

A Terror Since September

— AN ESSAY BY —

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My husband and I had been married two years when his brother Jared, in the midst of another psychotic break, wrote a to-do list that included buying a gun and five bullets to kill his family. My mother-in-law noted that number included me.

“You’re really one of us now,” she said.

At his commitment hearing, Jared insisted the list had been a joke. “I don’t even know how to use a gun,” he told the judge. This was true, and really most of our concern was directed toward Jared and his need for psychiatric help. The list was alarming, absolutely, but Jared had always been a gentle person before he got sick, and he had no experience with firearms. None of us *truly* believed he’d get hold of a gun, let alone use it.

Still, it’s the kind of image that doesn’t exactly leave you. And when Jared was unmedicated, the violent chaos that had taken over his mind roiled just below the surface, visible enough so it was hard not to be afraid that one way or another it would break through his exterior.

At the time my husband and I lived on Cape Cod year-round. I loved the desolate feel of the off-season, all the neighboring homes vacated and most of the nearby businesses shuttered. Our house was right on the ocean and a short walk from the harbor, where after Labor Day the boats sat stacked and unused. I could walk the beach for hours without seeing a soul. It was easy to pretend I was the last person left on earth. Sometimes this was a lonely fantasy, and other times it suited my mood perfectly.

But that isolated, windswept landscape seemed less romantic when my mother-in-law suggested moving Jared from North Carolina to Massachusetts. My husband and I met with a family therapist, mostly to allay my fears about the new arrangement—fears that we would become responsible for

Jared, or worse, that he would appear on our doorstep in his most agitated state. That he would be dangerous.

When I voiced this concern, the therapist waved her hand dismissively. “If he shows up uninvited, just dial 911. The police will be there before anything can happen.”

And my mind did not relax but chased after the fears she so easily swept aside. What would we do, out on our deserted stretch of shore, in the minutes between when a phone call was made and help arrived?

THE LAST SEPTEMBER begins when Brett finds her husband murdered, his head bashed in and his throat slit. From the moment she stumbles upon this shocking scene, it seems clear to everybody that Charlie’s brother, Eli—who’s been in and out of mental hospitals for years—must be the perpetrator.

It’s September when Brett finds Charlie dead at their borrowed home on Cape Cod. The last tourist has gone home, the seals have returned to the bay, the air is getting colder. And now, the back deck of their house is soaked with blood. As Eli disappears before the police can make an arrest, Brett is left to wonder not only if she’s next but how everything she’d done in the years since she met Charlie might have led to exactly this moment—him and Eli both, each in his own way, gone.

FICTION TAKES THE germ of an idea and reshapes it into something entirely different. I never really knew Jared before mental illness commanded his life. Brett not only knew Eli but loved him: they were best friends in college, until schizophrenia interfered the way nothing else can. As Brett tries to make sense of what happened to Charlie, she can’t help but sift through the three versions of Eli that loom large: the person he used to be before he got sick, the person he could have been if he hadn’t, and the tragic figure he’s become. In this way the novel is an elegy not only for Charlie but for what’s been lost to Eli and the people who love him.

Mental illness steps between a person and every wish he’s ever had. For the person suffering, it’s the most dangerous thing I can think of. And then there’s this other way it feels dangerous. If you’ve ever crossed the road to avoid someone who’s talking to himself—engaging his voices—then you

can imagine what it's like to be in the same room with a family member who's in that florid, irrational, unreachable state. Even when you know the statistics, that a person suffering from mental illness is more likely to be the victim of a crime than the perpetrator, it's terrifying on a primal level. You can understand how myths of demonic possession are rooted in psychosis.

Whenever I see Jared, if he's been taking his medication, I feel guilty for ever doubting him, for ever being afraid. Then when he's off his meds, it doesn't take long for the same uneasiness, the same fear, to rise again.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "I had a terror since September I could tell to none." Brett's terror begins long before the September she finds her husband dead. It goes all the way back to when Eli was nobody to be feared at all, just a friend full of promise, until one strange night at a party, a night that proved to be prescient. That was when Brett first wondered, as she does again and again, until the very end of *The Last September*, whether Eli needs to be feared or protected, or both.