



disturbingly **normal**

Disturbingly Normal — Chapter Preview

Other Books by J.D. Lenzen

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preview*

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the barista

Ben Morris knows more than he wants to about Jonathan Normal. They met a year and a half ago at the Black Rose coffee shop in the Upper Haight District of San Francisco. Ben was a nightshift barista and Jonathan was one of his regular customers.

Jonathan had messy, short brown hair, pouty full lips and calm brown eyes that transcended his twenty-five years of life. No matter how bright the day, he wore an untucked black dress shirt, black jeans, and black boots. This shadowy attire, along with a persistent *please don't bother me* look on his face, pushed the eyes of most away, but not the eyes of Ben.

Jonathan usually arrived a few hours before the coffee shop closed. He'd order the same drink, a mint-chocolate mocha, and he'd sit at one of the two tables that provided a view of the frenzied hum of the Haight. On the nights Ben was busy with customers Jonathan would gaze out the window until closing and then leave without a word. But on nights when customers were scarce, Jonathan would break from his usual brooding silence and talk to Ben for hours—typically well past closing.

More truthfully, their talks amounted to stories Jonathan told and Ben listened to while he straightened up, wiped down tables, or cleaned the espresso machine. Nevertheless, Ben enjoyed his time with Jonathan and appreciated the company he provided.

Of all the stories Jonathan told, Ben's favorite was shared with him shortly after he and Jonathan first met. Customers were sparse that night and Ben was considering closing early when Jonathan, one of three customers he'd served all night, looked up from his coffee and started to speak.

"Did you hear about the man in upstate New York who found the skeleton of a woolly mammoth in his backyard pond?"

Ben finished stacking the dishes he was holding, looked over at Jonathan, and smiled. "No, I didn't."

Jonathan took a sip of his coffee. "Scientists think it got stuck in the pond's mud some fourteen thousand years ago."

Ben circled out from behind the service counter, walked over to a chair near Jonathan, and sat down. "Where did you hear that?"

"I listen to NPR while I work," Jonathan said as he took another sip of his coffee. "The story came on during one of the news breaks."

Partly because he was curious and partly because he wanted to encourage more conversation, Ben asked Jonathan where he worked.

Jonathan looked down at his cup. "I don't like talking about work. I thought I mentioned that."

He had mentioned that. But, at the time, Ben had thought it was on account he'd had an especially bad day at work, not because he was establishing a conversational guideline. Nevertheless, he apologized for forgetting and awkwardly attempted to redirect the conversation by asking Jonathan if *he'd* ever been stuck in the mud.

A faint smile grew on Jonathan's face. "Yeah, I've been stuck in the mud."

Ben smiled. "Tell me about it."

Jonathan slipped his left hand into his left front pant pocket, pulled out a pocket watch, and looked at the face. "It's kind of a long story."

Ben scanned the coffee shop, "Everyone and their mother's decided to boycott the consumption of coffee tonight. I've got the time."

Jonathan leaned forward in his seat. "One summer, when I was a kid, my best friend Joe and I decided to walk across a storm channel near my house—we were about eight at the time. It was a dry summer that year, and the water in the channel, which usually stretched the width of a football field, was reduced to the width of a four-lane street. So, we thought we'd get our shoes wet, at worst, no big deal. We were way wrong.

"Each step Joe and I took toward the opposite end of the channel sank us deeper into mud. Joe was afraid he'd get stuck, so he turned back. But I pressed on, rationalizing I was already a mess, so I might as well go for it.

Jonathan took a breath. "Before I knew it, the channel mud was up to my calves, and then my

knees. From there I just started sinking, until it was finally up to my waist, and I was officially stuck.

“By this time, Joe was standing safely on the bank, and although he wanted to help me out, we both knew there wasn’t much he could do. So, I told him to run to my house and get my dad.

“As I watched Joe scurry up and over the bank of the channel, I figured he’d return with my dad, I’d get pulled out of the mud, and that would be that. But while my dad was rummaging through our garage looking for rope, he told my mom what’d happened. My mom has a tendency to overreact. So when Melissa Fischer, our next-door neighbor’s daughter, overheard my mom’s wailing fears, she ran and called her best friend, Jessica. Melissa told Jessica something to the effect that I was ‘moments away from suffocating in the mud of the channel.’ Jessica called her friends, who all called their friends, and so on and so forth. Until, forty-five minutes from the time Joe ran to get my dad, fifty-two bystanders, three police cars, a fire engine, an ambulance, and a local news crew were all scattered along the bank of the storm channel waiting to see if the ‘mud boy’ was gonna be all right.”

“That’s crazy!” Ben said.

