

I
Falling

'But in the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself.'

—Albert Camus, *A Happy Death*

The day I died

I CAN REMEMBER the day the old me died.

It started with a thought. Something was going wrong. That was the start. Before I realised what it was. And then, a second or so later, there was a strange sensation inside my head. Some biological activity in the rear of my skull, not far above my neck. The cerebellum. A pulsing or intense flickering, as though a butterfly was trapped inside, combined with a tingling sensation. I did not yet know of the strange physical effects depression and anxiety would create. I just thought I was about to die. And then my heart started to go. And then *I* started to go. I sank, fast, falling into a new claustrophobic and suffocating reality. And it would be way over a year before I would feel anything like even half-normal again.

Up until that point I'd had no real understanding or awareness of depression, except that I knew my mum had suffered from it for a little while after I was born, and

that my great-grandmother on my father's side had ended up committing suicide. So I suppose there had been a family history, but it hadn't been a history I'd thought about much.

Anyway, I was twenty-four years old. I was living in Spain – in one of the more sedate and beautiful corners of the island of Ibiza. It was September. Within a fortnight, I would have to return to London, and reality. After six years of student life and summer jobs. I had put off being an adult for as long as I could, and it had loomed like a cloud. A cloud that was now breaking and raining down on me.

The weirdest thing about a mind is that you can have the most intense things going on in there but no one else can see them. The world shrugs. Your pupils might dilate. You may sound incoherent. Your skin might shine with sweat. But there was no way anyone seeing me in that villa could have known what I was feeling, no way they could have appreciated the strange hell I was living through, or why death seemed such a phenomenally good idea.

I stayed in bed for three days. But I didn't sleep. My girlfriend Andrea came in with water at regular intervals, or fruit, which I could hardly eat.

The window was open to let fresh air in, but the room was still and hot. I can remember being stunned that I was still alive. I know that sounds melodramatic, but depression and panic only give you melodramatic thoughts to play with. Anyway, there was no relief. I wanted to be dead. No. That's not quite right. I didn't want to be dead, I just didn't want to be alive. Death was something that scared me. And death only happens to people who have been living. There were infinitely more people who had never been alive. I wanted to be one of those people. That old classic wish. To never have been born. To have been one of the three hundred million sperm that hadn't made it.

(What a gift it was to be normal! We're all walking on these unseen tightropes when really we could slip at any second and come face to face with all the existential horrors that only lie dormant in our minds.)

There was nothing much in this room. There was a bed with a white patternless duvet, and there were white walls. There might have been a picture on the wall but I don't think so. I certainly can't remember one. There was a book by the bed. I picked it up once and put it back down. I couldn't focus for as much as a second.

There was no way I could express fully this experience in words, because it was beyond words. Literally, I couldn't speak about it properly. Words seemed trivial next to this pain.

I remembered worrying about my younger sister, Phoebe. She was in Australia. I worried that she, my closest genetic match, would feel like this. I wanted to speak to her but knew I couldn't. When we were little, at home in Nottinghamshire, we had developed a bed-time communication system of knocking on the wall between our rooms. I now knocked on the mattress, imagining she could hear me all the way through the world.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I didn't have terms like 'depression' or 'panic disorder' in my head. In my laughable naivety I did not really think that what I was experiencing was something that other people had ever felt. Because it was so alien to me I thought it had to be alien to the species.

'Andrea, I'm scared.'

'It's okay. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay.'

'What's happening to me?'

'I don't know. But it's going to be okay.'

‘I don’t understand how this can be happening.’

On the third day, I left the room and I left the villa,
and I went outside to kill myself.

Why depression is hard to understand

IT IS INVISIBLE.

It is not ‘feeling a bit sad’.

It is the wrong word. The word depression makes me think of a flat tyre, something punctured and unmoving. Maybe depression minus anxiety feels like that, but depression laced with terror is not something flat or still. (The poet Melissa Broder once tweeted: ‘what idiot called it “depression” and not “there are bats living in my chest and they take up a lot of room, ps. I see a shadow”?’) At its worst you find yourself wishing, desperately, for any other affliction, any physical pain, because the mind is infinite, and its torments – when they happen – can be equally infinite.

You can be a depressive and be happy, just as you can be a sober alcoholic.

It doesn't always have an obvious cause.

It can affect people – millionaires, people with good hair, happily married people, people who have just landed a promotion, people who can tap dance and do card tricks and strum a guitar, people who have no noticeable pores, people who exude happiness in their status updates – who seem, from the outside, to have no reason to be miserable.

It is mysterious even to those who suffer from it.

A beautiful view

THE SUN WAS beating hard. The air smelt of pine and the sea. The sea was right there, just below the cliff. And the cliff edge was only a few steps away. No more than twenty, I would say. The only plan I had was to take twenty-one steps in that direction.

‘I want to die.’

