

Rayland Cooper suffered from a... *unique* condition. He loved monotonous days and strict routines, but not by choice.

His hands left him no other option.

While growing up, he'd shown strange behaviors. Baby Rayland would grab his head after every failed attempt at walking. Toddler Rayland pulled his hair whenever water destroyed his sandcastle. Astronaut-wannabe Rayland slapped himself if things didn't go his way.

Acned Rayland, however, took a turn for the absolute worse.

It happened on a regular school day.

The classroom was dead silent. Acned Rayland had spent the last half hour staring at the exam. The holographic clock showed there were five minutes left. The last three questions of the test remained incomplete; his mind, blank. *I studied this*, he thought as sweat ran down his pimpled cheeks. *Why can't I remember?*

Pencil deep in his cheek, Acned Rayland contemplated the exam while the last seconds went by.

A bell marked the end, and Ms. Thomson sent her assistant robot to collect the sheets. The machine bleeped and got going with clunky steps, but it didn't get too far.

Acned Rayland's chair and desk flipped over, knocking the robot down. Everyone gasped, teacher included.

Acned Rayland lay on the ground, letting out groans and muted screams. His own left hand landed punch after punch on his face. Meanwhile, the right hand covered both mouth and nose for a more merciful kill.

"I couldn't help it," he later said to his parents and a really weirded-out school principal. Bags of ice covered the bruises. "It was as if my hands wanted to murder me."

Acned Rayland soon joined the Wide Smiles Psychiatric Hospital, where he'd mature into Equally-insecure-young-adult Rayland, or Rayland for short. He pulled through his stay with the support from his family and a caring team of specialists.

One of his doctors stood out over the rest. Dr. Lulapus, an aged man who liked to stroke his beard whenever lost in thought, took an interest in Rayland and helped him understand his psychological condition. After a series of exhausting tests and overnight studies, Dr. Lulapus reached a pretty fair conclusion.

"Your hands literally want to fucking murder you. This is the peak of my career."

He explained how frustration or routine disruption could trigger the behavior, and advised him to avoid any kind of unnecessary stress. Dr. Lulapus also took a moment to inspire some confidence. "They will call us crazy," he said, "but we are not. Trust me on this."

The doctor shared his main theory about the condition, which involved Rayland absorbing a perfectionist twin before birth, whose spirit now inhabited his hands.

"So, how can I deal with it?" Rayland asked, under the right assumption that they'd never find a cure.

"I have a special medicine that will help you." The doctor took out a small translucent bottle, filled to the top with white pills. They made a rattling sound when he shook it. "And we can practice some breathing techniques. I also recommend cutting your hair short." Rayland's black hair fell halfway down his neck. "So your left hand doesn't have anything to pull from."

Dr. Lulapus handed the medicine to Rayland but kept a pill for himself. In an act of encouragement, he swallowed it and pushed his patient to do the same.

Rayland did so. To his surprise, the capsule had a sweet flavor.

They practiced basic breathing techniques for half an hour.

Dr. Lulapus then rehearsed his speech for the International Disease Convention for Unconventional Diseases, and asked his patient permission to do a live demonstration. Rayland denied all three times.

“There’s one last thing,” the old man said. “Brightec has provided us with their new experimental technology. It might help.” The doctor leaned forward and introduced what, long into the future, Rayland would come to hate. “Have you heard about dreaming stations?”

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Inside a circular room, strange machines formed a ring. They looked like white puff sofas with no folds, and a glass dome on top. According to the doctor, Brightec, the biggest tech company in the world, had distributed them to some hospitals and institutions to see the effect they had on patients. They would never be up for sale to the general public.

Dr. Lulapus gave him a nudge. “Go ahead, choose one.”

Rayland felt conflicted. His love for puff sofas clashed with his fear of concepts like “experiment” and “new” and “new experiment.”

“So, I just fall asleep in them?”

“Try not to. It gave me a pretty bad backache.”

Doubtful, Rayland approached a random one. Its glass dome opened and slid into a hair-wide socket, so he could take a seat. When he did, the dreaming station stretched, slowly, to match the length of his body. Even if he’d eaten his vegetables, Rayland was rather short, so the machine didn’t have to change much.

He rested on it, from head to feet. The leather was stiff and cold—softer around his neck.

