THE INVISIBLE DRAGON

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This collection of memoir essays chronicles the author's 19 year struggle with chronic depression. "The Invisible Dragon" explores the onset of the disease and its cure. "The Silent Typewriter" looks at how it affected the author as a writer. "Roses for Trish" discusses how it affected his wife. "My Mother's Son" explores the possibility that he inherited depression from his mother. The final essay, "The Dragon Returns" probes the author's life in 2012 with the probability that he has a personality disorder.

The preface examines several depression memoirs and explores the strategies used by William Styron, Elizabeth Wurtzel and Kay Redfield Jamison to prevent sliding into the pitfalls inherent in a linear structure. Among these are the use of alternative structures, language, characterization, focus and imagery.
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Andrew Solomon wrote, "Grief is depression in proportion to circumstance; depression is
grief out of proportion to circumstance. It is tumbleweed distress that thrives on thin air, growing
despite its detachment from the nourishing earth ... Grief is a humble angel who leaves you with
strong, clear thoughts and a sense of your own depth. Depression is a demon who leaves you
appalled" (Solomon 16). Like many others, I faced my own encounter with Solomon's demon,
and it left me more than appalled. It left me wondering who I was as a human being, because
chronic depression robbed me of nineteen years of my life.

The loss of those years, and the aftermath of the "cure," are the main forces that formed
the man I am today, the very reasons that I wrote this preface at the age forty-nine. When it came
time to write my master's thesis, I knew I wanted to write about chronic depression. That
presented a set of new challenges for me as a writer. Depression's emotional impact upon me was
as if I grew up with an abusive, alcoholic parent. I felt damaged; crippled as a man, husband,
son, friend and writer. Some days, I still ask "My God, what happened to me?"

In that light, to me, a chronic depression memoir qualified as trauma narrative. Writers of
trauma narratives, myself included, have different motivations for telling their stories. Sven
Birkerts described some of these as:

Trauma-based accounts are very often private salvage operations. Rather than assuming
continuity, they must, at the deepest level, reflect and somehow compensate for its
destruction. For a trauma is a rupture, a break (literally "wound"), whether brought on by
a single experience or, more commonly, the infliction of a repeated injury that cannot be
integrated; the normal continuum of growth is violated. The impulse for expression is
different at the very core. (Birkerts 145)

Some writers of depression memoir desire to understand what happened to them. Others want to
offer hope to fellow sufferers. Still others write to educate the public. I wanted to accomplish all
three goals, and more. I didn't want to write "the portrait of the artist as a middle aged man." I
wanted to grapple with chronic depression, to comprehend it and what it did to me. I wanted to
understand who I was now, free from it, in comparison to who I was then under its effects. Finally, I wanted to answer a pair of questions I am often asked: "Why did you wait so long to go back to school?" and "Why did you wait so long to write?"

In *Narrative* magazine, Regis University professor Abigail Gosselin described the basic problems that she saw in most mental illness narratives, which included depression memoirs. She wrote that the majority of mental illness memoirs follow a linear path that begin with how the writer became sick, chronicling the worsening condition, and culminating with the writer's lowest point or cure. Such memoirs "offer sensationalistic drama that safely contains the pain, messiness, and monotony of actual experience, and they often provide moral lessons as well. To achieve these purposes, certain aspects of experience -- especially identity, subjectivity, agency, and responsibility -- must be represented simplistically and straightforwardly." She wrote that these books may be entertaining and often educational, but "In simplifying experience, this narrative structure does not reflect the lived reality of most people" (Gosselin 133). It certainly did not reflect my life between 1988 and 2007.

Faced with so many personal goals, and potential pitfalls as outlined by Gosselin, I knew that new strategies would be needed if this project were to succeed. This essay examines the strategies of structure, focus, character, language, and imagery as used by William Styron, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and Kay Redfield Jamison to write their depression memoirs. In the process, I discuss how I used the same strategies to write *The Invisible Dragon*, how I followed Styron, Wurtzel and Jamison, or developed new ones to fit the needs of my goals.
Strategy: Structure

When I write a memoir essay, I usually use a linear, chronological structure. That served well in essays narrating some of my childhood moments. That format, however, required the use of far more intermittent details to link the scenes and reflection together than I was comfortable using for a memoir about the effects of a disease that dominated two decades of my life. It required too many moments of "and then this happened." Those scenes would be superfluous in my examination of depression, but necessary for the overall story to make sense. Sven Birkerts summarized the problem those links create when he wrote, "Even the juiciest scandals and revelations topple before the drone of 'And then ... and then ...'" (Birkerts 1). That caused me to re-examine the use of linear structure for *The Invisible Dragon*.

Elizabeth Wurtzel used a linear structure for her memoir, *Prozac Nation*. Kay Redfield Jamison did the same for *An Unquiet Mind*. For them, that structure worked and made sense within the context of their diseases. Wurtzel's illness appeared when she was a child, while Jamison's manifested itself in high school. They needed to depict their lives prior to the onset of the disease, and show their descent into bipolar disorder throughout their lives. They also had the space of a full length book to work with, and used other strategies to avoid the pitfalls of the linear narrative when applied to depression memoir. I did not have the luxury of unlimited page length, and my depression struck when I was an adult.

In the infancy stage of this project, I read an essay written by playwright and book critic Neil Genzlinger. In "The Problem with Memoirs," he wrote that a good memoir is "not a regurgitation of ordinariness or ordeal, not a dart thrown desperately at a trendy topic, but a shared discovery" (Genzlinger). To me, that meant a good memoir should be a mystery, as if narrator and reader are on a mutual journey of understanding. I thought that would be ideal for
accomplishing the goals I had for this project. That allowed the reader to experience depression as I did, and feel as if she or he discovered my epiphanies at the same time. Following Genzlinger's advice, and with both Gosselin and Birkerts' identified problems in mind, I decided not to write *The Invisible Dragon* as a book with a linear structure, but as a collection of essays all centered around my ordeal with depression. That required a thematic structure. I was in good company.

