

Tales from the Looney Bin: A McLean Memoir

*This Chronicle is Dedicated to Mia Valentine
Whose Missive Taught Me How To Embrace Positivity
Don't Tell Her I Said That Though*

The names of persons described in these stories have been changed. Some out of respect for their privacy, most because I just plain forgot them

So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help. Rosewater said an interesting thing to Billy one time about a book that wasn't science fiction. He said that everything there was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoevsky. 'But that isn't *enough* any more.' said Rosewater. – *Slaughterhouse-Five*
Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Jaron was holed up on the cushiest chair in the rec room watching a daytime AMC rerun of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. From what little snooping I did during my internment, I knew that Jaron was the patient who had been in the longest and that he still had no Discharge Date in sight. Though his prospects were bleak, he had managed to carve out a little niche for himself as the de facto King of the rec room TV. What he wanted to watch was what got played. Unfortunately for the King, this day a minor peasant revolt broke out.

Everyone besides Jaron and myself were occupied slaving away on some inane 500 piece puzzle or apathetically playing a board game instead of taking in the telly, but that all changed when Sonny Corleone, who made the painfully relatable mistake of taking a toll road, got the ever-living fuck blasted out of him by a rival family's submachine guns. A chorus of voices, largely those of the middle-aged women of The Joint, began bleating out complaints along the lines of, "This is way too violent," and, "This isn't helpful for our recovery!"

It seemed that whenever inter-patient friction occurred in The Clink, no Staff Members were present in the room, and so this dispute went unmediated through a few more commercial breaks until Michael's Sicilian wife got obliterated by the car bomb. That settled it. The matriarch of the women's society bum-rushed Jaron's chair and snatched the remote from him,

bringing the Academy Award-winning film to an abrupt ending well before we got to see the other Dons and Moe Greene get their bloody comeuppance.

The whole showdown left me in a real lather. Perhaps the women were right that the film wasn't helping *their* recovery, but it was certainly helping Jaron's. It was clear he knew that movie backwards and forwards. Amid the sterile haze of bedlam, that cinematic classic was a fixed reference point Jaron could find solace in. Comfort food, as welcoming as veal or cannoli. In that moment, I realized the mental healthcare industry wasn't tailored to the individual, and it definitely wasn't tailored to me.

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I'm a big fan of that wonderful three-pronged deductive device known as syllogism. The classic example of a syllogism goes like this (feel free to sing along if you know it): All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. Now this particular illustration no longer holds much water, because to prove Socrates is mortal, one only has to remember that he bit the dust 2,418 years ago. So here's a syllogism fit for the modern age: The Institute did not allow belts on the premises because they could potentially be used for self-strangulation; according to psychiatrist James Gordon, MD, "With severe depression, you might lose weight because you've lost your interest in food, which comes from losing an interest in pleasure"; therefore, I spent most of my time in The Slammer tugging on my saggy jeans, in a state of complete terror that gravity would have its way, and my bare ass would be exposed to all the kooks, with only a thin layer of unwashed Hanes for coverage.

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Tobin was my best friend during my stint in The Facility, which admittedly was only five days. That doesn't necessarily mean our connection was wholly ephemeral, it just had an

expiration date. I've had friendships that lasted a lot longer and meant a lot less. I knew I had to get in Tobin's good graces when, during my first breakfast in the cafeteria, he entered the room and the woman I was sitting next to whispered to me, "I don't like him, he's scary." It's a generally accepted principle that, when in confinement, you have to befriend the hardest motherfucker in The Clink to survive.

As it turns out, Tobin was not scary, hard, or a motherfucker in the slightest. He was just incredibly obnoxious, grating, and difficult to get along with due to his condition. Tobin could not stop talking, and I don't mean that in any figurative sense. He was a full-stop monologist, only pausing to take a microscopic gasp of air before resuming his rants. Bereft of a degree in psychiatry or speech pathology, I never actually determined what he was diagnosed with, but a quick Google search leads me to believe it was a form of logorrhea. It stands to reason that when you pontificate in bulk some real gobbledygook is bound to come out. I've taken the liberty of reprinting some choice bits of nonsense here, copied verbatim from a pocket notebook I had on me at the time:

I would rather die of laughter than ever have sex again.