The glass slid out and arched over Rayland, shutting all exterior air.

It turned out the “dreaming” part was not literal.

Images showed up on the glass. A collage of translucent pictures. The best sandcastle he’d ever built, the time he got an A on the hardest exam, his first kiss with the beautiful girl

on the poster in his room—Rayland recognized all of them. Memories slid from left to right, from right to left. They overlapped and blended.

His eyes followed the perfect sandcastle. It expanded on its own. The rest faded away. Now it moved. It came to life. It covered the whole space. The image rotated around the castle, just like Rayland had walked around it back then.

“What do you see?” the doctor asked. From outside, he just saw a transparent glass. After Rayland told him, he said, “Try thinking about your failed exam. About things that bothered you.”

As soon as Rayland did, the collage came back. The last unanswered questions, the clock ticking, the assistant robot.

His hands shook. He closed his eyes.

“That’s okay, Rayland.”

He opened them. The images were gone.

“It’s a process,” the doctor said. “We’ll take it slow.”

Rayland leaned forward and the glass slid open on its own. Once out, Dr. Lulapus walked past the **Patients Only** sign and dove right in.

The machine closed, and the show started.

The doctor’s lips retracted. His eyes got watery. He reached out a hand towards what, as he’d explain later, was the “best damn beef burrito he’d ever tasted.”

Of course, he couldn’t touch anything other than the stiff glass.

“If only...”

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Months passed—also breathing classes, dreaming station sessions, and curious journalists Dr. Lulapus pretended not to have invited.

All throughout, Rayland’s hands made no new attacks. The medicine kept them at bay.

“One per day, unless you’re feeling calm,” the doctor said while handling a second bottle. They lasted quite a long time. “Two if you’re on the verge of breaking.”

Rayland stared at the bottle, melancholic. “I can’t wait to join society again.”

“You’re almost there, but don’t let the excitement cloud your judgment. Some have relapsed and had to be reinstituted—for good, this time.”

“Oh.”

He buried those words deep deep deep inside his mind, for his own sanity.

Eventually, Rayland’s stay reached its end. In the hours before his parents picked him up, Dr. Lulapus took him to an empty hall for a private conversation. “Remember what I told you. You can do this. You are in control.” The doctor had stood by his side all along, although now he was also a patient. “There’s something I want you to have: a decent stash of your medicine, which I’ve kept in secret. You’ll have to sneak it out. It’s hidden behind a loose panel, in my office.”

“The one that now belongs to Dr. Smith?”

“My office. Check the bottom right corner and you should find it.”

“Couldn’t you ask the hospital staff to give it to me?”

“I don’t know, Rayland.” He sighed. “I already got in enough trouble when I tried to escape.”

Although confused, the patient didn’t insist. Their bond was too strong for that.

Dr. Lulapus said his goodbyes and walked away. Some minutes later, Rayland stood in front of the office. He took a look around to make sure nobody would see him, swallowed two pills in case things went south, and approached. The door slid into the wall, and back out once he’d gone through.

Just as promised, Rayland removed the panel and found a cardboard box with enough provisions for ten lifetimes. He carried it out before Dr. Smith showed up.

Rayland distributed half the content in his travel bag, among the clothes, and stored his other belongings on top of the cardboard box. Nobody suspected anything.

Look at that, he thought while getting in the family car. Rayland had never crossed the legal line to that extent before. *I can get away with this kind of stuff without triggering my condition. As long as things go well, I'll be fine.*

But things wouldn't always go well.

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Everyone at Brightec knows what it's like to have a boss with an awful sense of humor, and they have a list of tips for those who struggle to force a laugh. It starts like this: if you end up with a nosebleed or a headache, you got it cheap.

Also, if you end up puking in the toilet, we've all been there.

If she makes the robot guards chase you, careful with their laser guns.

If she hands you coffee, smell it first.

If you end up blind, here's the braille version.

If she hangs you from a drone and sends you flying around, just enjoy the ride.

But most of all, laugh. Laugh because it's over. Laugh because she's done.

And pray for whoever she targets next.

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Just like that, Helen Pool comes up with her biggest prank yet.

It hits her out of nowhere. She's now crying while a manic laugh escapes her mouth. She leans on her desk to avoid falling down.