William Styron chose a thematic structure for his memoir of depression, *Darkness Visible*. The subtitle of *Darkness Visible* is *A Memoir of Madness*. This book was not his life's story. It was strictly an intimate reflection of an illness. By focusing on one facet of his life, he eliminated the small details of life required to link a larger portrait. He examined three separate, but connected, themes: his personal ordeal with depression and how it affected him, his opinion about the nature of the disease and his own layman's definition, and his reflections of other depressives that he knew.

Although a small book of 87 pages, Styron divided *Darkness Visible* into ten chapters. In five of the chapters, Styron narrated his ordeal in the order it happened, from the day depression settled on him in Paris in 1985, to the day he was released from a psychiatric hospital. In the other five chapters, he explored his other two themes in depth. Chapters 4, 9 and 10 offer his definition and reflections on the illness. In chapter 2, Styron looked at the life of Albert Camus and reflected upon his struggle with depression. In chapter 3, he discussed Abbie Hoffman and Randall Jarrell's ordeals.

Styron began his story in the middle. While this is standard practice for novels and literary memoirs, Gosselin implied that it was still uncommon for most mental illness narratives.1

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1 The majority of chronic depression memoirs were not written by writers. In keeping with the disease's wide scope, most depression narratives have been written by chefs (portions of Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*), art
Styron opened *Darkness Visible* with the day he won the prestigious Prix del Duca literature award in Paris. Yet, the first sentence of the first chapter told the reader that this day would not go the way he hoped: "In Paris on a chilly evening late in October of 1985 I first became fully aware that the struggle with the disorder in my mind -- a struggle which had engaged me for several months -- might have a fatal outcome" (Styron 3).

From there, he led the reader on a journey through his life as depression nearly destroyed him. As soon as he seemed ready to write "and then," he switched themes, usually to the theme of his reflections of the disease. After spending time discussing his second or third themes, he returned to the first. He, too, took his reader on a shared discovery, by never following a direct time-line, but by following his themes.

Once he was released from the psychiatric hospital in chapter 8, which would be the climax of most linear narratives, Styron turned to what was actually the chronological beginning. In chapter 9, he explored the origins of his depression. He admitted, "The morbid condition proceeded, I have come to believe, from my beginning years -- from my father, who battled the gorgon for much of his lifetime, and had been hospitalized in my boyhood after a despondent spiraling downward that in retrospect I saw greatly resembled mine" (Styron, 79). He inherited chronic depression. Only after his own ordeal could he look back and recognize the same in his father. Then, he examined the possibility that his mother's death when he was thirteen may have contributed to his later illness.

Had Styron followed a linear structure, he would have begun *Darkness Visible* with those descriptions of his parents. That would have robbed the revelation of its power. It would also

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critics (John Bentley Mays' *In the Jaws of the Black Dogs*), actors (*Down Came the Rain* by Brooke Shields), singers (Marie Osmond's *Behind the Smile*), athletes (*My Secret Life* by Amanda Beard), and rock stars or their families (*Falling to Pieces* by Mary Weiland, ex-wife of Scott Weiland of Stone Temple Pilots), just to name a small sample.
have forced Styron to at least superficially describe his childhood, teen years and adult years. The linear structure would have forced him to rely upon "and then ... and then ..." just to take the reader to the day in 1985 when depression struck him in Paris. He circumvented that need by placing the beginning at the end.

Styron's success with the thematic structure convinced me to use it for The Invisible Dragon. I decided to write my memoir as five separate essays, instead of one book. Within each essay, I could focus on one facet of depression and what it did to me. In the context of a thematic structure, I could ignore years of my life, such as the time I tried to be an organic farmer and when I was a licensed minister. While entertaining and interesting stories, they did not add to the discussion of depression that I wanted to bring to the larger conversation on the illness, nor did they help me achieve my personal goals for this project. Instead of taking the reader on a day-by-day journey of my years with depression, I decided to examine what it was to me and how it felt, how it affected me as a writer, how it affected my wife, the possibility that I inherited it, and my life today with the probability that depression was a symptom of a larger personality disorder. Through such a structure, I could ignore the other facets of my life, or incorporate them if I thought they fit the five major themes.

Three of my five essays also followed a thematic structure. Chapter 1, "The Invisible Dragon," served as an introductory essay. I wanted it to convey the horror and pain I felt personally, because depression feels different to each victim. I chose two themes: depression and its effects on me, and why I waited nineteen years to seek professional help. The theme of depression was presented as scenes, while the theme of questioning my own motives was presented as reflection interjected between the other theme. Chapter 5, "The Dragon Returns,"
dealt with the emergence of a new mood disorder, and the possibility that I may have a personality disorder as well.

"My Mother's Son," the fourth chapter, also follows a thematic structure, but this one was a little different. The overarching theme was that I may have inherited depression from my mother, who in turn, inherited it from hers. To avoid revealing too much to my reader too soon, and to convey the reader on our shared discovery, I adopted the structure of a mystery novel. I deliberately withheld information until needed, and revealed some "red herrings" early to deceive the reader. I believed that this mystery novel structure would accomplish the goal of taking the reader on a shared discovery.

The third chapter presented the most difficulty. In "Roses for Trish," I wanted to show my wife's side of my story. Most depression victims feel that they suffer alone, but they do not. Like any other illness, depression affects a victim's loved ones. I wanted to give Trish a chance to tell how my depression affected her. My first attempts stifled her voice, moving her into the background as a secondary character. To keep her in the center, and give her a chance to speak, I chose the structure of the magazine article -- feature journalism. This structure allowed Trish to remain in the center of the story and for her voice to become the loudest. It moved me into the background, yet still allowed me the room to reflect. While not examined in this essay, feature journalism is the structure Andrew Solomon chose for *The Noonday Demon*, in which he interviewed 100 victims of chronic depression.

