

LUKE MUYSKENS

STOP MAKING SENSE

For most of the night, Nicole thought the manager of Moonlit Floats was trying to harvest the organs of her and her son. During their negotiations, he'd expressed too much interest in the positioning of their stomach and kidneys—if they crossed their legs in the tank, he told them, the tendons running through their hips would place tension on their digestive tracts. Once Nicole's mind was unburdened by gravity, she found herself reexamining his curious focus; she found memories of how his fingers moved, like they held an invisible scalpel. Nicole imagined her kidneys were worth ten grand each. Enough to buy a tank for Cedar, her son, and maybe a trailer for moving it around. Her worries concerning the homicidal manager increased as her imagination uncoiled in the Epsom salt pod, exacerbated by the creepy blue light pumped in.

“How was your night?” Nicole asked her son in the car, later. They'd begun their cross-country tour in a mobile home, but Cedar found sleep impossible to obtain within its thin plastic walls. They sold it and leased a Mercedes S-Class Coupe: the quietest interior on the market.

“The session was fine,” Cedar answered. “I slept.” The boy spoke with intense formality for a seven-year-old, which sometimes infuriated Nicole. He said things like, “My condition makes intimacy difficult,” and “The levels are unpleasant,” and “Cappuccino.” She sometimes wished he would speak with the bright simplicity of his peers; he was a strange enough boy without sounding like an automated polling system.

“That's good, honey. Are you excited for our meeting?”

“I like the pods very much. They are comfortable.”

“I know, Cedar.” They were in Minneapolis to visit Earworm Studios—an acoustics lab transitioning into the niche world of what its proponents called “Endurance Adventure,” and what its critics called “Recreational Torture.” The studio had developed the Guinness Book-certified quietest-room-on-earth, and touted the fact that no one had lasted more than forty minutes inside. Nicole

knew her son could last an hour unfazed, and thought he might even enjoy himself.

“Yes. I am excited for our meeting.” Nicole felt the urge to reach over from the wheel and touch her son in any capacity—smooth down his hair or scratch his back—but suppressed the compulsion. He wouldn’t have liked it. She snuck a quick look at him to see morning light passing through trees, throwing an uneven pattern like bright coins across him. His fine blonde hair appeared to burn. The boy wore a blue synthetic shirt designed as a rash guard for surfers—they had tried many fabrics and this was the least intrusive. He also wore a pair of yoga pants intended for a petite woman. Cedar was her little weirdo and she loved doing this. She loved carting him across the country, trying to find a cure for his odd condition. Every moment of it broke her heart.

“This is gonna be chill, little man,” an Earworm technician said to Cedar as he prepared to enter the chamber, stopping just short of ruffling the boy’s hair. Floaters had infuriatingly spaced-out demeanors augmented by DMT and the skunky aroma of sage or homemade deodorant, but the Earworm staff belonged more to the base-jumping YOLO crowd.

Nicole was proud of the contempt she saw on her son’s face. They were both becoming exhausted by the variety and frequency of jerks claiming their heat therapy, holistic glue application, and doses of heavy metal were vital to Cedar’s wellbeing.

Sound inside the room—what they called an “anechoic chamber”—behaved in a different way. As they stepped onto the suspended wire floor, Nicole found that for her entire life she had not been hearing sound but feeling it. The imperceptible echoes of being alive were stripped away. The large wedges of orange radiation-absorbent material on the walls, ceiling, and floor below the wire robbed her of the ability to distinguish space without sight—something she didn’t realize she’d been doing. To Nicole, being in the room felt like being inside her own body.

They’d been to Las Vegas, Oakland, Portland, and Bozeman, visiting centers for nerve dampening, electronically-stimulated relaxation, darkness therapy, and salts. Nicole didn’t participate in most of the treatments, but she tried, or at least supervised, the more risky and experimental ones. Because of an incident in a Montana yurt where a “licensed” doctor treated Cedar with what turned

out to be ultra-concentrated marijuana resin, she elected to join Cedar in the anechoic chamber for as long as she could last.

