

A Brief Disclaimer To Whom It May Concern On The Chapter You Are About To Read

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Please consider what you are about to read as part of a novel-in-progress that I hope to publish with your help. It will be hundreds of pages long. It will have barcodes inserted throughout the text, which will launch websites when you scan them with a barcode-reader attached to a computer. The websites will contain more text. Plus you'll be able to instant-message with Angela, the chestnut-haired protagonist, soon after her discharge from a psychiatric ward. All these elements will come together by-and-by. Consider, in the meantime, the chapter you are about to read as the encapsulation of Angela's central conflict.

I need to mention before you begin reading that Angela might bear a slight resemblance to a minor celebrity whose name I've changed here to Princess Ugmo out of spite and because she threatened to sue me if I ever used her real name. She was in the _____ Medical Center psychiatric ward when she threatened me. She'd been kicked off a reality television program about aspiring supermodels. Oh, you should have heard her talk about it. The things they made her do. The cocaine and vodka cranberries. The self-induced vomiting. Oh, the abuse; oh, the limousines.

"She even has liver damage," I overheard one nurse say.

"The poor thing," another replied.

Poor publicity whore, I say, because a week after she threatened me, she changed her mind and said I could write about her as long as I could get her story published. My answer to that is the same now as when I saw her six weeks ago. Forget it. I'm writing about Angela. I'm only mentioning Princess Ugmo to assure you that I am not a litigation risk.

But let's say I did write Angela with Princess Ugmo's biographical, physical, psychological, and historical details in mind. So what? That's just poetic license. And anyway, I made Angela better than Princess Ugmo ever could be. Angela stands tall in heavenly raiment, and she has tawny skin and beaming green-gray eyes and lustrous hair forever aglow in sunlight. And nice breasts.

Princess Ugmo, on the other hand, was a sulky curled-up thing with the skin of a plucked and boiled chicken. She always sat apart from the other

patients in the dayroom, twirling her thumbs as she scanned the gossip pages spread before her on her table, searching vainly for her boldfaced name. She pulled the hairs from her nose or eyebrows whenever a nurse asked her how she was doing. "How do you think I'm doing?" she said. "I'm surrounded by loonies. Take me down for a cigarette." If Ugmo possessed any beauty, it only concealed a bad spirit, a misbegotten gargoyle wrapped in a satin sheet that slips off in a strong wind, so her inner self could not help but reveal its evil nature.

Having spoken enough of Princess Ugmo, let's now return our attention to Angela and the chapter at hand. The chapter will appear at the beginning of the novel, or some place in the middle, or near the end, and as I started to say earlier, it contains the novel's central thesis: that the contradiction between secular culture and religious exaltation creates anxiety and other psychological breakdowns in thoughtful people such as myself and Angela, but not Princess Ugmo.

The chapter follows Angela's descent from her mystical, transcendent state to her near destruction at the hands of popular culture, to her subsequent resurrection. Angela, 20, checks into the _____ Medical Center psychiatric ward. She reluctantly divulges in group therapy that she has been part of a reality television show for aspiring supermodels. Her participation in the show, its unhealthy obsession with looks, weight, and figure, causes her mental sickness.

Now I do not claim in my novel, being a man two decades Angela's senior, to comprehend the cigarette-bulimia-and-cocaine regimen that snags her, leading to her institutionalization. I'm only interested in discovering why she abases herself. Angela's mental anguish is rooted in a well-intended mortification of the spirit, a sacrifice that verges on the messianic. It is secular culture, reality television that makes Angela sick.

Most girls you pass on the street, by contrast, have that sickness born in them already. Meaning: it is their ugly nature to destroy themselves or others in pursuit of self-gratification.

I came across one such miscreant one afternoon in September on my way to deliver letters to an office on Times Square, the sidewalk bustling with shoulders and legs and bags in a dizzying foment of adults. A potato-faced girl suddenly appeared, muscling through the crowd toward me. She spun a tourist 90 degrees, then brushed past a businesswoman who screamed, "Why aren't you in school?" Then she came face-to-face with me. We halted and danced the way two people do on crowded sidewalks as they accidentally choose the same bypasses. "Excuse me," I said. "Oh, sorry again."

“Out of my way,” Potato Face said. She placed her hands under my elbows, and with the unusual strength of a parent whose child has been pinned under a car, she lifted me bodily and plunked me to the side, then vanished in the muddled colors of pedestrian traffic. “What nerve,” I said.

