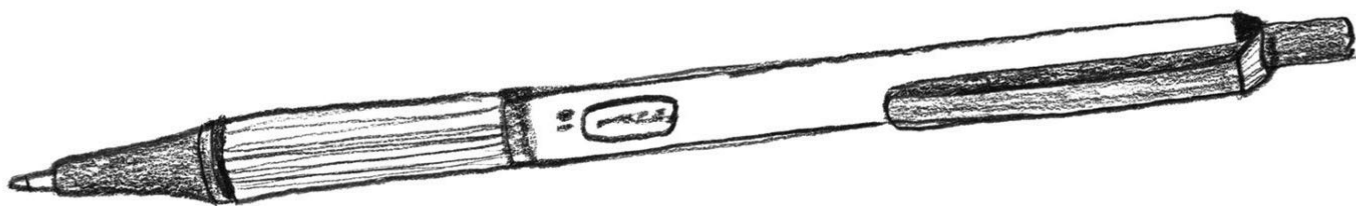


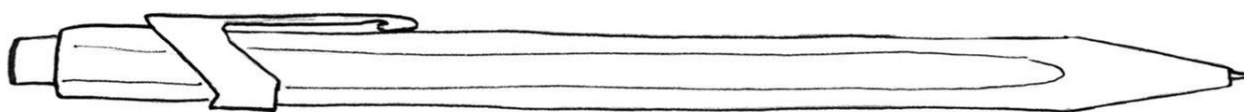
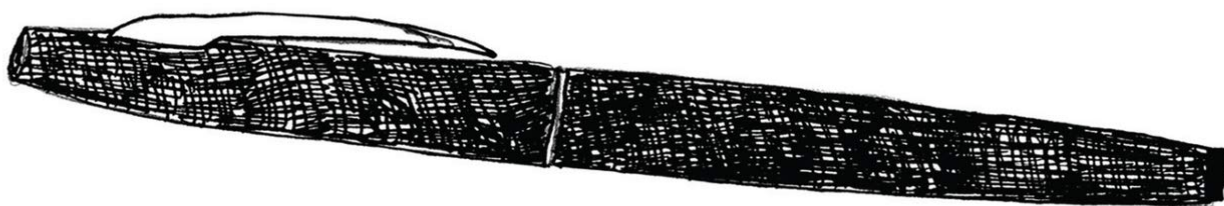
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SUICIDE NOTES



