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Blip

N EAR THE END OF MY TIME in the psych ward, I was taken off my daily sedative and asked to stay up all night. In the early hours of the morning, when the well-rested staff came in and turned on the machines, I had wires pasted to various parts of my scalp. The machines and wires seemed like something out of some earlier era's science fiction. Everything had a weird edge. On the ceiling there was a poster of the three monkeys who variously do not see, speak, or hear evil. I did not listen to the explanations or instructions of staff as they dripped glue between sections of my hair. I was thinking about my parents' record collection, seventies-era décor, LSD. Considering the possibility that there were secrets in my brain that had not been dug out but remained in the sediment.

To stay awake that night I drank huge coffees in the hospital's all-night café, people-watched, and thought about spring. I was working, too, on annotating *The World According to Garp* by John Irving, a novel I'd read while in the highest throes of my mania. A week or two earlier, I had been well on my way to proving that *Garp* was an allegory for the Holy Trinity, but now the anti-convulsants and the anti-psychotics and the lithium were finally working, so my hypothesis was crumbling to ash. It had taken weeks of high dosages of the drugs to bring me down; my mother claims that a few weeks into my stay I was still striding down the hallways and back, writing cryptic messages on the walls of the smoking room. But now, ideas had been dampened down. I could no longer see the things I had been able to.

Mania and depression had to do with vision for me—not with visions, because I experienced delusions more than hallucinations—but with the way I saw. The first metaphor I found to describe the

mania when it arrived, quick and elating as spring at the beginning of March 1999, was that a shard had been plucked from my eye. On one of my all night idea-benders, naked and skinny at my bedroom desk, naked and skinny and reaching upwards in front of my mirror, I remembered a Hans Christian Andersen tale, "The Snow Queen." A witch's mirror breaks and a skewing shard sticks in a young boy's eye. Like this boy, under the spell of depression, I had seen ugliness and evil everywhere. The mania had given me eyes for beauty. I did not yet call it "mania," of course. During this innocent time, I said to my mother, "Is this what the world is like? Is this what it really feels like to be alive?"

My parents did not yet suspect mental illness. My father was glad to see me happy.

It would take years to sort out what had happened. Was I still the same person I had always been? Was everything that had happened insane? Which was the baby, which the bathwater? And, because I was a believing Christian, why had God done this to me?

What, exactly, had God done?

I had to stay up all night so that, in the morning, they could hook me up to an EEG and measure the electrical activity in my brain, not because doing so was therapeutic, but because upon entering the hospital I had agreed to participate in a study. My consent was received when I was seventeen and, so filled with delusions of grandeur and the certainty of God's hand in my life, nothing frightened me. I would have agreed to anything. I was game.

I also cheerfully agreed to stay in the psych ward for seventy-two hours, which I would not have done had I known what doing so meant. My mother drove me to the hospital after I had lunged at her, tearing out her earring, and until I was finally admitted, she remained a constant, nervous presence by my side. She signed for me—everyone was thankful that I was not yet of age and therefore my legal consent was not needed—and I was cheerful, thinking that I could not be constrained.

"I can leave whenever I want," I told one of the other patients, one of a few schizophrenics who became my friends.

He laughed. "Oh, really? You hear that? She can leave whenever she wants."

"Well, yes," I said. "I still have free will. Watch." I led a few of them to the elevator near the nurses' station, and stood inside it, button pushed, waiting for it to move. The door remained open, the other patients staring at me, and I walked back and forth through the open doors—what the hell?—pushing and repushing the button.

A fifteen-year-old schizophrenic named Chris, who would become my mentor on the fourth floor, burst out laughing. "Everybody! She's got free will."

The nurses watched me through the glass. "Shit," I said. Finding out that my powers were not unlimited and that God's will would not always be clear was, for me, one of the rites of passages in the psych ward. My brain on mania was so optimistic the only times my delusions were threatened were when I suddenly saw that things could still go wrong, despite how good the world had become, how ever-present God was.

Chris explained to me that they controlled the elevators through the wristbands we were all wearing. He explained that when I got off-grounds privileges, they would monitor my whereabouts the same way.

This made sense to me.

Seventy-two hours turned into a week, two weeks, when I was finally granted supervised off-ground privileges an hour at a time. Chris explained to me about the "fuck-you" chair near the nurses' station, the one in the middle, which if you sat in it the nurses knew not to bother you.