Potato Face reappeared a moment later, diminished by distance, crossing the street to the median where Broadway and Seventh Avenue intersect near the military recruiting station. A large group of people had already gathered there in what at first seemed to be a protest. I wondered what noble cause Potato Face so ardently supported to have punched her way through the throngs as she did. But I could not make out the placards that some in the assembly held over their heads, and their voices formed no sound distinct from the ambient noise, so I stood a moment to see what they were about.

Then I discerned lurid pink hearts hand-painted on the placards. Few adults stood among the shocking number of girls in their jeans, T-shirts and banana clips, an ocean of hair teased up by chemical stiffeners like my mother uses. They cheered and swooned and reached toward a building across Broadway where, having followed the direction of their focus, I saw a guitar-strapped figure, amid cameras and spotlights, blowing kisses from the expansive window of a third-floor television studio. This man, an unknown entity to me, was obviously a pop star. He had that mysterious potency that releases excessive hormones in young women. They screeched with his slightest acknowledgement, however diffused by the reality of distance and glass. I hated Potato Face knowing that she had manhandled me for this guy, for such a low and crass purpose.

I only mention this because Potato Face came to mind after my first encounter with Princess Ugmo in the dayroom. She had brushed off a poor fellow who dared sully her with his presence. The man—it doesn’t matter who he is, but let’s call him Mr. Patient—was stunned by Princess Ugmo’s beauty and pathos. He mustered all his courage to approach her, to speak with her, just as the doctors encouraged us all to do as a corollary to our treatment. Mr. Patient made his way across the dayroom, a deck of cards in his hands, to where Ugmo sat alone reading the Page Six section of a day-old *Post*.

“What card games do you know?” Mr. Patient asked.

She moved the newspaper closer to her face, angled her head in another direction. Mr. Patient remained determined to break her carapace. He thought at first that she might be one of those people convinced they do not belong in a mental unit, while everyone else needs electro-shock therapy and restraints. Mr. Patient wanted to assure her that nobody in the ward posed her any danger because the ward was not for acute cases. He also wanted to help her

recover from her depression and the other horrors she suffered during her time in reality television. He may even have wanted to ask for her telephone number.

Mr. Patient placed his deck of cards on the table before her. “I would suggest Crazy Eights, but that might be misconstrued here,” he said.

“Thanks, but I’d just like to read right now,” she said. She turned her body away and began to pick at her eyebrows. Can you imagine the arrogance?

I see now, of course, that Princess Ugmo was no Angela, but a strung-out has-been despairing over her 15-minutes, dreading that her career might end anonymously among the nobodies and the loons. Oh, the bathos.

I had to make Angela better than that. In my novel Angela never turns her back on a well-meaning mental case. Angela *loves* people; nothing drives her more than their edification. Long before her institutionalization, she leads a foreign film appreciation society in her high school, screening DVDs every Friday afternoon while other girls waste their parents’ money at the cineplex. She shuns paperbacks with airbrushed Adonises on their covers in favor of tattered anthologies of the Gnostic Gospels or volumes of Teilhard de Chardin.

Angela later enters reality television only because she wants to understand why many girls her age become addicts and bulimics, turning their bodies inside out in a paradoxical effort to give them greater appeal. Their craving for adulation reflects their lack of self-worth, Angela thinks, but it only begets pain, the way Adam and Eve suffered for tasting the fruit that was supposed to make them the same as God. Angela wants to save them.

So you see Angela is nothing like Princess Ugmo, who so easily dismissed poor Mr. Patient. He returned to his seat, ashamed and bitter. But he could not get Princess Ugmo out of his mind. He dealt a hand of solitaire, wondering what she was like before she came to the ward.

A carnival of ideas, scenes, characters, motivations suddenly disrupted his game. He swept his cards aside and ran out to the nurse’s station to ask for a pen and paper. “I’m going to write,” he said.

“What a useful way to spend your time,” said Sandy, my favorite nurse. “Your mother told me you often write at home.”

“I just got this idea for a novel,” Mr. Patient said. He spoke rapidly, breathlessly, about this idea being different from others he’d had, that this time he could very well have a “tour de force” on his hands.

