

## Escaping the Iron Maiden

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Did you ever have a person that you just could not stand and almost hated, purely based off their reputation and how those around you perceived them? That's how I saw myself and genuinely couldn't see anything else. I was this strange figure that could never fit in and hated who I was, based solely on what others and those around me enjoyed saying very vocally.

Growing up, I considered the way my family behaved and saw things to be "The Normal." It wasn't until much later that I became all too aware that the way my mother raised us was far from "The Normal" for most people. While most were taking family trips to Disneyland every few years, mine was taking regular excursions to metal and punk concerts and festivals throughout the year, like the time we saw the Ramones or saw Linkin Park at Warped Tour. Most people had respectful interactions or conversations with their parents, our conversations with our mother went more like; "Hey, can I go out with a few friends to Target?"

"Yeah, but if I get a call from the cops, I'm ignoring it."

"Fuck off, we're not doing anything that you would."

That way of life and that way of being raised made sense to me, and it was all I knew until I started to get older and neared middle school. It's said that middle school is where the most change in one's life starts, and mine started to change a lot in ways that most wouldn't see that early in life. I started to see my life and my family's way of life to be weird and "The

Abnormal”, as those around me began to point it out to me.

As sixth grade came to a close, and I began to enter middle school, things were changing around me with those that I had been sharing a class with for the last four years. It was as if someone had come around and found the giant switch that flipped everyone’s opinion on me around, from “he’s alright,” to “he sucks and needs to know we hate him”. Out of what I perceived as nowhere, I was a social pariah and needed to be left on the fringes of the social hierarchy that was quickly being established within my middle school. The idea of me having a crush on someone became something to mess with others about and would garner a disgusted outrage from any girl that was insinuated to be the target of some perceived affection. I became the target of round rubber rockets at dodgeball in PE class, regardless of if I was still in or out. I had several hiding spots, my favorite being the small space beneath the staircase in the back of the gymnasium. This space that looked like a void in the world became my own personal void, where I could just be and exist rather than trying and failing to put up a façade to those around me. Where this space once felt cramped and tight when trying to hide from my chasers, I soon grew to find a solace and comfort within the cramped space that few, if any spaces gave. It had become a place where I could be left alone to read in peace instead of my book being taken from me, forcing me to give chase to several people just to get it back.

This drained me more every day.

Among the things my classmates would do and say to me was the enthusiastic revelation that I was weird. I was a strange person with an even stranger family, and nobody cared about the stuff we did and how nobody did that stuff. It became a regular reminder that I would always be this weird kid, no matter where I was to go, I wouldn’t fit in. No, I couldn’t fit in, and I couldn’t see a way to even try, because I was so innately weird and strange and the way I was raised had everything to do with that. All I had left were my books, and my rides home on the bus listening to Blink-182 *Greatest Hits* album, replaying songs like “Adam’s Song” and “Down” over and over again.

A few months into seventh grade, I had begun to go home every day with words echoing in my head as I would board myself up into my bedroom and wonder what happened. That room would become an almost emotional iron maiden as it enveloped me in a hard shell that would protect me from anything on the outside. But I would learn too late that

it was filled with sharpened spikes to destroy me completely. That room holds many memories that I still can recall very vividly; some good, others not. I remember excitedly reading the recently published *The Battle of the Labyrinth* by Rick Riordan or *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, I just as well remember discovering the crimson river that I could make flow down my arms and would break open that dam many times over the next few years.

When you get really good at hiding physically you can quickly transfer that knowledge to hiding emotionally. That is if those around you even want to see it or even see you as you are. This was the case with my father. He never saw me as me but saw me as what he wanted me to be. He seemed infuriated that I was never that. This would lead to the next chapter of an otherwise already rather tragic story as I started eighth grade.

When you're hated by your own flesh and blood for what you are and told you shouldn't be that, it leads you to do things you wouldn't otherwise. I was desperate to have someone want me, so I began to change myself to be a sport loving athlete that my father wanted his son to be. This would cause me to join the football team of my middle school, begrudgingly, as I fought with myself to be the son I had convinced myself I should've been. It becomes very easy to make small mistakes when you never actually cared about what you were doing in the first place. When you break a bone and are rather young and relatively new to broken bones and major injuries, they will prescribe you painkillers to take, which is the true start of this next chapter.

I started to take painkillers for my foot as I recuperated from this broken bone, and I began to notice something. While creating physical harm to myself proved a great way to distract from the emotional draining and pain of where I was, that was starting to wear off as I grew a higher tolerance for pain. I then learned that if you take enough painkillers in quick enough succession, everything goes numb as you suddenly just barely exist. I could make my mind go empty and all thoughts and memories associated with any treatment from that day would disappear and my body wouldn't feel anything. I took more and more, and eventually days without them began to feel groggy and I didn't like feeling anything so taking the painkillers kept that up without feeling like shit without them. I had become addicted and let myself be hollow and emotionless all by the age of thirteen. This addiction would lead me to one of my most vivid memories within that iron maiden room, and one of the lowest points that

many don't reach until their late twenties and early thirties.