She's no writer, but this prank will tick the whole fiction checklist. Challenges to surpass, dreams to chase, inner demons to fight, and twists and dragons and spies and sporadic breaks in which the characters can whine for a bit—it's all there.

She's only missing the one who'll face the challenges. The one with the inner demons. The hero.

Luckily, she knows just the guy. And his demons are eager to choke him, alright.

Many years after leaving the mental institution, Rayland jumped out of bed when he saw the holographic numbers of his bedside clock.

7:04

He had slept four extra minutes.

Routine disruption.

His breathing practice vanished, evaporated, disappeared. Air rushed in and out of his lungs, through the mouth. Panic took over. Rayland let all his anger out.

“Holy cow,” he said. “I can’t be late for work.”

In one short leap, he landed inside the bathroom (living in a small apartment had its perks). It was crammed with its most essential elements.

Rayland brushed his teeth, combed his short hair, and used the toilet. Simultaneously.

Avoid stressful situations. But relaxing could cost him his job. *Avoid frustrations.* But he had to hurry to keep up with his morning tasks. *Avoid routine disruption.* For *Lulapus’ sake*, *avoid routine disruption.*

His hands trembled.

“Please, please, please.” He jumped out of the bathroom. His bed would have to stay unmade. It’d have to. “I just need one more minute.”

Rayland ran towards the wardrobe.

Shirt, socks, pants, belt, and shoes; last but not least, his dark-blue jacket. He was done dressing, if not for one final piece: his metal Brightec pin, on the bedside table. It showed the letter B over a crescent shape. Rayland fastened it to the lapel.

“I did it!” His voice broke from excitement. “Now I just need to—”

The medicine was gone. Rayland always left a bottle by the bed for a quick dose before leaving for work. His hand had tried to grab it, but only found air.

Speaking of hands...

Both shook and turned red. It'd been a long time since he'd seen them that way.

Had he knocked out the bottle while sleeping? Or maybe his own limb threw it away to sabotage his routine?

Rayland searched every corner of the bedside table. Empty, empty, empty.

The stash.

He turned around. The doctor's provision hid deep inside his wardrobe. Rayland gave two steps forward before coming up with a new idea: he dropped to the ground and looked under the bed. The medicine bottle rested on the furthest corner, almost peeking on the other side. He crawled towards it and reached a hand.

Rayland could've sworn his arm stretched an extra inch. It tensed up, trembled, and hurt; but came back with the bottle. He slid out and stood up so fast his brain got dizzy. A trail of dust had glued on him, nothing some brushing couldn't fix.

He opened the bottle and took out two pills... or thought about doing so.

Neither hand responded. The rattling capsules danced around.

Rayland watched his medicine fall, and a hundred white dots scatter when it hit the ground. His hands rose before him, glowing red.

"I am in control, I always am." But any stand-down order died once it reached either wrist.

He gazed at them. Feral nails gazed back.

The attack came from the left. That five-legged beast, which couldn't even draw a line straight, would finally taste revenge. It latched on to his neck. Rayland crashed against the wall and slid down. He could not breathe. His veins drew a dark, shaky path under the chin.

Some pills had landed nearby. Rayland tried reaching for them. Of course, his right hand had different plans.

It approached, watchful.

His voice came out hoarse.

"Mercy."

He felt the gentle touch of its fingers. The hand that had fed him, the one that had handled his razor, now stroked his cheek in a maternal gesture. *Don't worry, honey, it'll be over soon.*

Luckily, Rayland still had two limbs that never turned into murderous monsters. He used his feet to sweep the closest capsules towards him and dove onto the ground, mouth wide open. Rayland swallowed three pills and a hair.

The left hand let go. The right one backed off.

He closed them, opened them, and moved each finger.

Victory.

Leaving aside the threat of a spectral perfectionist absorbed twin fetus, Rayland had other matters to face. He was already behind schedule, and the attack hadn't helped at all.

Brushing off the dust, he grabbed his cell phone and a full medicine bottle from the box. Once past the door, there'd be no time to lose.

While turning the handle, Rayland promised never to let his eyes rest for an extra minute ever again. Destiny was a funny creature, however, and had plenty of sleep lined up for him that day.