

# *The Lives of Daniel*

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*1*

Daniel Jacobson stood shakily, balancing the arches of his bare feet on the thin railing of the third-floor balcony. He already knew that he was going to jump, but for some reason found it necessary to steady himself with his left hand on the nearby wall. Wearing only the boxer shorts that he had worn to bed, the cool autumn breeze was enough to turn his skin into a sea of goose bumps. The longer he stood there, balancing on the edge of a thirty-foot drop - already having plummeted from the edge of his own sanity - the more he shook uncontrollably. Whether it was caused by the cool air on his mostly naked skin or the fear of actually committing to the last decision he would ever make, he did not know. Perhaps it was a little of both.

Daniel moved his left hand from the wall beside him and used both hands to grip the rain gutter above his head. He leaned out away from the balcony, putting his body at an awkward angle, with his feet still balanced on the railing. He knew that a drop from this height was no guarantee, so he would have to land head first to ensure that his fall would bring absolution rather than a long life confined to a wheelchair.

“All I have to do is let go,” he thought to himself as his arms began to tremble from fear. “Gravity will do the rest. Just close my eyes and let go – that’s all it’ll take to end this hell.”

Daniel closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. After a moment he no longer felt the chill of the air and his arms no longer trembled. He was at peace, something rare for his tortured mind, when he released his grip on the rain gutter – his last feeble hold on a world that would no longer play its cruel tricks on Daniel Jacobson.

*2*

When Daniel opened his eyes, the sunlight hit him as though lightning had burst from his own eyelids. Still blinded by the yellow, early-morning light, he crawled from his bed and stumbled toward the balcony door that stood open. By the time he made it to the metal railing, he was able to fully open his eyes, though his vision was still somewhat blurry from sleep. He already knew the answer to his question. There was no reason to look down at the pavement twenty-five feet below, for the same thing awaited his gaze each morning.

He didn’t ask himself how this was possible. He had asked that very question hundreds of times it seemed, and no answer had been forthcoming. He remembered the dream, if that is what one would call it, as though he had been wide awake when he allowed himself to fall. The blood spattered on the pavement below him, however, was very real. It was always very real.

As he did every morning at almost exactly the same time, Daniel hurriedly dressed himself and crept downstairs. His parents slept a little later than he did, so as usual, he should have just enough time. As quietly as possible, he opened the back door, which was located almost directly under his balcony, and stepped outside. He had long ago thought to move one of the water hoses to this side of the house, so cleaning up the small splattering of blood, still relatively fresh and easy to wash away, could be done quickly and effortlessly.

Well, effortlessly in one sense of the word. In another sense, it took a sort of strength that Daniel never knew he possessed. Each morning, he went through the surreal process of cleaning up a mess he could only assume had been made by him – though he was never left with an injury as proof. While spraying the blood from the sidewalk and into the grass with the water hose, he swallowed back vomit more than once.

Daniel stood on the sidewalk, staring at what was now just a thin sheet of water. He rubbed the top of his head, looking for an injury that he knew he would not find. “I don’t even want to kill myself,” he mumbled without taking his gaze from the wet concrete. After a moment, he turned his eyes skyward, making sure that some higher power knew he was expecting an answer sooner or later. “How can an 18 year-old guy that doesn’t even want to kill himself suddenly change his mind every fucking night, take a plunge, and wake up the next morning with his own blood spilled on the ground? And no injury to help explain things?”

As he expected – for this was an almost daily conversation with himself – no answer was offered. All he had for an answer was the surety that tonight, like every night, he would take his own life and live to clean up after himself.

“Daniel? What are you doing in the yard?” his mother asked, standing just inside the back door in her pajamas.

Daniel jumped as though someone had just set off an explosion at his feet. When he gathered his composure enough to provide an answer, he realized that he was pointing the water hose – which he had fortunately turned off already - at his mother, as though it were a weapon.

“Sorry mom, you startled me. I woke up and heard something outside my window a little while ago. There was a big dog walking through the yard and he took a crap on our sidewalk. I was just washing it off so dad doesn’t go ballistic again.”

“Well ok, thanks kiddo. But point that thing somewhere else. I’m not the culprit,” she said as she smiled and turned to go back inside.

