

Dominik

“Dominik!” my mother calls for my brother from the living room. “Can you come here for a minute?”

“Why?” he shouts back over the thunderous sounds coming from his room.

“I want to show you something.”

“Yeah, wait a minute,” he shouts back.

Ten minutes later, my brother is still sitting in his tall, black, reclining office chair in front of the 21.5-inch widescreen monitor in his room. He is playing the World of Warcraft Online, a.k.a. WoW, a massive multi-player online role playing game (or MMORPG). The surface of the desk around his keyboard is damaged by the constant “engraving” done by my brother’s pen, waiting for the game to load. Individual orange pills, receipts, papers and pens, which he had taken apart, are scattered across the entire desk. His computer is hooked up to a 5.1 stereo system with a powerful subwoofer, amplifying the sounds of the battle he is currently fighting, which is why he can’t leave. “It’s real time. You can’t pause it,” he always says.

His bedroom is awkwardly stuck in time. Some of my possessions remain scattered around the room even five years after I moved out. My 2003 Ancient Egyptian wall calendar still hangs on the pale yellow wall and the top shelf of the wooden bookcase in the corner of the room still harbors my fake Ancient Egyptian canopic jar, which is now hidden behind a metal dagger and a plastic skull that my brother “painted” with intricate patterns using a ball-point pen. All three artifacts lie under a sheet of dust.

The shelves below are now overflowing with hundreds of issues of various magazines that my brother reads and has accumulated over time: REFLEX, the most controversial Czech news magazine; LEVEL and Score, both gamers’ magazines; and Dračí Doupě, a magazine about a Czech version of Dungeons & Dragons. Thrown into the mix are some of his school notebooks, or that’s what they are supposed to be anyway. What’s actually there are bent sheets of paper that barely hold together, covered with miniature, illegible handwriting.

But he doesn’t really need those notes, because all the information that’s on there is in his head, along with hundreds of pieces of “useless” trivia

acquired from the constant reading of magazines and political news comics. Not surprisingly, he scored in the top one percent of the standardized high school test, which placed him 31st out of 1,300 applicants on the preliminary admissions list for the Charles University Law School. Being able to defend his opinions and win most of arguments thanks to his immense knowledge base, I think law school will be a great fit for him once graduates from high school this June.

On the other side of the room, my old clothes rack still hangs from the ceiling, but my ballroom dresses and a couple of old dressy shirts are now hidden behind my brother's clothes, his favorite orange t-shirt with a blue head print of Miloš Kopecký, a Czech writer, among them. My brother doesn't have a lot of clothes. He only likes to wear brand names like Represent or Quiksilver and is quite content with fewer, but better quality, pieces.

Below the clothes rack, partially hidden behind the clothes, are some of his most prized possessions: the black 5150 snowboard, snowboard boots and a back brace. Snowboarding is his other favorite activity besides computer games. And just like with computer games, he's really good at it. He goes snowboarding either with his friends or my mom multiple times every winter to the Austrian Alps, getting better every time and more annoyed with those who can't keep up with his skill in flying down black-marked ski slopes.

My colorful flower photography still hangs below the queen-sized bed that is suspended from the ceiling on a yellow metal chain. The metal bed frame and the wooden ladder, however, are now covered with snowboarding stickers and worthless Magic the Gathering (or MTG) land cards: plains, islands, swamps, mountains and forests. The rest of the cards are now stored in a box on the bottom bookcase shelf, collecting dust. The collectible ones, some worth over \$50, are filed in the card portfolio that my brother had embellished by three famous artists who design the cards. I remember my brother begging my mom for money every week so that he could buy more booster packs. My mom always used to joke that if we ever go bankrupt, we'll sell the cards.

Across the bed is my old wooden dresser with the tall mirror above it, except now, instead of reflecting bottles of perfume and lotions, it reflects more piles of loose sheets of paper, textbooks, clothes and plastic bags. One of them holds over 30 loose packets of dark brown and orange pills. In any other 19-year-old boy's room, that bag would most likely signal drug abuse or possibly drug dealing. In my brother's room, it's a sad reality.

In November 2008, he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, an incurable autoimmune disorder where the body's immune system attacks its

own gastrointestinal tract, resulting in abdominal pains, loss of appetite, noticeable weight loss and possibly brain seizures. Losing close to 20 pounds since he was diagnosed, at 6'4", my brother is a stick, which he effortlessly hides behind loose clothes and pants. It's what everyone his age wears anyway.

Crohn's has also imposed some radical limits on my brother's diet; he can't eat any vegetables, fruits, nuts, fried foods or drink any alcohol. Some of these limits actually work for him just fine, since he never liked vegetables.

When he was little, he would always argue with my mom that whatever vegetable she wanted him to try doesn't taste good. My mom could never make him eat any. My grandma thinks it's because he ate too much when he was a baby, when my mom would just go to our garden and pick up whatever vegetable she'd find and mix it all together for baby food—she thinks he just got sick of it. Now, Crohn's provided the perfect excuse for my brother not to eat vegetables at all.

Dominik has been lucky that he hasn't experienced any of the more serious symptoms. He continues to snowboard, go to school and play computer games as usual. He says the only change is taking those brown and orange pills, which are antibiotics and corticoids preventing inflammation and, ultimately, his malnutrition. However, shortly after being diagnosed, he decided that the disease "wasn't that serious" and that he wasn't going to "stuff his body with shit like corticoids for nothing." He hadn't been taking his daily dose of 8-10 pills regularly. Sometimes he would just take them out and set them next to his keyboard. Sometimes he would throw them out in the trash.

My brother's slacker attitude has been omnipresent in most of his life, not just Crohn's. Fortunately for him, he has always been able to get away with it in most parts of his life thanks to his extraordinary memory, intelligence and gift for languages. Much to my mother's dismay, however, my brother's memory does not extend to typical daily activities such as eating, taking the pills, remembering to bring paperwork from school or knowing where his phone charger is. Hence the two trays with dirty glasses and empty plates that are usually on my brother's desk next to the keyboard—my mom brings the food to him to make sure he eats regularly.

However, since last Monday, things have started to change. After a regular doctor's visit, my brother found out he was in relapse. All this time, he thought he was getting better and that the disease "wasn't really doing anything" to him. After all, his life hasn't changed drastically. Now his daily dose consists of 15 aggressive corticoids, which make his stomach hurt to the point he can't move.

It's hard to talk to my brother about anything, let alone about him being in relapse. Last time we spoke, he would continue to deny losing any weight since the diagnosis. I think talking about it would mean to admit he is sick, but I know he is taking it more seriously now. He wakes up every morning to make breakfast to take his pills with. He is also more punctual about taking all of his doses on time, without my mom having to constantly remind him. I hope he will be able to continue to live his life without the disease taking away who he is: a passionate gamer, apt snowboarder and a future lawyer.