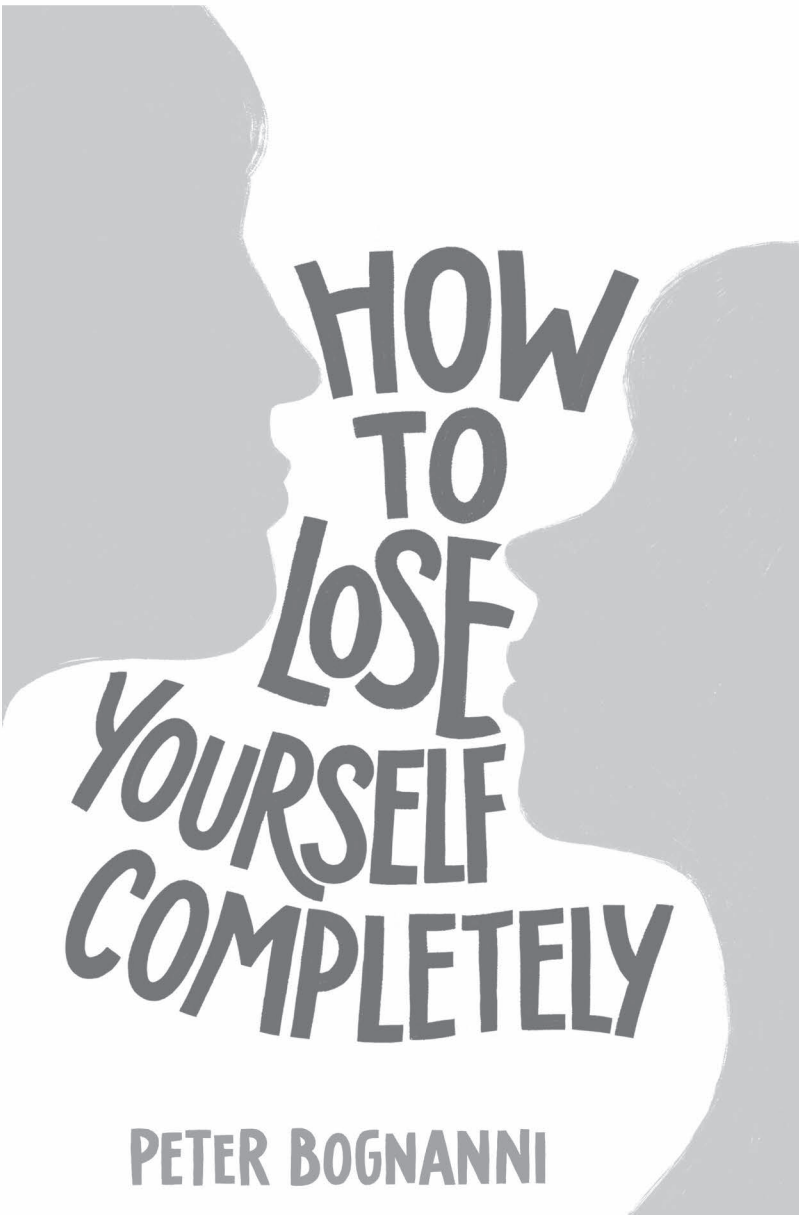




# HOW TO LOSE YOURSELF COMPLETELY

PETER BOGNANNI



A Rock the Boat Book

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*For Junita, with love and gratitude*

*Grief is just love with no place to go.*  
—Jamie Anderson

# ONE

You wake up on a moving bus somewhere in northern Minnesota, and for a few seconds you think he's still alive. This happens almost every day when you're awake, but you haven't yet opened your eyes. That's when you see him. Slouching in a doorway. Eating olives from a jar. Sitting next to you on your bed in the heat of summer, reading a Choose Your Own Adventure book. You can see it all so clearly. His lanky body sprawled on the bed. His eyes searching the page as he tries to make it through the last chapter without meeting a bad end. But before he does, and before you can ask him if he's real, your eyes flash open to a pink sunrise blurring past your window, and immediately, you remember where you are.

You are on a school bus you boarded this morning in the parking lot of your old junior high. And judging by the road noise, this bus has seen better days. The constant drone puts your thoughts in a blender, and it takes you a second to get your bearings. You are not in your old room. You are not with your brother. You're in a seat by yourself, fists clenched in your lap, and your cheek numb against the cold glass of the window. Outside, a line of jagged pines cuts through the rising sun. Inside, it's hard to see much of anything, even your fellow passengers.