"The Silent Typewriter," chapter 2, is the only essay written in a linear structure. For that essay, I wanted to show the effects depression had on me as a writer. To do that with the power I wished, and to show the joy I feel in writing, I had to also show my life before and after depression. That required a linear narrative. I avoided Gosselin and Birkerts' identified problems
with the structure, and took the reader on a shared discovery, by employing another strategy -- that of strict focus.
Strategy: Focus

I chose Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind* as the example of focus, and her book served as my guide for writing "The Silent Typewriter." I chose it not so much because of what it was, but because of what it wasn't. That is not to say that William Styron and Elizabeth Wurtzel were not focused. Both of their books focused exclusively on depression and its effects. Their books, however, would not exist without depression. Jamison still could have written her memoir without mentioning depression. In that case, it would have been a coming of age story, an entertaining college narrative, or a career memoir, and would have been successful as any of the three. By focusing every scene and every reflection upon bipolar disorder, Jamison kept her memoir from becoming any other type of memoir, transforming it into a highly regarded examination of a disease.

In keeping with the different set of goals writers have for penning a depression memoir, hers were complex. She wanted to tell her story, but it filled her with trepidation. Jamison was not only a victim of bipolar disorder, she was also one of the nation's leading experts on the disease and a faculty member at Johns Hopkins University. "Clinicians have been, for obvious reasons of licensing and hospital privileges, reluctant to make their psychiatric problems known to others" (Jamison 7). As a clinician, she wanted to reach out to her patients to say "I understand," so she wrote "I am tired of hiding" (Jamison 7). She also wanted to demonstrate, on a tangible level, why medication was as important to mental health as psychotherapy.

Every scene, every character, and every moment of reflection within *An Unquiet Mind* focused upon bipolar disorder and its effects upon the narrator. For instance, in describing her attendance at a garden party hosted by the chairman of UCLA's psychology department, she wrote:
My memories of the garden party were that I had a fabulous, bubbly, seductive, assured time. My psychiatrist, however, in talking with me about it much later, recollected it very differently. I was, he said, dressed in a remarkably provocative way, totally unlike the conservative manner in which he had seen me dressed over the preceding year. I had on much more makeup than usual and seemed, to him, to be frenetic and far too talkative. He says he remembers having thought to himself, Kay looks manic. I, on the other hand, had thought I looked splendid. (Jamison 71)

In reflecting upon the moment, Jamison maintained her focus on the illness, instead of any glory she felt at the time. Furthermore, instead of reflecting herself, she reflected through the eyes of an objective colleague, one who saw things differently, one who connected the event to the disease, even when Jamison herself did not at the time.

Jamison did not limit her focus to just the exuberance of mania. She also focused on the crushing effect of the depressed times. In describing her appointment to UCLA's psychology department, what should have been the highlight of her life to that point, she wrote:

I was hired as an assistant professor in the UCLA Department of Psychiatry, got good parking for the first time in my life, joined the faculty club posthaste, and began to work my way up the academic food chain. I had a glorious -- as it turns out, too glorious -- summer, and within three months of becoming a professor, I was ravingly psychotic. (Jamison 62-63)

Even here, in a moment of triumph, Jamison returned to bipolar disorder and its effects. She didn't even allow herself as the main character to enjoy good parking before she inserted the negative side of bipolar disorder.

When I wrote "The Silent Typewriter," I decided to follow Jamison's sense of focus. I wanted that essay to serve as a spotlight on my writing career and how depression affected it. "The Silent Typewriter" easily could have become a career narrative or a school memoir, as I have many entertaining stories of writing in high school and my first job after college was as a small town reporter. I once stayed up until 3 AM in the wet woods on a January night in Alabama just to photograph a hound worth a quarter of a million dollars. While engrossing, that
tale, like many of my others, had no place in this narrative. To accomplish my goals for this piece, I had to maintain firm focus. If a moment or scene did not fall within that spotlight, I eliminated it. That required a sense of discipline I had never imposed upon myself before. Every moment, every scene, that I included had to somehow relate to depression and writing. At times, that focus wanted to evaporate. I bolstered my focus by using yet another strategy, that of a carefully defined narrator character.
Strategy: The Narrator's Character

The concept of the narrator as a character in a memoir is similar to that of the narrator in fiction. The narrator is not the writer, but a character created by the writer to represent himself or herself on the page. There are often two levels to a memoir narrator's character: the older, wiser narrator looking back, and the younger (often naive) narrator performing the action upon the page. For most memoirs, I usually create a narrator's character that is not too far removed from myself the writer. I realized that would not work for "The Silent Typewriter," not if I wanted to adhere to a strict focus of depression and how it destroyed my career. I had to create a new form of narrator's character, a distillation that kept within the theme and focus of the essay.

Elizabeth Wurtzel did the same thing when she created herself as a narrator's character for Prozac Nation. Wurtzel turned herself into a vulnerable girl demonstrating all the madness of the mania and depression of bipolar disorder. Her descriptions of her world demonstrated a woman on the edge of insanity: "I wanted more coke. MORE! COKE! NOW!" (Wurtzel 6) and "Okay, I think, lying in my bed, Let's face it, girl, you live in a fucking anomic here. Of course you're going crazy, Elizabeth. People tend to go crazy when they don't even have a container of milk in the refrigerator" (Wurtzel 208). She also wrote, "Lawyers everywhere. Well, really there were only two" (Wurtzel 95).

She sounded like a narcissist brat. She readily admitted that when she wrote "I don't mean to sound like a brat" (Wurtzel 8). This self-obsession was a deliberate act. Wurtzel, the writer, was far better at word choice that she implied, having been a staff writer for Rolling Stone, The New Yorker and New York Magazine. Most writers do not use all-caps, slang, sentence fragments and run-on sentences, except for special effect in a portion of narrative. Ordinary people, however, do write or at least speak like that, especially when they, like Wurtzel, grapple with the
question "what is wrong with me?" Wurtzel wanted to present herself as an ordinary person dealing with an extraordinary illness. She wanted to demonstrate, at a visceral level, the madness she felt living a life out of control. Instead of telling that to her reader, or even showing it through scenes, she showed it through her own eyes, by creating a character for herself who was almost insane. She removed everything from Elizabeth Wurtzel the character that did not convey the idea of a woman on the brink of madness.

