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"The Incurables": Writing Madness, Hopelessness, and Hope

by Mark Brazaitis

Sometimes writers choose their material; sometimes material chooses its writers.

On the subject of depression, I fall in the latter camp. Of course nobody in their right mind would choose to become intimate with what Andrew Soloman calls the Noonday Demon. Right mindedness, in fact, precludes such intimacy. And yet intimate we are with—to use Winston Churchill's term—the black dog. In any given year, 14.8 million American adults, or 6.7 percent of the U.S. population 18 and over, suffer from major depressive disorder. Five-point-seven million American adults, or 2.6 percent of the U.S. population 18 and over, suffer from bipolar disorder. Ninety percent of people who commit suicide suffer from a mental illness.

Having, in the spring of 2004, found myself on the other side of a far-too-intimate interlude with depression, and having allowed myself six months to reacquaint myself with the possibility of happiness, I sat down to write about what I had lived and learned. I thought I would knock out an essay and be done with the whole matter. In preparation, I read the books of a dozen of my forbearers, including William Styron's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, Martha Manning's *Undercurrents: A Therapist's Reckoning with Depression*, Susana Kaysen's *Girl Interrupted*, and Tracy Thompson's *The Beast: A Journey Through Depression*. I found all of their books to be well-written, thoughtful, and, for someone who might be, or might know someone, suffering from a mental illness, helpful and hopeful.

For my part, I wrote three and a-half paragraphs and quit.

I quit not because I had nothing to add to the conversation—we storytellers are all speaking into the brilliant babble of the Bible and Shakespeare and Toni Morrison and twenty seasons of *The Simpsons*—but because the tone I had struck from the onset, and couldn't shake, was incongruously both removed and petulant, cold and raw. It was apparent I wasn't ready to confront the material—not this way, anyway. Not head on.

I opted to turn my attention back to work I'd left off a year or more before, stories and poems I had drafted about Guatemala, the subject upon which I'd built whatever literary success I enjoyed. Guatemala was familiar. Guatemala was safe. The next time I called up a blank screen on my computer, it was with the intention of writing a new story about Guatemala. But instead of the lush green hills and coffee farms of Alta Verapaz, I saw an actor alone on stage. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move.

Why? I wondered.

Because, I discovered, or decided, he had reached the point in the script where there was a blank space, a black hole, as it were, between what came before and what was to come—or was supposed to come—

afterwards:

The Actor was told he should, during the actual performance, improvise a line to fill the blank space. During rehearsals, however, he was under strict instruction to complete the blank space with something widely familiar—the pledge of allegiance, a Hail Mary, lyrics from a pop song—so as to save his spontaneity for actual performances. But at the dress rehearsal, the director, Elia Sellars, announced, “I don’t think improvising a line is in the best interest of the play.”

The words were hardly out of the director’s mouth when the Actor’s heart began to beat frantically and his hands began to shake.

At the time I was drafting “A Hole in the Script,” I didn’t consider the hole symbolic of depression. I didn’t consider it anything but a literal blank space to be grappled with by an actor who, following the tradition of his craft, considers the playwright’s work sacred. But in revisions, I saw its secret connotation.

Depression is a hole—a deep and confounding hole—and every proposal to rescue the sufferer from it seems, to the sufferer, at best a long shot and at worst a cruel attempt at deception, the equivalent of telling a terminal cancer patient she can look forward to a long life.

How does my Actor escape his predicament? By falling down—unintentionally—and, aided by the audience’s applause, standing up to finish the play.

For my next story, I turned again to the theater, intending to write a farce about a talentless but endearing buffoon of an actor who ruins every production he’s in. But although my protagonist in “Pistachio,” Felix Kapoodle, is indeed a talentless thespian, there is, I discovered as I worked on revisions, a method to his mediocrity. He isn’t a mere clown but someone who defies the harsh judgments of a cruel profession—and, by extension, a cruel world—by participating in the drama anyway, if necessary by shouting out invented lines from his seat in the audience.

With his words, Kapoodle inevitably seeks to forestall—or overthrow altogether—the unfolding tragedy on stage. Therefore, he creates the role of the unattached second gentleman caller in *The Glass Menagerie*, sweeping Laura Wingfield—and her mother—off their feet and moving with them to a house on a golf course in Atlanta. He answers the phone when Blanche DuBois, desperate to escape a prowling Stanley Kowalski, dials her (perhaps imaginary) ex-boyfriend Shep Huntleigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In *Oedipus Rex*, he plays the part of a marriage counselor. Madness? Or merely the earnest intentions of someone who, in refusing to let his thespian dreams die, wants, if only in the context of the theater, to

bring a little justice to an unjust world?

The story's form is an external review of Kapoodle's memoir, which Kapoodle mailed to the Harvard University Press three days before his death. The reviewer is a professor at a middling university, and, eager to impress the Harvard folk, he not only reads Kapoodle's 600-page memoir but fact-checks it by conducting interviews with everyone mentioned in it. In this excerpt, the reviewer reports what happens after Kapoodle forges a letter from the director of the Yale School of Drama and thereby receives an understudy role in a Broadway-bound version of "Hamlet":

Mr. Kapoodle burst into the final scene, before the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, and declared, "I am Pistachio, Hamlet's long-lost brother, and you will now have to fight the two of us. Look out, freaks!"

