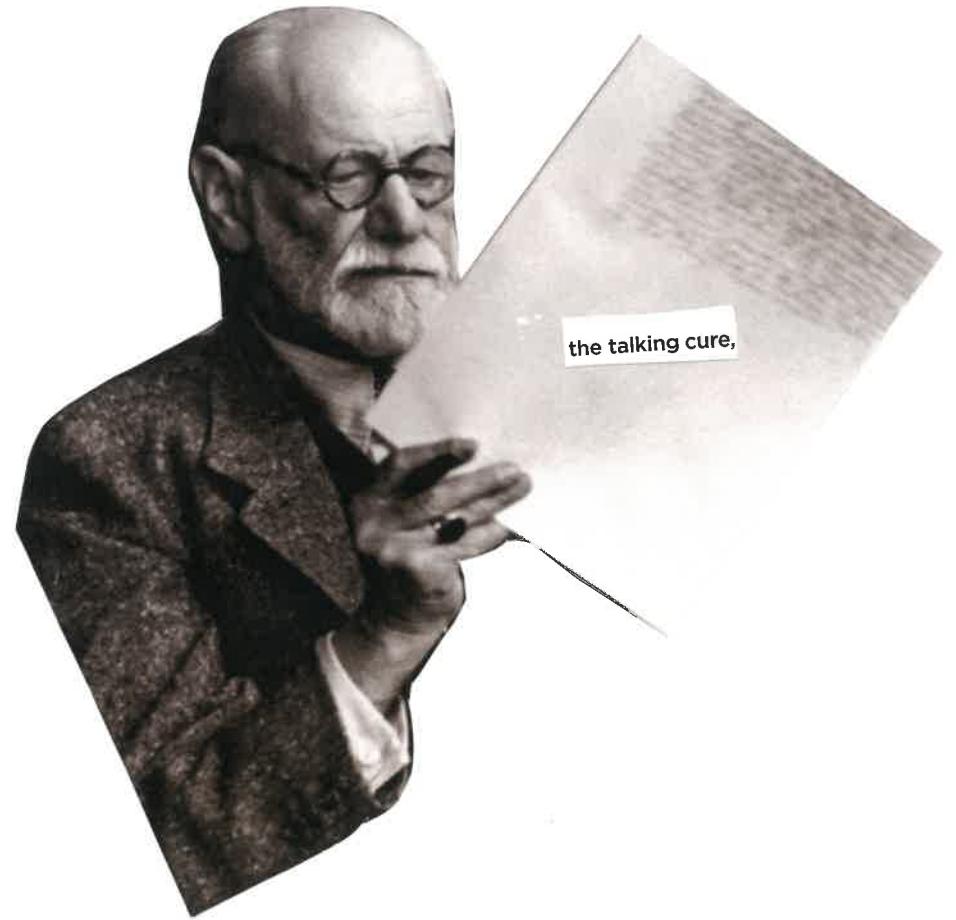


**THORAZINE**



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by Ben Kritikos

My psychiatrist was called Leonard Cohen. Warm and slight, he was the Jewish grandfather I never had. You passed through two doors, back to back, into his office. I suppose it was for privacy, real or imagined. Once inside, it looked like any shrink's den: wood panelling, thick volumes of Freud, reclining chairs. Behind a concertina door, Leonard Cohen kept an arsenal of toys from the 1960s: board games, G.I. Joe (the big ones that all looked the same), and a miniature plastic oven in which younger patients such as myself baked small cakes over the course of the session. While I mixed Betty Crocker instant cake mix in a paper bowl, he would tactfully inquire after my progress at school. Spooning the gooey mixture into a two-inch disposable cake tin, he casually introduced my recent problem making friends into the conversation. In the 25 minutes it took to bake the mini-cake, he got down to the nitty gritty: WHAT DO YOU THINK IS WRONG, BEN?

I waited in the lobby for my mom. The bellhop smiled beneficently at me. He looked like an organ grinder's monkey. My legs hung off the slippery leather couch without my feet touching the floor. I looked around at the mirror-panelled walls, a million half-bits of me in all directions. My mom arrived a half hour late. We ate the cake together.

At the end of a session, Leonard Cohen handed my mother a pamphlet to read. It outlined the symptoms and potential treatments for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The following week, she handed it back, saying, "Nah, that doesn't really sound like him." Leonard Cohen said, "I meant you."

Leonard Cohen spoke gently to my mom. "I would like to prescribe Ritalin." Some half-dark and speechless part of her recoiled, a fierce animal instinct to protect its young. "I don't think he's ready for that," she said.

Mrs Hoffman taught Orchestra. When she showed us the melody from Bizet's Carmen, she sang

Toreador-a, don't spit on the floor  
Use the cuspidor  
That's what it's for

She put multi-coloured tape on the neck of my cello to signify where the notes were and showed me how to hold a bow. After three years, I could play Pachelbel's Canon passably. Not as well as Teddy Graham, though. While he played, his <sup>eyes</sup> tracked the notation and Mrs Hoffman's baton, all in a rich vibrato. Everybody said he was gay. Teddy and I were the only two cellists, so everybody said I was gay too. For some reason, they only beat me up.