My memories leading up to it are fuzzy and incomplete, almost like the actual moment has claimed all the ram for that day. Flashes of words being pelted at me like stones, words like *Dumbass*, *Fuckhead*, and *Dipshit*. A quiet bus ride home staring out the window curled up on my bench alone, not even listening to music. Opening the front door, to see only the path down the hall and into my bedroom like being in a video game where they won't let you move around and go anywhere besides the plot point. The moment I sit on my bed everything is suddenly clear like watching a video tape that was smudged and suddenly hitting a clean part of the tape. The bottle in my hand. Open. With a sea of pills in it, as I tilt my head back like I would copy later when I discover shots as the pills tumble down like rain falling on my tongue as I fall back down on the bed in a lulled sleep.

You know those dreamless sleeps where you're almost aware that you're sleeping but all you're in is dark and you are unable to move or breathe? That's what I was in. It would've been the best sleep I had if I wasn't trying to have a different result. I would eventually wake up to a yelling voice several hours later, as my eyes flutter open to see the empty bottle in my bed beside my head and pillow with my father saying something about food and not being a bum. Sitting up and rubbing the recently developed throbbing headache away, as the reality of my failure (my thought at time) settled in. This pattern and cycle would continue for several months with several more attempts at rectifying what I saw as a failure. I kept trying until I met a very specific person.

To this day I don't know her name, and I'm pretty sure I never will. I'm okay with that now, but she came into my life like a whirlwind blowing everything around and out of place and left just as quickly. In 2013, I was going to the Vans Warped Tour with my mother and sisters like we did every year which had become one of the few things I ever looked forward to anymore at this point of my life. I was excited to see Goldfinger and Reel Big Fish later in the night as they were the headliners for their respective stages, but the entire day was filled with bands I had been wanting to see like Big D and the Kids Table and Bowling for Soup, and bands that I would first find out about at this show like Ice Nine Kills and Beebs and her Money Makers. Early in the day I was in the crowd waiting for New Years Day to come out to their stage and I had maneuvered myself up near the front as I bumped into a girl with curly brown hair that ran down

to the small of her back. She turned around as I instantly began to profusely apologize to her. She just looked me up and down for a second and smiled and pointed down. "That's an awesome shirt."

She said, her finger directing to the skull logo that had become known as the fiend from the band Misfits on my shirt, that had become a go-to to wear to concerts. That opened a moment as we started to talk while waiting for the band to come out. All we talked about was music for a moment. Which bands we were excited to see, which ones we hadn't heard of but wanted to check out and who we wanted to see most of the headliners. Her blue eyes sparkled like a sun-soaked ocean, filled with more excitement with each band name she listed off, and began to talk about bands that weren't even at the Warped Tour that year, but she still wanted to see. Just as New Years Day came out, we had agreed to go to each other's choices for bands and we did just that.

I took her to Ice Nine Kills and Anarbor, and she took me to Motion City Soundtrack and Crown the Empire. All the while we just talked and got to know one another between sets. Halfway through the day I realized I wasn't putting on a façade anymore, and hadn't been for all this time, but was being genuinely me without having to alter myself in some way and she didn't walk away. If anything, she kept wanting to know more and hear about my life and all the stuff I had done with my family up to that point, I loved hearing about her love for music and concerts but limited chances to go to any. She spoke with such a passion that couldn't be faked and it was easy to get lost in that passion and want to give that energy right back to her. We talked like this until in the mosh pit for Goldfinger at the end of the night, as the bodies bounced around us and we threw ourselves back into them suddenly a surge of movement came up behind us and split us apart with a sea of people between us and I never got the chance to look for her as the venue was shutting down for the night. My brain no longer felt trapped within itself. I had slipped out of the iron maiden and hadn't even realized it till the day was over when we were back at the hotel room with my father. That night I looked in the mirror of the hotel bathroom and saw someone I hadn't seen in five years. It took me a moment to recognize them.

They had grown and their hair was longer and framing their face, but the face was the biggest change. It had looked happy again for the first time in an even longer time, I knew I wanted to see that more, and I knew that was me. It was the truest and most genuine version of myself I

had seen in those five years, and it was one of the most welcoming sights I had seen in such a long time. I had found someone who liked the weirdness and the abnormal parts of me and my family and I wanted to be the person who did again. I knew that the addiction was the last thing helping me with that.

This day I would become tired of it all: the failures, the attempts, the lack of pain, and I was ready to be done with it all. I found myself standing over a toilet as I poured the last of painkillers down and watched as the pills swirled around and sank away from my life. I had nearly destroyed my life, and stalled it for many years regardless, based on things that others saw or thought while they never even truly knew me. I reached a point where I truly no longer cared what others saw in me or my life. Yes, I can say that I am weird, and my upbringing was not "The Normal," and I love my strangeness and I wouldn't want it any other way.