“That is something.” Sandy paused and her smile half-melted. “Maybe you should sit on it for a few days; see if writing a tour de force is something you really want to do.”

“Please, Sandy. Don’t let my ideas get away from me.”

“One of the things we talk about here a lot is that there are reasonable goals and there are impulses. Sometimes we have an impulse, but it might not be in our best interest to act on it. Impulses can distract you from life.”

Mr. Patient had heard that before. He implored, he importuned; he promised Sandy that this idea was no caprice. She finally relented. He received a pen and a memo pad stamped with the logo for a new antidepressant. Mr. Patient returned to his table in the dayroom, shuffled the cards into a pile, and faced Ugmo on the other side of the room so he could look at her from time-to-time while he wrote.

He composed the following scene, later rescued from a trash bin. The scene is set one early evening at the end of June, five years before Ugmo’s admission to the psych unit. Princess Ugmo in ecstasy:

Princess Ugmo sits on a patio chair on her family’s back porch following dinner. She looks up from her de Chardin to watch the crepuscular sunrays embrace a cloud of gnats zipping above the golden lawn. Light extends its arms further to where the grass frontiers on a deep stand of birches, their papery bark effusing honey light.

Something about this familiar landscape now stirs her so deeply that she rises from her seat, sticking an index finger into the *Hymn of the Universe* in order to hold the page she’s been reading, where de Chardin writes *once again the fire of the universe has penetrated the earth*.

She follows the gentle slope of the lawn, the grass tickling through the interstices of her toes. She steps out of the shadow of her house to be engulfed in sunset and to see how far its light penetrates into the blue darkness that has begun to gather deep inside the trees.

Ugmo stands between the sun and the trees to feel, and to know, and to watch how the light grasps her from behind, splaying her body horizontally in the form of her own stretching across the ocher border of fallen leaves and twigs, the hat ferns and bluebells, and the lower trunks of birches close at hand. She turns to her right and walks. She watches how the stalks and roots flicker in the light as her dark projection passes over them; it makes her think of schools of fish leaping over the surface of an ocean.

She stops and turns to squint at the reddening sun, blushing over its potency, the pulse of a trillion photons produced by horrific internal reactions, speeding a great distance to touch her skin. The hairs of her arms stand on end, rising to meet the sun, like the heliocentric action of morning glories. “Mass and energy,” she whispers, “are God Himself.”

She dares not breathe, because to breathe means to advance time, so in her last gulp of air, her breasts rise, bringing her T-shirt up, exposing her navel. She raises her arms and her shirt rises even further, and she begins to pray that forever she will see the spirit of God deposited in all things, the way she does now: in every atom, in every plant and animal, in the very flesh of our bodies.

It pleased Mr. Patient to imagine Princess Ugmo framed in this numinous light. He thought she’d like it too. He wanted to show it to her in the hope that she’d recognize herself the way Jesus might find His reflection in the Gospel According to John.

Mr. Patient waved his notepad as he walked once more across the dayroom. Ugmo was leaning back in her chair, watching television. She crossed her legs, rested one arm on the other, put her hand to her brow and picked at her hairs.

“Hello, again,” Mr. Patient said.

She stared at the television. He felt like an ice climber at the bottom of a crevasse who kicks his crampons here and there to find the most secure place to begin his ascent. “Do you have the time?” he said.

She dropped her hand from her face. “It’s between 4:00 and 5:00, I’d guess,” she said. “*Ellen* is on.”

“Oh. Well, if you’re not busy after your program, I wondered if you’d read something I wrote. It’s based on you.”

“It’s what?” She took the pad slowly, suspiciously, between two fingers.

“Tell me what you think.” Mr. Patient sat in an empty chair next to hers. She stiffened and shuffled a few inches away from him. She held the pad as if it were something wet and dirty that had fallen on her head while she was walking on the street. Her breasts pushed out against her sweatshirt.

“I can’t understand your handwriting.” She squinted. “Is that my name?”

“Yes, I told you—”

Princess Ugmo knocked her chair over as she stood. People looked up. Mr. Patient worried that a nurse or security guard would come in. He stood too.

“What are you, some kind of reporter?” she said.

“No, no, no.” He reached for her shoulder to reassure her, to feel through her shirt the tension her bosom placed on the strap of her bra. But she moved out of reach.

“Don’t touch me, creep.”