The schizophrenics tended to be self-protective and sarcastic. The ex-manics were the opposite, teary-eyed and earnest. Depressives shuffled down the hall when they weren't sleeping the day away. Anorexics hoarded their single-serving Frosted Flakes boxes and little tubs of applesauce. Everybody smoked in the little green room, tried to conspire. Once, we started a fire in there, which quickly burned itself out.

Six weeks in and the world was fading into a dimmer version of itself. The first night of my mania I had watched the sun rise and wept over the beauty of it; now I watched the sun rise and felt little. Felt how inscrutable the world was, filled with mysteries I would never understand. Might never again be interested in understanding. I looked down at the dog-eared *Garp*.

I still had over an hour until my early morning EEG. My body was thrumming with exhaustion, with that familiar feeling of too much energy, too much electricity, the first harbinger of mania. Not sleeping, drinking too much coffee, these had been trouble to me in the first place. I had not respected the limits of my brain's chemistry because I didn't know what they were. I had not eaten a complete meal or finished a snack for months, whittling my body down until it was mere bones and taut flesh, flesh stretched over me like leather over a drum.

During the previous summer I had become sad: crying easily, feeling isolated from my friends, becoming obsessed with *Saving Private Ryan* because I envied the soldiers their sense of meaning and of pur-

pose. I would go to a matinee showing of the film, emerge into the overwhelming heat of summer and smoke cigarettes, bemoan the asphalt everywhere, and then would go home to lie down on my bed to listen to music and cry. One day I got hungry and decided not to eat. I thought: let's give this a try. I ate less and less, and because I was not a moderate person, have never been a moderate person, my depression became a much bigger issue than the teenage angst it resembled. Death did not frighten me: St. Paul said that "To live is Christ, to die is gain," and I took this with the full force of its meaning.

By January, I lost my sense of chronology, my interest in days. I smoked cigarettes, one after the other, and drank coffees on the hour all day and night. Months before I became fully manic, I stayed up late writing poetry or epic essays—twenty pages on the Book of Jonah for Old Testament class, another twenty pages about the mind-body problem for English—until the letters crawled across the screen like bugs.

My father would later draw a comparison to the prophet Elijah, who had lived with pure dependence on his God, until living that intimately with Him threatened to overwhelm him. My father's interpretation of events was an antidote to everyone else's, to my mother's, which roughly translated as: you're crazy and you'd better just stay on those meds.

What happens when the body is exhausted, but the mind will not let it sleep? The mind watches thoughts racing on ahead of it, desperate to follow this train or that, pulling the frayed edges, letting them unravel, letting revelations roll. The revelations rolled out like an eternal roll of carpet, an unfurling tongue, and everything was a metaphor leading to another metaphor. I was led down mental paths that could keep me occupied for hours. The body begins to fail—shaking and thrumming, falling down in mid-step, fainting after a single swallow of wine. My mind was a marathoner; my body was, by comparison, a couch potato. And beneath ordinary life, as I soon discovered, there was another order of things, waiting to be felt and seen. Infinity in every grain of sand. Recycling an empty soda became an opportunity for reverie: because its molecules were eternal, everlasting, and there was nothing new under the sun. Beliefs built on themselves. My mind believed my body no longer needed food or sleep, and so I came to believe I had passed through the Christian apocalypse; that the new Earth promised by the Book of Revelation was only another dimension of the old one; and that, for now, I was the only person there. I rebuilt the world, molecule by molecule, so that each thought drifting through my consciousness like a balloon gathered the weight of tested fact. In the early hours of one morning, out with friends frightened by the way I was dressing and talking, I ordered oatmeal and gulped

down coffee creamers. I thought: oatmeal with cream will slow me down. I had a thought and immediately I believed that it was true.

It seems irresponsible to ask a seventeen-year-old girl, capable as I was of childlike credulity, nearly recovered from my episode and living in the psych ward, to stay up all night. To send me wandering around the hospital for hours, forbidden from sleep. Lack of sleep was a gateway, as was coffee, and part of me in that dampened, deadened state, hoped it would send me flying again. But instead I kept nodding off. An hour before the EEG appointment, I took off running around the hospital—over the ramps by emergency and through the patio outside the cafeteria, around down John Street, near the statue of St. Joseph—because I wanted the early morning cool and the shock of energy to wake me up. I had come to believe that the cars driving by were watching me, that they had some access to my thoughts via the hospital ID bracelet, so I ran with the flourish of a performer, my arms raised in a kind of worship. The cars and the people driving them, like the God of my upbringing, were benevolent.

