



ZIG-ZAG
BOY

A MEMOIR
OF MADNESS AND
MOTHERHOOD

TANYA FRANK

Z I G - Z A G
B O Y

A Memoir of Madness and Motherhood

T A N Y A F R A N K



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For Zach and the elephant seals

“Insanity—a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world.”

—RD LAING

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

Zig-Zag Boy is a love story, an urgent tale of a fierce battle a mother wages for her child. I worry about telling such a personal story, one that isn't just my own, but I hope that sharing it will help others to feel less alone, to give those of us who contend with psychosis a collective voice. Families like ours live on the edge, in a no-man's-land, our voices often stifled or ignored by bureaucracy and archaic laws. Despite being the closest witness to Zach's suffering, I came to realize that I was often unable to advocate for him, to break through the barriers created by current mental health systems.

Psychosis is often thought to be genetic, or a symptom of brain chemistry gone awry, yet no disease markers show up in brain scans or blood tests. It may well be caused or triggered by the interplay of various factors we are just beginning to understand, from epigenetics to trauma to culture and environment.

For many years I despised Los Angeles, because that was where Zach's psychosis first presented, but now I know that LA didn't cause this experience any more than I did. Psychosis is more complex than this.

I hope that the simple idea of being with someone and not doing to them, of asking what has happened and not what is wrong, will resonate and proliferate. I firmly believe in the privilege of supporting each other in this way and will continue to advocate for such a basic philosophy, which will conserve money as well as lives and help to promote a more compassionate world.

Tanya Frank
February 2023

Z I G - Z A G

B O Y

BIRTHING SEASON

WINTER 2017

I walk out to South Point. It is wild and desolate; the air smells of molted seal fur and guano. I take my binoculars so I can see her more clearly—the first elephant-seal mother to haul off. She is lumbering and clumsy as she heaves her body over the dunes and past the willow.

Early winter is birthing season at Año Nuevo, the elephant-seal sanctuary in Northern California where I am training to be a docent. My fellow volunteers are eating lunch in the barn. I am alone out here. Walking helps. I make new footprints in the sand, my skin tingling in the salty air. I clench my fists and release them.

Out on Cove Beach, the surfers in their black wetsuits carve up the face of a wave. My boy used to surf, raising his limber body onto a shortboard. That was when he trusted the water and its purity. I didn't suspect that anything could get in the way of his dreams.

The mother seal dives into the water when the beta males aren't looking. She knows that if she is caught they will try to mate with her, just in case she hasn't been impregnated by the alpha. It doesn't matter that she is spent and famished.

Somehow, she isn't spotted. Her skin shimmers like silver foil as she dips into the surf. She heads out into the deeper, darker water where she moves more easily and only has herself to think about. She doesn't look back at her pup, who lifts up his head and chest from the beach as he searches for her. This is the first time she has left her baby's side since his birth. She has given him all of herself, even when the tides were wild and threatening, when the huge elephant-seal bulls rose around her, roaring and fighting violently for the alpha position, when she was empty from birthing and had lost one-third of her body weight from lactating and fasting.

Now something tells her it is time to leave him, to ignore her pup's cries that carry on the breeze. He continues to call the way he has done for the last month, the sound that had always worked to keep her close and

protective of him. But she is far away now, hungry for fish and squid, deep-diving, alone. Her blubbery pup is still too fat to swim, and his buoyancy would attract the sharks. He must slim down and learn when to take the plunge himself. I stare at him, stranded, rejected.

The pups have a fifty percent chance of surviving their maiden voyage, and even if this pup one day makes it back to Año Nuevo, to the very same breeding ground where he was conceived and born, there is no scientific evidence to suggest that he and his mother will ever reunite. The mother will forget the scent of her pup, his cry and the bond they forged during their early days together; she will mate again, give birth and propagate. She is all instinct.

As I stand on the bluff I think about Zach, my youngest son, lying at home, curled up inside his sleeping bag, hands over his ears to shut out the voices only he hears.