Everything is bullets man. Raindrops are bullets from heaven just shooting down on us for doing dumb shit.

I hate songs, I just like music.

Hey man, I know we can talk about this because you're cool. I have been flaccid the whole time I've been here, let me tell you. I've "released my frustrations" three time here and it took so long, unlike my usual 30 seconds. 30 Seconds to Mars, more like 30 seconds to meh!

As I said, Tobin was not hard.

I would often delude myself into believing Tobin was sort of a mad sage, dispensing profound proverbs and meaningful maxims straight from The Creator. Then I would look around

and remember that everyone in here, myself included, was out of their fucking gourds. Tobin was no exception.

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One night, a group of the young adult patients snuck some edibles into The Joint and got baked. They proceeded to dick around in the rec room for a couple of hours. I was not invited. Even in The Nuthouse I was not considered cool.

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Before I checked myself in to be placed on suicide watch, I made sure to bring a backpack stocked with supplies; I had a well-founded hunch the Mass General orderlies might pawn me off into someone else's custody for an indeterminate period of convalescence. Though I skimped on clothes (regrettably forgetting to bring any additional underwear), I did manage to stash a mini library of books. When they security-checked my belongings, they placed my collection in a massive paper sack, but a few errant pages still managed to overflow out of its top.

My plan was to not let my mind be idle during my mandatory vacation. The ideal scenario was to be like one of those convicts who completes their MBA while incarcerated (and then tragically fails to find any purchase with it upon release). The attempt was an utter disaster and I dropped out in disgrace when the curriculum became too rigorous.

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was a bust because Pynchon is so obtuse and erudite you need to consult a dictionary and an encyclopedia seven times each just to conquer a single paragraph. The Joint's own library housed no such reference books and those handy-dandy pocket computers were contraband.

Terry Pratchett's Discworld series of satirical fantasy novels would have been a great companion in those trying times, but in the shuffle, I had mistakenly grabbed *The Light Fantastic* instead of its predecessor *The Colour of Magic*. Out of the 41 books set on the Disc Pratchett published before his death, *The Light Fantastic* was the only direct sequel in the franchise. I may be crazy, but I'm not a goddamned maniac who reads things out of sequence.

Comics fared a little better, as I did manage to get through four issues of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* – out of the 28 I brought – but I had to swear off the series when I became too jealous of the book's characters. The protagonist of the story, Morpheus, is the literal embodiment of dreams and all the supporting characters are visited by him in their slumber. At the time, I hadn't had a good night's sleep in two months, and the notion of being well-rested in addition to benefiting from fantastical nighttime revelations left me exceptionally bitter.

The one relative success I had was tackling 100 pages of Stephen King's *The Dark Tower Vol 5: Wolves of the Calla*. The victory was short-lived because I finished the series later that year only to discover it was a 4,316-page clusterfuck and a colossal waste of my time. King's no-outline improvisational style of writing has engendered some all-time great thrillers over the years, but it left his "magnum opus" stuffed with incoherent contradictions, dead-ends at almost every turn, and a brutally unsatisfying conclusion. I suppose there's some connection to be drawn between that and life itself, but it's probably better not to dwell on such things.

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During my stay, I introduced the rest of the chronically depressed horde to The Smiths. No really, I know that sounds exactly like the kind of fish tale a smarmy fabulist would invent, but I promise it is 100% true.

Every other night, the Staff would hold a music therapy session in the rec room. Because no one was allowed access to the internet on their own, tunes became a veritable delicacy, something to be revered. At the session, every participant would write what song they wanted to hear on a piece of paper which would be turned into a YouTube playlist.

For some reason unbeknownst to me, I really needed to hear the opening riff of “This Charming Man.” So, for two minutes and forty-three seconds, the sad sacks were subjected to the stylings of the most despairing band of the 80s. After the song was over, the community matriarch remarked, “That was surprisingly ok.”

I had to agree. The 9-time NME award-winning band was surprisingly ok.

Immediately following my pick, one of the cool stoner kids had his song choice, “Potato Salad,” prematurely cut off because it contained too many racial slurs. Too many for The Clink being a sum total of one.

