

MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

TOP HONORS LEVEL III

Dear Ned Vizzini,

Quite simply, your book saved my life.

I had my first suicidal thought at only eight years old. After being yelled at for talking back to my parents, I collapsed onto my bed, heart beating fast and barely able to breathe. Tears rolled down my cheeks, one after another, and my stomach twisted into knots. The nausea, lack of air, and sense of defeat broke me. I couldn't bear to feel anymore; I wanted it to end. With my wet face stuffed into my knees, I whispered to God and asked him to take me away. While apologizing for not believing in him, I accepted that if he granted my wish, I would probably end up in hell, but I was desperate. I begged him to kill me, to take me off this Earth, then I would no longer have to suffer. To no one's surprise, he didn't grant me my wish.

Though I didn't know it at the time, I had had one of my first panic attacks; the first of many that have occurred consistently throughout my life since.

For the next two years, I continued to pray during my panic attacks, which had become weekly events. As an eight-, nine-, and ten-year-old who did not yet understand the concept of mental health, I hid my agony from everyone I loved because I thought they would judge me for not being strong enough to handle something as simple as life.

Two months and 7 days after my 10th birthday, my cousin Antoine passed away, partly due to his own struggles with mental health. This was my first real encounter with death, and the day I finally gave up on the already little belief I had left in any sort of God.

Over the next four years, my mental health steadily declined – I easily consider those few years the worst of my entire life. I changed from what can only be described as a bubbly social butterfly into a socially anxious shut in. Now, instead of praying for an escape during my panic attacks, I started to plan my own elaborate suicide in my head. However, I could never get the courage to actually carry it out. My panic attacks became more and more frequent, growing from about one every week to at least one every day, and I became more and more miserable. Yet, I forced myself to present the innocent facade of fitting in with my family and friends every day, as if I wasn't constantly thinking about killing myself.

To escape my miserable day-to-day life, I threw myself into my books and began to build an impressive library. I inherited *It's Kind of a Funny Story* from my older sister the summer between seventh and eighth grade. Up until I met Craig that summer, I had felt alone in the world and my feelings. I found the same suffering and desperation I had dealt with by myself for so long in another person, which I didn't know was possible. When Craig decided to ask for help with his mental health, his family and close friends

didn't reject him and throw him away like I had believed mine would. Instead, they accepted him for who he was and made sure he got the help he needed. Suddenly, I didn't feel completely hopeless. I thought to myself if Craig's family can accept and help him with all of his problems, can I get the same help from mine? The answer was yes. Though I left out the suicide part, I revealed most of my problems to my parents, and they helped me find a therapist and get medications that made my life much less miserable and much more enjoyable.

A few months ago, I decided that I wanted to go off of the medication I was currently on in order to try to find something a little more perfect. About a month before school started, I was completely unmedicated, and my old thoughts crept back into my mind. For a while, I let them simmer until even just the thought of getting out of bed in the morning made me want to give up. This time, instead of silently suffering until it was actually too late, I thought of *It's Kind of a Funny Story* and Craig. Once again, he made me realize that I was not alone in this. That depression is not something to be ashamed of, but an obstacle in life that you often cannot handle alone. That getting help isn't a sign of weakness, but a show of courage. And so I asked for help.

Thank You,

Sophie