Cedar and Nicole sat side-by-side in folding chairs, displaying different behaviors and experiencing different realities, as was often true due to Cedar's severe case of Sensory Processing Disorder. Until her son's diagnosis, Nicole thought senses like sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste were subjective. She believed a mossy log felt roughly the same to different feelers, and that a fire engine's horn was the same level of abrasive to all. Cedar seemed, at first, to be an unhappy baby, crying and refusing to sleep. When he was able to cover his ears, he did so. When he was able to articulate his discomfort, he told his mother how the scent of her pickles was too briny. He vomited each time he rode in a car and couldn't calculate how much strength was required to hold a marker. "Please do not touch me, Mother," Nicole remembered him saying at a young age. "I do not like it."

Nicole had expected the absence of sound in the anechoic chamber, but didn't anticipate the creation of sounds. After a few minutes, her organs became loud. Cedar sat with a contented smile while she squirmed. The silence allowed her stomach to gurgle and her heart to romp. She heard liquids squishing back and forth inside her head. She heard the creaking of cartilage in her joints when she moved. She heard her fingernails growing. Nicole had never been uncomfortable within her body, but when allowed to be louder than her mind, it became intolerably gross. A house-like symphony of organic shudders and groans wracked her with unfamiliarity. She needed to leave. Looking back from outside the thick vault door, Nicole felt bad about abandoning her son, but this place—one of extreme stability, where almost nothing entered, left, or changed—was his. A place where she could not live.

Their next stop was at Bodyhigh Floats, just across the river in St. Paul. Finding tanks was not a problem—the fad spread through the country until every yogi and NFL player could float weekly and no strip mall was complete without a LiveSea or a Float 365—the difficulty was in finding a center that would allow Cedar to float overnight.

Since first trying flotation therapy in Vegas, Cedar had been unable to sleep outside a tank. The poor sleep that plagued his entire life was made worse by the knowledge that a pure, pleasant place existed, where he could find a level

of comfort experienced by those without his condition. It was like trying to navigate the world bare-eyed after first being prescribed glasses.

Before bed, Nicole and Cedar liked to play a game called “Butterflies.” Much of their treatment efforts were aimed at finding ways for Cedar to control his senses by learning how they could be muted, and how to adapt those dampening strategies in his mind, but Butterflies used more traditional methods of sensory integration therapy. Cedar would lie prostrate on the floor with his eyes closed. Nicole would find something small and soft, like a piece of tissue paper, a feather, or a cooked noodle and tickle a spot on his arms or legs. He would tell her where he was being touched and describe the butterfly touching him. Was it landing or fluttering past? Was it small? Large? Blue? Red? Furry? Smooth?

Nicole was tickling Cedar’s left foot with a large maple leaf she found on the windshield of their car. She trailed the leaf in small, light circles, watching how Cedar’s brow tightened with each change in direction.

“This one is not a butterfly,” Cedar said. “It is a moth.” They had played this game every night for weeks and he had never described a moth. Nicole realized that she’d stopped moving the leaf and worked it back into motion. Cedar’s abdomen tightened. “A luna moth. It is a nice green. Its wings have a fine layer of fuzz.”

Nicole saw her son’s father in the movement of his mouth when he spoke. Cedar resembled his mother in almost every way—his fine hair, narrow hips, and near-translucent skin—but his mouth moved like Benny’s: the man who moved to Japan a month after Cedar was born and never returned. He sent them a bag of lychee-flavored hard candies and ten thousand dollars each Christmas, but they did not otherwise speak. Nicole felt sad when she saw Benny in Cedar’s lips, but not for having lost the man. Rather, she was saddened by the act of remembering herself at a younger age and recalling the energy she no longer had.

“Can you hear the moth?” Nicole asked.

“No, Mom. Luna moths are silent. As silent as outer space.”

“As silent as the Earworm room?” Cedar nodded. Nicole recalled a fact about the luna moth. In most climates, the moth survives for only one week, its primary functions being to mate and lay eggs. The poor creature’s trip through life is too limited to necessitate a mouth. It dies before nutrients become necessary. “Do you like it?”