a novel

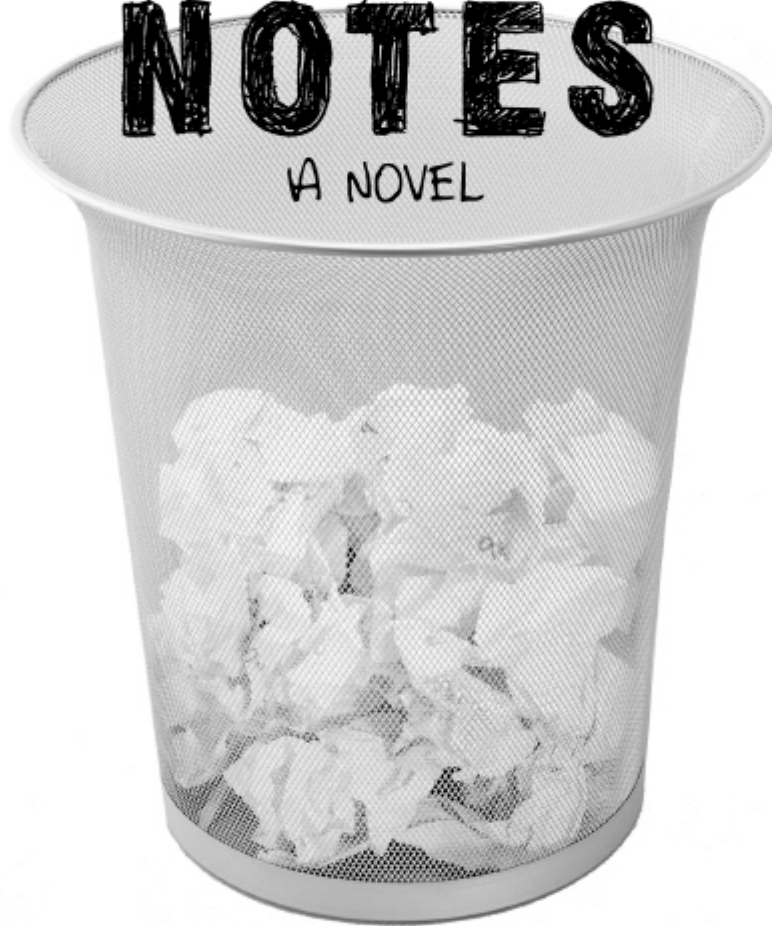


MICHAEL THOMAS FORD

michael thomas ford

SUICIDE NOTES

A NOVEL



 HarperCollins e-books

For Abby McAden,
who told me to write it

Lexa Hillyer,
who made it better

and Sarah Sevier,
who saw it through

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Also by Michael Thomas Ford

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About the Publisher

“You may think you’re fine, but you’re not. If you don’t want to talk about it right now, that’s your decision. You have forty-three more days to talk about it. Do you have any more questions?”

All I could do was sit there for a minute or two, watching him watch me. “What do you mean I have forty-three more days?” I asked him finally.

“You’re in a forty-five day program,” he told me. “You’ve been more or less awake for two days, counting today, which leaves you with forty-three more to go.”

“What kind of program?” I said.

“To determine the cause of your distress and work on your healing process,” he told me like he was reading a brochure. “You’ll participate in individual counseling sessions with me and in group counseling with some of the other patients.”

“Other patients?” I said. “What other patients?”

“Other young people,” Cat Poop told me. “You’ll meet some of them tomorrow.”

“Why?” I asked. “Are we having a sing-along?”

Day 01

I read somewhere that when astronauts come back to Earth after floating around in space they get sick to their stomachs because the air here smells like rotting meat to them. The rest of us don't notice the stink because we breathe it every day and to us it smells normal, but really the air is filled with all kinds of pollutants and chemicals and junk that we put into it. Then we spray other crap around to try and make it smell better, like the whole planet is someone's old car and we've hung this big pine-scented air freshener from the rearview mirror.

I feel like those astronauts right now. For a while I was floating around in space breathing crystal-pure oxygen and talking to the Man in the Moon. Then suddenly everything changed and I was falling through the stars. I used to wonder what it would be like to be a meteor. Now I know. You fall and fall and fall, and then you're surrounded by clouds and your whole body tingles as it starts to burn up from the entry into the atmosphere. But you're falling so fast that it burns only for a second, and then the ocean comes rushing up at you and you laugh and laugh, until the water closes over your head and you're sinking. Then you know you're safe—you've survived the fall—and as you come back to the surface you blow millions of bubbles into the blue-green water.

Only then your head breaks through the waves and you suck in great breaths of stinking air and you want to die, like babies when they come out of their mothers and find out that they should have stayed inside where they were safe. That's where I am now, floating in the ocean like a piece of space junk and trying not to throw up every time I breathe.

I'm not really in the ocean, though. I'm in the hospital. They say they brought me here last night, but I was totally out of it and don't remember anything. Actually, what I heard someone say was that I was kind of dead. Pretty close to dead, anyway.

I really do think I was flying around in space, though. At least for a little while. I remember thinking that I'd finally find out whether anyone lives on Mars or not. Then it was like someone grabbed me by the foot and yanked me down, back toward Earth. I remember screaming that I didn't want to go, but since you can't make noise in space, my voice was just kind of eaten up.

Now that I know where I am, I'm not so sure I wouldn't be better off just being dead.

And maybe I *am* dead. I mean, it does kind of feel like Hell around here. I'm in this room with people checking in on me every five seconds. And by people I mean nurses, and in particular Nurse Goody. Can you believe that? Her name is actually Nurse Goody. And she is, too. Good, I mean. She's always smiling and asking me if she can get me anything. It's really annoying,

because all I *want* is to be left alone, and that's the last thing they seem to do here. So many people run in and out of this room, I feel like a tourist attraction. I bet Nurse Goody is standing outside the door selling tickets, like those guys at carnivals who try to get people to pay to see the freak show. Barkers, I think they're called. That's what Nurse Goody is, a barker. She stands outside my door and barks.

