Now You Know What I Did Last Summer



Prologue

Writing this on Thanksgiving morning in a random Starbucks, stealing a few quiet minutes of solitude before a packed weekend of familial familiarity. I'm thankful for much – and aggravated by much, too, but today's not the day to enumerate – but I'm especially grateful for the great response to my first week of posts here at the i2b oasis. Thanks for reading and sharing and tweeting and commenting. Good to know I'm not simply howling at the moon. Please comment and share to wretched excess so that I become more popular than Paris Kardashian.

For today, an answer to the burning question – why does Immune to Boredom exist?<fn>Beyond the obvious egoism and narcissistic delusion that anyone might care what I have to say.</fn>

The answer: I need it. After finally getting a handle on lifelong depression last spring, I nearly died over the summer. i2b is part of my attempt to make sense of things in the aftermath of a disruptive but decidedly non-epiphanal event.

Some Reassembly Required

The Unreliable Narrator Gets His Groove Back

And after all that, I was just minding my own business at a train station in upstate New York when a tick bit me on the ass<fn>The geographic location, viral carrier, and body part of the offense remain unverified. But something happened, believe you me.</fn> and put me in the hospital for a month. Talk about your random and indifferent universe.

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It's not that your Unreliable Narrator sets out to lie, but you must admit that a little tweak makes any recounting more enjoyable. It's not a violation of truth, just a gentle(ish) reassembly that allows the pieces to rest more comfortably side by side. Maybe a dollop of fabrication here and there, but only insofar as the narrator appears more noble, inspiring, and intelligent.<fn>Except where fabrication denigrates the narrator to paint a false sense of humility / vulnerability / fragility that might entice the unwary reader to proffer greater sym-/em-pathy than might otherwise emerge.</fn> Who can blame?

Besides, I don't even attach my name to this chronicle;<fn>I'm not hiding my identity. Any reasonably astute reader could out me with a few keystrokes on the googly box. Go ahead. You will be minimally whelmed with what you find.</fn> how much trust should you put in someone who won't even identify herself. Himself. And so on. Just don't look at it as lying; that's such an ugly word, so judgmental. Let's call it editing, instead. Everybody loves an editor. So if you think something I wrote seems edited (nudgewink), don't take it personally. It's not you, it's me.

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Depression had been an intermittent companion for decades. Not the engulfing, collapse into a quivering heap kind. <fn>Not always, anyway.</fn> It’s more like a wastrel ex-roommate who shows up from time to time to crash on your couch and eat all your food and smoke up your stash and upend whatever sense of progress and structure you had managed to reclaim since the last visit. A familiar and unpleasantly comfortable friend who knows you well enough to encourage your worst impulses and make you believe there is some deeper meaning to the wave of dissolution rising on the horizon who then takes all your money and fades into mist without so much as a by your leave to the reassembly required. But it’s nothing to worry about, really, I’m doing fine, leave me alone, we can’t be out of gin already,<fn>FWIW, I detest gin.</fn> &c.

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Here’s some essential advice: if you find yourself in a hospital flirting with death, be sure to have some high-quality music with you. Run it 24/7. The docs had me on mega-IV doses of Doxycycline (known henceforth as Doxy because Sonny Rollins), the reigning WMD of the antibiotic world. But it was the music that kept me alive.<fn>“This I believe,” the Narrator intoned with an outsized sense of self-important righteousness that brooks no dissent.</fn>

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Proof the nth of the random and indifferent nature of the universe: how did this native of the Deep South arrive at a train platform in the Hudson Valley at just the moment when a virally virulent tick<fn>In the name of accuracy…a tick is not an insect; it is an arachnid. The Narrator’s devotion to factual accuracy is often wholehearted.</fn> crawled up my skirt for a nice feast on my ass?<fn>Again, important to note that delivery agent, body target, and locale remain subject to dispute.</fn>

What random accumulation of butterfly wing beats placed the Narrator on the precipice of that hoariest of plot twists that signals imminent redemption or rebirth or or the tragic demise of one gone too soon? If one arbitrary decision had gone another way, would this chronicle even exist? Would the narrator's reliability be less tenuous? Would the unexamined life remain unexamined? Might there be fewer question marks?

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Several years ago, the Narrator made a hard-nosed decision to grow up. At last. A real job with cubicles and everything. And the Narrator killed it, solid results for almost three years, on and off airplanes in such garden spots as Trenton and Reno and Jackson, adding twenty pounds and discarding whatever sense of joy and optimism might have been. Two days before Thanksgiving, 12 hours after crawling off a redeye and finalizing the papers that would bring the company a few million more dollars, I was sacked. Not personal, they said. It's business. I remarked that the "it's not personal, it's business" gambit originated in *The Godfather* and was generally something said just before somebody took a bullet behind the ear. These Galtian heroes shuffled their feet and offered their weasel condolences and I walked out vowing to never be a cubicle monkey again.

Growing up is a suckers game.