“That’s not even the worst of it... Thinking he’d pull me out, my dad took the rope he’d brought back from our house, held on to one end, and tossed the other out to me. Then he hollered out instructions for a bowline and told me to tie the rope around my waist. When I was done tying, my dad started pulling—I didn’t budge an inch. So he got a bunch of guys from the crowd to help him out. This time, I not

only didn't budge, the rope cinched so tight I could barely breathe.

"My dad thinks this is on account I accidentally tied a slipknot instead of a bowline, but I'm pretty sure I tied it right.

"Anyway, a few moments later, while I was adjusting the rope around my waist, I heard someone call out that they had a solution. It was the voice of a policeman, and silence swept across the crowd as he spoke. 'If the boy could get his bowline tied correctly,' the policeman said indignantly, 'I could tie the other end of the rope to the bumper of my car and we could inch him out.'

"When I heard mumbled agreement from the crowd I nearly wet my shorts. Thankfully, my dad had more sense. 'Inch my boy out with your patrol car?' he questioned. 'Are you nuts? He nearly got cut in half when we just had men pulling on him!' Then, thank God, Patrick Moore spoke up.

"Mr. Moore was the owner of Moore's Lumber Yard and a neighborhood friend of my dad. His thought, tile the mud like you would a floor. 'If we lined up the tiles properly,' Mr. Moore said, 'a person could get close enough to dig out some of that mud. After that, someone could pull him straight up and out.'

"It was a brilliant idea, and it didn't involve pain, suffering, or accidental dismemberment—plusses for me.

"Thirty minutes later, a fireman was standing over me, shoveling out the mud that was pressing against my body. Once he'd created a gap, the fireman bent down and cupped his hands underneath

my armpits. Then he counted to three and began to pull.

“By this time, I’d been stuck in the mud for a little over two hours, during which time I’d only been able to move my arms, shoulders, and head. So, it felt good to see freedom in sight. But just as I was starting to smile, I felt my shoes and socks peel off my feet. When I mentioned this fact to the fireman, he paused and resentfully asked, ‘Do you want to get out of this mud or not?’ I told him I did, and he heaved one more time. With a *harrumph*, I was freed, but completely naked from the waist down—my shoes, socks, underwear, and shorts, all sacrificed to the mud beneath me.

“As soon as the fireman let go of me, I tried to stretch my t-shirt down to cover myself. But, I couldn’t get it to stretch much farther than my waist. So, in a fit of pure desperation, I started to run.

“I ran over the plywood tiles, maneuvered around the crowds of people, jetted up and over the channel and down the streets that led to my house. I ran so fast and so hard that by the time I reached my driveway, I dropped from exhaustion. My parents arrived home a short time later, and were thankfully sympathetic to my embarrassment. Unfortunately, the news crew that covered the incident wasn’t.

“Although they assured me and my parents they wouldn’t, and in fact didn’t, air their tape of my uncovered bottom, they did make repeated mention of it and had an on-air laugh at my expense.”

That was one of Jonathan’s earlier stories. The others that came before, and most of the ones that

came after, were similar only in that they all revolved around the memory of an experience he'd once had. Still, not all his stories were light-hearted ones. Over time, he'd reflect upon, and occasionally share, darker moments from his life. The most unnerving of which was shared with Ben the last time the two spoke.

It was a Friday night, and the Black Rose had been closed for nearly an hour. Ben had just finished mopping up and was about to lock up and leave when he heard someone pounding on the front window.

A closer look revealed it was Jonathan. He looked worn out and tired, and the sockets of his eyes were red, like he'd been crying and then wiped them dry with his knuckles.

"Can we talk?" Jonathan called out from the other side of the window.

"Why?" Ben asked.

Jonathan reached out a hand and pressed his palm against the glass. "Because you listen..."

Ben was genuinely concerned by Jonathan's distressed look, but he'd also just ended a ten-hour shift and hadn't eaten a thing all day. So he asked Jonathan if he'd be up for talking over food.

"No problem," Jonathan replied. "I'm kind of hungry myself."

Ben took a second look at Jonathan. There was intensity in his eyes he hadn't seen before, a fire that surprised him. "Meet me at Sparky's."

Sparky's was one of a handful of 24-hour diners in the city. Subsequently, it was something of a

refuge for club-goers, tweakers, insomniacs, and night-shifters looking for an after-hour meal.

Although Jonathan had left for Sparky's before Ben had, Ben was parked and standing at the entrance before him. The reason for this was simple; Jonathan drove a car and Ben drove a scooter. Finding a parking space for a car in San Francisco isn't impossible, but it takes time. Ben, on the other hand, could find a parking spot for his Vespa PX just about anywhere.

As soon as Ben saw Jonathan walking toward him, the hostess called out, "Ben, table for two!"

"Good timing," Ben said as Jonathan walked up. "Our table's ready."

Jonathan didn't look pleased.

Ben walked through the front door, following behind the hostess.

Jonathan slid up beside him and sighed. "I really need to talk to you."