But it's not like there's anything interesting in here. No television. No roommate (which actually, now that I think about it, is probably a good thing). Not even any magazines or books. Just me in bed looking out the window, which is the kind with wire running through the glass so you can't break it and jump out. The paint around the windows is all chipped, like maybe someone who was in here before me *tried* to break the window, then decided to claw their way out instead.

Now that I look at it, the whole room is kind of old-looking. The walls are this dirty white color, and there are some cracks in the plaster, and a weird brown spot on the ceiling that looks like a face. The Devil's face, maybe. Because, like I said, I think I might be in Hell. It would make sense that he would be watching me. Him and Nurse Goody are watching me. Good and Evil.

That's funny. Good and Evil. Maybe I'm not in Hell. Maybe I'm in that in-between place. What do they call it? Limbo. Where all the dead people go who don't have a "go directly to Heaven or Hell" card. Dead babies go there, too, I think. People no one knows what to do with, and dead babies. My kind of people.

Maybe I'm in Limbo, and the Devil and Goody are fighting over me. Or waiting for me to make up my mind where I want to go. What would I pick, Heaven or Hell? That's a good question. Seriously, I think I would pick Hell. The people there would probably be more interesting.

Come to think of it, it really is hot as Hell in here. There's a radiator under the window, the big old metal kind that shakes whenever water goes through it. I guess it's been working overtime. I swear, this place must be eleventy years old. It's like any minute now the whole building is going to fall apart. At least then I wouldn't be here.

It's raining, and the only thing I can see out the window is part of a forest. Since it's winter, though, it looks less like a forest and more like a bunch of skeletons holding their hands up to the sky. The rain is running down the glass, making it look like the skeletons are under water. Drowning. Although if they're skeletons, wouldn't they already be dead? So maybe they're just swimming. Anyway, the skeleton trees are kind of freaking me out. It's looking more and more like this really is Hell. Maybe I should tell Goody she's in the wrong place.

I'm really tired. The radiator is rattling, it's hot in here, and my head hurts. I keep looking up at the Devil's face, and I think he's laughing at me. I sort of

wish Goody would come in and make him shut up. Maybe she's given up on me.

I know they're hoping I'll say something about why I did what I did. So for the record: I just felt like it.

Day 02

This just gets better and better.

It turns out I really *am* in the hospital. Not Limbo. I'm pretty sure that it *is* Hell. Because I'm not just in the hospital. I'm in the mental ward. You know, where they keep the people who have sixteen imaginary friends living in their heads and can't stop picking invisible bugs off their bodies. Whackos. Nut-jobs. Total losers.

I'm not crazy. I don't see what the big deal is about what happened. But apparently someone *does* think it's a big deal because here I am. I bet it was my mother. She always overreacts.

They weren't going to tell me—you know, about the mental ward thing—but I found out when Goody left my chart next to the bed while she went to get something at the desk. Someone should tell her that you really shouldn't leave something like that lying around if you don't want someone to look at it.

Anyway, I just happened to pick up the chart, because that's what I do when someone leaves something around and I want to know what it is, and right there on the top of the first page it said psychiatric ward. At first I figured it was someone else's file, but then I saw my name. Let me tell you something, seeing your name and psychiatric ward on the same piece of paper isn't the best way to start your day.

When Goody came back she saw me looking at the file and the smile plastered to her face finally disappeared. "You're not supposed to be looking at that," she said, like I didn't know and would apologize.

"This is a psych ward?" I said, trying to read as much as I could before she grabbed the folder, which she did about two seconds later.

"It's time for your medication," she said.

"Uh-uh," I told her. "Not until someone tells me why I'm here."

"I think you know why you're here," she said, giving me that look people give you when they know *you* know what they mean.

"I'm not crazy," I said.