My eyes prick with tears behind my sunglasses, and then I am crying more freely, fiercely, and it hurts my throat. I want to climb down to the beach and pick up the seal pup, to feed him myself, but the laws of nature govern here at the reserve. There can be no human intervention.

I leave South Point and make my way back under the low sky. The marine haze is still heavy on the northern side of the reserve. The other docents gather and take their seats in the old horse barn for the afternoon session. We are going to watch video footage of great white sharks, filmed by researchers at the University of California. I keep my sunglasses on and stand by the door, trying not to panic about the fact that there is no Wi-Fi or cell service here on this remote part of the California coast. I wonder if my son has woken up yet, frantic to reach me, if he will remember to call his older brother instead. I wonder if it is helping at all, me being here, trying to distract myself, trying to become a woman who isn't solely consumed by looking after her son, trying to put him together again.

The shark expert starts his commentary about shark feeding habits, their evolution. It is hard to concentrate, the lecture sounds muffled and the room is airless. I hear something about the bad reputation that great whites have, how it is our responsibility to explain to park visitors why they don't deserve to be feared and hated. It is important to him; I can feel it in the urgency of his delivery and the quiver of his Adam's apple. I recognize that desperation to set the record straight.

THE BREAK

Autumn 2009

“This is how they’re monitoring us,” he whispers, his face stricken, his breath sour. “We have to cut some stuff out, change the receiver. I can do it.”

“Who?” I ask. “Who is monitoring us? And why?”

He puts a finger to his lips to quiet me and begins rifling through the toolkit, although he doesn’t seem quite sure what he is looking for.

“What’s going on?” I whisper.

And this is how it begins, in the laundry room in the late hours, when I find Zach, my nineteen-year-old son, tracing the wires of our defunct telephone circuit board.

He has never rerouted wires in his life, and besides, we suspended our landline service half a decade ago.

I stare at him, his slim body tense, the muscles of his neck straining, fists pumped as if ready to swing at the punching bag that hangs in the basement. His pupils are big. He navigates the familiar space awkwardly, like an intruder, knocking against my mud-splattered bike that leans against the wall. I don’t recognize him: his expression, his movements, his demeanor.

“Did you take drugs?” I ask. He shakes his head.

I shiver in this forgotten room. Its concrete floor numbs my bare feet. I’m a Londoner by birth with a tolerance for damp, so I know it’s not the cold that has me shaking. I am scared of what is happening to my child.

My partner Nance is in San Francisco for work. My eldest son Dale is

in Santa Barbara for college, and we—my younger boy and I—are in Los Angeles, a metropolis of over twelve million people.

Outside it is autumn, the season of turning inward, of gray skies and dormant leaves.

“Sit down,” Zach implores. He slides to the floor and props his strong back against the washing machine. I join him, moving a mound of laundry out of the way.

He is taller than me at 5 feet 9 inches, with thick chestnut hair and gold-flecked eyes like mine. His face, forearms and calves—the parts his wetsuit doesn’t cover—are still tanned from a long, late summer. He is wearing a nylon t-shirt and football shorts. At close proximity he smells of Axe deodorant spray and garlic.

He had stayed over last night, rather than returning to his shared apartment in Westwood. I’d made him spaghetti with marinara sauce, prepared the way he likes it, with grated Parmesan. He ate every bit (which always pleases the Yiddish mama in me), then retired early to what used to be his room, to work on a mid-term paper for his history degree at UCLA. He was a little tired and withdrawn—which I had put down to the pressures of his studies, or girlfriend troubles—but other than that he appeared fine.

Fine. The very notion seems absurd now, as we sit side by side with his mouth against my ear.

“I’m scared the bad people will hear me talking to you.”

A strangled laugh rises in my throat, in part because his hot breath tickles, but mostly because it is my default reaction when I’m nervous. I don’t know what to say, what to do. There is no protocol for this new territory. I feel sweat break out on my palms and the back of my neck. When he lunges forward to grab his rucksack, I’m startled.

I watch him take his notebook and a marker pen from his bag. As he zips the compartment back up I see the tip of our large, serrated kitchen knife, the one that went missing last night. Adrenaline courses through my body. My son would never hurt me. I know he wouldn’t. It’s Zach, for God’s sake. My gentle, soft-spoken boy with an easy smile.