Nothing changed. Daniel never really expected it to do so, but that did not make his life any easier. Sometimes he even felt like he was beginning to agree with the version of himself that decided to take his own life every night. In fact, the only reason he did not fully break down and tempt his fate was the fear that he would simply wake up from the ordeal. The last thing he wanted was a second, fruitless suicide routine that left him with another mess to clean up every day.

20 years old now, Daniel was struggling to keep his head above water at the local community college. His parents had encouraged him to leave home and attend one of the state universities, but he knew better. His nighttime secret would be difficult to hide while living on a college campus. He sometimes toyed with the idea of leaving home in the hopes that it would stop – that just maybe, his problems only existed while living at home and could be left behind. That, however, took a sort of courage that he was not ready to display.

Daniel never slept away from home. He had done a good job of fabricating excuses since his nightly troubles had begun, though at times was forced to simply claim that he had a personal quirk with sleeping anywhere besides his own bedroom. It was a tiring exercise at times, but he had no other choice. He was even forced to lie his way out of family trips during holidays and other such occasions, which always proved to be far more difficult than simply turning down school friends who had invited him to a sleep-over.

On one particular night, however, Daniel found that excuses were futile and would get a chance to test his ‘leaving home’ theory.

“Listen son, I’ve already told you my peace. This isn’t up for discussion. You may be 20 years old, but you live in my house,” Daniel’s father said, his hand on a cup of coffee that was now cold. The two had been arguing at the breakfast table for half an hour, and it did not appear that Daniel would win this one.

“Dad, I know. I’m sorry - I’m just afraid that I’ll freak out if you force me to sleep anywhere besides here. You know me, it’s just this thing I have,” Daniel pleaded with his head in his hands.

“Look, Daniel. I know how you are, and I know what it’s like to go through the weird little quirks that come with growing up. But son, sooner or later you have to get over that stuff and learn how to direct your own life – not have it directed for you by childhood fears.” Daniel’s father looked at his coffee cup, then stood up and poured it out in the sink.

“But that’s neither here nor there. The simple fact is that you don’t seem to be getting any sleep at all lately, and it’s no longer something we can overlook. The sleeping pills, the therapy, the anti-depressants – none of that has done anything for you.” He

poured a fresh cup of coffee and sat back down. “The doctor said the only thing he could do at this point is give you a battery of sleep deprivation tests. That means a night in the hospital with monitors hooked to your head. I’m sorry kid, but you don’t have a choice in this one. We’re going to fix this whether you like it or not, and we’ve already scheduled the procedure.”

Daniel said nothing as he stood up and walked out of the kitchen. He wasn’t sure why he chose this place to sit down and think – probably because he came here every day. He looked down beside him at the concrete that had dried not long ago. As he stared, he realized that a faint, barely visible stain had formed on the spot of concrete that had seen so much of his blood. “Maybe I should come down here and put down a garbage bag or something every night before I go to sleep,” he thought. He began to cry when he realized that he wasn’t joking.

#### 4

“Daniel, come inside and get some lunch,” his mother yelled from the kitchen window. He hadn’t realized how long he had been sitting in the back yard. He felt like his mind had been racing the entire time - but apparently on nothing. He couldn’t remember anything about the couple of hours that he had spent wasting away on the sidewalk.

The food on Daniel’s plate remained undisturbed as he sat staring at the small pool of water that was forming at the base of his glass. His father had left for work shortly after their conversation at the breakfast table, but he might as well have still been there. Daniel got the same, seemingly rehearsed, lecture from his mother. Apparently his parents shared a brain.

“Mom, do you believe in God?” he asked, swirling the small puddle of water around with his finger.

His mother seemed a little surprised by the question. “Well, we’ve never been a very religious family, Daniel,” was the only reply that she could think of at the moment. After seeing that such an answer wasn’t going to satisfy her son, she continued, “But I guess I’d have to say that I do believe there’s a higher power up there somewhere.”

“Up there?” he asked, finally looking up from the table. “Why do you say ‘up there’ if you’re so agnostic about it? Hell, you could say down there, over there, or somewhere in Iceland for all it matters.”