There was a lizard near my feet. A real lizard. I felt a kind of judgement. The thing with lizards is that they don’t kill themselves. Lizards are survivors. You take off their tail and another grows back. They aren’t mopers. They don’t get depressed. They just get on with it, however harsh and inhospitable the landscape. I wanted, more than anything, to be that lizard.

The villa was behind me. The nicest place I had ever lived. In front of me, the most glorious view I had ever seen. A sparkling Mediterranean, looking like a turquoise tablecloth scattered with tiny diamonds, fringed by a dramatic

coastline of limestone cliffs and small, near-white forbidden beaches. It fit almost everyone's definition of beautiful. And yet, the most beautiful view in the world could not stop me from wanting to kill myself.

A little over a year before I had read a lot of Michel Foucault for my MA. Much of *Madness and Civilization*. The idea that madness should be allowed to be madness. That a fearful, repressive society brands anyone different as ill. But this *was* illness. This wasn't having a crazy thought. This wasn't being a bit wacky. This wasn't reading Borges or listening to Captain Beefheart or smoking a pipe or hallucinating a giant Mars bar. This was pain. I had been okay and now, suddenly, I wasn't. I wasn't well. So I was ill. It didn't matter if it was society or science's fault. I simply did not – *could not* – feel like this a second longer. I had to end myself.

I was going to do it as well. While my girlfriend was in the villa, oblivious, thinking that I had just needed some air.

I walked, counting my steps, then losing count, my mind all over the place.

'Don't chicken out,' I told myself. Or I think I told myself. 'Don't chicken out.'

I made it to the edge of the cliff. I could stop feeling

this way simply by taking another step. It was so preposterously easy – a single step – versus the pain of being alive.

Now, listen. If you have ever believed a depressive wants to be happy, you are wrong. They could not care less about the luxury of happiness. They just want to feel an absence of pain. To escape a mind on fire, where thoughts blaze and smoke like old possessions lost to arson. To be *normal*. Or, as normal is impossible, to be *empty*. And the only way I could be empty was to stop living. One minus one is zero.

But actually, it wasn't easy. The weird thing about depression is that, even though you might have more suicidal thoughts, the fear of death remains the same. The only difference is that the pain of life has rapidly increased. So when you hear about someone killing themselves it's important to know that death wasn't any less scary for them. It wasn't a 'choice' in the moral sense. To be moralistic about it is to misunderstand.

I stood there for a while. Summoning the courage to die, and then summoning the courage to live. To be. Not to be. Right there, death was so close. An ounce more terror, and the scales would have tipped. There may be a universe in which I took that step, but it isn't this one.

I had a mother and a father and a sister and a girlfriend. That was four people right there who loved me. I wished like mad, in that moment, that I had no one at all. Not a single soul. Love was trapping me here. And they didn't know what it was like, what my head was like. Maybe if they were in my head for ten minutes they'd be like, 'Oh, okay, yes, actually. You should jump. There is no way you should feel this amount of pain. Run and jump and close your eyes and just do it. I mean, if you were on fire I could put a blanket around you, but the flames are invisible. There is nothing we can do. So jump. Or give me a gun and I'll shoot you. Euthanasia.'

But that was not how it worked. If you are depressed your pain is invisible.

Also, if I'm honest, I was scared. What if I didn't die? What if I was just paralysed, and I was trapped, motionless, in that state, for ever?

I think life always provides reasons to not die, if we listen hard enough. Those reasons can stem from the past – the people who raised us, maybe, or friends or lovers – or from the future – the possibilities we would be switching off.

And so I kept living. I turned back towards the villa and ended up throwing up from the stress of it all.

A conversation across time – part one

THEN ME: I want to die.

NOW ME: Well, you aren't going to.

THEN ME: That is terrible.

NOW ME: No. It is wonderful. Trust me.

THEN ME: I just can't cope with the pain.

NOW ME: I know. But you are going to have to. And it will be worth it.

THEN ME: Why? Is everything perfect in the future?

NOW ME: No. Of course not. Life is never perfect. And I still get depressed from time to time. But I'm at a better place. The pain is never as bad. I've found out who I am. I'm happy. Right now, I am happy. The storm ends. Believe me.

THEN ME: I can't believe you.

NOW ME: Why?

THEN ME: You are from the future, and I have no future.

NOW ME: I just told you . . .

Pills

I HAD GONE days without proper food. I hadn't noticed the hunger because of all the other crazy stuff that was happening to my body and brain. Andrea told me I needed to eat. She went to the fridge and got out a carton of Don Simon gazpacho (in Spain they sell it like fruit juice).

'Drink this,' she said, unscrewing the cap and handing it over.

I took a sip. The moment I tasted it was the moment I realised how hungry I was so I swallowed some more. I'd probably had half the carton before I had to go outside and throw up again. Admittedly, throwing up from drinking Don Simon gazpacho might not be the surest sign of illness in the world, but Andrea wasn't taking her chances.