I sit on the floor in silence, my breathing shallow. He focuses intently on the task he has assigned himself. His wavy hair falls around his face as he leans forward to write:

Mike and Josh are not really my friends.

They are members of the Russian Mafia out to harm me.

UCLA is a network set up to spy on me.

Our computers and cell phones are bugged.

Everything I know about how to parent is tested in this moment. I place my hand on his forehead, which is warm but not overly so. “Stay here,” I instruct him firmly, as if he is a dog that might dash out the door. I grab the thermometer from the bathroom and place it under his tongue, praying that he has a fever-induced delirium that will pass with a dose of aspirin, but it reads 98.6. Normal. Dread swells in my chest.

“Come on, Zigs,” I encourage, helping him up. “I think you’re tired out.”

I guide him back to bed with my hand on his shoulder, the way I used to do when he was little. His old room, in the basement of our three-story house that clings to the Old Hollywood hillside, is a far cry from the council flat in East London where we used to live. It has always been a surreal pleasure to live here, but suddenly the steps are too many, the house too big, daybreak and Nance too far away.

I tuck him in, hoping he will go to sleep and wake up his old self—with the kind eyes and strong Jewish nose like mine, the boy who still belly-laughs his way through old *Simpsons* episodes, who loves to surf overhead waves at Malibu Beach, and can play anything on the piano by ear. The son I am so proud of.

My hope is futile. He can’t rest. Los Angeles has insomnia too; it is perma-young and edgy, a city on steroids. Police sirens drift up from the flatlands and the coyotes howl in response. Zach gets up and peeks out from under the blinds at the window. In the distance, news helicopters whirr above the Hollywood Walk of Fame for the debut of *Avatar*.

“See, I told you,” he whispers, so quietly that I have to strain to make out the words. “I’m under surveillance. They’re reading my mind. They’re coming for me.”

There is a hitch of pure terror in his voice that I haven’t heard since he was a child, when, after catching a few scenes of *Frankenstein* on television, he had had terrible nightmares. They seemed to stretch on for weeks, and I would wake up with him next to me in my bed. It is as if we have traveled back in time. His fear is all-consuming. He won’t let me leave his side.

It is only when our Bedlington terrier, Belle, settles at our feet and

Zach reaches out to touch her that I let out my breath. It is a good sign, finally—a boy and his dog. He had begged for her when he was eleven, paying her adoption fee from the sale of his Pokémon cards and never looking back. He was an earnest kid with Harry Potter glasses—and smart too, a chess whizz, when the rest of us didn't even know the rules. In my mind's eye I can still see the look on his face, that shy delight when he came home with the trophy.

I leave him with Belle while Suki, our other dog, follows me to the toilet. I pee and call Nance. Her voicemail kicks in. “Honey, it's me. I need to talk to you. It's urgent. There's something wrong with Zach.”

Zach knocks on the toilet door and my heart jolts. I flush the chain and try to squeeze the fear from my chest, straighten my mouth, relax my jaw where I hold the bulk of my tension. I wonder how much he heard. I don't want to do anything to worsen his distrust, to fuel any fear that we will join ranks, his two mothers, against him.

“Can you stay with me?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say. I follow him, holding my phone with a tense grip, checking the battery level surreptitiously and switching it to vibrate.

Zach crawls under his blankets and pulls them up over his face. I sit next to him, resting my hand on his shoulder, trying to soothe us both.

I stay until the sun begins to climb above the palm trees and the blue jays chirp as if everything is right with the world. My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's Nance. I move stealthily from the room to talk to her in private. I hear her getting ready for work. Nance is a commercial producer. Her day will be full of studio or location commotion, actors, video crews, camera equipment, and now this. She is not panicky by nature, and her steadfast, unruffled tone calms me.

“Maybe give it a bit longer,” she says. “He might just be having a bad trip.”

“But he's been here the whole time,” I say, as if bad trips only happen at raves and in the company of one's peers.