The Clink had rigid rules of what physical items were and weren’t allowed on the premises but had no defined systems in place for determining what ideas were permitted. The stoner kid had his racially conscious rap track censored, but I was freely allowed to stream my Morrissey song, who is...you know...an actual racist.

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When I woke up on the day before my incarceration began, the idea that I would wind up incriminating myself for crimes against sanity in front of a tribunal of therapists was the furthest thing from my mind. I just wanted to go to work and earn my precious minimum wage.

Not an hour later, I was sitting idle behind my desk when inspiration struck, and I got underway mentally composing my suicide note. I hadn’t planned to start it that day, but I seized the opportunity to end the writer’s block I had been experiencing. The proper rhetoric was

coming to me with an uncomfortable ease and I was in a real creative flow. It was right around the “No one has wronged me and also no one could have saved me. This is my fault and I bear all the responsibility. Please do not feel guilty, I love you all,” clause when I realized the odds were pretty high that I would shortly put pen to paper and paper to pills; I was concerned. I decided to text my friend Mackenzie (that is her real name but fuck it because she deserves her recognition).

Me: Mackenzie, can you do me a huge favor?

Mack: Yes

Mack: But if it's moving something heavy...no

Mack: Is it moving something heavy?

Me: It's more like forcing something heavy to move somewhere. Can you come with me to therapy today?

Since she didn't have to strain her tiny body by fireman's carrying me into our college's counseling center, she agreed and started notifying professionals and looking into my health care provider to figure out what they could cover. Meanwhile, I got to the important business of entering Customer Satisfaction Surveys into my company's database.

When I got off work, I bought some of Mackenzie some of her favorite sour gushers – let it never be said I don't pay my debts – and the two of us headed off to therapy. Mackenzie came into the session with me because, at the time, I had a pathological inability to disclose information to therapists. Mack acted as a failsafe, coaxing me into coming clean about the note I was drafting. The therapist dismissed Mackenzie so the rest of the session could be private.

“What would you have to be doing to realize you're going to take your life?” she asked.

“If I was researching methods, I would be scared,” I answered.

“Have you researched methods?”

“Oh no, of course not.”

“Well that’s goo-“

“Wait I forgot, I did write this sketch called *The Noose Store* a month ago and I spent an hour studying various knots to ensure it was accurate.”

A brief silence. The therapist scribbled some notes down on her legal pad, then she leaned in.

“Alright...Do you have a plan in place?”

“I mean, nothing concrete. I’ve been toying with the idea of doing it on my 20th birthday next month.”

“Uhm, why?”

“Well Shakespeare died the same day he was supposedly born, and my high school theatre teacher always said that that was probably good for his family because they only had one significant date they needed to grieve.”

The therapist returned to the pad, probably writing down something about what a god complex I must have to think myself in any way comparable to the author of *Hamlet*. She reached back into her file folder and produced a single sheet of paper.

“Okay...I’m going to have you to fill out this safety plan so you’ll have a support network when you’re contemplating self-harm.”

I struggled for a spell to complete it, mostly because I was stumped by the final prompt: *The one thing that is most important to me and worth living for is _____*

“Can I put down *Avengers: Endgame* or does it need to be serious?” I asked. At the time, I was considerably invested in finding out how Earth’s Mightiest Heroes were going to best Thanos.

“Alright...so based on how long it took you to fill out that form, it is my professional opinion that you should go to Mass General immediately.”

“Well, that’s going to be a no-go. I’ve actually got a comedy show tonight and the classically trained actor in me is saying it must go on.”

The therapist had done a pretty good job of maintaining her poker face up until that point, but it morphed into one of gobsmacked shock as I refused to comply with her mandate.

I was booked to appear on a character-based stand-up show as real-life Roman Orator and Defender of the Republic Marcus Tullius Cicero that night. I’d written my last few jokes after I finished logging those Customer Satisfaction Surveys, and I really wanted to find out whether the material would play in front of a crowd.