“What’s gotten in to you, Daniel? I don’t really know why I said ‘up there’, other than the fact that people generally just think of looking up when they’re talking about gods, higher beings, or whatever.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ve never been able to see anything ‘up there’ though.”

“Ok, what gives? You’ve been acting pretty weird today. Don’t give me the usual ‘nothing’s wrong’ crap. I’m your mother, so I know when you have something in the closet.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said, sticking his tongue out at her. Apparently the ploy worked. She gave a small laugh and seemed to drop the subject as she picked her fork back up and continued eating.

“Thanks for the food, Mom, but I’m not really hungry. You mind if I just take off for a little while?” He picked his plate up to sit it by the sink.

“Ok, just don’t be gone long. We have to get to the hospital early this evening. And are you sure nothing’s wrong, Daniel?”

“Yeah, Mom. Just a little nervous about tonight I guess.”

## 5

It was a little after 4 p.m. when Daniel finally walked back into the house and heard his parents arguing in the kitchen. They apparently had not noticed him coming in and continued with their argument. Daniel rarely heard his parents raise their voices, so he stood quietly in the foyer and listened.

“All I’m saying is that we should maybe look into it, Sarah. I know he’s always been a great kid, but think about it. He went from being a model student with worlds of promise to being a 20 year-old guy who still lives at home, is barely making it through college, and appears to have no direction. He seems to have virtually no life other than mulling around this house. We know he’s not on drugs, so tell me what the hell we’re supposed to think? It’s like he’s detached from reality or something. It’s like his life has stopped and he’s just spinning his wheels, waiting for someone else to free him from childhood,” Daniel’s father said, seeming to have difficulty staying calm.

“I don’t know, Tom. I’ve asked him on several occasions if anything was wrong, but I never get much of an answer. He doesn’t seem much like the Daniel I remember from his childhood, but I have a hard time believing my child is crazy. I know my old son is in there somewhere. This *will* pass, whatever it is.”

Daniel walked back to the door, opened it, and shut it loudly to give the impression that he had just walked into the house. He didn’t want his parents to know that their conversation had been overheard. It seemed to him that the last thing they needed was something else to worry about.

“Daniel, that you?” his father’s voice came from the kitchen.

“Yeah pop, it’s me.” He made his way to the staircase in the next room.

“We have to leave in a little less than an hour. Are you all set to go?”

“Yeah, just gotta pack a few things in my room.” He bounded up the stairs.

## 6

Daniel walked into his bedroom and fell onto the bed. While lying there, trying not to panic, he fought with the idea of just telling his parents everything. He could think of no way out of the situation, other than maybe delaying it a few days with some half-baked excuse, but that would do little good. He would still have to go through with the tests eventually, and his parents –not to mention everyone at the hospital - would learn the hard way about his little secret.

As he ran through the possible ways in which he could explain the happenings to his parents, something occurred to him. “I always make the jump wearing nothing but my boxers,” he thought to himself. “I know for a fact that my parents lock up the house when they go to bed - so how the hell do I manage to get back in? It’s not like there’s a pocket for keys in my underwear,” he asked himself, this time aloud.

Realizing that he had an enormous hole in his story, Daniel decided against telling his parents anything. “How have I managed to go this long without thinking about that?” he asked himself as he stood from the bed to begin packing.

As Daniel walked out of his room and toward the staircase at the end of the hallway, it took all the courage he had to keep from running and hiding. He had been living with his problem for quite a while, but at least it had been unknown to the rest of the world. “How are people going to treat me when they find out that I’m suicidal and apparently immortal?” he thought to himself as he reached the stairs. Not ready to be around his parents yet, he sat down at the top of the staircase and tried to stop his trembling.

## 7

The sun was sinking low on the horizon as the Jacobsons drove toward the hospital. Daniel sat quietly in the back seat of the Ford Explorer and stared through the side window. He couldn’t help but notice the red, fading sun, sinking into the horizon - like the blood stain washing into the ground next to the pavement.

It seemed that everywhere he looked now, regardless of how hard he tried to push away the images, he saw something that reminded him of the bloody sidewalk. The torment that had begun in his dreams no longer fled with the washing away of his own

blood. It now occupied every moment of his life, slowly replacing once-vivid, youthful eyes with dark circles that seemed increasingly devoid of life. Daniel felt as though his suicides were beginning to work – though much more slowly than one would expect from a nearly 30-foot drop.

