

## Xanax Country

On the day you stopped loving me, the weather forecast predicted south to south easterly winds below ten knots with seas of around half a metre. It was a good day for sailing. Outside, it was spring. The ponytails of young women bobbed along the fence of our walled garden. Sagging flowers, stirred by a suddenly tender sun, stood taller, while doped pigeons spread their wings, pressed their breasts into warm dirt and slept without vigilance, dreaming perhaps, of a world without cats.

Here in Xanax Country it was winter. The inside of our house had long ago formed its own weather, unmoved by the outside seasons. I woke alone on our couch, pursued from sleep by dreams of the sea. My favourite pyjamas were rent, the buttons torn off, a casualty of my nightmares.

I tried to remember a time when the sea was not haunted.

One endless summer in my childhood we all but lived on the beach. We changed into our togs in the back of my mother's Volkswagen on the way, chancing naked evacuation if the engine caught fire again.

The broad expanse of my mother's hand rubbed sunscreen on our backs while our feet danced, longing to run for the waves. She poured thermos cordial into coloured metal cups which stacked into each other; we crunched small ice blocks between our teeth, too impatient to let them melt.

That summer I learned that the sea plays a trick on children who spend many hours bobbing in the waves: at night, as they drift to sleep, they feel the motion of waves as though they are still in the water.

Decades later when I returned, unusually for a childhood place the beach seemed bigger now: the waves higher, the sea wider, the horizon more distant.

Once we shivered in the early-morning shade of the painted beach boxes, willing the warming sun to invite us into the water.

Now I marvelled at the size of the waves, at our courage in offering ourselves to those swells to be pushed and pulled, swept and swayed, giggling when shoals of whitebait nibbled our feet – or not – maybe it's a shark! We thrilled at every touch of the world unseen beneath the surface, never knowing if it was drifting seaweed or the last time we may be acquainted with our legs.

Beyond that horizon was a world aching to be discovered one day.

One day.



I've spent enough time with psychiatrists to know that psychiatrists don't like psychiatric patients very much.

By the time of my first appointment I was already well acquainted with the language used to describe people like me, the person I am now, the post-incident I. The more forthright just call us monsters and attention-seekers outright.

According to the literature, my mental health could be variously assessed by my dress, my job, my mortgage, my savings, my marshmallow intake, my ability to maintain relationships. I wondered how Hitler's relatives might have felt about that one.

Enter, psychiatrist number one. I dubbed him Bipolar Bill after reading a paper he authored wherein he diagnosed everyone from wayward mothers to irresponsible pet owners as bipolar.

Bipolar Bill shouted down anything I said that was inconvenient to his diagnosis – this I only learned when I recognised the name of the drug he prescribed.

His face fairly lit up when he wrote the prescription. He said the pills would make me educable about myself.

After that first appointment I waited for you to ask me how I was, how I got on, what had happened. When you didn't, I ploughed answers to the questions you should have asked into the silence, as though your indifference were a fallow pasture I could sow with seeds of tender understanding.

For weeks I walked past the boxes of pills on the kitchen bench, afraid that if I took them, I would discover that I was no more than a figment of my own imagination.

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The washing machine started it. We had bought it one night in an appliance mega store, when our future was bright and shiny new, along with a two-slice toaster, a compact microwave, the brown couch which is now my bed and boat.

We didn't really know how to choose so we went for mid-priced appliances. It worked out well enough.

The washing machine was a novelty because it beeped when it had finished its cycle. Laughing, we jumped at its command, disgorging the clothes from the cylinder and closing the lid to restore peace.

One morning when I was in the bathroom, the washing machine beeped once too often. It beeped all through my shower, while I hurried to towel myself, while I struggled to pull a dressing gown over my wet skin. *Beep beep! Beep beep!* Two sharp beeps of increasing urgency and volume.

Calmly, quietly, I stepped out of the bathroom, took up a laundry basket and let the washing machine have it.

I saw a tee shirt once depicting Wile E. Coyote finally catching up with the Road Runner whom he gleefully throttled: *Beep now, you bastard!*

That was me, laying into the washing machine. *Beep. Now. You. Bastard!*

I turned around and found you watching me from the kitchen door. That night you went to bed without telling me. I crept up the stairs and stood before our closed bedroom door, dancing from foot to foot with my hand on the knob, too afraid to open it in case you looked at me the way you often do now, with reproach or flat-out distaste.