“Well, if he doesn't seem better by tonight,” Nance says, “then perhaps you should take him to the hospital, just to let them assess him.”

I hang up. My stomach is roiling. The day slows as I focus intently on Zach. He doesn't eat breakfast, or lunch, or dinner. He looks out of the basement windows onto the cul-de-sac as if he is expecting someone. He stares at himself in the mirror with a curiosity that is novel and perplexed. I ask him again if he has taken drugs, if he has a headache, if he fell in the

night, but he says no, and I believe him.

As the night closes in, I think about what Nance said. I feign conviction and tell Zach we need to go to the emergency room. He looks at me with wide eyes, scared and doubting, as if I've announced an imminent betrayal. I feel myself recoil. I'm his mum. But he nods and swings his legs out of bed. I shuffle him upstairs and into our Volvo, buckling him up in the front seat and activating the child-safety locks. Just in case. As we head west toward the ocean and the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, his eyes dart from billboards to people on the sidewalk to car license plates. I drive slowly, focusing on my breath.

"What's happening to me?" he says. "What did I do to make me a target like this?" I tell him he must be exhausted, maybe suffering the stress of exams, and that I hope they will give him something to help him sleep. I can't tell whom I'm trying hardest to reassure.

The emergency room is quiet, with just a handful of people dotted around on the vinyl seats. A television screen, the sound off, dances in a corner. We are ushered promptly into a private cubicle, temperature-controlled and sterile, where Zach is asked to don a blue gown and plastic ID bracelet, and to vacate to the bathroom so he can urinate in a specimen cup. Back in the cubicle, a nurse takes his vital signs. Pulse. Temperature. Blood pressure.

"All normal," she confirms.

"That's great, Zigs," I say.

But instead of being directed to another department for further tests, or to the pharmacy to pick up medication, we are asked to wait, which we do. Machines blink and bleep, and staff in pale-blue uniforms and sensible shoes race along the brightly lit corridors. The chaos that exists behind the calm façade of the reception is unsettling. It is everything that we don't want to see at such a fretful time: the skid of carts on linoleum, scurrying bodies, the clatter of clipboards, bright lights and hurried, half-caught conversations.

A nurse bustles in to ask about Zach's physical health, what medications he takes, whether he is allergic to anything. I think she asks him if he has eaten and drunk and slept, but I am distracted by a piece of blue tape on her nose that covers her piercing, and a band-aid on her arm, a tattoo leaking out around the edges.

She takes notes, flares her nostrils, and the tape crinkles. Then she leaves.

Zach wants to leave too. He has changed his mind. He shuts his eyes and cocks his head to one side, and I can tell he hears something I can't, senses danger heading toward us that I do not comprehend. I am aching for him to play by the rules, to appear good and sane enough to be sent home. I want to feel safe and comforted by the fact that we are in a hospital, a place with doctors and nurses. My mum brought me up to think that doctors were gods and nurses were angels, that they miraculously cured people. As children, my siblings and I were taken to the GP at the first sign of a snuffle or cough. I was given so much tetracycline for tonsillitis that it caused staining to my adult teeth when they came through, but mum—up until her last breath at just sixty-one—still trusted medical professionals. I want to believe she was right to have faith in them. Perhaps I can instill confidence in Zach this way too. We can find out what we need from the doctor and then get back on the road, homeward bound, where we belong.

I peek out at the other patients. Some of them are moaning, bandaged and bloodstained. I try to pass off my nagging doubt, the sense of wanting to flee the scene, my boy and me. Perhaps we could start over: more sleep, more bolognaise, more quiet time with the curtains drawn and Belle snuggled between us on the bed, the thing that soothes us, or at least used to, before today.

I look up to notice that we have been assigned a security guard, who is posted outside the room. Protocol, I tell myself.

After another round of questions and more monitoring of Zach's temperature and blood pressure, a female psychiatrist with kind brown eyes and a daisy-print dress asks to talk to Zach alone, then to me privately, and finally to both of us together. I recount the events of the last twenty-four hours, and before I've finished my last sentence, I am signing papers to admit him into the psychiatric ward for a seventy-two-hour hold. I realize how tightly I have been clinging on to the hope that somebody might offer us a concrete medical explanation so we can fix it. So we can fix him.