'Oh God,' she said. 'We're going now.'

'Where?' I said.

'To the medical centre.'

'They'll make me take pills,' I said. 'I can't take pills.'

‘Matt. You *need* pills. You are beyond the point at which not taking pills is an option. We’re going, okay?’

I added a question mark in there, but I don’t really remember it as a question. I don’t know what I answered, but I do know that we went to the medical centre. And that I got pills.

The doctor studied my hands. They were shaking. ‘So how long did the panic last?’

‘It hasn’t really stopped. My heart is beating too fast still. I feel weird.’ Weird nowhere near covered it. I don’t think I added to it, though. Just speaking was an intense effort.

‘It is adrenaline. That is all. How is your breathing. Have you hyperventilated?’

‘No. It is just my heart. I mean, my breathing feels . . . weird . . . but everything feels weird.’

He felt my heart. He felt it with his hand. Two fingers pressed into my chest. He stopped smiling.

‘Are you on drugs?’

‘No!’

‘Have you taken any?’

‘In my life, yes. But not this week. I’d been drinking a lot, though.’

'Vale, vale, vale,' he said. 'You need diazepam. Maximum. The most I am able to give for you.' For a doctor in a country where you could get diazepam freely over the counter, like it was paracetamol or ibuprofen, this was quite a significant thing to say. 'This will fix you. I promise.'

I lay there, and imagined the tablets were working. For a moment panic simmered down to a level of heavy anxiety. But that feeling of momentary relaxation actually triggered more panic. And this was a flood. I felt everything pull away from me, like when Brody is sitting on the beach in *Jaws* and thinks he sees the shark. I was lying there on a sofa but I felt a literal pulling away. As if something was sliding me towards a further distance from reality.

Killer

SUICIDE IS NOW – in places including the UK and US – a leading cause of death, accounting for over one in a hundred fatalities. According to figures from the World Health Organization, it kills more people than stomach cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, colon cancer, breast cancer, and Alzheimer’s. As people who kill themselves are, more often than not, depressives, depression is one of the deadliest diseases on the planet. It kills more people than most other forms of violence – warfare, terrorism, domestic abuse, assault, gun crime – put together.

Even more staggeringly, depression is a disease so bad that people are killing themselves because of it in a way they do not kill themselves with any other illness. Yet people still don’t think depression really is *that bad*. If they did, they wouldn’t say the things they say.

Things people say to depressives that they don't say in other life-threatening situations

'COME ON, I know you've got tuberculosis, but it could be worse. At least no one's died.'

'Why do you think you got cancer of the stomach?'

'Yes, I know, colon cancer is hard, but you want to try living with someone who has got it. Sheesh. Nightmare.'

'Oh, Alzheimer's you say? Oh, tell me about it, I get that all the time.'

'Ah, meningitis. Come on, mind over matter.'

'Yes, yes, your leg *is* on fire, but talking about it all the time isn't going to help things, is it?'

‘Okay. Yes. Yes. Maybe your parachute has failed. But chin up.’

Negative placebo

MEDICATION DIDN'T WORK for me. I think I was partly to blame.

In *Bad Science* Ben Goldacre points out that 'You are a placebo responder. Your body plays tricks on your mind. You cannot be trusted.' This is true, and it can surely work both ways. During that very worst time, when depression co-existed with full-on 24/7 panic disorder, I was scared of everything. I was, quite literally, scared of my shadow. If I looked at an object – shoes, a cushion, a cloud – for long enough then I would see some malevolence inside it, some negative force that, in an earlier and more superstitious century, I might have interpreted as the Devil. But the thing I was most scared of was drugs or anything (alcohol, lack of sleep, sudden news, even a massage) that would change my state of mind.

Later, during lesser bouts of anxiety, I would often find myself enjoying alcohol too much. That soft warm cushioning of existence that is so comforting you end up

forgetting the hangover that will ensue. After important meetings I would find myself in bars alone, drinking through the afternoon and nearly missing the last train home. But in 1999 I was years away from being back to this relatively normal level of dysfunction.

It is a strange irony that it was during the period when I most needed my mind to feel better, that I didn't want to actively interfere with my mind. Not because I didn't want to be well again, but because I didn't really believe feeling well again was possible, or far less possible than feeling worse. And worse was terrifying.

So I think part of the problem was that a reverse placebo effect was going on. I would take the diazepam and instantly panic, and the panic increased the moment I felt the drug have any effect at all. Even if it was a good effect.

Months later a similar thing would happen when I started taking St John's Wort. It would even happen to a degree with ibuprofen. So clearly the diazepam wasn't entirely to blame. And diazepam is far from being the strongest medication out there. Yet the feeling and level of disconnection I felt on diazepam is something others claim to feel on it too, and so I think that the drug itself (for me) was at least part of the problem.