His parents had been arguing for a couple of minutes before Daniel realized it and withdrew his trance-like gaze from a horizon that had grown virtually dark. He felt groggy and weak, as though he had been asleep for years.

“No, we’re not turning back now! We made this decision and it’s the only way out for him or us. Are you interested in paying the consequences? Because if not, then shut your damn mouth. Besides, this is best for Daniel too,” his father yelled.

It seemed to Daniel that his parents looked older now than when they had left the house. The stress he was causing them must have been even greater than he realized.

“Mom? Dad? Anyone gonna bother to ask me what I’d prefer? Or maybe you guys can just drop me off and do all this without me,” Daniel said with a look of disbelief. Two arguments in one day had to be a record for his normally docile parents. His head was pounding and the oncoming car lights seemed to pierce his skull. He felt queasy.

“Daniel, for God’s sake!” his father shouted, turning around to look at his son with wide, unbelieving eyes. He seemed to turn white as though he were seeing a ghost.

Daniel’s look of disbelief turned to one of horror as the car jolted to the left and began bouncing across the median at nearly 70 miles per hour. Time slowed to a crawl. The world around him became completely silent as he watched his father’s face twist, showing the horror of recognizing what had happened before snapping his head back toward the front of the car. His mother, watching the scene unfold before her, opened her mouth as though trying to scream. Daniel heard nothing.

It was too late for Daniel’s father to change their course. The car had aimed itself for the oncoming lanes, and the wet grass beneath them did not lend itself to course corrections at such a speed. Peering through the windshield as their vehicle rocketed toward the cars in the opposing lanes, Daniel found himself in a state of utter calm. He had visited death on more occasions than he cared to remember – but this time it was not of his own doing. This time it had to be real. It was fate, not his own will that was sending him toward a bloody end today. He grieved for his parents, but welcomed the thought of a long-awaited release.

Daniel’s cocoon of silence broke as the front of the Explorer seemed to explode in every direction at once. Due to his father’s attempts to steer the vehicle back toward their own lane, the front wheels were turned sharply to the right when they finally hit the pavement on the other side of the median. The sudden traction had jerked the car to the right, putting them in position for a direct, head-on collision with another SUV. The two

vehicles were indistinguishable from one another as they spun awkwardly through the air, remaining as one twisted mass. The silence had been replaced by an equally impenetrable darkness as Daniel's ears were assaulted by the screaming hiss of metal being torn apart. In the darkness, despite the barrage of nightmarish sounds, Daniel felt peace.

## 8

"He has a good pulse and he's breathing ok!" someone yelled in the darkness. Daniel was still aware of his own presence, but had been waiting patiently for his soul, or whatever was left of him after the ordeal, to rise into the air and give him a view of the horrific scene. "There's no way they're talking about me," he thought, waiting to finally leave his destroyed body.

The realization hit him with a horror worse than that of the wreck when he felt hands touching him and heard the same voice – this time in a gentle whisper near his ear.

"You're ok. You just have to remain calm. Can you hear me?" Came the voice as Daniel felt one more set of hands gently touching his head.

"He's only bleeding a little," came another voice. "I can see what appears to be dozens of wounds all over the top of his head, but they're not bleeding – they look kind of old."

After a moment, Daniel built up enough courage to open his eyes and see if he was actually still alive. He slowly cracked his eyelids, allowing part of the harsh light to bombard his vision. It appeared as though someone had a floodlight pointed directly at him. The pain was intense. Once the dull throbbing had subsided enough to be tolerable, he opened his eyes further and was able to make out the silhouettes of several people who seemed to be fitfully working around him. He was still alive. Daniel opened his eyes wide and let out a scream that startled the people hovering above him. Daniel once again fell into darkness and silence.

## 9

Daniel awoke from an unconscious state for the second. The light was less imposing this time and no silhouettes loomed over his body. He heard the steady, rhythmic beep of a machine beside him and decided that he must be in a hospital room. Raising his head, he looked around the room and saw a man that he knew as the preacher of a local church. Daniel panicked.