“I assure you I’m not a reporter. I’m a messenger. In the day. At night I’m a writer. I write all night long. My mother complains I burn the candle—”

“Don’t write about me. My life is mine. If I ever see my name in anything you write I will sue your crazy ass. I’ll sue you and this hospital and anyone who ever prints my name without my permission. I’ll sue your mother.”

Princess Ugmo sped toward the door. Sandy and another nurse were just coming in to investigate the commotion. Ugmo tore Mr. Patient’s pages from the pad, crumpled them up and threw them in a trash bin. “Someone take me down for a cigarette,” she said. She pushed Sandy aside while the other nurse followed her into the corridor.

Sandy asked Mr. Patient what happened. He recounted the incident. “You probably shouldn’t have shown her,” Sandy said. “In fact, it’s better if you keep away from her from now on.”

“I don’t understand,” Mr. Patient said. “I was writing something nice about her.”

“I don’t doubt it. But maybe now you see what I meant before about acting on impulse. Just do me a favor: if you have to write, don’t use her name.”

It was in Princess Ugmo’s ugly nature to react the way she had, to rush to the margins, to scurry away in pursuit of a filthy cigarette, even to choose anonymity, her worst hell, over her own glorification in the chapter that you are about to read.

So after Sandy left I retrieved the pages I’d written and flattened them out as much as possible. I crossed out each occurrence of the name Princess Ugmo so vigorously that the pen tore through the paper and made ink scratches on the table beneath.

I sat with my hands cupped around my skull, staring at the crossed-out names, wondering what to put in their place. It hurt my head to think now. No name seemed adequate for what I wanted Princess Ugmo to really be. Then the name Angela came to my mind. She appeared fully clothed, vibrant in her beauty, full of love and grace. I have to say in all modesty that I knew how Zeus felt when Athena sprang from his troubled mind.

I need to discuss one last thing that might occur to you as you read this because it occurred to my mother: that Mr. Patient and I are the same person. I left the hospital a week after the incident, and I spoke with Princess Ugmo only one more time. When I got home, I told Mother all about the novel that I intended to write, mentioning pretty much all that I’ve written here thus far.

“This so-called ‘Mr. Patient’ is you and you don’t even know it,” Mother said. “It’s simple. You fall in love with a girl. She rejects you. Now you hurt so much, you can’t talk about it using your own name. End of story. Who goes to a mental ward to pick up a girl, anyway?”

I asked Mother what she meant by Mr. Patient being me.

“Trust your mother,” she said. “And while we’re on the subject, if by some miracle you do write this novel, it’d be nice if you could throw in a section where ‘Mr. Patient’ goes bananas standing outside naked with his arms raised up like some perverted pagan who worships the sun. I tell you what. If you really want a bestseller, you can go so far as to have Mr. Patient staying on his medication long enough to get a decent job and move out of his mother’s house. For good this time. So they can all live happily ever after. The end.”

“You’re not a literary type,” I said. I tried to explain how Mr. Patient and I were not the same, how Mr. Patient never stands naked in front of his house, but half-naked in his kitchen, and how Mr. Patient spends three weeks in the hospital whereas I only spent two.

“Ha,” Mother said.

In fact, in my novel, Mr. Patient and Angela grow very close in the hospital. They meet after Mr. Patient experiences what the nurses call a manic episode. He wakes up one morning feeling like he’s burning, so he cannot dress for work. “There’s too much electricity,” he says to himself. He runs through the house in his underwear unplugging various appliances and piling them on the curb: the toaster, the blender, the television. He tries to remove the refrigerator also, but finding it far too heavy to budge, he begins to unload its contents to lighten the load. His mother wakes up, sees her son, and the jars and the frozen meat and the Tupperware all over the kitchen counter. She convinces Mr. Patient that she’ll finish emptying the fridge if he’ll ride a taxi with her.

“Thank God your father left me benefits,” the widow Patient says as they’re driving. “Or you’d be going to Bellevue or Creedmoor.” She begins to cry and hug her son. “What’s going to happen to you when I’m gone?”

Then he meets Angela in the ward, and he falls instantly in love because of her charity and selflessness and poise despite her suffering. He watches her break up a fight between two religiously deluded patients who are arguing over which one of them is God. She says one of them could be Moses. After considering for a moment, one man agrees and God and Moses shake hands.

Mr. Patient approaches her with a pack of playing cards in his hands. “That was fantastic,” he says.