Though it’s often been stated that comedy and misery go hand in hand, the center had no protocol in place for what suicidal comedians were supposed to do in the event of having a gig and a depressive episode simultaneously, so the therapist called in a second therapist to assess my unique situation. There are few things in life more difficult than convincing two licensed practitioners that making a toga out of a bed sheet, accenting your face with gold eyeshadow, and reciting hacky puns about the Roman Empire is going to make you feel mentally stable.

We brokered a deal where I agreed to go to the hospital the second the show had ended. Her final question before we shook on it was:

“If the show goes well and you’re riding high afterwards, will you still check yourself in?”

It was kind of her to never ask how I would respond if the show went poorly. In the end, it went well. In fact, it went really well. In fact, I killed. In fact, it is one of the best performances I've ever given. And still I checked myself in. It's just a real shame Rome had to fall.

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Though they would never admit it, there is a guaranteed path to getting your Discharge Date at The Institute, and boy is it a racket. Basically, all you have to do to end your sentence is show up to every group meeting instead of spending time in your room. It's a surefire way to expedite the process.

My assigned roommate was asleep 24/7 and had a violent sonic boom of a snore. The roommate had a skinhead look about him; I tend to let sleeping dogs lie; therefore, I always stayed out of the room, went to Group, and feigned interest in what everyone was saying.

They would begin the morning meeting by stating the The Joint's cardinal rule: *Do not compare yourself to the other patients here* " I broke this rule several times because the only way I "survived the experience" (to repurpose an X-Men phrase) was to remind myself that I wasn't as batshit as everyone else here.

Next, they would ask a getting to know you question. These had a tendency to escalate to controversy.

What person, living or dead, would you like to have dinner with?

"Albert Einstein," said the first speaker. Bad answer because you wouldn't understand anything he was talking about.

"Ghandi," said the second speaker. Bad answer because, though he was a fluent multilingual writer, he was only ever recorded speaking in English twice.

"Osama Bin Laden," said the third speaker.

“What the fuck.” said everyone else.

“There are things we don’t know about his relationship with the American government prior to 9/11,” he replied.

I can’t remember who I ended up picking, but I’m almost certain it wasn’t a terrorist.

Once, they asked who everyone’s favorite president was. This incited a heated debate about whether Obama or Trump was the greatest man to ever run the country. Thankfully, Tobin defused things by throwing out George Washington’s name, reasoning that he was the OG. One girl threw out Alexander Hamilton. Bad answer because he wasn’t a president. I threw out Martin Van Buren because I’ve always been amused that his nickname was the little magician. That, my friends, is what’s called playing it safe.

At the end of the morning meeting you had to set a goal you’d try to achieve by the night meeting. The one stipulation was that your goal couldn’t be to get your Date and leave. I always met my goals because I always set easy goals.

Get accommodated. Finish a puzzle. Read twenty pages. Child’s play.

One meeting, the nurse leading Group threw a curveball our way. “Today we’re going to play a game,” he said. “It’s called Shit You Need To Know If You Want To Live Here.” He neglected to explain the purpose of this game, and he never explicitly specified where “Here” was. Massachusetts? Planet Earth? The Milky Way Galaxy? From context clues I deduced “Here” referred to the good old U.S. of A.

“How many stripes are on the American Flag?” he asked.

This was going to be a piece of cake. “13!” I barked triumphantly.

“Correct. What do they stand for?”

“Why, the 13 original colonies!” Duh.

“Correct. How many amendments are in the Bill of Rights?”

“Ten!”

The game was technically open to all, but so far, I was in control of the board.

“Where is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier located?”

Crickets

“How many people are buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?”

Louder crickets

“How many steps are there to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?”

Crickets so loud they were deafening and one woman’s ear drum burst

Apparently, I had unknowingly lived 19 years in this country as an illegal alien, because I didn’t have the foggiest idea what the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was.

FYI, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (or the TUS as we in the know call it) is located at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. Four soldiers are interred there. There are 21 steps.

Congratulations! You now possess the knowledge required to live in the self-proclaimed greatest nation in the world.

Here’s one more piece of shit you need to know if you want to live here: The United Kingdom’s Suicide Hotline is far superior than ours. Its number is 116 123.