"Nobody said you were crazy," said Goody, her smile returning. Suddenly she was all happy again, like there'd been a momentary blackout in her reception and now we'd returned to the regularly scheduled program.

"That file does," I shot back. "It says it in big letters."

"Take your pill," she said, ignoring me. "You'll feel better."

"No," I told her. "I don't even know what it is."

Goody smiled, which was starting to get on my nerves. "It's a sedative," she said.

"So you're drugging me?" I said. "Why? What the hell is going on here?"

Goody took the paper cup she was holding out to me and put it back on the tray by my bed. "I think maybe you should talk to Dr. Katzrupus."

"Catwhatsis?" I asked her. "Cat Poopus? What kind of name is that?"

"Katzrupus," she said again. "I'll get him."

She disappeared, taking my file with her, which she totally should have done the first time, because then we wouldn't have had this problem. At least not right now. After she left, I stared at the cup with the pill in it. It was a small red pill, round like a ladybug. I almost took it, just to see what it would do, but I didn't want Goody to think I thought I needed it or anything, which I don't.

Goody came back a minute later with some guy. He was short, with really wild black hair that was about three weeks past needing to be cut, and he looked like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days either. He seemed way too young to be a doctor, and at first I thought he was some kind of student doctor or something, like I didn't even rate a real one.

"I'm Dr. Katzrupus," he said, holding out his hand.

"Why am I in the nuthouse?" I asked him, staring at his hand without shaking it.

"You're not in a nuthouse," he said, taking his hand back and pushing his glasses up his nose. "You're in a hospital."

"Right," I said. "The nut ward in a hospital."

"It's a *psychiatric* ward," he said. "And you're in it because we're concerned that something might be bothering you." He spoke in this really calm and casual way, as if he was telling you what he had for dinner. For some reason, that really bugged me.

"Something might be bothering me," I repeated, mimicking his voice. Then I laughed. "Why would something be bothering me?"

Cat Poop got this weird look on his face, like he didn't know what to say. I just kept staring at him.

"Are my parents around here somewhere?" I asked. "'Cause if they are, I'd really like to go home now."

"We need to run a few tests," he said. "And, no, your parents aren't here."

I thought it was kind of weird that my parents weren't there, and I wanted to ask where they were instead of being with their kid in the hospital, but I didn't. "I'm not so good at tests," I said instead. "Especially pop quizzes. Could I maybe have some study time first? I wouldn't want to bring the curve down for the whole class or anything."

He looked at me for a second. Then he said, "I'll see you later this afternoon."

After he left Goody came back with this other guy who I swear to God was a vampire. He took what seemed like three gallons of blood out of me, test tube after test tube of it. After the fourth one I started to feel really sick.

Finally, the Human Leech and Goody went away with his tray of tubes and a woman came in. "I'm Miss Pinch," she said. I swear. I'm not making it up. I don't know what it is with the names around here. I'm not sure this isn't all a

dream, because in the real world people just aren't named things like Nurse Goody and Miss Pinch and Dr. Cat Poop.

"I need to ask you a few questions," Miss Pinch told me, pulling a chair up beside my bed.

Turns out that was the understatement of the year, unless to you "a few" means eight thousand and sixty-two.

"Have you ever taken Ecstasy?" Miss Pinch asked me, smiling and cocking her head like a bird. An irritating, nosy little bird.

"No," I told her, and she made a check mark on the folder she was holding.

"Methamphetamine?" she said. When I didn't answer right away she added, "Crystal? Ice? Tina?"

"I know what it is," I told her. "And no, I've never taken it."

She made another mark. And she kept making marks after every question and answer. Cocaine? No. Check. Alcohol? No. Check. Marijuana, GHB, snappers? No, no, no. Check, check, check.

I kept answering no to everything, because I really haven't ever done drugs, and she kept looking at me like maybe I was lying just to get her out of there. So finally I said that yes, okay, I'd smoked pot a few times, and that seemed to make her happy. Like it's not possible that there's a kid on this planet who hasn't smoked pot. Moron.

"How about glue?" she asked me.