They must have been there this morning, but it was pitch

black outside, and you were distracted by your dad, who was there to make sure you actually got on the bus. It was so dark he almost did a face-plant as he helped you with your new sleeping bag and survival gear. He isn't the world's most coordinated guy even in broad daylight, and he couldn't even hug you without accidentally stepping on your foot. You were okay with the hug, though, which broke a quiet tension that had haunted you on the drive over.

You were less happy when your dad decided to speak.

Because what he said was:

"Just try. Okay, Case?"

This was not the right thing to say for two reasons.

One, it implied that you haven't been trying to feel better since the funeral. And two, it suggested that you don't usually try at things. Both of which aren't true. You want more than anything to feel better. And you try way too hard at most things. You once heard anxiety described like a duck moving across the water; on the surface everything looks smooth, but beneath, it's all frantic motion. This sounds about right to you, so maybe all your dad has been seeing is the surface and not your little duck legs, paddling for their very lives.

You managed to swallow your anger, though, and moments later you were sad as you watched him shuffle back to his dented Prius with the bumper sticker that reads FOLLOW ME TO THE WAFFLE HOUSE! He gave you a half wave before getting inside, and he seemed hesitant to leave, which was odd since this whole thing was his idea. Your mom had to work early at the hospital today, but she made your favorite dinner last night and refolded the clothes in your bag. Just thinking about all your shirts in there, sitting in perfect squares, is enough to make your throat catch.

Sometimes when you're up late, your mind doing its usual laps, you think if you don't start to feel better soon, you'll have to live with your parents for the rest of your life. This is comforting at first. Then you remember the way they scream at each other over the deafening drone of the coffee grinder in the morning, and how your dad still walks around in his briefs, which have a number of see-through patches in the back, and you feel like you would probably slowly turn into a very different person if this was your fate.

The bus goes around a bend in the road and a blinding ray of sun cuts through the windshield, setting the air aglow. But, still, it's hard to make out your fellow travelers behind the row of tall seats. The only thing you know about them is that, like you, they are in high school, and like you, they are willing to go out in the middle of nowhere for weeks with total strangers to confront their overwhelming anxiety and try to find a reserve of strength to overcome it.

Adventure Therapy.

That's what it's called.

The phrase made you laugh out loud the first time you read it on the website. You imagined yourself whining about your life as you rappelled out of a military helicopter and hacked through a dense jungle with a machete. The specifics of what you're actually going to do have been kept secret, but there are pictures of canoes and overgrown hiking trails on the FAQ page, so you know it's going to be something outdoorsy, and something that counts as an "adventure."

But that could be anything, really.

Using a public bathroom can be an adventure with your condition.

“Excuse me.”

A disembodied voice sends your thoughts dissolving like thinning mist, and it takes a second to realize that the words are being directed at you.

“Do you have a Klonopin?”

“What?” you say.

The face that greets you is fuzzy in the half light, but the voice sounds like a guy’s. And, sure enough, the longer you stare, the more the rounded silhouette of a short afro comes into focus. Then a pair of retro, brow-line glasses.

“Klonopin. It’s a central-nervous-system depressant. Do you have one I could borrow?”

His voice is soft with a slight quaver, and you can’t tell if he’s being condescending or just as clear as possible about what he needs.

“I know what it is,” you say. “Just . . .”

“Just what?” says the voice.

“Did you really come on an anxiety trip and forget your meds?”

A frustrated sigh.

“No, I’ve got, like, half a Walgreens with me, but it’s in my duffel under the bus. I usually keep a lucky one in my pocket, but today I forgot. Go figure. Anyway, I . . .”

“I’m a Xanax person,” you say.

“C’mon, man. What is this? Amateur hour?!”

You are momentarily quiet at this judgment. It has never occurred to you that people might have such strong feelings about nearly identical sedatives.

“Sorry, sorry,” he immediately says. “I’m a little edgy. Moving

vehicles aren't my thing. And I usually have my support animal, but he couldn't come. Which is why I need the . . ."

He clicks his tongue and trails off and then seems to actually look at you for the first time.

"I'm Troy," he says.

"Case," you say.

He extends a sweaty palm, and you shake it before he yanks it away. He's silent after that, and you remember that before you stopped going, your therapist was always telling you to ask questions. People like being asked questions, she said. It plays to their vanity.

"So what is it?" you say.

"What is what?"

"Your support animal."

"Ah," he says. "Right. You mean Turbo. He's a wiener dog. Thus, the shirt, I guess . . ."

He points to a white ringer T-shirt with bright blue ribbing around the neck and sleeves. You have to squint to make out the faded letters stretched over his skinny chest, which read: THE GRASS IS GREENER UNDER MY WIENER.

"Oh," you say.

"Yeah," he says. "I'll snag one, by the way."