Ben turned and looked at Jonathan. "We'll talk."

"Alone, away from here..."

The hostess pointed at a table and Ben sat down. "I thought you said you were hungry?"

Jonathan remained standing. "I lied."

Irritated by Jonathan's fickle disposition, and a bit testy on account of his hunger, Ben snapped back, "Well, I didn't! So if you want to talk to me, you're gonna have to do it while you watch me eat."

Jonathan sighed and sat down across from Ben. "All right."

A few moments later, the waiter arrived. He was wearing bright red glitter lipstick, blue eye shadow, a pink tutu, and a circa-1979 Shaun Cassidy and Parker Stevenson *Hardy Boys Mysteries* t-shirt. Ben and Jonathan looked at each other and smiled.

After taking Ben's order for a bowl of mashed potatoes with gravy, chili-cheese fries, two slices of toasted sourdough bread, and a Coke, the waiter asked Jonathan what he'd like.

Before answering, Jonathan locked eyes with Ben and asked, "Are you actually planning to eat all that?"

"Of course," Ben replied indignantly. "Why?"

Jonathan sat back. "Forget I asked." He handed the waiter his menu. "I'll have a Coke."

Once the waiter was gone, Ben decided to capitalize on Jonathan's and his shared smile by asking him if he'd ever seen a waiter as decked out as theirs was.

Jonathan ignored Ben's question. "Can we talk now?"

Ben huffed. "Sure."

"Something happened today. Something horrible, that I don't remember, but I'm pretty sure I did."

"Something happened where?"

Jonathan sighed. "At work."

Ben leaned forward in his seat. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought you don't like to talk about work?"

"Forget about that," Jonathan said. "There's something I need to get off my chest. Something I'm hoping you can help me understand."

By this point, Ben didn't care why Jonathan was backpedaling on the subject of his job. He was more curious what had gotten him so worked up. So he sat back and crossed his arms. "I'm listening."

Jonathan leaned forward and whispered, "I'm a mortuary driver."

Ben turned an ear toward Jonathan. "A what?"

Jonathan waited for a customer to pass by the table and then continued. "I pick up human remains for a mortuary in Oakland."

"Okay."

Jonathan scowled. "I'm not a freak!"

"Relax," Ben said. "I don't think you're a freak. What mortuary do you work for?"

"Christian-Collins. At least I did, until today."

"You were fired?"

"Yeah."

"Did they have a reason?"

Jonathan picked the salt shaker up off the table and started toying with it. "They had a reason."

"What was it?"

Jonathan set the shaker down and wiped his hands over his face. "This afternoon, I picked up a man named Robert Ray Lewis. He died of cancer at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland. A doctor supervised his death, so all his paperwork was in order." Jonathan clasped his hands in front of him and looked down at the table. "All I had to do was drive him four blocks. Four stupid blocks... But I slipped into a blur."

"A what?"

Jonathan's eyes started to tear up. "I blacked out. Things got hazy, I don't know..."

Sympathetic to Jonathan's tears, Ben reached out and gripped one of his hands.

Jonathan looked up and over Ben's shoulder and then pulled his hand away.

Ben looked back and saw their waiter.

"Two Cokes," the waiter said as he set down their drinks.

"Thanks," Ben said as the waiter walked off.

Jonathan took a breath and continued. "When I came to again, I was in the Berkeley hills, near Tilden Park. The hearse was parked on the side of the road, and I was standing outside the driver side door."

"Let me get this straight. You blacked out and woke up standing?"

"Yeah."

"That's odd."

Jonathan looked at Ben flatly, "It gets worse."

Ben swallowed. "Go on."

"I tried to open the door, but it was locked. So I reached into my pockets to see if I had the keys." Jonathan paused and took a slow, deep breath. "I found a credit card receipt from Big 5 Sporting Goods in my right pocket. The time on the receipt was two-twelve p.m., an hour after the pickup, and the signature on it was mine."

"What was the receipt for?"

"An aluminum baseball bat."

"And you don't remember buying it?"

Jonathan cleared his throat. "No."

Ben was starting to get uncomfortable. "I'm sure there's a legitimate reason for all this. One you can look into and get taken care of." He thought for a

moment. “Maybe you have walking narcolepsy or something?”

Jonathan grimaced. “There’s more.”

Ben wiped a hand over his mouth.

“When I circled around the back of the hearse, I found the back door open and Robert Ray Lewis’s body sprawled out on the ground.”

Ben tensed.

“His body was bludgeoned and there was a blood-stained aluminum baseball bat lying next to him on the ground.”

Ben studied Jonathan’s face. “Are you fucking with me?”

“No.”

“Then why are you telling me this?”

Jonathan pursed his lips. “I have no one else to talk to.”