For "The Silent Typewriter," I went further than I ever had in creating a narrator's character of myself. Similar to Wurtzel, I distilled myself to the bare essence of what I wanted to convey to my reader. I eliminated everything about myself that was not Nathan Boutwell, the writer. In the process, I discovered who I really was at my core. I knew I loved Medieval tales and stories of heroes, but I had no idea how much I did until I stripped everything else away and saw how much of that remained.

I also created a different narrator's character for "My Mother's Son." For that essay, I turned myself into a detective, trying to unearth the truth of my deceased mother and grandmother. My approach was to think of myself saying to Mom and Buh, "Just the facts, ma'am." The shift in narrator's character allowed me to also shift another strategy, one that I enjoyed. It allowed me to use different language.
Strategy: Language

One of the problems I have analyzing any piece of literature is that I tend to get lost in the language used by the writer. From the lofty philosophy of Walt Whitman to the terse compactness of Ernest Hemingway, I love how people use words. It is no different for me analyzing depression memoir. The three writers I chose to serve as guides all chose words in different ways. Perhaps the best way to examine how Styron, Wurtzel and Jamison employed language in their respective memoirs is to explore how they defined depression itself.

Styron made that analysis a little difficult by spreading his definition of depression throughout his book, instead of confining it to a few tidy paragraphs. He came the closest in defining depression when he described why he ignored Madame del Duca's invitation to lunch:

But my behavior was really the result of the illness, which had progressed far enough to produce some of its most famous and sinister hallmarks: confusion, failure of mental focus and lapse of memory. At a later stage my entire mind would be dominated by anarchic disconnections; as I have said, there was now something that resembled bifurcation of mood; lucidity of sorts in the early hours of the day, gathering murk in the afternoon and evening. (Styron 14)

Styron's word choice seemed odd to me. His description of depression, indeed his word choice and sentence structure for the entire book, read like a Victorian Era narrative, as if written by A. Conan Doyle. That was in keeping with the whole tone of his book, however. Styron did not have characters, as they are defined by writers of fiction or contemporary memoir. He described no one, and few of the people who appear in Darkness Visible spoke in quotations. He seemed to tell, more than show. This book, however, was a reflection of an illness, a look back at its effects. It was as if Styron recounted his ordeal by the fireplace after supper. Indeed, the first chapter began as a lecture presented at Johns Hopkins University (Styron i). As pure reflection, then, Styron had the leeway to present his narrative in a more philosophical tone, reminiscent of
Walt Whitman's introduction to *Leaves of Grass*. Therefore, he had the freedom to use words such as "bifurcation," a word hardly ever used in conversation or literature today.

Elizabeth Wurtzel did not have that leeway. She had a story to tell, one that evoked madness, and needed to convey the insanity she felt. That required a sense of immediacy. She had to be more direct in her description of bipolar disorder:

... depression is not a sudden disaster. It is more like cancer. At first its tumorous mass is not even noticeable to the careful eye, and then one day -- wham! -- there is a huge, deadly seven-pound lump lodged in your brain or your stomach or your shoulder blade and this thing that your own body has produced is actually trying to kill you. Depression is a lot like that: Slowly, over the years, the data will accumulate in your heart and mind, a computer program for total negativity will build into your system, making life feel more and more unbearable. But you won't even notice it coming on, thinking that it is somehow normal, something about getting older, about turning eight or turning twelve or turning fifteen, and then one day you realize that your entire life is just awful, not worth living, a horror and a black spot on the white terrain of human existence. One morning you wake up afraid you are going to live. (Wurtzel 21-22)

Here, Wurtzel drew a comparison between depression and cancer, a far more understood disease. She also compared depression to a computer program. Between the two comparisons, she probably drew metaphors that the majority of her readers understood. The interesting point of her description was the use of the second person, the "you." Second person perspective is a gutsy device, and best left in the hands of writers such as Jay McInerney. Wurtzel seldom used second person narrative in *Prozac Nation*, but she did here, to pull the reader into her world, and let the reader feel for herself or himself what it must be like to wake up afraid that he or she would live another day.

Perhaps deliberately, perhaps not, Jamison seemed to walk a line between Styron and Wurtzel. She used philosophical language to define depression, but at the same time, she made it more personal:
Sensuality is pervasive and the desire to seduce and be seduced irresistible. Feelings of ease, intensity, power, well-being, financial omnipotence, and euphoria pervade one's marrow. But somewhere, this changes. The ideas are far too fast, and there are far too many; overwhelming confusion replaces clarity. Memory goes. Humor and absorption on friends' faces are replaced by fear and concern. Everything previously moving with the grain is now against you -- you are irritable, angry, frightened, uncontrollable, and enmeshed totally in the blackest caves of the mind. You never knew those caves were there. It will never end, for madness carves its own reality. (Jamison 67)

Jamison's word choice not only defined bipolar disorder, but the dichotomy between the two states. To describe the manic state, she used words that would seem desirable to most people; the words of self-empowerment, of the pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Jamison made the manic state seem almost beautiful, and indeed, it became Jamison's narcotic. To describe the depression state, however, she used a metaphor -- a black cave. That struck a primal fear in most readers, at least it did in me. Some readers probably wondered "Where is the giant spider who can see me?" Others may have thought "Where is the 1,000 foot drop off?" Yet others may have remembered Plato's cave allegory. Jamison described the horror with one metaphor.