"One . . ."

"Xanax. Sorry. Sometimes I forget the whole context thing. But I'll take it, you know . . . if the offer's still on the table."

You dig into your pocket, where you feel the familiar ovoid contours of the pill. Sometimes all you need to do is just dip your fingers into your pocket and touch the edge and you start to feel a

little better. Still, it doesn't feel good to fish this little talisman out of your pocket now to give it away.

"Thanks, man," Troy says when you hand it to him.

Then, instead of swallowing it, he quickly chews it into a paste, a trick that only the professionally anxious know makes it kick in faster (at the expense of the worst aftertaste imaginable). After that, he salutes you for some reason and disappears behind the wall of his seat again.

Outside, the sun turns the air a chalky white and it begins to rouse a few more of your compatriots. You hear a yawn or two. The telltale candy-rattle of a pill container. And that cartoon-bubble-popping sound a phone makes when a message goes in or out. Once you reach your destination, deep in the Boundary Waters, your phones will no longer work, so it makes sense that people would be using them while they still can.

You don't want to use yours, though.

Not because you have no one to text—you still have a few loyal school friends, even after your months of isolation—but because you know if you get your phone out now, you'll just look at pictures of your brother, Sean. And, if you do that, the suffocating guilt will almost certainly return and you might even start crying. Right now, you have a chance, however short-lived, to be the guy who doesn't cry first on the therapy trip.

So you keep your phone in your pocket. But because just thinking about all this is making you feel bad anyway, you decide to get up and walk slowly to the bathroom at the back of the bus, where you close the old accordion door and look in the mirror.

"Wherever you go," your therapist once said, "there you are."

It was the name of a book or something. You never read it,

but the phrase stuck with you. And here you are in this bathroom: same floppy haircut you've had since freshman year, and the same lost expression on your face. You take a breath and try, just for a moment, not to think of your brother, who, ironically enough, actually liked the outdoors. Hiking. Fat-tire biking. Cliff-diving. He was always trying to get you out of the house, and he would have been beside himself with excitement at the thought of a wilderness mystery trip.

If he were here right now, he would surely be punching you in the arm and telling you, with his face too close to yours:

"C'mon, Space Case. Get out of your head!"

You draw one long breath—in through the nose, out through the mouth—and flush the toilet in case anyone outside somehow wants to prove you didn't really go to the bathroom (yes, this is actually the kind of thing you worry about). And then, while you're splashing water on your face and trying to shake the feeling that coming on this trip was probably a terrible mistake, you suddenly hear a voice from somewhere else on the bus.

It's too distant to make out any words, but you stop anyway, water dripping from your forehead into the tiny basin below. Even though it's far away, and even though there's a door separating you from the sound, you know immediately whose voice it is. It doesn't seem possible, but it's one you know very well. A voice you used to hear almost every day before things went terribly wrong.

A voice you were sure you would never hear again.

## TWO

The bus is braking when you step out of the bathroom, and you have to steady yourself against the wall to keep from lurching forward into the seat of an Asian American kid in an all-white tracksuit who immediately gives you a death stare.

“Watch it, NARP,” he mutters, and then returns to squeezing a tennis ball so hard that his knuckles could cut glass.

You don’t know what *NARP* means—though, really, how could it be good?—so you turn away and look toward the front of the bus, trying to catch a glimpse of the person you expect to be there. But all you see is the view out the windshield and what looks like the last truck stop at the edge of human civilization. It’s an orange box of a building with diesel pumps and a hand-painted sign that says FERG’S SMOKED FISH.

You glance at the seats up front, but you don’t find her there either. Only a ruggedly handsome man in a red snapback, who is slowly getting to his feet. You know from the prep materials that his name is Silas and that he’s some kind of therapy-nature guide. There was another guide with him in the photos, a short muscular woman with red hair, but you look around and you can’t find her anywhere. Meanwhile, Silas fishes something out of the pocket of his vest. It’s a palm-size rectangle, and when he removes the

plastic case, you can see it's a cassette tape. One he promptly feeds into the bus's ancient stereo system.

He doesn't look old enough for cassettes, which means it's either his parents' or he got it just because this bus has a tape deck. Either way, after a long, high-frequency hiss, out come the first few notes of a song.

And unfortunately, it's a song that you recognize.

You know it from a radio station that your dad liked to listen to at full volume on the way to your therapy appointments. It's called "Country Roads," and it's by a guy named John Denver, who looks, you remember, like a friendly shop teacher in spectacles.

