I Decked the Halls and the Halls Decked Me

The holidays are nearly through. I have enjoyed a sufficiency of great food, good cheer, spiked nog, family, wrapping paper, tinsel, and close quarters. And I got the new John Cleese memoir, a most perfect gift.

I have also endured a scarcity of time alone to think, to walk, to sit, to stare aimlessly. In short, the time to do the things necessary to write something that doesn't suck.

All this a long way around admission that this week, I got nothing. I offer a full refund for any inconvenience this has caused.

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.

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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.

The Chorus is No Virgil



I've always been a Storyteller, hidden. We are all Storytellers. It's how we make sense of things and impose order on a chaotic flood of information and sensation and emotion. At best, stories aid understanding, provide a framework for appropriate response, and offer an accurate map of where we've been/are going. At worst, our stories spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that undermine our lives with confusion, poor judgement, and unintelligible mapping. Even when you put together a story that works well on all levels, is more or less verifiable…even then we know that someone else can arrange the same facts *Roshomon*-like into a narrative that bears scant resemblance to the order that works so well for you, but that somehow also withstands the understanding/response/mapping evaluations that you have to apply if any of you have any intention of being honest about our stories. <fn>Which proposition opens a whole other can of pintos, no doubt.</fn> And by you, of course, I mean me.

One motivator behind the i2b blog is to move the layers of stories out of my head and onto the page. <fn>Picture a half-century or so of sedimental buildup that requires systematic excavation to reveal both the fossil record and the cumulative context that describes a lifetime. A sedimental journey, if you will forgive.</fn> This layer by layer excavation is my pomo version of Dante's stroll through the underworld, each layer revealing more truthiness, with the trepidatious explorer gently guided by a wise and compassionate friend through the horrors of Hell. That's where Dante got off easy. When I start dusting the dirt away from the hidden treasures to peel back and reveal the ossified detritus of a lifetime of

stories, who is my guide? Bad news. My internal Greek Chorus of Stern Judgement and Doubt<fn>Who do you think you are, anyway? Getting a bit above ourselves, aren't we?</fn> stands ready to provide a running commentary/narrative. I hate to complain, but the Chorus is no Virgil, to say the least.

But let's leave the chorus to their disharmonious mutterings for a bit. I'm finally letting the Storyteller out to play. I'm not sure why it has taken so long, lifetime wise, to let this creature into the light. There are all kinds of good (and barely reliable) stories I can concoct to explain this away, but most likely it boils down to letting the GCoSJ&D control the narrative. Because that's what they/it live for: narrative control. The i2b project is all about regaining some control over the narrative. Their story grows tiresome.

After a lifetime of writing professionally, I began trying to Write this past summer after a personal apocalypse.<fn>Severe illness, near death experience, a month in hospital, two more months of recovery, &c. No biggie.</fn> Lying in bed, unable to move, too much time to think, I worked out a narrative of the whole ordeal in my head. I was not planning to Write,<fn>Chorus: "You're not a Writer. That's something that other people do. Who do you think you are?"</fn> but I was compelled. I somehow understood that the physical act of arranging the words on a page could neutralize the emotional charge the events had for me in a way that talking about it never could. And it worked. Now I can look at the entire apocalyptic episode as a story *over there*, something with almost no lingering emotional resonance. I put it over there, and did it on my terms. I can only assume that the Chorus was in a weakened condition at the time, too sick to interfere. Alas, it got better.

I can reliably confess that I, as a Storyteller, am an Unreliable Narrator. My Twitter bio gives the game away: "An Unreliable Narrator seeking connection in a fragmented world." And so the exercise is also about creating

connectivity.<fn>Otherwise, why bother with the ‘in public’ part? </fn> We are not so different, you and I, despite so much irrefutable evidence to the contrary. Dancing on a few of the self-help/therapy/pop-psych buzzwords of the moment, I am attempting to create meaningful connectivity through vulnerability and a willingness to share my secret aspirations/fears/longings/&c. And I buy that notion, truly, and recognize that my success will rise or fall on the barometer readings of my honesty and authentic vulnerability. I mean that, no ironic wink about it.

But then comes a voice from the GCoSJ&D, probably a basso profundo, reminding me that these are no longer private mutterings, that anyone in the world could read this,<fn>And that even without my name appearing on the i2b site any two-year old with a LeapPad could figure out my identity in no time flat, and anyway, most anyone reading this is here because you know me in the first place, being that I am a nascent and unpublicized toiler in the bloggy vineyards.</fn> so watch what you say, bub. Then comes the mezzo to shriek, “What makes you think anyone cares what you think anyway!” And all together, they sing: “Come back inside where it’s dark and safe.”

The Storyteller resists the sirens.

