But then it dawned on me that if I couldn't touch a door handle, cutting open sick guys and sticking my hands inside was probably not a wise career move.

And that was it. I was out of ideas.



So here I was, twenty-two, and sitting in a sterile room staring at a doorknob. There had to be something that a colorblind-eight-toed-secret-OCD-sufferer was good for.

Maybe they'd say I was best suited to be a feature film star. Yeah, I liked that because I could live a reclusive and mysterious life in Europe between movies, and have a stunt double to touch things for me. I wouldn't have to hide my weirdness anymore because everyone would just think I was an eccentric artist.

The doorknob turned and the professional walked in.

I slipped my hands into my pockets.

She sat on the table and smiled.

I smiled back.

Here it comes.

"Sorry to keep you."

"That's okay."

"We had to run the results twice because at first we thought there was some mistake."

I held my breath. Maybe they'd figured out how abnormal I was.

"After a second review, there was no mistake. We've just

never seen anything this extreme before.”

I didn't know what to say so I looked at one of her shoes. She had small feet.

“Well, it seems that the job you're best suited for is to be a forest ranger.”

I looked up. “A forest ranger?”

“A forest ranger.”

“Okay. But how come?”

“Well, there's evidence that you may be the most extreme introvert we've tested in seventeen years of doing this, and I suppose that as a forest ranger you'd be out in the woods alone for months without seeing another human being.”

Hmm. This sounded good.

But then I was confused.

“Um, but I like most people.”

“Yes, it's a common misunderstanding that introverts are always shy or don't like people. What it means is just that you are emotionally and psychologically drained by being around others, while extroverts are energized by others.”

“Huh.” I nodded as if Freud and I had just been discussing this very thing over wiener schnitzels that morning.

She tilted her head to the side the way some people do when they're feeling sorry for someone. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Sure.”

“No matter what you end up doing, make sure you get a lot of time to yourself. If you don’t, you’ll experience mental and emotional exhaustion that could eventually lead to burnout. You have to accept that it’s okay to be who you are.”

I wondered if she could save money buying children’s shoes.

“Tyler?”

I realized I should say something. “Is there any way to fix this?”

She laughed. “It doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with you, just that you’re different than most other people.”

“A forest ranger huh?”

“Yup. Or some other job like it.”

I thanked her and when I stood to go she said, “Just so you know, your OCD is going to complicate all this a bit.”

Yikes! She knew.

“You need to be careful not to become a total recluse and shut out the world. Even extreme introverts need people.”

She handed me a business card, and though I didn’t want to touch it, I took it. She said that if I ever needed to talk, this person would be good.

I figured there must be something really wrong with me for her to suggest this, so I hugged her to avoid shaking her

hand and said, “Well thanks for everything, and maybe I’ll see you in the woods one day.”

I felt stupid for saying this so I headed for the door. But then I froze. She was good at her job so she reached around me and turned the handle. Her hands were tiny and I almost said something about children’s mittens, but instead headed for the parking lot wondering what kind of car a forest ranger should drive...

This has been a preview of part of the short story, "Naked".