In his memoir, Mr. Kapoodle defends his improvisation: "Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with giving old Billy's tragedies a jolt of the new, not to mention the happy."

Isn't our world a Shakespearean tragedy on a proportion unsuitable for the stage? And how do we bear it? In our minds, are we not all Felix Kapoodles, longing to rewrite the script on global warming, on mountaintop removal, on genocide in Africa, on poverty, on homelessness, on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, on cancer, on child pornography, on human slavery and the sex trade, on torture techniques that make the punishments of the Inquisition seem like a 1950s fraternity paddling party?

In the end, therefore, the reviewer of Kapoodle's memoir cannot but acknowledge the legitimacy of his subject's quixotic quest.

The next story I wrote, "The Bridge," was, from the start, unquestionably about mental illness, although the subject continued to resist my efforts to portray its interiors—and by this, I mean the way the disease works insidiously on the ego, reducing it to a terrible essence of anxiety, fear, and lust for oblivion. The depression of the story's hero, a 64-year-old small-town Ohio sheriff named John Lewis, is manifested, at least until the final scene, not as an interior struggle against hopelessness and despair but as a public safety issue: an increasingly desperate effort to prevent the entire town of Sherman, Ohio—and, indeed, what comes to seem like the whole world—from leaping off the town's highest bridge. The escalating number of deaths is intended to parallel Lewis's growing despondency:

Sheriff Lewis clicked on the TV on the kitchen table. On its twelve-inch screen, he recognized the scene immediately: the south end of the Main Street Bridge. A woman with buttercup-blond hair was on live, interviewing people about why citizens of Sherman

were throwing themselves off the bridge....

As the anchorwoman asked a question of the blond correspondent, the camera showed Sherman police officers escorting groups across the bridge. After they'd crossed, some people chose to re-cross. The bridge, Sheriff Lewis could see, was becoming an amusement park ride.

As the blond correspondent summed up the situation, Sheriff Lewis saw a blue van drive slowly past her and stop in the middle of the bridge....

By story's end, Sheriff Lewis finds his resistance to the temptations of the bridge fading, and he staggers onto it even as the government, bereft of other solutions, commences bombing it into oblivion. CeCe, a sorority president at Ohio Eastern University who has chosen to take on the suicide epidemic as her chapter's Good Samaritan project and has become friends with Sheriff Lewis in the process, is also on the bridge:

In the smoke, a body collided into his body. Sheriff Lewis felt her hair against his chin, her breasts above his belly. "CeeCee!" he said, and being able to state this as fact rather than wish seemed as remarkable as anything he'd ever seen or done.

"You," CeeCee said softly and with relief. "You're still here."

Boom!

Boom!

"Stop it!" CeeCee shouted at the sky, which neither of them could see. "Stop it, please! There are only two of us left, and we both want to live!"

She turned to Sheriff Lewis and grabbed his hand. Her hand was hot; he could feel her blood pumping through it, wild with life. "I'm telling the truth, aren't I?" she asked him. "You do want to live, don't you?" She squeezed his hand even tighter, as if to prod him toward the right answer.

He prepared to mimic her optimism, but as his eyes blurred, succumbing to the smoke and more, he saw a landscape of loss. He wondered when the concrete and iron he was standing on would dissolve beneath him. He feared to what degree he wanted it to.

“Keep holding my hand,” he told CeeCee.

For my next story, I wondered if I could move closer to my characters’ emotional lives through tone. But a tone that matched the characters’ despairing moods was certain to push the story past the sad and into the melodramatic and morbid—and therefore the unreadable. The tone would have to work against the mood without trivializing it, the way the sweetness of the melody in the song “Banks of the Ohio” works against the murderous subject matter—and makes the song all the more disturbing.

I wouldn’t sprinkle sweet with sad. But perhaps a faint touch of the comedic would help.

The story, “The Incurables,” features Adam “Drew” Drewshevsky, an adult film star in his late twenties who, riddled with venereal disease and suffering from impotence born from guilt over the histories of sexual abuse suffered by the women with whom he has been physically intimate, finds himself, after a feeble suicide attempt, in the psychiatric ward of the Ohio Eastern University Hospital:

Sitting cross-legged in front of the TV was a woman about Drew’s age, in pink pajamas, watching “Winnie the Pooh.” He focused on her hair, a color between blond and brown. It had hundreds of corkscrews and was as short as a man’s.

When Eeyore, the donkey, appeared on the screen, the woman turned to Drew with exasperation and said, “You know what he needs, don’t you?”

Drew shook his head.

“Electroshock,” said the woman. “ECT. Like me.” She laughed. “I have my sixth treatment tomorrow.” Her voice was a whisper: “Don’t tell them, but number five put me in a mania. I’m feeling good right now. Are you single?”