“How long have I been here?” Daniel screamed, bolting upright in his bed. A fit of nausea hit him, but he fought to stay upright.

“You have been here since early yesterday evening. It is now about 10 a.m.” the man said, standing up to walk toward Daniel. “My name is Reverend John Wilkinson.”

Daniel began ripping the IVs from his skin. Jumping from the bed, he tried to run toward the window but collapsed. His legs felt as though someone had literally removed his muscles. Clawing at the tile like an animal, he managed to crawl to the window and look down at the pavement below. “What’s happened since I got here?” He said, turning back toward the reverend with a look of horror.

“Settle down, Daniel!” The reverend picked him up and helped him back to the bed. “You’re completely safe. You’ve been lying in bed since you got here, as would be expected. I’m sure you’re still very confused from everything that’s happened. But I assure you, everything is okay now. Please, just lie here in bed. I’m sure the doctors wouldn’t want you running around the room just yet.”

As Daniel allowed the reverend to lay him back down, he began to relax a little. The look of horror soon returned, however. “My parents! What about them? Where are they?”

Reverend Wilkinson squeezed Daniel’s hand and his eyes took on a soft, sympathetic gaze. “I’m afraid we have much to discuss.”

Daniel closed his eyes again and several tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Your parents, as you know, were in the front seat of the vehicle. Daniel, I’m sorry, but they didn’t make it. It happened instantly, so they didn’t suffer.”

The reverend placed his other hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “I know you’re going to be very confused and angry about this loss, son. But please, try to remember that everything has happened for a reason. You escaped with your life in more ways than you know. Your parents did not, and that is simply how it must be. God has a plan whether we see it or not.”

“I want to go home,” Daniel mumbled through his sobbing. “Where was your God when I needed him? Instead of finally giving me peace and letting me die, he took my parents and left me here to suffer even more!” Daniel would have pulled away from the reverend, but he felt almost paralyzed. He could only lay there and cry.

“This isn’t something that you’ll overcome or even understand immediately, Daniel. It will take time - time to heal the wounds and time to find your faith. But I promise I won’t leave your side until both have been achieved.”

At that moment a knock came at the door. Daniel turned his head, and through the blur of his tears saw another man walk into the room. He wore a tan suit and had what appeared to be a badge hanging beside his belt buckle.

“Daniel, this is Agent Briggs from the FBI,” the reverend said as he looked toward the other man. “We’re sorry that all this is happening so soon, but we have no choice. He’s here to speak with you if you feel able.”

Daniel tried to sit up while wiping tears from his face, but the reverend gently eased him back down. “What are you talking about? What can’t wait?”

Agent Briggs walked over to the side of the bed and shook Daniel’s hand. “Daniel, my name is Derek Briggs. Like the reverend said, we’re really sorry to come to you with all this so soon. I wish it didn’t have to be that way, but we have no choice.”

“What do you mean? What’s happening?”

“Daniel, after the accident, a police officer went to your home to see if anyone was there. They wanted to see if you had any other family at home that should be informed.” Agent Briggs paused, as though having trouble uttering his next words.

“Ok, and?”

Briggs looked uncomfortable, but continued. “Well, while knocking on the door, the policeman smelled something coming from inside the house. His first reaction was to try and contact any neighbors that he could find, but realized that the closest house was nearly a mile away. That wouldn’t do him any good, so he made a call and got a warrant to enter the premises.”

“What are you talking about? What did he find in my house?”

“Well Daniel, that’s the part we’re hoping you can help us with. Is your room located on the third floor, on the back of the house? The one with the balcony?”

“Yeah, that’s my room. What are you getting at?”

“Daniel, I think that’s all that you and I need to discuss for the moment. That information - along with medical reports concerning the bed sores on your back and wounds on your head - tell us everything we need to know in order to proceed. Just understand that you’re not alone by any means. Reverend Wilkinson here will be by your side, and Laura Jameson from the local FBI trauma support team will be coming in to help you in the next few minutes.” Agent Briggs forced a smile and turned to leave the room.

“Wait, what are you talking about? I don’t understand what’s going on,” Daniel said, reaching to feel the top of his head.