Three completely different ways to describe depression; three different uses of language. While not deliberate, I followed more of Jamison's language for The Invisible Dragon. If I wanted to avoid the trap identified by Gosselin, and to present chronic depression as the serious illness I believe it is, I needed to avoid sensationalism. While I don't try to manipulate the emotions of my readers (the strict definition of sensationalism), I do tend to use hyperbole, to exaggerate in my storytelling. That is not so much to embellish the truth but because it is part of my cultural consciousness as a Southerner. Anyone who has sat around a Florida fish camp or Appalachian campfire at night should have noticed that each ghost story, each hunting tale, each war exploit, is more adventurous than the previous one. This is not a case of lying. It is simply that Southerners like to outdo each other (McWhiney). Exaggerations such as hyperbole are permitted in the rules of Southern oral tradition. Listeners know the storyteller is stretching the
truth, but none of them seem to mind. I grew up with that tradition and the use of hyperbole, hearing it from my parents, grandparents and most of my aunts and uncles.

Hyperbole did not belong in this project, however. Hyperbole carries a level of humor, an invisible wink to the reader, that lightens the subject. Depression did not deserve to be treated with any sense of humor. It nearly destroyed me, and I know what it does to other sufferers. If I wanted to present depression as a monster and fill it with its true horror, then I needed to let it bring that horror to the reader in its own terms. I had no need to exaggerate the length of the monster's claws or the depth of its roar. I decided to take a serious approach to depression and let it terrify the reader through blunt fact. I chose to describe what depression did to me with no embellishment, and let the reader reach his or her own conclusions.

Stripped of hyperbole, I now had the freedom to let the words flow in an organic form and at an organic pace. While still using a poetic, almost philosophical tone, I chose words that were more subtle, more terse. As as example, and to compare myself to Styron, Wurtzel and Jamison, I defined depression as:

It felt like a tangible creature that ate me from the inside out. Yet, it remained invisible and, for half the time it was with me, nameless. Being a romanticist and a Medievalist, sometimes I thought of my sorrow as a dragon, consuming me the way the great beasts did the England of lore. I wish it had been a giant reptile. I would have known how to escape it. There was no escaping this monster. It came from within me, as if it were me, a manifestation of my worst nightmares and darkest loneliness combined together with what I can only call eternal grief. I use that term a lot to describe how consuming it was, but it is the only term that seems accurate now. When both of my parents died within four months of each other in 2006, I realized that the grief I felt for their loss and the grief that consumed me in 1988 were indistinguishable.

Prior to this project, I would have extended the metaphor of the dragon into the realm of hyperbole, describing it as ravaging, grinning, and drooling its way through my life. That did not fit with my goals for this project, much less help convey the reader on a shared discovery with
me. The humor of such language would have overshadowed it and reduced the effort to comedy. As it was, I had a hard enough time controlling metaphor, my usual form of imagery.
Strategy: Imagery

The term imagery means different things to different people. To me, it means the descriptions invoked by writers. I love dense description of place, and believe that the setting of a story should be treated as a character, whether that story is fiction or non-fiction. I don't just want to see the setting in my mind as I read, I want to smell it and hear it, too. Given the space restrictions of an essay, and the amount of deep reflection required to convey my illness, I found my usual descriptions of place, items and even people, forced from the page. There still had to be a way to evoke the physical place, and the images I saw and felt. William Styron, Elizabeth Wurtzel and Kay Redfield Jamison may have felt the same way when they approached imagery in their works.

Styron, in keeping with his short memoir, used the tersest imagery of the three. In his first chapter, he describes the Hotel Washington, on the Champs-Elysees of Paris, in terms that even an untraveled American like myself can see in my mind:

In those days the hotel was one of those many damp, plain hostleries made for tourists, chiefly American, of very modest means who, if they were like me -- colliding nervously for the first time with the French and their droll kinks -- would always remember how the exotic bidet, positioned solidly in the drab bedroom, along with the toilet far down the ill-lit hallway, virtually defined the chasm between Gallic and Anglo-Saxon cultures. (Styron 3-4)

At first reading, this may seem like nationalist, or at least parochial, language. The images, however, linger. Terse, spartan and minimal, the images conveyed the sense of a stripped down hotel, almost a youth hostel, defined by a bidet (a device that I have yet to see for myself). Styron's imagery here indicates why he chose this hotel -- it was the meeting point between French extravagance (the bidet) with American practicality (the toilet).

At the same time, Styron began to work his way toward the moment later in the day when depression struck him, through the use of words such as "damp," "plain," and "drab." Those are
not the words of exuberance, but of sorrow. The overall image here was one of grayness.

Through the use of the word "chasm," and the division between French and English (American) cultures, Styron prepared the reader, and himself, for the division between the how he should have felt at winning a prestigious literary award, and how he actually felt.

More in keeping with the nature of my project, was the imagery invoked by Jamison. Jamison described her year as a foreign exchange student in Scotland:

In was, it is, a mystical place: full of memories of cold, clear nights and men and women in evening dress, long gloves, silk scarves, kilts, and tartan sashes over the shoulders of women in elegant floor-length silk gowns; an endless round of formal balls; late dinner parties of salmon, hams, fresh game, sherry, malt whiskies, and port; bright scarlet gowns on the backs of students on bicycles, in dining and lecture halls, in gardens, and on the ground as picnic blankets in the spring. (Jamison 51)

This may have read like a giddy girl's experience in a land of neverending balls, but that was exactly what Jamison wanted to express. During her year in Scotland, she remained in an almost constant state of mania, the high point of bipolar disorder. Through a run-on sentence, Jamison conveyed the sense of urgency, sensuality and exuberance she felt in those manic moments. She did so through the use of carefully chosen, yet textured, adjectives. The image in this paragraph was that of a year-long party, but in her manic highs, that was exactly what Jamison felt, and why she evaded medication for nearly a decade.