“Yes.” A direct response from Cedar was rare outside the Butterflies game. He fixed himself internally, where he’d created a world of moderate stimulation, where he was comfortable. He often responded to questions with non-sequiturs from his insulated mind. A direct “Yes” or “No” was invigorating. Nicole saw a flash of Benny again. At least she recognized something in Cedar. There was so much in her son—beyond their physical similarities—she could never hope to place, odd tics and behaviors she had never seen in another human. His body was an instrument tuned to an unfamiliar key.

Before shutting the half-egg fiberglass lid, Nicole snuck a glimpse of her son in the tank. His wet rash guard reflected points of light, appearing like dim, distant stars. His head was already rolling into sleep. As the mother of a child with a disability, she felt two things when she saw her son sleep. First, she was filled with unequalled happiness because he was no longer in pain or discomfort. Second, she felt guilty for feeling relief, because he was unconscious and she feared she would feel the same if he died. But as Cedar floated, he looked unborn, as if he were in a chrysalis, still forming and becoming a beautiful winged creature that would someday split from his shell of hardened silk.

To save money, Nicole slept on the floor next to the pod. She enjoyed some parts of flotation sleep, like how it softened her muscles into sacs of gel and created a space in which ideas flowed more organically, but she found some of its other properties frightening. Some nights she peeled from her body and hovered over the water. Some nights she thought of strange, ugly things. Foxes tearing apart baby rabbits in endless deserts of mud. She liked sleeping on her air mattress, where she could bury her face in a pillow. It was something concrete she could smell, grab, and taste if she wanted. That night, however, she did not sleep. She rolled over and over. Hair got in her mouth. Her toenails scraped against her legs. She wanted to scream. Once during the night, when she thought of Cedar in the tank beside her, an awful thought entered her mind. She already felt, at times, like dying. If she was suffering from his condition, she never would have made it this far.

In Minnesota, cherry trees bloomed in the second week of April. Nicole was feeling claustrophobic. For months, she’d been party to a search for isolation from the senses, and as a consequence, she felt her eyes, nose, and ears were starved. She was tired of darkness and silence. She was hungry for color and

sound. Ignoring the guilt she felt indulging herself, she resolved to visit a park and experience the trees. Cedar insisted on coming along. Nicole couldn't keep her son from the stimulation he wanted. Still, she needed a few minutes to herself, so she snuck out to the car and listened to music. Allowing herself a sick sense of humor, she chose "Life During Wartime" by the Talking Heads.

They brought a tote bag containing two bananas, a Mindfold mask designed to block all light while allowing you to open your eyes, peanut butter sandwiches, 3M Peltor noise-cancelling earmuffs, and a beach ball. Nicole chose Como Park after reading a leaflet on the twenty cherry trees that had been gifted to the park by the country of Japan. For a moment, she thought of Benny. She thought of how lovely Mount Fuji must have looked during the bloom, wreathed in a tangled forest of pink and white.

When they arrived, Nicole's first instinct was to spring from the car and frolic through the fragrant grass. Instead, she waited and watched Cedar emerge squinting. She offered him the Mindfold but he refused. Together, they moved to a shady spot under an oak in the corner of the park where Nicole spread a fleece blanket. They sat and watched the cherry trees. Like happy partygoers, the group of trees pulsed in the warm spring breeze, throwing clouds of pollen onto the grass. Nicole was stunned. The color and smell was intense, even to her muted senses. She looked over to Cedar, who was quietly vomiting off the edge of the blanket.

Nicole had to fight her body not to rub Cedar's back while he finished. She offered the earmuffs but he refused again. She asked if he wanted to leave the park, but he wanted to stay.

"I know they are beautiful," Cedar said of the trees. "But I do not think they are beautiful." Nicole knew her son was not in physical danger, so she overcame her maternal instincts and let him suffer. They sat side by side, behaving differently and experiencing different realities. Cedar began to sweat. His breathing was deep and quick. His hands moved back and forth to a similar rhythm of the trees in the wind. Nicole tried to enjoy the cherry blossoms, but she was consumed by the nervous energy beside her. It was torture for them both.

