

# A PHASIA

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CREATIVE NONFICTION

To protect the innocent, let us call our main characters Dean and Agatha. But because no one is truly innocent in this tale, let us make it clear we are talking about \_\_\_\_\_ and me.

This is a real-life story, with real-life characters. Named Dean and Agatha.

Which parts of the story are most important?

Dean and Agatha loved each other. Dean joined the military. Dean and Agatha got married.

Agatha always called Dean her “partner.” Maybe she did not want to be married; maybe she did not want to be married to Dean.

Dean went crazy.

Is that the end of the story?

Maybe someone should write a how-to guide for people who will go crazy inside the military. It is very normal for young men to have their first episode of schizophrenia inside the military. The military can be very stressful—you must stand on your own inside the military. You must learn discipline and self-reliance. You cannot lean on anyone else. You cannot depend on anyone else.

But the how-to guide would have to be for people who had already had their first episode of schizophrenia outside of the military. People who falsified their medical records. People who got caught. People who did not correctly understand their first episode of schizophrenia, who mistook it for other, more normal, acceptable things. People who loved Jesus. People like Dean.

Agatha did not love Jesus, but Agatha was idealistic—she had *hope*.

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When Agatha first met Dean he was in a phase of not loving Jesus. Agatha did not know Dean was in a phase of not loving Jesus. Agatha did not know Dean had phases of loving Jesus.

When Agatha first met Dean, Dean’s friends and Agatha would go out at night and spray-paint the town. (Dean would write the word *Aphasia* under the busy freeway overpasses and inside of the drainage tunnels. *Aphasia* was the first word he understood among those of the psych-ward doctors to describe his earliest diagnosis. Agatha did not understand this. Agatha thought Dean was *creative*.)

Dean was impulsive then, always in and out of jail for this misdemeanor or that misdemeanor. Dean was wild. Dean was reckless.

Later these behaviors would become *symptoms*, as in “When did you first notice the *symptoms*, Agatha?” Or, “Why did you not see this coming, Agatha? All the *symptoms* were there.” And sometimes, “You could not have known, Agatha. The *symptoms* are often mistaken for something else.”

Because all of Dean’s friends were impulsive. All of Dean’s friends were wild and reckless. Isn’t everyone impulsive, wild, and reckless when they are young, derelict skateboarders who are often in and out of jail for this misdemeanor or that misdemeanor?

Doesn’t everyone experience confusion when they look back and try to piece it all together?

What matters about Dean loving Jesus? At first it was not noticeable that Dean was loving Jesus too much. At first it just seemed like Dean was loving Jesus the same way he had always loved Jesus in the phases when he loved Jesus.

It can be complicated to recognize the difference between loving Jesus too much and loving Jesus just enough.

Is it just enough when you pray before a meal?

It is too much when you turn to Jesus because you are *lost* or *hopeless*?

Is it just enough when you go to church every Sunday (and Bible-study on Wednesday)?

Is it too much when you believe in sin? That you are sinning? That Jesus is watching for you to sin?

Is it just enough when you pray?

It is too much when you hear Jesus talking back?

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For a while, things were okay for Dean and Agatha. Dean and Agatha were *happy*.

But then Dean and Agatha went on a trip. Dean had a long weekend away from his station. It was in the winter. Dean and Agatha had been in New York for a year. They lived in a little port town with a little port harbor. Agatha loved the little port town. These details matter. The details tell us about the people. We are setting the person of Agatha. We are establishing the person of Dean.

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On the trip with Dean and Agatha:

Agatha wanted to go to Salem. She wanted to drive along the coast. She wanted to take the ferry. She wanted to stay in the Nathaniel Hawthorne house that had become the Nathaniel Hawthorne Bed and Breakfast Inn. She did not want to go to the witch museums because she hate(s)d museums. She wanted to climb the rock harbors. She wanted to go to Boston. She wanted to walk around Walden Pond and throw rocks at the ice. She wanted to eat tinned fish in front of the fire with grained mustard and crackers. She wanted to make love to Dean in the romantic Bed and Breakfast. She wanted to want to make love to Dean in the romantic Bed and Breakfast. She wanted to read poetry and drink hot chocolate, visit the fishing villages, see a storm roll in over the ocean.

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Dean wanted to talk about Jesus. Every chance he got, Dean brought everything back to Jesus.

This is the part of the story where Dean begins to show *symptoms*, when “the patient begins to suffer from hyper-religiosity.”

Agatha knew something was wrong when she bought a postcard with a witch on it in Salem and addressed it to Dean’s mother. In truth, Agatha had known something was wrong for a long time. In truth, maybe Agatha had always known something was wrong. But what was wrong? What was wrong with Dean?

Dean got angry when Agatha bought the Witch Postcard and addressed it to Dean’s mother—in the way Dean typically got angry—but this time he used words to express his anger instead of silently staring Agatha down.

Dean talked about how terrible it was that Agatha could not understand the implications behind sending a witch in the mail to Dean’s mother (who also loved Jesus). Was Agatha not aware that witches were connected to the Devil? Did Agatha not respect Dean’s mother? Did Agatha not respect Dean or even Jesus?

It was never a problem for Dean that Agatha did not love Jesus. But even before the witch postcard, there were fights. Marriage made the fights come more often because now there were questions of children, questions of family. But even this seemed like a normal progression of events.