For better or worse, I’ve taken the leap to subject my stories to scrutiny. I agonize endlessly over which word; how to construct the phrase/sentence/paragraph; how much to reveal; where to play with misdirection. Is my intention clear, my words suggesting exactly what I wish? Is the struggle even worth it, given that my tens of readers<fn>Someday!!</fn> will certainly refract my tale to fit frameworks I could hardly recognize or understand or anticipate? Does it even matter what I think a story means, or what the reader thinks it means?

Most embiggendly…how much is too much? Certainly I owe my

family a measure of privacy, and I really don't want to say something that makes me utterly unemployable or makes people cross the street when they see me coming. But I am striving for something *universal* in my ramblings. What's the point of trying to generate connectivity via vulnerability if I have to pull my punches to hide embarrassing specificity or unpopular opinion?

The Unreliable Narrator is a common element of literary analysis. Weighing how much/little credence to afford a storyteller becomes key to measuring the story itself.<fn>This may be even more critical to interpreting so-called creative so-called non-fiction, specifically as regards most of what passes as *truth* in the flood of memoiristic storytelling that publishers push like fast food on ravenous readers, volumes that I frequently find myself hurling wallward with a cry of "Oh, come on…Really?" Running with scissors, my ass.</fn> Not that it's as simple as Narrator-clearly-unreliable-therefore-story-untrue. I'll go ahead and assert that an Unreliable Narrator, who may in fact be at least semi-reliable and/or brutally honest, might convey *meaning* and create connection more effectively than a Reliable Narrator, if such a thing can be said to exist. Not for nothing, I'm also ready to suggest that all Narrators are, to some extent, unreliable.<fn>Like that's some kind of major scholarly leap. And if I can accept that, why are books flying wallward in the first place? The Chorus demands answers.</fn> Otherwise we would not have so much of that frustrating/delicious *Rashomon*-esque discrepancy that itself delivers incredible frisson vis a vis the understanding/response/mapping matrix even though/because none of us can really agree on what actually happened or what it purports signifier-wise. And if Nietzsche is to be believed,<fn>He was mad as a hatter, after all. Talk about unreliable.</fn> there are no facts, only interpretations. So what's a little gentle re-configuration of fact among friends?

Yesterday, I began writing this post. I was in a gloomy mood.

There was no reason for the gloom, no real story available to explain it. I just get that way sometimes. But the Chorus abhors the explanatory vacuum, especially when my defenses are down. So it provided justification upon explanation for why I was blue, and isn't this thing awful and that thing horrible, and what about that thing that person said/did/didn't/implied/&c that one time, remember?

It was a singularly unpleasant day of writing. Reading back at the end of the day revealed carnage. There was blood everywhere; everything good and true was reduced to ash and dust mixed with tears and a Sazerac that spilled over my laptop. There was a tear in the knee of my corduroys and it seemed I had lost one sock, but happily still had both shoes. My gloomy mood darkened and I lay awake most of the night in agony. The Chorus sang vespers all night. "Come inside, it's safer here".

Had I revealed too much, crossed uncrossable boundaries? Was I afraid that I had exposed a darkness that would make me non grata, persona wise?

Nope. It was basically a bunch of true and banal stories, more or less embarrassing in their specificity. It was an honest accounting of unadulterated bullshit. And it was a whine.<fn>A ruling precept of this blog: No Whining.</fn> My soul-searching/searing revelations were empty, feeble ploys for pity. A recitation of facts, a litany of bath- and path-etic woe. Me, me, me, oh how I suffer. But worst of all, and the reason it all came out this way, is that it was a product of that goddamned Chorus. All my worst impulses, my doubts, my self-pity, my fears…all that baggage the Chorus sings about day and night. The Storyteller gave up narrative control.<fn>See above re: "stories [that] spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that undermine our lives with confusion" &c.</fn>

There's a running gag (sic) in the movie *Synecdoche, New York*

that has Philip Seymour Hoffman's character performing a ritual daily inspection of his morning stool to determine his health. The essay as it stood was the result of a psychic stool sifting. I flushed it this morning and began again on whatever question this ramble is trying to address.

So is this story going anywhere?<fn>At this point I refer the reader to The Immunity Manifesto Legal Disclaimer re: resolved endings, hatred of.</fn> Not really. We're pretty much done here. I started writing yesterday to post tonight. The Chorus took control and it went badly. They/it/I/we have done so repeatedly over a lifetime around music, business, friendships, family relationships, and so on. But because I had promised to post here every Monday, giving up was off the table, and instead of letting the cursed GCoSJ&D have its way, I wrote about the Storyteller writing its way out of their shadow.<fn>For the moment, at least.</fn> The Storyteller intends to stay out in the light and deny the Chorus, who are in the end the most unreliable narrators possible. Nothing will ever shut those bastards up, but their claim on my attention weakens, one story at a time.

I won't bet on how useful this ramble has been for the reader who makes it this far, but I cannot overstate the value it had for the Storyteller. Maybe that's point enough.