I remember the last time I touched you, how you were not content to let my hand drift away from your stomach where I had placed it, but how you removed it immediately and folded my arm back against my own body with such purpose and economy, like a card table being put away at the end of a long weekend, all business now, holiday over.

It was another time I thought I could sow seeds of should-be, that I could grow compassion in you if only I found the words to help you understand.

Please, baby, I'm sick.

I know.

I'm depressed.

Well *do* something about it.

*Do* something.

*Do* something.

*Do.*

Bipolar Bill looked crushed when I said the medication had no effect. He rallied though. I would respond better to lithium, he said. Breaking into an unprompted tribute to John Cade, he reached for his prescription pad.

When he called my referring doctor a great proselytiser, I quit.

Years later, after I had given up on psychiatrists and was bumping from psychologist to psychologist looking for one who had fewer issues than I did, I came across some of his former patients. Like me, they were still trying to find their way toward some help, still hoping for an honest diagnosis not intended to secure an aging psychiatrist a place in history.

A war veteran told me he couldn't get an appointment with a psychiatrist because they weren't allowed to charge him more than the schedule fee. Turning earnest, harrowed eyes to me, he asked, *What does that say?*

*That next time there's a war, we should send shrinks instead soldiers.*



You always preferred to leave me in the mornings, when I was most paralysed, having woken on the small island of our brown couch. You left me so many times that you perfected your routine; your evacuation drill was executed with a speed and efficiency no less than admirable. I learned to recognise you were leaving by the sounds you made packing. Good thing too, because you never told me you were going, except that first time when you came in and ordered me to wake up.

*Talk to me or I'm leaving.*

For two days I had lay pinioned to the couch, unable to convince myself to at least drink some water from the glass on the coffee table.

*You refuse to speak. You refuse to eat.*

I tried to explain that I could not speak, that when I tried, the words I thought were mine a moment before abandoned me.

You left anyway.

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Homework: consider what life would be like if nothing unexpected ever happened.

The psychologist forgot that she set me the same task the week before.

I applied myself but couldn't help but think it a facile exercise: the idea that a surprise birthday party may offset being held hostage by an armed man, that my nearest and dearest yelling *happy birthday* could be traded off against a shotgun blast, that a welcome bunch of flowers or box of chocolates could ameliorate the spray of pellets, the explosion of plaster – or worse – not knowing until the dust settled, because I could not see or hear, who had survived the blast, or who might survive the one that came after.

The cons list streaked ahead. Without the unexpected there would be no: *cancer, broken bones, late trains, plane crashes, murder, manslaughter, rape, child abuse, house fires, acts of terrorism, earthquakes, floods, bushfires, handkerchief-evading green nuggets clinging tenaciously to the end of one's nose all day, avalanches, mine collapses, lightning strikes, drownings, early periods/late periods/no periods, dog shit on new shoes, volcanic eruptions, bee stings, infidelity, betrayal, flat tyres, bird bombs, laddered stockings, broken nails, premature grey hairs, lost wallets, burglaries, farts on the train, kidnapping, snake bite, miscarriages, wedgies, spiders in the linen cupboard.*

Or *diarrhoea*. Truly, let's not forget *diarrhoea*.

Life without the unexpected looked pretty damned fine to me.

The pros list brightened with *lottery wins* until I reasoned that the odds of being in a car crash were so much better.

The idea that catastrophe had to be accepted as some sort of karmic trade-off for sex on the beach dinged my bullshit detector squarely in the red zone.

Psychologist number two assumed an omniscience that made Bipolar Bill look humble. She held forth on every subject except the man with the shotgun who plagued my nightmares.

When I would not defer to her opinions, she said I refused to see the truth and used the panic attacks I had by then as a stick to beat me with.

*Sarah, do you want your panic attacks to stop?*

She niggled at my faith like a rotten tooth she would excise. She herself believed that the crystal on her desk emitted favourable energy.

Then there was the mirroring I wasn't supposed to notice – leaning forward when I leaned forward, assuming any position I assumed – and the unwelcome parenting: smiling approbation when I pleased her; scowling and angry tones when I didn't.