Later, as Agatha listened to Dean listening to a radio broadcast about Jesus (he never used to do this in front of Agatha), she felt Dean was far away, and Agatha was afraid. Agatha was afraid for Dean.

But by the time Agatha truly understood something was wrong with Dean, it was too late.

It is always too late in stories like these.

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Maybe Dean is not being portrayed well enough—maybe Dean does not feel like a real person.

Dean:

Sometimes slept on the roof of buildings.

Once pushed a burning van over a mountainside.

Used to drink so much he would pass out wherever he was standing when he needed to pass out.

Was very handsome—baby blues and a sweet, sweet smile.

Would always pick the most dangerous path, but always made it through.

Loved bread.

Made the most beautiful wooden tables out of found wood.

Was the best skateboarder in his skateboarding group of friends.

Sometimes got sad but hardly ever cried unless he was extremely stressed.

Went to jail dozens of times.

Wrote long, labyrinthine poems.

Wanted to be a Forest Ranger.

    Or an engineer.

    Or an electrician.

Liked shoes.

Was concerned his head was too big for his body.

Wanted a new set of friends who were not always getting into trouble.

Often quoted this Bible verse: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.”

Had a father who did not love him enough.

Had a mother who used to cut the tails off the purebred puppies she sold, and who used to wake Dean in the middle of the night screaming that he had to believe in Jesus to avoid the pits of Hell.

Loved Brad Pitt movies.

Ate a lot of sugar. Mostly cookies.

Joined the military to be taken more seriously in the world.

Loved Agatha.

Is this a good time to say that Dean is dead?

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Dean is dead in the way people who have lost their minds are dead:

Dean is dead to those who judge by diagnoses.  
Dean is dead to his dreams and his aspirations.  
Dean is dead to his reputation.  
Dean is dead to his friends who do not understand.  
Dean is dead to privacy.  
Dean is dead to his military career.  
Dean is dead to supporting himself.  
Dean is dead to the absence of confusion.  
Dean is dead to sleep.  
Dean is dead to calm.

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When Dean went crazy, everyone helped Agatha and no one helped Agatha.

That is to say, everyone helped Agatha when she was Dean's Wife, and no one helped Agatha when she was herself.

This is an important part of the story. Dean did not think Agatha was herself. In the height of the story (and maybe always), Dean thought Agatha was Dean. And Dean was Agatha. And Agatha and Dean together could take over the world. Agatha and Dean were so powerful together. They were the greatest love story. WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY WHY would Agatha want to ever tell a different story?

Maybe it does not matter that Agatha also needed help. Dean was the one crying in the white rooms, pacing the floors, and waiting for Agatha.

(This is the part that haunts Agatha the most, Dean's face in that tiny window—waiting, always waiting. But we are still in the past. Let us avoid what haunts Agatha today.)

Though perhaps what haunts Agatha today is unavoidable.

Maybe Agatha could have stopped Dean from losing his mind, and maybe no one can stop anyone from losing their mind.

While Dean was waiting for Agatha, Agatha was planning her escape. She knew it was the time to go. The worst had happened, Dean was gone, and even if Dean wasn't gone how could Agatha help Dean if she did not love Jesus?

How could Agatha help Dean if she did not love Dean enough? (Dean was always telling Agatha she did not love him enough, so she knew it was true.) How could Agatha help Dean if she did not want to be married? If she did not want to be married to Dean?

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In the end, the details make the person, but what kind of person is made out of the details? For example, here are some details that Agatha does not want to remember:

*The sound of Dean's boots climbing, climbing, climbing the stairs that final morning.*

*«There's nothing wrong with me. It's you, Agatha. You're the sinner. Why don't you believe, Agatha? It's your fault, Agatha. Where are you, Agatha? There's nothing wrong with me, Agatha.»*

*Maniacal birthday requests made from inside the hospital—written on a piece of notebook paper like it made perfect sense, like it was normal to have maniacal birthday requests made from inside the hospital.*

*Playing checkers, playing chess, always playing something.*

*«Don't leave me, Agatha. Please don't leave me. It's your fault, Agatha! Don't leave me, Agatha. Please don't leave me.»*

*Hope, the illusion of hope, the blame of hope, the accusatory questions concerning hope and taking away someone's hope.*

*«Why aren't you helping him? Why aren't you doing something to help him?*

*Decisions. All the decisions in the world.*

*Clothes in plastic sacks. «Why are you taking his clothes?» «Why are you taking my clothes? Agatha, don't let them take my clothes.»*

*You cannot bring in this belt. You cannot bring in these shoelaces. You cannot bring in this chocolate cake.*

*Questions. Timelines. Questions about timelines. What came first? Jesus before the disease? The disease before Jesus? What came first? What is left?*

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The details make the story, but which parts of the story are most important?

Dean and Agatha loved each other.

Maybe Agatha did not want to be married; maybe she did not want to be married to Dean.

Dean went crazy.

Is that the end of the story?

Agatha thinks she could have done more to help Dean.

But there are only two things, really, that Agatha could have done.

1. She could have known.
2. She could have stayed.

Would it have helped anything if Agatha had known? Would it have changed anything if Agatha had stayed?

After all, you cannot help a dead person, and Agatha (thinks she) knows this.