The night of no sleep did not cause me to go manic. Nothing would again. Not pregnancy or post-partum hormones, though I'd been warned about those. Not alcohol or marijuana, though I chose not to touch harder drugs, thinking that if I took any uppers or hallucinogens I'd never come down again. Would, like I'd heard happened to Sartre, end up on a mescaline trip for two full years. Not late nights, not cigarettes, not anti-depressants, not going off my meds absolutely and forever. The closest I came to that former euphoria was falling in love with my husband and then falling in love with my babies.

The boundaries of madness are infuriatingly vague. Debates surround the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—because of how exhaustively it pathologizes even the saner of us. But even the most pared down version of the DSM would contain bipolar disorder—it's one of the big ones, it's serious—and the history of bipolar disorder before there were psychotropic drugs is riddled with accidents and incarcerations. And although there are no definitive tests for bipolar—nothing observed in the brain or the blood that can make a diagnosis certain—every psychiatrist I ran into in those days was absolutely sure that I was not a borderline case. I met the diagnostic criteria. It was clear to everyone that I should stay on the drugs.

In the light of my diagnosis, it turned out that many of my normal behaviours or preferences were crazy. For example, three weeks into my hospital stay, I complained to my psychiatrist that the drugs weren't letting me dream. Every night I fell into a timeless coma, with-

out company. My psychiatrist, a humourless woman who found nothing funny about my puns or my exaggerations, said in her grim way, "Would you rather be well or have dreams?"

I looked down the barrel of the rest of my life. "I'd rather dream."

This was taken as further proof that I was not getting better.

Then, when I was well, I had losses to grieve. I tried to go to a support group of bipolar adolescents, and their first topic of discussion was the stigma the diagnosis carries. Whether or not to tell your employer, for example. "Why would I want to hide this?" I exclaimed, no longer manic, but still delusional. "This is the best thing that ever happened to me!"

Another bipolar friend who still suffers from her disease talks about being metaphorically straitjacketed or lobotomized by the drugs. The summer I recovered was the bleakest of my life. I felt nothing except a fear of being alone. It was worse than my previous depression, because I could not write and I did not recognize myself. The moments before falling asleep and upon waking, when I felt most alone, pulled me into despair. I would wake and crawl into my parents' bed, as I had never, in all my life, done.

At, by then, eighteen years old, sluggish and sodden from the lithium, I made that dangerous decision. I went off the meds. The psychiatrists knew the story, had seen my kind a million times before. We were like diabetics addicted to sugar, unable to accept reality. I did a risk assessment: I would rather live in a world of colour than of grey, even if it ruined me. I didn't believe it would ruin me. And because I'm an anomaly, it didn't.

My psychotic episode had obliterated everything in my life: my peers at school looked at me funny, scholarship and university applications deadlines had come and gone. I felt confused about God's actions here, and my faith was shaken. The after-effects were felt by everyone in my family; all paths to the future were blocked up with debris. I couldn't make sense of it if I didn't have my wits about me; nor could I rebuild. I needed to have myself for company.

I don't understand what happened those years ago. We don't know why my mind ran off a cliff or why it has never happened again. I live in the wake of the miracle of remission, one of those cases no one can explain, like the person with untreatable cancer whose tumours suddenly disappear. A psychiatrist told me that I was just one of a very small percentage of people, that perhaps it was the perfect storm of factors: antidepressants, lack of food and sleep, and the general anaesthesia and morphine I was exposed to during an unrelated surgery just before my episode.

It took faith—perhaps even blind faith—to go off of the meds. The faith with its capacity for leaping that may have led me into madness was also the faith that saved me. A taste of heaven was more than most people got. I had gotten to hear my God speak and survived it.

But no one was talking to me just then. I was running, aimless and desperate in the wasteland of the hospital parking lot, streetlamps still winking, the odd car nearing and seeming to regard me. I was alone and would be for a long time. There seemed to be no deeper meaning in the lines in the sidewalk, in the slow easing away of night. No message in the streetlights turning red, green, yellow. *I don't know when to stop and go*, I'd written in a poem from my small bed on the fourth floor. *Only the buses know*.

I managed to stay up all night. I arrived at my appointment on time. My punctuality will surprise people in the years to come, as will my ability to hold on to love, hold down jobs, mother children, finish homework, go to bed on time. As will, eventually, the fact that I was ever so psychotic that I was hospitalized. The wires were glued to my scalp, and the machine came on with a series of beeps and bleeps, and I leaned back in the reclining chair and closed my eyes.

"Don't fall asleep!" A technician shouted. "Wake up!"

I opened them and looked out blearily. Someone asked me questions, and I no longer remember the answers I gave.