After a few minutes, Cedar groaned and tipped onto his back. Nicole worried that he'd passed out, but he wiggled his toes.

“Keep looking, mom,” Cedar said. Part of being a child who only felt comfortable when turned inward was that he had trouble empathizing. He rarely considered his mother’s feelings, and the fact that he wanted her to continue watching the blossoms despite the pain they caused him filled Nicole with tangible love. It poured into her brain and filled her with a heavy, warm liquid. She tried, in turn, to place herself in the internal world to which he was escaping. She imagined it like a small inverted moon. Dark, smooth, and contained.

“I love you, Cedar.” Nicole’s eyes broke from the trees and fixed on his body. A delicate monarch butterfly floated between them. It hovered, as if making up its mind, and landed on Cedar’s wrist. Nicole watched in awe as it walked his hand, tasting his skin with its flute nose.

“I feel a butterfly,” Cedar said. The pace at which his stomach heaved was slowing. His toes stopped squirming and his eyes, behind their lids, became still.

“Good, Cedar,” Nicole replied. “What does it look like?”

“It is big and orange. With black spots, like eyes.” The monarch fluttered its wings against his skin. A tiny, miraculous laugh escaped Cedar’s body.

In Minnesota, the second week of April was Severe Weather Awareness Week. When the tornado siren ripped open the still air of the park with its high-pitched wail, Cedar began to cry. His eyes screwed shut and he curled into a ball. Nicole placed the noise-cancelling muffs over his ears, wrapped him in the blanket, and carried him back to the car.

Nicole and Cedar’s next destination was the Society of Weightlessness in Mexico City—the only clinic in the world claiming to have perfected a terrestrial zero-gravity environment. Specialists there measured Cedar for the creation of a customized magnetic bodysuit, in which he would float through an electromagnetized chamber. An extreme subset of the SenDep cohort believed the perception of gravity ate a huge percentage of the brain’s capacity, and without it, the human mind was capable of almost anything. Nicole held out hope that with Cedar’s mind not consumed by the planetary force, he’d be free to manage his senses in a normal way. Floating came close to eliminating gravity, but didn’t allow for realistic movement of the body. Nicole wondered if Cedar could learn to live without gravity and apply that knowledge to the unmagnetized world. She just wanted to see if it could happen.

During the day, they stayed in a dark, well-ventilated, soundproof guest room, but between the calibration sessions they had to find Cedar a place to sleep. Instead of float tanks, the Society of Weightlessness operated an Olympic-sized Epsom salt pool designed for tethered group floats. The trend hadn't yet swept Mexico, so the only other occupant of the pool was an old woman who rarely moved. Leaving Cedar alone in the large pool seemed, for some reason, worse than leaving him in an individual pod. Nicole imagined a creature formed of sedimentary salt creeping from the dark ends of the pool and swallowing him legs-first. She chose to float alongside him at night, hoping her presence was brave and bright enough to fill the water.

The evening before Cedar was scheduled to test the anti-gravity chamber, Nicole sat him down and asked how he felt.

"How many things do we need to try before you're done?" Cedar answered. Nicole had no response. Cedar had never resisted her efforts to find an effective treatment. Was he tired of life on the road and burnt out by constant failure, or did he doubt the limitlessness of her care?

"What do you mean? Cedar, you know I'd never give up on your happiness." As a mother, Nicole had always characterized herself as capable of anything for her son's sake. She felt she had a static, constant flow of love at maximum capacity. But when questioned, she lost confidence. Every human characteristic had a breaking point. Nicole once fractured her collarbone. The pain was so intense it felt not like pain at all, but like warmth. She had seen Cedar, many times, deal with sensory overload by passing out. Would her love—perceived as limitless, but in reality, not—reach a point and flip, turning into hatred or apathy? Looking into the wide blue eyes of her son, Nicole was afraid of this possibility.