She liked to ask leading questions while staring into the distance and pursing her lips. I think that look was supposed to convey profound thought. It put me in mind of vacuum cleaner salesman trying to upsell me from the model under my arm to the one with the allergy filter in the window.

She claimed an impossible knowledge of my dreams.

My mind set her a little test without letting me in on the joke until it was over. I had a dream about a rocking horse and a milk crate that I told her about, insisting that we could go no further until we uncovered the meaning of it.

The milk crate transpired to be a ruse invented to see what she would make of it. The rocking horse was another matter. I know the details wouldn't interest you so I

won't go into them, other than to say that when she got it wrong I knew without doubt she could not be trusted.

Exit, psychologist number two.



The media have to tip-toe around the subject of suicide, but can say what they like about someone like me, with no regard for consequence.

In the days following the incident, camera crews camped out on our front nature strip.

By day three, when I continued to refuse interviews, they took to having a lunch break in the pub around the corner. The walls were closing in on me. Every time I looked up the ceiling raced down and I shrieked, expecting to be crushed. Thinking the reporters gone, I ventured outside and turned my face to the sun.

One had stayed behind. Her name was Stacy and she would go on to win a Gold Logie.

Stacy promised solemnly that by telling my story I would be helping others. I didn't fall for that, but suddenly it seemed that the walls and ceiling would stop trying to crush me if I explained the decision I was forced to make that day: stay with those I love most on this earth or leave and get help.

The money I was paid for the interview would keep the other television networks away, said Stacy. The media siege would end; my home could be my own again.

She offered me sixty thousand dollars.

I make no apologies for wanting that money. Not even now. I saw before me God's own eraser. With that something good, I could wipe away the bad thing. The incident need never have happened.

News of my paid interview headlined the evening bulletin on every station. The reporters who missed out, who themselves offered me vast sums of money – now called me the coward who ran, abandoning her elderly parents to an armed madman.

My victim bona-fides were annihilated. I was scum exploiting tragedy for an *undisclosed sum*, which, according to *sources*, was said to be in a region ten times greater than sixty thousand dollars.



I went back to the beach a couple of days later and sat on the sand, thinking about that endless summer in my childhood.

I had forgotten about a time when I decided to walk the length of the breakwater, trying to get a closer look at the horizon. The stones were pointy and hurt my wet feet. I kept going, hoping, in the magical way of a child, that it would get better the further I went, but of course it didn't. The rocks only grew sharper with distance, leaving me no choice but to go back the way I had come, over the same pointy stones, and by then, on thoroughly tender feet.

I could have slept in our bed that night – you were already gone. The house seemed to grow more echoes with your every leaving, I guess because you took more away with you each time, sometimes arriving with an empty bag for the talks we were supposed to have about our future.

Instead I returned to the couch and willed myself to dream of the sea as it was once upon a time, when the remembered motion of waves lulled a child to sleep.



I have no seaman's love of the craft; its labour stirs no poetic sentiment within me. Its groans and cries may swell the heart of a tourist, if a tourist had the heart for these swells, their cries of fear and anguish would drown the protests of the tiny boat; its

lament would not be heard above the roiling seas, swell and crash, groaning boat, crying waves, trouble the ear of no living soul in this world.

Above the swells so high, the face of my heart, features unseen through the fog you peer, wonder at my tiny boat quaking beneath your ship high above me. I'm scared to be so close looking up up up; toss me a ladder? I would join you on your liberty ship. Send me the ladder to reach you. I want to be with you, where you are is love and comfort and freedom from pain you don't understand. There is no ladder for me; the sea takes me; teeming swirling seething; I reach for a sky that exists beyond my sight, for the blue of it – the blue means air. I breathe the light unafraid. I have trained for this. I will not be crushed. I will not be swamped, *if* I keep my head tread water, look up, up up up.

Send me the ladder!

*Thunder* your voice, the whirlpool breaks, I am swamped! I am swamped! Water over my face, my air taken, my face awash.

Demons sleep; monsters wake in shock; obscenely rent – soft frail pink, torn beyond repair – my favourite pyjamas, a casualty of the screaming bed.

The screaming bed; a weeping door; the sounds of leaving.

Captain, take me with you.