Everyone on the bus is silent, holding out for some kind of explanation. And when the chorus kicks in and shop-teacher John starts yelling about "mountain mamas," Silas starts walking slowly down the aisle of the bus, shaggy brown hair spilling out of his backward hat. You sit back down and watch him. He is tan and has a chipped front tooth, which somehow makes him even more masculine and good-looking. And before anyone can ask him what this has to do with therapy, he doubles down and starts to sing along in an enthusiastic and totally off-key voice.

"Take me home! To the plaaaaaaaace I belong!"

He's not dancing, thankfully, but he's looking at each of you directly in the eye, daring you to say something about all of it. When you don't, he motions to the bus driver, who gets up and turns down the music.

"Adventurers!" he shouts.

Blank stares all around.

"Who among you . . . would like me to turn off this song?"

Five hands shoot up, including your own. That's how you know how many of you there are.

"I will consider it!" he says, his eyes scanning the seats. "But first I want reasons."

It takes a second for everyone to weigh the cost-benefit of stopping whatever this is versus speaking publicly. Finally, Troy stands up behind you and cups his hands over his mouth.

"THIS SONG IS NOT GOOD," he says.

This gets a few laughs.

"That's subjective, brother," says Silas.

"No, it's not," mumbles this girl a few rows in front of you who's practically burrowing inside her lavender hoodie.

"Okay, Fran, okay. What else you got?" says Silas.

At this, Fran-the-hoodie-girl goes silent. There's another spell of quiet. Only a few seconds probably, but anxiety tends to stretch uncomfortable moments like taffy. Then another girl, the one you couldn't see before, stands and speaks.

"I don't like watching you listen to it," she says.

And there, finally, is the voice again.

It's low and a little monotone, with a high note at the end of the sentence that sounds like she's asking a question even when she's not.

"Aha! Now we're getting somewhere!" says Silas. "Why not?"

To this, the girl says something that you don't hear, probably because your heart is now pounding in your temples. When she's done speaking, though, Silas smiles and turns back to the group.

"Did everybody hear Diana?" he says.

You all shake your heads.

*Diana.*

You have to fight to get a breath.

“Well, I’m not going to repeat all that. But, basically, Diana is embarrassed for me and it is causing her extreme discomfort. Like, a *bunch* of discomfort. Does that sound familiar to anyone?”

Nobody nods. Especially not you because the name *Diana* is now stuck on a loop in your whirling brain, and a pit in your stomach is threatening to swallow your whole body.

“Case!”

You feel yourself jolt upright in your seat. It’s possible you make an unflattering noise of some kind when you do this, but you don’t hear it over the cranking gears of your own internal machinery.

“Yes?”

“Yes, what?” says Silas.

It takes you a few seconds to remember what the question was.

“Yes,” you say again. “It . . . uh . . . sounds familiar to me. And yes, I’m super embarrassed for you.”

He stares at you and shakes his head. His eyes stay locked on yours, and you can also feel four other pairs of eyes stuck on you now.

“Well, that’s bad news,” he says. “Because that’s not going to work for us.”

“What isn’t?” says the tracksuit guy.

“Embarrassment, brother! We have to find a way to get rid of that real quick.”

Silas motions to the bus driver, who turns the song back on.

“On this trip,” he says over the jangly music, “we’re going

to be together for a long time, trying to make some progress on this thing we're all struggling with. Everything we do is going to be kind of embarrassing. The sooner we can be open with one another, the more progress we're going to make. You understand?"

A hand goes up.

"Yes, Fran?" says Silas.

"No offense. But wasn't there supposed to be, like, another therapy person on this thing besides you?"

Silas nods.

"Yes," he says. "There was. But unfortunately, she had a medical emergency and she can't make it on this trip. So it's just us, adventurers. And I'm here to tell you: We are enough. We are enough!"

You hear his words, but he might as well be speaking underwater. So you close your eyes and give in to the zoning your brain is so fond of, and when you come to full consciousness again, your ears pulsing, chest tight as a drum, everyone is getting off the bus. You have, it seems, been given permission for one last pit stop.

You don't really want to move, but curiosity about Diana pulls you from your seat. And as you head toward the thin rectangle of daylight at the front of the bus, you finally see her clearly, just a few feet away. Her jacket has the same row of safety pins near the collar. Her curly hair still hangs barely over her eyes. You stop, and then you just stand there with your arms at your sides. She doesn't block your path, but she doesn't exactly move out of the way either.

She did the same thing every time you met her in the hallway of your house, usually when she was leaving Sean's room, spritzing on perfume to cover up the weed smoke or tucking her shirt back

into her jeans. And if you happened to meet eyes with her, she often gave you the same deadpan expression she's giving you now, and she never, ever got out of the way.

“Hey, Case,” she says.

“Hey, Diana,” you say.