I learned something from Styron and Jamison. If the use of hyperbole is inherited from my Southern culture, so is my fondness for metaphor. I am sure that most regions invoke some form of metaphor, but Southerners seem to do that more than others. Instead of just remarking "You're crazy," I usually say "You don't have all your dogs barking," a metaphor invoking my paternal grandfather's habit of buying hounds that barked in the same pitch. Recently, on an episode of Sons of Guns, Louisiana gunsmith Will Hayden said "I haven't felt this cramped since I made love in the back of a '72 Gremlin." He could have said "I'm uncomfortable," but that is
not the Southern way of speaking. I usually write the way I speak, including the heavy use of metaphor.

My thesis committee chairman, Professor Bonnie Friedman, however, took me to task for that. She told me that the use of metaphor robbed depression of its true horror by reducing it to a level that everyone already understood. The reader did not need to understand depression on his or her own terms. They already knew that. They wanted to understand it on my level, meaning without the gloss of metaphor. Just as writing without hyperbole caused me to impose new forms of discipline, writing without metaphor caused me to go even further.

I allowed myself one or two metaphors, namely that of comparing depression to a dragon. I thought that transformed it from a disease into a universal motif. Depression is at epidemic stages in the United States. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that almost 10% of the adult population in America suffers from some sort of chronic depression (NIMH). If the disease is an epidemic, then it warrants an universal metaphor. I have encountered no other metaphor more universal than that of the dragon. Cultures from Japan and China, to India, to subsaharan Africa, to the Middle East, to Europe, and American Indian and Aztec civilizations all have some form of dragon legend. While there are differences in the legends (Asian dragons are symbols of good luck, while in Europe they are ravenous sheep-eaters, and the Aztecs saw them as gods), they are still universal. So is depression, apparently.

Beyond that, however, I tried to use more direct, and less metaphorical, imagery. I avoided Elizabeth Wurtzel as an example, because she used over-the-top metaphor throughout her book, but that helped her convey her life as out of control. Mine was controlled, but sad, much like Styron and Jamison's. In the end, I followed Jamison's pattern and chose adjectives
that conveyed the feeling I felt, while at the same time, taking the reader on our shared discovery.

Andrew Solomon wrote, "Depression is grief out of proportion to circumstance." Couple that to Sven Birkerts' statement, "Rather than assuming continuity, they [depression narratives] must, at the deepest level, reflect and somehow compensate for its [continuity's] destruction." I would combine the two of them to state "Depression narrative is memoir out of proportion to chronology." Time is bent in the mind of the victim of depression, and to convey that sense of bent time to the reader, special strategies are required. These strategies may be standard to most writers of memoir, but they were not to me. I learned them the hard way, by having to use them to take my reader on our shared discovery into the heart of chronic depression. If I wanted the reader to understand why I could not "just be happy! Just get over it," then I needed to write in a way that made sense to the reader. Perhaps William Styron, Elizabeth Wurtzel and Kay Redfield Jamison thought the same thing, too.
Works Cited


PART II

THE INVISIBLE DRAGON
A cold front sat over Washington, D.C. that Saturday in late November, 1988. I looked out the sliding glass window of our apartment at the dismal sky and the perpetual winter weep that settled over our part of Bethesda, Maryland. I smiled. I've driven in tropical storms, I thought. I'm not going to let the weather stop me. Today is going to be a beautiful day. I threw on my new leather jacket, grabbed my keys and walked out to my 1986 Hyundai.

My wife, Trish, worked a second job as a unit secretary for a Bethesda hospital, so I wouldn't see her until that night. I had the whole day to myself. I planned to pick up some pipe tobacco, buy a novel, eat lunch in a local tavern, drive around in the country, then end up at home about the time Trish arrived, so we could go out to eat. I drove to Montgomery Mall in Bethesda, parking at the J.C. Penney's entrance. I browsed the men's section of Penney's before heading out to the mall and to Georgetown Tobacco.

Near a kiosk selling artificial diamond jewelry, something slammed into my stomach. It felt like boxer's punch to the gut. The force of the blow made me stop. I stood in the mall, clutching my stomach. Emptiness began to spread outward from the invisible punch. I felt like a hollow figurine made of spun glass. All of my emotions collapsed inward at the same time –
rage, lust, joy, love, envy, ecstasy. Only grief, a despair of brilliant clarity, remained. It owned me.

I wanted to sit down and cry. I told myself that six foot four inch tall men don’t do that in public. Everyone walked silently by me, making no sound. I felt like I was trapped inside a glass bowl. I felt like if I tried to touch someone, an invisible force would stand between us. Even the overhead music vanished. What just happened to me, I asked myself. Did I just have a stroke? My hands still worked. I felt my face. No fever. Maybe I just need to eat, I thought.

My feet felt encased in lead as I walked to Georgetown Tobacco. Every step seemed to suck another year out of my life. By the time I reached my destination, I felt ancient. The sales clerk asked if he could help me. It took five minutes to force the words out of my mouth. I heard the words in my mind, but could not force them through my lips.

"I’d like -- a pound -- of Vir -- ginia All -- iance and two ounces of Shen -- an -- doah," I finally croaked.

What’s wrong with me, I asked myself. The clerks and I knew each other on a first name basis, yet I stared at this man as if I had never seen him before. His smile seemed to melt into a sinister leer in my mind. I thought he was going to kill me! I wanted to run. I wanted to hide behind one of the big plants in the mall outside the store. I breathed in ragged gasps. Do something familiar to calm down, I told myself as the clerk filled little ziplock bags from the big jars of tobacco.

I decided to buy a new pipe, something tangible I could focus on and hold. It took me three minutes to tell the clerk which pipe I wanted, a curved stem briar that looked like it belonged between the lips of Sherlock Holmes. What’s wrong with me? I asked myself again. I’m an English major! I’m an editor. I was on the public speech team and in the Stetson theatre.
for three years. I don’t get stage fright. Why can’t I simply tell this man what I want? I’ve bought hundreds of cigars from him!