When I told Mrs Hoffman I wanted to quit Orchestra, she said, "Okay... If you don't want to play cello anymore, that's fine. But is there another reason?" I squirmed under the weight of her concern.

"No," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Because it would be a real shame if something else made you stop playing. It's great having you in the orchestra. You're a very good musician."

"I don't like the cello anymore," I said to the floor tiles.

The old neighbourhood was rough when my mom was growing up. If you were small, you had to fight. At home, your parents screamed at each other with fire in their eyes, hot like a furnace. When the furnace got too hot, the fire had to go somewhere. My grandparents beat the shit out of my mom until she developed migraines. School sent her home when she passed out in class from all the beating. And it wasn't unusual. My mom and her friends from the same street--Elaine, Lily, Lorraine--held hands and cried after school, sharing wordless hopes that their parents would stop hitting them.

The girls grew up into women in their 30s with husbands and kids and houses in the suburbs and nobody hit anybody. Except Lorraine. Lorraine's parents put her away before graduation. She came out when they died, filling silences with terrible jokes. Her hands trembled from the medication. The state found her an apartment in a building for assisted living. She became the youngest tenant by half a century.

We ate pizza with Lorraine after Leonard Cohen. She chattered uncontrollably, straining in the harsh grey and black of her clothes. I remembered Dad's joke that she raided a nun's wardrobe. Stubbing out the butt of her cigarette, she absent-mindedly lit another. Every motion outside the stream of monologue had to work its way through the thin cracks between words.

Lorraine rang the house at three in the morning to scream at my mother that our house was on fire. My mom spent half an hour convincing her that we were ok, that we were asleep in the house and it wasn't on fire.

My mom rested her gaze on a small mirror, patting a make-up sponge over the circles around her eyes. I asked her why Lorraine trembled so much and why she always repeated herself.

"It's the medication she takes."

"What does she take it for?"

"She's got something called schizophrenia."

"What is schizophrenia?"

"It's a mental illness that means she sometimes thinks bad things are happening, but it's really just her imagination."

I asked Leonard Cohen if I could catch schizophrenia.

"You don't catch it. It's not like a cold." He explained about chemical imbalances. I pictured test tubes.

Jerry and I walked home from school and saw Peanut on the way. Jerry called him Peanut because his head was too small for his tall, thin body and he talked to himself. It was the day after Halloween and splatters of fake blood dotted the sidewalk. Cartoon surprise spread over Peanut's face. "Blood!" From across the street we heard him drawl, "There's somethin' fishy goin' on around here." We laughed so hard we almost cried.

At home the phone was ringing. My mom sat sobbing on the floor with the phone in her lap.

"Don't answer it," she said. "It's Lorraine." It occurred to me that something terrible might have happened. "I can't..." She choked on the words. I hugged my mom, but she was inconsolable.

I failed freshman year so I had to make up the credits at summer school. We read a story called 'A Sound of Thunder' where this guy goes on a time travel safari to hunt a T. Rex. He panics and doesn't kill the dinosaur, but he crushes a butterfly and when he comes back everything is similar but totally different. Like, everybody speaks English with a weird accent and the signs are all in a different spelling and some fascist won the election. It was kind of cool.

The second week we did algebra. I hated it. The teacher would explain how if  $a = b + d$  then  $c$  must equal what? The meaningless letters worked like sleeping pills. I got a boner thinking about Jenny O'Rourke and her tan, thin legs.

Saturday morning my mom said, "Hey. You're going to start taking Ritalin." She handed me the orange jar and explained how it was ok, there was nothing wrong with me, but that it might help me do better in school. She didn't sound too sure, but whatever.

I popped my first round white pill over coffee at the diner. Jerry was supposed to come meet me but he never showed up. I waited an hour, working my way through a pack of Winston Lights, eyeing the waitresses to make sure nobody asked me about my age. My hands trembled. It could have been the coffee. Or the cigarettes. But I felt weird.

When sweat poured down my legs, I knew something was wrong. In 5th grade, a guidance counsellor told our class how a middle school kid died from inhaling aerosol cans to get high. Some guy walking his dog found the kid's body behind a fence on a little patch of grass. When I thought about inhaling aerosol, all I could picture was metallic mist pouring into your chest from your head, spreading out like a cloud until your heart beat faster and faster. Your heart would beat so fast it might break, or burst, or just stop from too much work. That's how I felt now. My heart throbbed, not like in love, but like when you cut yourself and for a few seconds you feel nothing, then all of a sudden the cut throbs and blood starts pumping. I thought

my heart might be bleeding. Like I might drown in my own blood.

I stood up with too much force and knocked the table, spilling my coffee. Trying to keep steady, I walked to the payphone in the foyer. Pressing the receiver to my ear, I realised how hot my skin was against the cold plastic. I called my mom collect and she told me not to worry, I was fine. Ritalin could do that at first, Leonard Cohen had even said so, but it was nothing to worry about. Even when I explained about the bleeding she said don't worry, it's fine. It's fine. But it wasn't fine and she didn't understand, and that was the first time it occurred to me that adults don't always know better.



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