Ben was unsettled by Jonathan’s confession and pretty much wanted to get the hell out of Sparky’s and away from the conversation. But at the same time, he didn’t want to agitate him further. So he suggested that he get his food to go, so they could continue their conversation outside. From there, Ben figured, he’d politely excuse himself.

“I feel bad,” Jonathan said. “I didn’t mean to spoil your night.”

“Really, it’s cool,” Ben replied nervously. “Just let me settle the bill and get my things bagged up. I’ll walk you to your car. We can talk more on the way. Okay?”

Jonathan sighed. “Okay... But, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna wait outside for you.”

Ben mustered up the most convincing smile he could. “No problem.”

After paying the bill and leaving a tip for the waiter, Ben walked outside. A few steps from the door, Jonathan was hugging an attractive black girl good-bye. She had long, pencil-thick braids that flowed down over her back, high cheekbones, and dark catlike eyes. And she seemed to know Jonathan well. After the girl walked away, Ben walked up to Jonathan. “A friend?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Jonathan replied as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “What do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ben said. “You only had a Coke. I covered it.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s her name?”

“Tonya,” Jonathan said in a soft voice.

“Who is she?”

“A friend... She’s on her way home from a party.”

“She’s beautiful,” Ben commented.

Jonathan looked off in the direction Tonya walked. She looked back and he waved at her. “In more ways than you could ever imagine.”

The sincerity in Jonathan’s voice intrigued Ben, stalling his planned exit long enough for Jonathan to say, “My car’s parked a block down the street. If you’re still up for talking?”

“I am,” Ben replied, surprised by his response.

As Ben walked beside Jonathan, his nerves started to get the best of him—until, underneath a

street lamp, less than a block from Sparky's, he stopped. "This is as far as I go," he said.

"Something wrong?"

"I like you, Jonathan. Really, I do. But what you just told me was pretty unsettling." Ben pursed his lips. "See, I don't really know you. You're one of my customers, and I like you and all, but—"

"I could be some kind of freak," Jonathan interjected.

Ben stepped back. "I'm sorry, but what am I supposed to think?"

Jonathan looked down, ran his fingers through his hair, and started to cry. "I don't know!"

Ben took a breath. "Were you high?"

Jonathan looked up. "Was I what?"

"High," Ben repeated.

"No, I wasn't high!" Jonathan snapped back. He shook his head and started walking away.

A surge of pity rose within Ben. "Okay, then," he called out. "Have you ever done this before?"

Just outside the illumination of the street lamp, Jonathan stopped walking and turned around. His face was streaked with tears. "No!"

"Then why this unconscious urge to beat the body of this man named—" Ben paused to think.

Jonathan sniffled. "Robert Ray Lewis. And, I don't know!"

Ben walked up to Jonathan. "You said you slipped into a blur."

Jonathan wiped his eyes with the palms of his hands. "So?"

"Do you remember thinking or feeling anything?"

Jonathan looked down, reached up with one hand, and started scratching the front of his neck. “Hate,” he said. “I remember feeling hate.”

Ben felt a lump in his throat. “Was Robert Ray Lewis black?”

Jonathan stopped scratching, looked up and locked eyes with Ben. “Yeah, he was black, why?”

“Was it a racial thing?”

“That’s what Mr. Pestana asked.”

“Who’s Mr. Pestana?”

“My boss.”

Ben was stunned. “Your boss knows about this?”

“Why do you think I was fired?”

“Is he pressing charges?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes. “He won’t press charges.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“The press would kill business. Besides, Mr. Pestana told me he wouldn’t.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“At the mortuary...after I put the body back into the hearse, I found the keys dangling off the back lock. So I drove to the mortuary and told Mr. Pestana everything I just told you.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said he’d repair the body, make it look like nothing happened, and that he wouldn’t press charges.”

“That’s it?”

Jonathan paused as if in thought. “He also said I was fired and that if I told anyone what I did, he’d have me arrested.”

“But you told me.”

“I had to tell someone!”

Ben flinched.

Jonathan grimaced. “What do you think I should do?”

“You should thank your lucky stars you’re not going to jail!” Ben snapped. “That’s what you should do.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I!”

Jonathan turned away from Ben and walked to his car.

Another surge of pity rose within Ben. “When was the last time you took a vacation?”

“Never,” Jonathan said, yanking open the driver side door.

“Well, maybe it’s time you took one,” Ben said. “Get away for a while. The rest might help you make sense of what happened.”

Jonathan looked back at Ben. “I’ve always wanted to take a road trip up the coast, visit old friends, maybe see Canada.”

Ben’s face softened. “Then I say do it.”

For a moment it looked as if Jonathan was going to say something else. Instead, he got into the car and started it up. He rolled down the window and called out, “Thanks.”

“For what?” Ben asked.

“For listening.”

Ben smiled. “Take care of yourself Jonathan.”

“I will,” Jonathan replied, and then sped off down the street, out of sight and out of Ben’s life.