"Think about a hot day," Cedar said. Nicole tried to keep a confused expression from her face. "Think about yourself. You take off all your clothes and you are still hot. You rub some ice on your skin but it melts. You go swimming but the water is hot too. You fan yourself but the air blowing at your face is still hot." Nicole watched his face move. His mouth was not resembling Benny's. Each motion was deliberate and slow. "After everything you try fails, you give up and let yourself sweat. As the sweat runs down your face and gets in your eyes, the sweat cools you. It evaporates and leaves behind cold, comfortable skin."

“I don’t understand, Cedar. Do you not want to try the weightlessness chamber tomorrow?” Nicole felt her body fill with the acidic pressure of desperation. “If you don’t want to do it, we don’t have to.”

“No, I can do it. Good night, Mom.”

That night in the flotation pool, Nicole felt her mind slipping more than usual. The visions she usually experienced during flotation were not quite dreams, because she was not asleep, but were also not voluntary, and bore no real meaning. That night, however, she didn’t visualize the typical honeycomb networks or elastic faces. Her mind created an entire world.

Nicole experienced a place Cedar would’ve loved. It was a forest, but the colors were all variations of red, like seeing light through your eyelids. Everything glowed from the inside. Each surface was smooth and the shapes followed a strict pattern. There was no smell. All sound was muted and low. Nicole moved through the woods, marveling at the grid of matte trees and the general lack of life. While she knew this landscape would’ve been a paradise for her son, she realized how deeply she disliked it. The scene was creepy and foreign. It was not a space they could both occupy, and Nicole felt, in that moment, okay with her distaste.

With gradual, intentional effort, Nicole added senses to the muted world. She used her mind to add burs to the bushes and moss to the logs. She summoned the rich smell of rotting wood and the piercing calls of birds. She allowed the forest to be cold and proceeded deeper into it, feeling comfortable and aware.

Cedar entered the anti-gravity chamber in his heavy magnetic suit. Inside, he wore it like a second skin. Nicole watched her son push gently off the floor and rise. A clump of panic jumped into her throat, but she worked to suppress those feelings.

“Cedar,” Nicole said, unable to keep fear from her voice.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Cedar said looking back. “I want to go.” He pushed off the ceiling with his hands and floated back to the center of the room, beaming. One of the weightlessness specialists floated him a magnetic ball. They said toys would help Cedar discover how things moved without gravity. He caught the ball and watched his reflection in its surface.

Cedar’s disorder had always caused him to move as little as possible, but he flipped and rolled in this void-like chamber. He ricocheted off the walls and

ceiling like an acrobat. Nicole tried not to gasp—she was accustomed to thinking of her son as fragile. “Cedar,” she called again. He responded with a cheerful whoop that normally would’ve caused him pain.

After no more than five minutes in the chamber, Cedar pushed himself back to the ground and peeled off the suit. Nicole waited with a nervous smile while the observers scribbled feverish notes. Cedar approached, already back in his usual cautious gait. “How do you feel?” the lead specialist asked in a loud voice. Cedar flinched. “Why did you come down so soon?”

“That was a very pleasant time,” Cedar said. “More than most treatments I have experienced.” Nicole found something was different about him, but she couldn’t figure out what. His posture and mannerisms were unchanged. There was no sudden light in his eyes. The joy she heard him express while bouncing around the room was gone.

“Did the absence of gravity free your mind from its limitations?” Nicole asked, spouting copy from a float tank brochure. “Were you able to access more mental capacity without it?”

“No,” Cedar replied, frowning. “But I had fun.” That her son could experience fun was an absolute revelation. They’d been, for months, years even, chasing comfort and function. She never considered hoping Cedar would have fun. The moment was small, and she had no idea how it would affect Cedar’s long-term health, but she smiled and let joy romp through her body. Fun.

“Would you like to do that again?” Nicole asked.

“I don’t think so, Mom. I know it is expensive.” She realized what was different about her son. They were experiencing something in the same way. A harsh laugh slipped from Nicole’s body. Cedar smiled in response. The observers continued taking notes as the mother and son shared that moment—a rare intersection of shared perceptions. The same thoughts and feelings resided in both as they occupied the same world, seeing and sensing as one.