Drew knew he should be attracted to the woman, who was pale and slim and had small, strawberry-colored lips. Any heterosexual man in his right mind, and with functioning and unsullied equipment, he decided, would be. “Yes, I’m single.”

“Well, I’m not,” she said, shrugging. She turned again to the TV.

She diagnosed all the characters: Piglet needed anti-anxiety meds, Tigger had ADHD. “And Pooh’s a honey junkie,” she said. “Sugar-coated but always thinking about his next fix.”

A nurse popped into the room to tell them it was ten

o'clock, time for lights out.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Drew said to the curly-haired woman.

"Only if I haven't escaped."

"So this place is locked?" he asked.

*"Where do you think you are," replied the woman,
"the Four Seasons?"*

There cannot be a drive-off-into-a-sunrise-together ending for these characters. But perhaps they can, with each other's help, meet the dawn with less apprehension and pain than they did the day before.

In writing my next story, "Classmates," I thought I had at last found an occasion, in my growing series of depression stories, for the first person point of view. It would be the story of a forty-year-old man's visit to the wife of a classmate who had killed himself. I would solve the old problem of maudlin tone by having my narrator be a mere reporter, a Jake Barnes-like listener to what his classmate's wife revealed to him. The narrator's life and emotions would be understated or wouldn't be invoked at all.

But as I fell into the story, I discovered it wasn't possible to leave out the narrator's emotions—or his story. In fact, I discovered that the narrator's story, and how it paralleled his classmate's, was the story. But the more central the narrator became to the story, the more problematic the first person point of view became.

It wasn't that the first-person was sentimental or self-pitying or, to the other extreme, cold and emotionless. It was that in order to make the story work, the narrator couldn't know as much about himself as he would have needed to know to tell the story in first-person. In first person, he would have seemed too self-confident, too assured, too aware of what he had lived through. But my narrator was still fumbling for answers. He was—perhaps not unlike me—still figuring it all out.

So I changed the point of view to third person. But third person drained the emotion from the story, made it too analytical, made the narrator seem too removed from the lives of the characters.

I put the story aside. When I returned to it, I wondered if the problem wasn't point of view but verb tense. Keeping the story in the third person, I switched from past tense to present. It didn't help.

First person present tense? Also no better.

I did like present tense for the story, however. It gave it tension and immediacy, and it made the protagonist's discoveries fresh and unexpected. But as I stared at draft eight or twelve—whatever it was—the story seemed

hopeless, a good-intentioned failure. I had more than a few of these on my computer. Occasionally they called to me like alley cats, ragged and flea-infested but with bright eyes.

But I had one more, desperate idea. Call it the fiction writer's version of football's Hail Mary pass. Second person.

You imagine you are here to play the part of your classmate resurrected, to seduce his wife from her sadness. Yet all you see when you conjure her bed is a pair of pillows lined against the headboard like tombstones.

"He was a piano player," you say.

"We both played. But six months ago, he stopped playing. I should have distrusted the silence."

You remember your own estrangement from what you loved, how everything you enjoyed became torture, and how the gulf between the pleasure you once felt in such activities and the burden they became made your pain all the more acute.

"How long had he been depressed?"

"It's hard to know. Maybe two-and-a-half, three months."

"The same," you say.

Confusion crosses her face. "The same what?"

You hesitate. "The same with me."

"Oh," she says. "So you..."

You suppose you had always meant to tell her.

In fiction and memoir, I have yet to write about depression in the first person. I hope to, although lately I've turned to other subjects: horses and figure skating, for example. But I did find a place in which to join depression and the first person. In the brief burst of the lyric poem, there was, at last, an occasion for me to claim ownership, however quietly, of an illness that, whatever you've heard or read, isn't ennobling and isn't, or shouldn't be, shameful but is only one of the dozens of serious but treatable conditions you or someone you love may confront. So I'll conclude with a lyric poem, but first, please—and of course—if you or someone you love is depressed, treat it like diabetes—like a tumor—like a heart attack. Treat it.

The Penelope of the Psych Ward

Sea green, violet, Christmas red.
Wherever she was—with the rest of us
in front of the television
or in the room she shared
with an orange-haired anorexic—
she had her knitting needles,
scarves flowing from her lap
as if from a rainbow spring.
She gave the scarves to everyone
who was leaving,
and I wondered if it would ever be my turn.
Weeks passed; my depression remained
as dogged as her labors.
She was some kind of Penelope,
and I was a traveler on a terrible sea.
One day I awoke to calm waters.
I wasn't happy,
but I saw I could be.
She had a gift for me—not a scarf,
but music,
a CD she'd made
of her favorite songs.
Listening, I imagined a parade, a homecoming.
No, only this: My front door,
opening.

Mark Brazaitis's most recent collection of stories, *The Incurables*, won the 2012 Richard Sullivan Award and will be published by the University of Notre Dame Press this fall. He is also the author of two other books of fiction, *The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala*, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, and *An American Affair*, winner of the 2004 George Garrett Fiction Prize. His book of poems, *The Other Language*, won the 2008 ABZ Poetry Prize. He directs the Creative Writing Program at West Virginia University.

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