I nodded, and she lit up like a Christmas tree. At least until I said, "I used to eat paste. In kindergarten. Bad habit. I totally gave it up, though. I swear. It didn't mix with the apple juice so well."

I have to say, I was a little disappointed that she wasn't madder than she was. Maybe talking to crazy people all the time makes you kind of immune to it. She just kept asking and checking. After we went through every drug known to science, Pinch said, "Now let's talk about sexual activity."

"Let's not," I said, giving her the same big smile she was giving me.

"Have you ever—" she started to say.

"Seriously," I said, interrupting her. "Let's not. It's none of your damn business."

"I'm only trying to help you," she said, still smiling.

"Well, you're not," I informed her. "You're just pissing me off. Now go away."

She stared at me.

"Seriously," I said. "Get out of here. There's nothing wrong with me. I answered your stupid questions about the drugs, and I'm not telling you anything else because there's nothing else you need to know. So either go away or else sit there while I take a nap, because this is the last thing I'm saying to you."

She snapped her file shut and stood up. "I'll just get the doctor," she said.

That seems to be what they do around here when you say no to them, like the doctors are the National Guard or something. So once again I got a visit

from good old Cat Poop. This time he shut the door so that we were alone. I pictured Goody Two-shoes and Pinchface standing outside, pressing their ears to the door to try and hear what the doctor was saying.

“You’re not making this very easy,” he said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I guess my kindergarten teacher was right when she said I don’t play well with others.”

“We want to help you.”

“You know, everyone keeps saying that,” I told him. “But I have to tell you, I’m starting to think you don’t. Because if you did, you’d let me out of here. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“There’s evidence to the contrary,” said Cat Poop.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Really. Do you want me to sign something saying that? Then will you let me go home?”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option,” he said.

“What about my parents?” I asked him. “Where are they? Tell them I want to go home now.”

“Your parents agree that you need to spend some time here,” he answered.

“You can’t keep me here against my will,” I informed him. “In case you don’t know, this is the land of the *free*. People have rights. I have the right to free speech, and to bear arms, and to not be locked up in a nuthouse!” I knew what I was talking about. I mean, I’ve read the Constitution. In sixth grade, and I don’t remember exactly what it said. But still.

Cat Poop looked at me for a moment, then said really calmly, “You’re in a psychiatric ward because you attempted to commit suicide. You may think you’re fine, but you’re not. If you don’t want to talk about it right now, that’s your decision. You have forty-three more days to talk about it. Do you have any more questions?”

All I could do was sit there for a minute or two, watching him watch me. “What do you mean I have forty-three more days?” I asked him finally.

“You’re in a forty-five-day program,” he told me. “You’ve been more or less awake for two days, counting today, which leaves you with forty-three more to go.”

“What kind of program?” I said.

“To determine the cause of your distress and work on your healing process,” he told me like he was reading a brochure. “You’ll participate in individual counseling sessions with me and in group counseling with some of the other patients.”

“Other patients?” I said. “What other patients?”

“Other young people,” Cat Poop told me. “You’ll meet some of them tomorrow.”

“Why?” I asked. “Are we having a sing-along?”

“If you want to,” he said. “But usually the patients just sit in a circle and look at each other until someone decides to talk.”

“I don’t have anything to talk about,” I informed him.

“Then you have forty-three days of staring to look forward to,” he said. “Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?”

“How about the environment?” I suggested. “Maybe the effects of greenhouse gases on the Amazon rain forests? Or what will happen when the polar ice cap melts? Did you know all the polar bears are drowning because they have nothing to sit on?”

“Perhaps another time,” he said. “I have rounds to make. We’ll hold off on the rest of your evaluation until you’re in a more cooperative mood.”

“Good luck with that one,” I called after him as he left.

He’s wrong about the suicide thing, by the way. This is just a big misunderstanding. I’ll sort it out in the next couple of days and then I’ll be out of here. In the meantime, maybe I *will* take the ladybug pill. If I have to be here, I might as well get in a good nap. And, really, I kind of like how these pills make me feel. I’ll have to remember to tell Pinch. She’ll get a kick out of it.