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My second to last day in The Pen, I was making a pit stop in my room to grab a jacket for the daily nature walk when I discovered my roommate was awake and packing his bags. Though I had thought him to be a sort of hardcase Rip Van Winkle, he had somehow secured his Date and was on his way out. I was eager to get the room to myself but dismayed that he had poked such a gaping hole in my Group is the Ticket to Freedom theory.

“Hey kid, I’m sorry about all the snoring. I know it’s real pain in the ass,” he said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, I hardly noticed,” I replied for the sake of going along to get along.

“Naw, man, you noticed. Listen, I’m like super bipolar. And sometimes I’ll go months where the only thing I can do is sleep. It’s real rough.”

“Oh. Uhm, I was just diagnosed with bipolar disorder.”

“Damn. I’m sorry kid, that’s a bad break. Just try to do a better job managing it than I have. I’ve been unemployed for 6 months. After I get out, I’m heading off to New Orleans to look for work,” he said as he shoved his life into a suitcase.

I let him know I worked at a career center in Boston that could help get him a job a lot closer to home. I was ever the corporate shill.

“Really? I’ll definitely consider it.” He paused before adding, “I looked at your books while you were out, interesting stuff.”

“Oh yeah. I didn’t actually finish much of it,” I lamented. “You a big reader?”

“I read when I can. Mostly the classics. Are you a fan of Dostoevsky?”

“Never read him, but one of my suitemates is trying to conquer the *The Brothers Karamozov*. He hit a wall after the 100-page eulogy, though.”

“Haven’t heard of it. But I like that *Crime and Punishment*. The guy’s got some really interesting ideas about living among the poor to understand what life’s really about.”

My roommate finished packing his bag and started heading towards the door.

“Hey, kid,” he said, “you’re going to figure this thing out. Don’t let it get you down.”

My roommate walked out the door. He never swung by the career center or at least never on a day I was working.

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When my Date finally came, it happened to be Valentine's Day. I've never placed much stock in the holiday because I'm not particularly lucky at having my affections requited, but at least this year I learned to love myself.

My college roommate picked me up from The Slammer to commemorate the occasion. With my personal effects and belt now returned, I no longer had cause to fear an accidental unveiling of the full moon. That's Amore.

We spent a couple hours shooting the shit and charging phones in a Wendy's before making our way to the Middleboro train stop. He noticed one of the metal signs for the stop had come loose and decided we should take it home with us. Under his diligent leadership, we furtively nicked the placard and enshrined it in our suite's hallway. It is my belief that the unspoken goal of the heist was to make everyone feel as lost in the world as we did. I always met my goals because I always set easy goals.

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Since the rec room TV was mostly tuned to AMC, I caught a lot of snippets of *Die Hard* sequels. I also witnessed an episode of the *Partridge Family* where Danny Partridge became an honorary member of the Black Panthers. The writer of said episode wasn't in The Facility with me, so it was permissible for me to compare myself to him as a reminder I could be a lot more mentally unstable.

I did wind up getting upset at content that didn't help with my recovery. *Suicide Squad* came on the idiot box and the title itself was triggering for obvious reasons. I didn't feel like I was on a team back then, let alone a Squad. In other words, Katana didn't have my back.

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The night before Valentine's day – my final night in The Facility – I was left to my own devices in an empty room, so I followed Tobin's example and "released my frustrations." I don't regret the act itself, but I do regret spilling a few drops of frustration on the sheets.

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After my showing as Cicero, Mackenzie, Billy (the real name of the college roommate because once again, fuck it), and I called an Uber to ferry us over to Massachusetts General Hospital. When we arrived, it occurred to me that some of the medical professionals might mistakenly diagnose me with jaundice, because I still had faint traces of gold makeup coating my baggy eyes.

We navigated the hospital's labyrinthine layout to find the Emergency Room. I sallied up to the front desk to see if the pharmatender could cure what ails me.

"What can I do you for, mister?" said the pharmakeep.

"Got any hair of the dog for a cowpoke at his wit's end?"

He took me to another room where I met with a risk assessor, who determined that I was indeed one of those at-risk youths that you read about in the papers. She took me to another room where I was quizzed about my at-riskness by a different staff member. He took me to a cordoned off waiting room. Eventually some other scrub took me to another austere room where I was once again interrogated. I had the spiel down to the letter at this point. After my testimony, he dropped me back off in the waiting room, while the team figured out the best course of action for revoking my at-risk status.