She blushes. She says she’d love to play Crazy Eights. He sits across from her and for the next three weeks, they spend all their free time together, playing cards, talking about their dreams, promising to keep in touch after their discharge.

But eventually she returns to college, to a campus far away north, and though they exchange a few letters, the reality of their lives—the distance between them in miles and age, her time consumed by her studies—makes

correspondence difficult, and soon the letters stop appearing in the mail. And Mr. Patient is left with only an idea of Angela, and a desire to write a book about her: an encomium, a love-novel. But while his medication gives him the focus to find another messenger job, his resolve to write begins to flag, and he struggles with his diminishing motivation.

Mr. Patient spends years trudging up the stairs to his computer every night after he comes home after work. The widow Patient emerges from the kitchen with a spatula in hand, forcing Mr. Patient to stop mid-flight for their ritual greeting. “Yeah, ma, how are you,” he says.

“Why don’t you say something when you come in?”

“We say the same thing every day.”

“Yeah, yeah: ‘I’m too old to check in with my mother.’ You’re too old; I’m too old; we’re all too old.”

He always interrupts her to say how he needs to write, and she always heads back to the kitchen making asides about pipedreams and that his prescription needs to be refilled and that for dinner tonight they’re having fried liver or chicken fingers or fish sticks. He goes to his room to stare at a blank screen or to play a game of computer solitaire.

Soon his mother dies. His relatives don’t know what to do with him. They have no place for him to stay while he looks for a place of his own. He sleeps on their couches for a few months, and in their homes he surfs the Internet in search of the best way, the easiest way, the least painful way to commit suicide. He comes across a web page that recommends “Death by Nuclear Weapon.” It’s too impractical. It’s a bad dream because it’s an unattainable dream. Then in his searches he accidentally finds a website for a mental health clinic in Vermont whose director turns out to be Angela.

Mr. Patient cannot believe his luck. She has faded in memory after so many years, but seeing her name revives in him the feeling he had when he first saw her in the ward. He contacts her. She invites him to visit. With the little money left over from the sale of his mother’s home, Mr. Patient moves to Vermont where there are no televisions, computers, hair products, evil princesses or potato-faced girls or gargoyles. There is only a winterized cabin with an outhouse near a deep tract of maple trees where Mr. Patient chops wood for the fireplace. He and Angela sit there night after night, gazing upon the flames, talking about God and the fire of the universe.

I hope this synopsis entices you to read the enclosed chapter. Now I’ve been home from the hospital for several months. Meds make you tired, man, and walking around midtown with its sharp elbows and pointy feet doesn’t help, and the day leaves you with nothing much left over to write. You try, but

the hours grow fewer and fewer, the way autumn shortens until there is almost no light when you get home, and it is suddenly winter and frigid and gloomy, and the earth closes its eyes and the trees begin to dream. My mother watches *Law & Order*. I lay on the couch. The television seeps into my sleep.

I dream sometimes of Princess Ugmo. I remember with contempt and pity how she looked the last time we talked before my discharge: I was scribbling in my notepad when I noticed her shadow passing over my eyes. I looked up to see her standing across the table from me, gripping the back of an empty chair. She had more color in her face than when she first came to the ward, and her hair was shampooed and bunched-up in a modest ponytail. “You still writing about me?” she said.

“No way. I’m writing about someone else. I learned my lesson.”

“Oh.” She looked down and drummed her fingers on the chair. “But you’re still writing a book?” she said.

I said yes.

“Will it be published?”

I told her I wasn’t writing it for my health.

“Because I thought maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if you used my real name after all. I think people want to know my story.”

I asked her if she meant that she wanted me to write her biography.

“Something like that. I think it would be a hit. People are crazy about celebrities. Even minor ones. They want to know what happened to me.”

“I’m sorry. I only write fiction.”

What else could I say? I’d already begun to think exclusively in terms of Angela. Princess Ugmo was irreparably damaged in memory. She was harmed in the same way television destroyed the Peer Gynt suite for me. Now whenever I hear its first movement, I can’t help but think of breakfast, because of all the times they’ve used that music to sell a bowl of cereal.

So we turn our eyes instead to Angela and the splendor of her outstretched arms, the stars of heaven in her eyes, standing outside my mother’s house like the Virgin Mary in a niche. ☺