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Soon after, the wastrel ex-roommate showed up with shadow companions and settled in for an extended residency. Like the roommate, these shades and I were well acquainted, sharing deep secrets I had long tried to forget. The invasions and upending and subsequent bouts of dissolution and disillusion came more frequently. Irritants gained the power to cast me into the darkest humor. Serious challenges rendered panic and paralysis, while the best of life generated flat stoicism, if

that. Because why bother enjoying the milkshake when a shit sandwich is just around the corner.

Last spring, I had just completed a short tour with the best band in America<fn>This is 100% true.</fn> that you've probably never heard. <fn>I promise to tell you all about them sometime.</fn> Ten people blowing the roof off of packed houses, an astonishing gumbo of klezmer, funk, afro-beat, Zappoid melodies, Saturnalian cacophony, and the hottest drum-sousaphone pulse engine anywhere on the planet. And throughout the tour, as audiences were sweating and dancing and generally losing their minds,<fn>Again, 100% true. About this, I would not lie.</fn> your Narrator<fn>Who is in fact a guitarist of some international familiarity. Another clue! (?)</fn> was watching as if from a distance, with one persistent thought: "You really should be enjoying this more."

So I talked to my doctor<fn>Cue the twin bathtubs advert.</fn> and we tried a few chemical enhancements.

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The loving embrace of viral bio-horror brought fevers, enveloping pain, and a head-to-toe (including the inside of my mouth) petechial rash.<fn>Characterized by blood seeping from little capillaries just under your skin.</fn> All joints swelled and frozen in place, the knees resembling well-boiled hams, the digits barely recognizable as toes or fingers. The rash moved into my lungs and liver. My fever rose, my behavior increasingly alarming. And on my 55th birthday, I celebrated by enjoying a nice lumbar puncture.<fn>Cake and ice cream are for triflers.</fn>

I visited the fever swamp of meningitis and encephalitis. Just add morphine and oxycodone; your Narrator was tripping balls. Conversations with people not present, including one lovely cigar party with Gandhi and Jerry Garcia.<fn>Of course, I knew this was hallucination. I detest cigar smoke.</fn> Lots of

serious conversations with the kids, essential life lessons that they need to know, conversations that I continued even when I realized they were a couple hundred miles away, chats that I had to continue in my solitude because the despair over not sharing this crucial information was too much to bear. Awaking to find myself cleaning the kitchen, hands moving back and forth to polish the imaginary surfaces. I was getting my affairs in order.

But despite the best efforts of that nasty mosquito,<fn>Perhaps not a tick. It's healthy to keep an open mind.</fn> Death could not get the better of me.<fn>So far.</fn>

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Nobody really talks anymore. What is there to talk about, anyway? Other than the depressions and fears and anxieties, the uncertainties of an economy stacked against you, and just when did my kids grow up and my parents get old all of a sudden anyway what the hell? Oh yeah, and I almost died for my summer vacation this year. Who wants to hear that litany of sad sack shit, anyway?

If dancing on the grave's edge provided any kind of epiphany, it's this. Lots of people want to hear this litany because they want to share their own story, or at least to know their own story does not mark them as aberrations. People want me to know: they had a heart attack or kidney failure or lymphoma or cancer. They were in the hospital for x months because of [fill in malady here]. They got screwed at work or their children grew up or their parents got old all of a sudden what the hell. Your Narrator's brush with the Reaper seemed to be a new open space for talking about these things.<fn>Your Narrator apparently believes that the sun shines out of his ass.</fn> Not to solve problems or find answers. Just to be able to say, "This shitty thing happened to me. Now, what's up with you?" Nobody, anywhere, world without end, was talking

about this stuff before that earwig<fn>It could have happened. But I still blame that fucking tick.</fn> crawled down your Narrator's auditory canal.<fn>Sun shining out of ass.</fn>

Or maybe I had forgotten how to listen.<fn>What good is a musician who forgot how to listen?</fn>

My 5th grade teacher assigned a short story exercise. I wrote a tale about an astronaut exploring the moon<fn>Neil Armstrong had recently taken his giant leap. Clever application of calendars and arithmetic reveals yet another clue!</fn> and discovering a vicious moon monster. Most of the story was about the desperate attempt to retrieve a laser death ray gun that would dispatch the beast. After an adjective-heavy chase across the moonscape:

"He aimed carefully and fired the death ray gun at the monster. It did not work.

"The End"

I thought this exceedingly clever. I'd never heard a story that did not resolve. What a fun trick! My teacher was very displeased and gave me a C. Friends who read it were annoyed because I did not tie it up and put a bow on it. I explained that this way they could fill it in the way they wanted it to happen. Geebus, do a little work yourself, people! My arguments fell on deaf ears.

To this day, I love the unresolved ending.<fn>An opinion not universally shared, it seems.</fn> Consider yourself fairly warned. Or encouraged.

Always be sure to share the music.

"Is that Coltrane?" asked the neurologist sliding a needle

into my spine.

Yep.

“Cool. I’ve never had Trane as a soundtrack for a lumbar puncture. It’s usually Jerry Springer or a game show.”

I never felt a thing.