Zach's eyes flit left and right. He wants to know if his room will have a lock on it; his voice is urgent as he continues to insist that the mob are after him.

"Everything is going to be okay, Zach," I say, trying to wrap my arm around him like I did last night, though reaching him on the gurney is awkward. I notice the strip of pale flesh where his wristwatch has been removed. His glasses are gone, too, stuffed with his clothes into a clear plastic bag. He suddenly looks sicker than when we arrived. He squints at

me as I wave goodbye. I don't know how to leave him. Am I supposed to turn and walk out onto Westwood Plaza? Everything has shifted on its axis, and I can't undo it.

I drive home alone, slipping down the side streets of Hollywood and up to our hilltop. The city below is an orange shimmer of glass and steel skyscrapers. I park in the carport and stay there, too stunned to move. I cannot shake a vision of my boy being held down and injected with drugs that make him drool and shuffle. This thing has swallowed my son, locking him into, and me out of this city that seems suddenly hostile and foreign.

I make my way into the house and slump onto the bed. I feel something deflate in me, and I'm left with nothing but a few sad, shallow breaths.

PSYCHOSIS NOS

The first time I saw elephant seals I was happy. We all were, especially Zach.

It was our first Thanksgiving holiday, and Nance had suggested that we take the long way up to her childhood home in the San Francisco Bay Area to celebrate with her folks. The drive took us along Highway 1 through Big Sur, or “God’s country,” as it was called by the locals. This long strip of coastline is home to some of the deepest underwater canyons, the richest kelp forests and an abundance of marine mammals.

The farther north we went the more rugged the landscape became, and the boys, unperturbed by the swell, surfed at various spots along the way. We were a couple of miles north of San Simeon when I saw them from the bluffs above Piedras Blancas Beach. At first sight they looked like gray boulders strewn around the sand, perfectly still, big inanimate lumps of granite. But when I looked more carefully through Nance’s binoculars that I had strung around my neck, I spied them beneath the willow, under the beating-hot sun—elephant seals. Real live beasts, moving their flippers, digits and fingernails visible as they scratched their bellies and flicked sand over their backs. They were enormous, especially the males, as long as the rented SUV we were traveling in. I wavered between reverence and revulsion as I focused on the scarred, mottled chest-shields of the alpha males.

“Look, look!” I shouted to Nance and Dale and Zach, wanting to share this otherworldly scene of these prehistoric-looking animals. “I thought they were rocks.”

Afterward, when we were settled back in the car, warm and close to each other, and in motion, I realized the sheer size and spectacle of what I had just witnessed. Like the enormity of the seals’ bodies, it was almost too much to behold. I knew there and then that there was a wild magic

about these beasts, and the fact that they could haul out just a few feet from Highway 1.

Like their fellow Californian creatures the scrub-jay, the Channel Island fox and the bald eagle, these gargantuan animals had been hunted to near extinction. Their species had dwindled to a bottleneck. It was a miracle that they had survived and were now at healthy enough numbers that they could be taken off the endangered list and placed on the protected one.

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Lying in bed in our Hollywood home, I feel cold. I turn over, burrow under the quilt and start to cry at the memory of that day; my infatuation with Nance, with the land, and these animals. Before now, I had assumed, perhaps naively, that we had come through the worst: my mum's passing in 2004, too soon, too painful. The loss of Auntie Betty during that same wretched year.

Since then, a full five years on, we had survived an expensive bureaucratic process to get our green cards. The golden state is now our home. We belong, and have the papers to prove it. And yet, despite our affiliation to America, it is as if we don't fit so neatly anymore.

Until recently, on nights like this when the sky was clear, Zach journeyed with Dale to the Pacific Palisades on the West Side of Los Angeles. Complete with shortboards, wetsuits and all the energy of youth, they went surfing, bracing the wind and the swell of the currents. They wore neon-green glow sticks around their necks so they could watch out for each other after dusk.