Billy and Mackenzie figured out who to talk to for visitation permission, and subsequently joined me in the waiting room. They had grabbed me some ice cream from the nearby vending machine. It was good, but it still didn't fill out my waist enough to hold those

fucking Levis up. When I wasn't using my soon-to-be-confiscated phone to message a friend I wouldn't be able to make his birthday party, email my boss to let her know I probably wouldn't be coming in to work that week, and reveal to my parents what a miserable bastard their son turned out to be, Billy, Mackenzie, and I spent the evening swapping stories. We gossiped about mutual acquaintances, we recounted escapades of our youth, we revealed sensational tales of our sexual exploits, or lack thereof.

I went on something of a melancholic rant, openly sharing why I thought things didn't work out with my first (and, as of now, last) girlfriend; I had never talked about that with anyone before. It seemed to me the fact that I was unable to express to her that I was profoundly sad was a particularly pointy nail in the coffin. I also discovered my roommate was bisexual, something that an observant domestic partner should have known a long ago. (but hey, I hadn't discovered I was bisexual either and I'd lived with myself significantly longer). I apologized for my lack of knowledge and he forgave me because he knew I was too busy treading water in my own sea of troubles to pay attention to his.

The whole affair was like the dinner scene in *Jaws* where three larger-than-life characters find common ground monologuing about their past lives and singing couple songs, all the while knowing a killer shark is looming in the background to snatch one of them away. I still had a lot of fun that night and walked away being the real smiling son of a bitch.

Eventually it became too late for the pair to continue holding vigil with me, so we said our goodbyes and I thanked them for making me not feel so alone for the first time in...well...possibly ever. When they were gone, I turned my attention to the waiting room's muted TV. AMC was doing a movie marathon. In order, they showed *Eraser*, *Predator*, *Alien*, *Predator* again, and *Eraser* again. Perfectly palindromic.

Come morning, the team had decided I was to be sent to The Institute. They rolled me in a stretcher to the back of an ambulance bound for The Looney Bin. As the car started moving, a feeling of inner peace like I had never known before washed over me. I don't have the right words to describe it with any justice, so I'll steal a few of Kurt's. *Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt*. It was Tranquility. It was Zen. It was Love. I will never know for sure, but I believe that it was my mind telling me that I had done the right thing by finally accepting that I needed help.

When I got the chance, I knew I had to update the safety plan's final question to say *The one thing that is most important to me and worth living for is chasing that feeling down, no matter how many potholes are on the path.*

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Also, just to be clear *Avengers: Endgame* didn't disappoint. 10/10.

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The End

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About the Author



Evan C. Phillips is a miscreant small-dick long-fingered virgin with little chance at a successful future, a textbook ne'er-do-well. Currently, he studies Comedic Arts at Boston's best bastion of incipient madness: Emerson College. When he's not writing sketches that are structurally sound, but chocked full of stilted dialogue and characters that all sound exactly like the author, Evan supervises the computer lab at Masshire Downtown Boston, a career center dedicated to connecting the unemployed with businesses looking to hire. His main responsibility is to use the Insight™ surveillance software to remotely X out of job searchers' pornography. Though he rarely shows up anymore and consistently lies to his boss about his whereabouts, she continues to insist he is the most integral piece of the operation and the best intern they have.

Evan struggles with undiagnosed body dysmorphia and hypochondria as well as diagnosed Bipolar Disorder Type 2 – although he worries he actually has Type 1. Evan copes with the manic episodes by listening to Kanye West's "Dark Fantasy" and starting long-term Instagram stunts he can't possibly execute on. He copes with the depressive episodes by listening to AJJ's "Big Bird" and avoiding the freezing lakes The Brain Chemicals want him to drown in. He never listens to *Ye*, it's an evil album that tricks him into making poor decisions.

Evan's newest project is buying as many gaudy goth rings as possible, since fidgeting with them helps curb his undiagnosed excoriation disorder.

By the way, his sketch *The Noose Store* was nominated for an Emerson Evvy award, a prize given out at the largest student-run award show in the country. He lost.