Leaving the tobacconist, I wiped the growing perspiration from my face and staggered to Waldenbooks. Mute people glided by me, leaving me in my bubble of misery. As I looked around, I thought, I feel so alone now. I’m in a mall full of people and I feel like the only person on the planet. I just miss the South, I told myself. So, I wandered to the history section, and emerged with a biography of Confederate general James Longstreet. I abandoned the rest of my plans for the day. Instead, I went home by way of the liquor store, arriving at our apartment with a quart of Jim Beam bourbon and a fifth of rye whiskey.

I threw my tobacco and book on the couch, ignored my cats, and stormed into the kitchen. I poured myself three shots of bourbon on top of two shots of rye. Then I trudged into the living room. Setting a tape of bluegrass music on perpetual replay, I curled up on the couch, and clutched my book to my chest. Six hours later, Trish came home. Trish is an Irish-German woman whose hair and soprano voice remind me of a cardinal perching on a full feeder and whose eyes I compare to a freshly scrubbed sky. I usually greeted her at the door with a languid kiss. That night, I didn't even look at my wife. The stereo hissed as the torn cassette spun in the tape deck. Half the bourbon was gone and a pile of soggy toilet paper lay around me on the floor.

"What’s wrong, honey?" Trish asked.

It took me five minutes to tell her. I tried to get the words out. I wanted to tell her but I just couldn't. The words refused to take shape in my mouth. All I could do was stare at her and try to move my lips. She asked if I wanted her to drive me to the hospital.

Eventually I struggled out the words "I want to go home!"
My life collapsed into days of wanting to just sit in a corner of the bedroom and weep. Everything I had been up to 1988 -- husband, son, friend, writer, fairly happy adult -- was turned inside out and painted the same shade of dull gray. I went through the almost daily mundane act of forcing myself out of the apartment in some feeble attempt to live. I went to work and I came home, and in both places my body was present but my mind was absent, as if lost on its way to find me. The only thing that made sense on those days was to cry over my own absence.

This miasma developed a predictable pattern. It struck with physical pain, always feeling like a slap to my stomach, leaving me to languish with uncontrollable grief for three days. Then, it vanished for four days. During those four days, I felt too exhausted to really live, so my level of functioning was only marginally better than when I was sad. The four days without sorrow may have been worse. During the times of freedom, I could look at myself and tell something was wrong, but never identify it. The man I had been never quite came back into focus. I remained a cipher to myself, and I missed who I had been. Then grief came back with the same relentless force. I dreaded that fourth day, my last day of freedom before another onslaught.

It felt like a tangible creature that ate me from the inside out. Yet, it remained invisible and, for half the time it was with me, nameless. Being a romanticist and a Medievalist, sometimes I thought of my sorrow as a dragon, consuming me the way the great beasts did the England of lore. I wish it had been a giant reptile. I would have known how to escape it. There was no escaping this monster. It came from within me, as if it were me, a manifestation of my worst nightmares and darkest loneliness combined together with what I can only call eternal grief. I use that term a lot to describe how consuming it was, but it is the only term that seems accurate now. When both of my parents died within four months of each other in 2006, I realized that the grief I felt for their loss and the grief that consumed me in 1988 were indistinguishable.
For the first twelve years, I never knew my misery had a name. I called it homesickness, failure, lack of purpose, anger at the economy, the wrath of God. In 2000, I finally learned that I had a clinical disorder. That year, Trish and I flew to Fort Worth, Texas, to see Bobby and Cheryl, two close friends we met when we lived in Athens, Georgia. Bobby was a young minister and an occupational therapist, and Cheryl taught elementary school. While Trish went shopping with Cheryl, I went to Starbucks with Bobby. He asked how I was doing. A classic Texan, right down to the boots and cowboy hat, Bobby could tell when I bluffed, so I knew not to hide anything from him. I told him about how I felt and what I did to try to make myself feel better.

"Old son," Bobby said. "It sounds like you have chronic depression."

"Yeah," I said. "I know I’m depressed. Even happy moments sadden me."

"That’s not what I said," Bobby responded. "Chronic depression is when you have a brain chemistry imbalance. Any doctor can fix that."

That was the first time I heard that. It was just my brain?

"Do you mean to tell me this is all physical and not emotional?"

"Bubba, that’s exactly what I mean to tell you," Bobby said.

"All this time it was my body?"

"Yep."

Bobby was right. I finally went to a doctor in 2007, and he diagnosed my suffering as chronic depression, a mood disorder, a physiological ailment. Why didn't anyone have the common decency to tell me that before Bobby did? No one told me men could suffer from chronic depression. That disease belonged to women and Vietnam veterans, at least from what I
heard. It appears that even clinicians didn't know men could suffer from depression until 1990, and it took ten more years for that news to trickle down to my ears.

It was just an illness. I still don't know how that's possible. Physicians and psychologists describe it as an illness, but depression never involves bacteria or viruses scourging the body with fever and nausea. Depression is an imbalance of brain chemistry, as mysterious in its origins as it is in its sometimes sudden departure. My life was flattened into a cardboard cutout of myself by a chemical inequality that, if measured, would be a lot less than what it takes to oversalt mashed potatoes. Some days I cannot handle that. Something as powerful and as relentless as the great melancholy that I faced deserves to be larger than a few micrograms of chemicals with strange names like serotonin and cortisol.

Even worse, something that took on Lovecraftian proportions in my life story deserves to be brought down by something equally dramatic. The larger the dragon, the larger the lance used to kill it. Instead, depression was defeated by something the size of a match head, a little pill called Wellbutrin. I took it three times a day for six months. It reset my brain chemistry. After nineteen years of agony, the monster in whose shadow I trembled was destroyed within a fragment of that time by the tiniest of foes. Depression roared into my life with unrelenting force in that mall in Washington. It faded from my life without so much as a whimper. While I don't miss depression, I do sometimes feel that its invisible retreat and unceremonious defeat robbed me of a sense of closure. It left in its wake a series of questions that I cannot answer.

