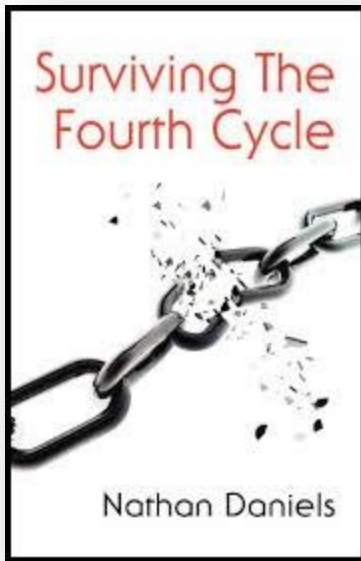




EXCERPT FROM - SURVIVING THE FOURTH CYCLE

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Chapter 18

JOURNAL ENTRY (Relapse at the Circus)

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There's nothing more frustrating than having a relapse! Thinking everything's fine one day, then waking up to a change in gravity and realizing you're on the dark side of the moon again. It happened to me today, or yesterday... I don't know. It's three-thirty in the morning, and I feel confused.

It has been months since I've had a debilitating episode. I've been living in the real world with the rest of my family, and nurturing my desire to overcome my illness. I've kept quiet, and refrained from exposing myself to more stimulation than I can handle. This may have given me a false sense of security. I've spent most of my time writing feverishly, and breaking through the very doors that, I myself, sealed shut. I can't deny feeling enlightened, yet I suppose, in many ways I remain baffled by my ever-changing mind.

I haven't cut myself in several weeks, and there have been no phantom visits from my late parents' ghosts. Stores have not transformed themselves into funhouses, and the outside world in general, has not stricken me as a nightmarish landscape of brewing hostility. In other words, I've made some undeniable improvements, though I still struggle with my diet and sleep.

I wasn't ready for the circus though...

I had Hailey get a ticket for me weeks ago, in foolish haste, succumbing to the illusion that all was well. Even as the date approached I remained convinced I could handle all the sights and sounds of the Greatest Show on Earth. I actually fell asleep the night before, looking forward to the event, and imagining it through my son's eyes.

I acknowledged the fact that, months ago, I would have panicked over the twelve-thousand people that would attend. I would imagine them standing elbow-to-elbow and bumping into me... invading my personal space. I would've stressed over the ever-changing lights, the pyrotechnics, and the crowded sounds of chaos...

But, I'm better now...

That's what I thought until I woke up twenty-two hours ago. I opened my eyes and could feel the weight of the universe, pressing me into the mattress, not wanting me to get up. My mind was

boiling over with noisy thoughts that made me deaf, and dizzy. I realized I could feel the embrace of the fourth Cycle, again, holding me with renewed power. Hugging me like a friend who'd been away for a while. With this, came deep despair and hopelessness. I withdrew, and remained silent in bed, until it was nearly time to leave.

I remember getting into the van's passenger seat... and then I blacked out. I don't recall the drive to the arena at all. I remember blackness, and I remember counting, with my digits reaching one hundred... repeatedly, and with hypnotic redundancy.

I see myself in the parking garage... briefly.

Then I'm waiting in line with Chris on my shoulders. Hailey's talking to me, but I don't understand what she's saying, and I jump back into the blackness.

Now I'm in my seat, and a stranger is tapping me on the shoulder and speaking to me. I don't understand him either, and waive him away, annoyed. I bury my head in between my knees and hug myself... rocking. I'm in the "airplane crash position".

I can hear elephants, and they sound like they're pissed off at me. I think, "Fuck you, elephants! Just leave me alone!" My internal shout makes my ears pop, and I'm deaf.

The building appears to be on fire, and I can feel the intensity of its heat smothering me. It looks like the people in the front row are burning, but they're cheering for more, in muffled silence. I'm distraught, and look to my family. They're applauding silently, and then disappear in a pulse of darkness.

The next time I find my way back to the world, my eyes are following the broken lines on the highway. The sky is dark, and we're heading home.

Hailey went to bed shortly after we returned, and I could tell she was sharing my immense frustration. It breaks my heart, having her tethered to my madness, and along for this ride. While she was sleeping, I cut myself, just once, to make the shadows stop moving toward me.

Fucking shadows... my most consistent imaginary friends. Writing extensively about a forgotten night spent on a rock in the woods was a reminder of the first time I saw the shadows come creeping to life. To this day, when I'm nervous, lost, and alone, I can still see them slide across the walls and floors in unnatural motion.

Are they bodiless entities that can smell my misery and sense my loss of will? Sometimes it's hard to convince myself it isn't real. On nights like this, I still wonder if lost souls are waiting for me to join them. Maybe they are real. Maybe they know something I don't.