Agent Briggs turned around before walking through the door. “You’re obviously a strong young man. You hang in there. Everything will be ok.” With that, he turned and exited the room.

## 10

The following weeks proved difficult for Daniel. Not only did he have to deal with the loss of his parents – he had to learn the truth concerning them and their actions. The fact that local news papers began running his story only made the situation worse. Reverend Wilkinson had been true to his word, however, and was always available to help protect Daniel from both the images he was faced with and the reporters who were obsessed with getting every grueling detail.

Most challenging of all was accepting the fact that more than two years of his life had been a complete fabrication. Laura Jameson, his trauma councilor, had told him that it was to be expected, considering the conditions that his battered mind had so desperately wished to escape. She had told him that, having proven unable to physically remove himself from the traumatic situation, his mind had devised a way of offering him a sort of refuge. A part of his horrific reality, however, had found its way into that dream-like state in the form of suicidal dreams. Somewhere deep inside, Daniel was still aware of the torture – and desperately wanted to escape, even if it meant death.

Daniel wasn’t sure if he had any desire to remember. As it was, he could view it as something that had happened to someone else. Even after seeing police images of the hellish scene in his bedroom, he had no memory of what had occurred. His mind kept it safely locked away, offering only the memories that it had created for him.

## 11

Daniel clutched the warm coffee cup as though it were a life raft. He hadn't even taken a sip, but the warmth on his hands was comforting. His conversations with Laura Jameson were never pleasant - but he had found that small, unexpected things like a warm cup of coffee could help him keep a grip and talk about things that he only knew from pictures. He was expected to somehow overcome a trauma that he couldn't remember. The only trauma he *could* remember had turned out to be a fabrication, but that didn't stop it from haunting him every time he closed his eyes.

"I know I eventually have to deal with it all," Daniel said, staring at the cup in his hands. "I'm just not sure how, that's all. How do I learn to deal with something when I wasn't really even there to witness it? I can't even figure out how to deal with the one thing I *can* remember, because it apparently never happened!"

"Well, we're gonna have to figure that one out together, Daniel. In the meantime, we just go from one day to the next. You're in charge of your own reality now. I just don't want you to keep avoiding this to the point that your entire life is spent doing the same thing you were forced to do for those two years. You had no choice but sweep the pain under some mental rug back then, but you're free to deal with it now - free to deal with it knowing that it no longer represents a physical danger."

"Yeah, that's cute Laura. And how exactly do I know that this *is* my reality? How do I know that I'm not fabricating this as well? If I can do such a great job of convincing myself that I wasn't laying on my back, tied up in a bed - that I wasn't being beaten on the head nightly and nearly starved to death if not for the IV's - that I wasn't allowed to lie around in my own shit and piss for weeks at a time - How the fuck do I just decide that all this is suddenly *real*? You, this coffee shop, this conversation - this could all be a load of crap that I'm creating in my head. Then, when we're all done here - I'll just go home, strip to my underwear, and try to kill myself for the thousandth time!"

Daniel finally took a sip of his coffee and sat the mug back down harshly, sloshing some of the liquid onto the table. On the red mahogany, the puddle of coffee could have almost passed for blood. "You see that puddle I just created, Laura? That's the only *reality* I have. You're asking me to trade one hell for another. Thanks, but at least the hell I've known for two years is one that I supposedly created myself. I'll take that over the other one any day."

Daniel stood, pulled a wrinkled dollar from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. After staring at Laura for a moment he turned and began to walk away.

"Where are you going, Daniel?" Laura said as she got up to follow him.

"I'm going home. I don't feel like talking today."

“Daniel, it’s not a good idea for you to stay in that house. I’ve told you that. Please, let me get you a hotel room or something. You can even stay with me until we figure something else out.”

Daniel turned before reaching the glass doors and faced Laura again. “I don’t remember the shit that went on in that house, Laura. The only people who do are now dead and gone. It’s my home and I won’t be run off by memories that I don’t even have.” With that, he turned and walked into the rain.

Laura sat down at an empty booth near the door and began to cry. She wasn’t supposed to let emotions come into play with her patients, but that was proving somewhat difficult in Daniel’s case.