

A Pep Talk

There's a bandage on my left arm, on the inside of my elbow. They draw my blood from there once every four weeks. It was once every two weeks for six months before that, and once a week for six months before that. The phlebotomist told me there's a lot of scar tissue around that vein. And it makes sense, the vein having been tapped so many times in the name of counting my white blood cells. The Clozaril might weaken my immune system, though my psychiatrist hasn't had it happen with more than two (possibly three) of the patients he's prescribed it to in the past thirty-some years.

Getting everyone onboard, me chief among them was the first struggle — everyone was in denial, diagnosing me with epilepsy though they didn't have a degree in neurology. We couldn't talk about it, it made it real and that's the last thing we wanted. A long road, among the many long roads just to come to terms that maybe my life was over.

Then it was compliance — swallowing the little pills every day at the prescribed times. Some of them might have worked if I'd given them the chance. The worst ones — the Haldol, the Xanax dehumanized me. Sure they quieted the schizoaffective disorder, but they also robbed me of my personality. I've always been a hugger — not when I'm on Haldol or Xanax.

You go to a lot of doctor's appointments. You learn to wait, you learn to take a book with you. You learn to entertain yourself privately in public. Don't bring anything funny, — no Vonnegut, no Neal Stephenson. You learn to deal with your body's malfunctions: the aching joints despite young age, sweating profusely because the pills make your body unable to regulate its own temperature, poikilothermic it's called.

You learn when to keep your mouth shut — when you can trust someone with your darkest secret and when it's best to lie; to tell them you make your living fixing computers in your apartment and not that your living is made for you, deposits in your bank account that come regardless of your productivity. Because there's stigma — you're a homicidal risk, a parasite leeching off society, a manifestation of everyone's worst fear.

You do what you can — you write a blog, you speak in front of people about your experiences. But you can't tell the baristas at the coffee shop you go to so often they start making your drink as soon as you walk in. People have to be mentally prepared to be told about mental illness — its ugliness and also its overwhelming beauty.

You do what you can — you're an ambassador for the mentally ill. Because you're high functioning. Held up on a pedestal, the constitutive example of your species. But still, you lose friends. Because someone always gets tossed overboard when the ebbs and flows of the illness become violent.

And you sit there, once a week, across from an educated someone who has no idea what you're going through, what it's like, and try to answer the question: what happened?

You can't.

There's hardly ever an answer with mental illness. They can't test for it, they can't take blood to see its progress. You have to do the work, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and you have to suffer through it. But you get these moments of inexplicable beauty — the sunsets you hallucinate you wish your parents could see. And, in those moments it's worth it. There are new friends, and you're thankful. God is good, you say. And indeed He is.

Life doesn't end with mental illness. Seeming and being are two different things. Mental illness, and the ECT that accompanied it, gives you a chance to start over — to build your house on the solid rocks instead of the vapid sand. Chances like that are rare — they ought to be taken. Because you're taken care of: that living you make without earning is your only shot at independence, it lets you live the life you've always wanted. You work on your projects when you're feeling well and you take care of yourself when you're not. You take your pills, and you take your walk every day, and you love people the best you can. Because your parents always told you try your best, and that's really all you can do.