

A Brief Descent into the Abyss

By Auguste Corteau (Greece)

It's February 2009.

I haven't bathed for two weeks. The bedclothes might be made of stone they weigh so much. Some mornings, all I feel strong enough to do is crawl to the bathroom to brush my teeth, for the one thing I can't stand, is this sour staleness in my mouth – the taste of misery. Those are the good days. On bad days, I wake up weeping and sobbing, as if tragedy struck while I slept, and my love just stands and looks at me, disconsolate, devastated, unable to help or soothe me.

Of course, I am clinically depressed. I know that – that's why I'm on medication. And the reason for my depression is the fact that, a couple of months ago, I suffered a psychotic break during which I believed myself to be the new Dalai Lama, and was subsequently hospitalized, strapped to a bed, pumped full of antipsychotics and then released into the care of my helpless loved ones.

I know all this, yet the knowledge doesn't alleviate the grief, the ineradicable grief that makes my mornings such trials. Maybe the antidepressants haven't kicked in yet (they will, in about three weeks' time, but at the time I take them I don't know that yet). Or maybe it's worse than the doctor who admitted me into the loony bin thought, and I'm not a unipolar depressive who just happened to suffer an isolated psychotic incident, but a full-blown paranoiac, or schizophrenic, or – worse: a manic-depressive.

Oh, I know it's called bipolar disorder these days. I know all about it. You see, my mother was bipolar (and in her later years, all pallid and swollen from the pills and the booze and the agoraphobia and the compulsive eating, simply *polar*, as in the bear), and on her tenth suicide attempt in a span of twenty years (once every two years – not too bad, Katherine) she managed to get the overdose right (roughly 400 pills, 222 of them undigested at the time of the autopsy) and killed herself, three days short of my twenty-fourth birthday.

I lie there, broken and torn, and save my strength so I can pull myself upright and drag myself all the way to my therapist's office for my twice-a-week session, during which I wail and rail at him, or sit stone-faced and silent, or simply wander off to less perilous topics and spend forty minutes telling him how I venerate Proust and how heartbreaking the beginning of *Combray* is – all that stuff about his mom, and lying awake at night waiting for her kiss.

Then, out of the blue, my therapist suggests I write about the psychotic break, of which I oddly possess complete and utter recall, down to its every hilarious and ghastly detail. "No way, José," I tell him. I haven't written for more than three months, and he wants me to actually grapple with a recounting of the same abyss I'm still struggling to climb my way out of?

And yet, somehow unable to disobey my shrink's request, I find myself typing away on my old clunky laptop, dredging up all the terror and the beauty of my stint as a madman, and actually laughing out loud about certain parts of it (like me streaking across the mental hospital's grounds, with two nurses chasing after me, both wielding shots of lorazepam). When my love returns from work at the end of the day, he finds me in the kitchen, freshly-showered, and making linguini al pesto.

It took thirty years of living in the shadow of mental illness to unmake me, and less than thirty minutes of writing about my greatest fear to forcefully pull me out of it and put me back together with something infinitely stronger than glue.

Comedy is tragedy plus time, Carol Burnett famously said.

Don't I know it.