Zach has good friends, steadfast ones of seven years whom he has planned to kayak with around the Channel Islands, to motorbike with through the desert. One of them has an RV. Another is building a light aircraft and has access to his father's small sailboat. The plans sound impressive, the kind of once-in-a-lifetime missions born out of privilege and vitality. I wonder what will happen from here on out, whether Zach will still be able to join them and do these things he has been looking forward to.

Everyone loves Zach, and the many strings he has to his bow. Before he left home to live on campus at UCLA he would entertain the hilltop neighbors by reading them pages from his novel-in-progress. This chatty, precocious teen of mine could be found playing with the dogs, or doing his homework so he could get the scores needed to be accepted to a top-tier university. It wasn't just Nance and I who recognized Zach's scholarly talents. He had been admitted into all kinds of clubs and advanced placement programs at high school, as well as Debate Society and Theater Studies. His brother Dale has his own strengths too. He's streetwise, a natural comedian, and a gifted singer-songwriter and guitarist. When Zach decided to pick up the guitar and teach himself how to play, I'd cringed a tad. "I wish he would just leave that one thing in Dale's corner," I'd told Nance.

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I look at my watch, the big face on the wide, brown leather strap that Nance got for me. I'm keeping track of the next seventy-two hours during which Zach will be kept in the psych ward for observation. In California this is known as a 5150 hold.

I am very much alive, still breathing in and out, but I can't quite fathom what to do with myself. Time stretches into the kind of void I have rarely experienced, aside from when mum died, or my boys were born. I call the hospital, who tell me that Zach is sleeping peacefully, but I'm unconvinced. His phone has been taken away. I have no way of checking in with him directly. I feel distrustful, suspicious. All the things that he has been detained for.

Sleeping peacefully is the kind of language that is reserved for post-surgery patients, people who are in terrible pain. I want to sleep peacefully too, to be knocked out, sedated, but even if I had the means, I know I need to be alert, ready for anything in case he needs me, in case of a bad reaction to the situation. I am the adult. I must be calm and in control.

I rub tiger balm into my neck. It makes my eyes water.

I imagine Zach in a single metal-frame bed. Again, I wonder if they've given him any drugs, and how he is feeling.

I will the hands on my watch to move faster, as if I am Uri Geller. As a

little girl, when my first wristwatch—a red Timex—started to slow, mum encouraged me to fetch it from my jewelry box, sit cross-legged in front of the TV and hold it out like a gift to the self-proclaimed psychic. Uri fixed it. He could bend metal too. He called it psychokinesis, and when under hypnosis he claimed that his power was given to him by aliens.

My watch today is quartz, like my old Timex, but it is heavy, and the suede underside of the strap makes my wrist sweat. I look again with much intent, but the hands don't move any quicker; they may have even slowed down. I don't think I believe in Uri Geller anymore. I don't know what I believe in right now.

Nance calls from the airport. She is taking the rest of the week off work and making her way back home.

“I am so grateful,” I tell her.

“Of course,” she says. “Of course.”

I enter the bathroom and fill the tub, more hot than cold, the way mum liked it. I miss her. I miss Zach. Each absence winds around the other, a tight plait of loss and grief that I can't untangle. Inching my body down into the old porcelain bath, my skin reddens in the heat. Free-floating soothes me. I have put on weight in recent months, but the water still lifts and lightens me. I think of the elephant-seal colony at Piedras Blancas, my special place.

I close my eyes in the steam. I hear the waves and the wind, and I see the outlines of the elephant seals that haul out at the beach. These marine mammals float and dive, but they also sink. Instruments have tracked their slow descent to depths of up to five thousand feet in waters darker than night and icy cold. They have adapted to be able to hold their breath for up to two hours and shunt their blood supply from their extremities to their vital organs, entering a state of rest that might be compared to sleep apnea, but they always surface in the end. Despite the risk of predators, they come up to the light in the shallows, to replenish oxygen, to breathe.

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After seventy-two hours in the psychiatric ward, Zach's assessment is over. He is going to be released. Nance is back, and she drives me to collect him. They cut off his wristband and hand him a clear plastic bag