My brain contained too much cortisol and not enough serotonin, causing me to experience everything in shades of sorrow, which in turn warped all my other perspectives. That is the clinical explanation for why I was depressed, but that does not answer the question why. As in, why me? I know that my chronic depression was caused by a physiological condition, but
what caused the physiological condition? That is the why I want to know. I accomplished nothing with my life, except to feel like I lost 20 years. I want to know why! I want to know what led up to that moment on that bitter November day in Washington. That will help me understand who I am today.

Psychologists believe that creative people are more prone to chronic depression than others. Maybe we are. When God formed me, I think he gave me strong physical senses, and deep emotions. Some of my friends call me a sensualist. Based on what most people write about their sensory experiences, it seems that I enjoy the taste of food more, the sight of a rose more, and the physical pleasure of sex more. Perhaps I simply put more emphasis on my senses, but they are how I experience life around me. I am also led by my emotions, responding with a visceral depth at the sight of a hungry child, a woman with bruises on her face, an old man with his hand outstretched for a quarter. My senses and emotions cause me to revel at a glorious sunset as if it were a 1950s Technicolor epic by Cecil B. DeMille complete with soundtrack by Elmer Bernstein. I have to express what I see and feel, to put it on paper. It is just too beautiful to ignore.

My senses and emotions may have left me vulnerable to depression's attack in 1988. What would have been mere circumstances to anyone else became violent stressors to me, simply because my feelings naturally blow things out of proportion. Trish experienced the same circumstances, but she shrugged and continued her life. My senses and sensitivity caused those circumstances in Washington, D.C., to twist my possibly already fragile brain chemistry past the point of no return.

I do remember 1988 as being the most stressful year of my entire life up to that point. Trish and I married in January, 1987 and we settled in Orlando, Florida, the closest city to my
hometown of DeLand and hers of Mt. Dora. We loved our lives. I went to work in the morning as a grant-writer for a non-profit organization while Trish worked as a scheduler for a motivational speaker. We made enough money to eat out, buy a few drinks, and indulge in our passion for books. We spent our nights and weekends with our friends, my parents or Trish's mother, when we didn't spend them in bed.

Then, in February, 1988, I lost my job. Somehow, I missed the deadline for the grant that funded my position. Orlando slipped into a recession around that time, and after two months of looking for a new job, any job, I found nothing. Trish's old college roommate invited us to Washington, D.C. to check out the job opportunities, so we went. Trish promptly secured a position as a secretary with the National Institutes of Health, and I became the editor of the employee newsletter for Chevy Chase Savings Bank. On the surface, we had arrived; my wife worked for the government and I was paid to write. Underneath, however, I was miserable.

The higher cost of rent in Washington forced us to live in an apartment complex that had been built in the 1960s. The low-ceilinged unit felt like a dark tunnel. It had no patio and the tiny bedrooms barely held our furniture. We seemed to be the only people in our building who spoke English and gunshots peppered the nights. Several times in our year and half there I found empty syringes next to the tires of my car. We had no friends other than Trish's old roommate, and even she was too busy to spend much time with us.

I grew up in a small Southern town, and for the first time in my life I now lived in a large Northern city. No one prepared me for the differences. While I took advantage of the cultural and historical opportunities that seemed to be on every block of Washington, I was also terrified. I had never seen a place so big and confusing. So many suits, so many big cars, so many people in a hurry. A few times I made a wrong turn and ended up on 14th Street, driving by scorched ruins
of buildings destroyed in the 1968 riots. I had never seen a sight like that before, and I didn't know how to take so many angry faces looking at me.

Even though we made more money in Washington than we did in Orlando, we couldn't made ends meet. To help us stay financially afloat, Trish took a second job, meaning she worked every night and on Saturday. For the first time in our short marriage, I only saw my wife on Sunday. I am convinced that my brain chemistry was already out of balance, and as the winter of 1988 approached, whatever held serotonin and cortisol in stasis collapsed.

People have asked why, once I knew I had chronic depression and knew a doctor could cure it, that it took me six more years to seek professional help. When I was a child, my mother's over-protective nature toward me gave me a pathological distaste of doctors. Whenever I coughed, it seemed Mom thought I had pneumonia, or worse, tuberculosis. I think I spent the majority of my childhood sitting in pediatrician's offices waiting for a shot. I learned fast to hide a case of the sniffles and to muffle a sneeze. Most kids faked a fever to stay home from school. I faked health and went to school with a fever to stay away from the doctor.

When I was ten, I came down with a bad case of mononucleosis. I am not sure how I contracted it, but it was an epidemic in my school in third grade. In the space of six months, Mom took me to seven different doctors. Six of them diagnosed mono. Every one of them swabbed my throat, inducing a severe gag reflex. They took blood tests. I watched in horror as my life flowed into tubes stuck into my arm.

"That doctor doesn't know what he's talking about!" Mom snapped as we drove home. "You don't have mono. You've never kissed a girl. It has to be something else."

So she took me to another doctor. More throat swabs, more blood tests. I still have scars from those blood tests in the folds of my right inner elbow, little dots lined up in a pentagon
shape. Mom finally stopped when a doctor in Daytona Beach diagnosed me with hepatitis. That satisfied her. During the course of a routine blood test a few years ago, I asked my doctor to check if I had ever had hepatitis. The test came back negative. The doctors who diagnosed mono had been right all along.

Between all the visits to doctors when I was a child, and that summer of blood tests and throat swabs, I decided that I would rather treat myself using naturopathic and homeopathic means. When I have a cold, I take vitamin C, eat chicken soup and stay in bed. It just seems to be a more peaceful, and less expensive, alternative to a steroid shot and a Z-pack. The only reason I went to a doctor for depression in 2007 is that Trish made me.

I didn't go to a doctor because I was afraid of doctors. That answer doesn't seem to really answer the question, does it? I do not know why I avoided professional help once I knew I suffered from chronic depression. I go to the doctor when I have something I can't treat myself, such as a broken bone or the flu. Once I learned I had a physiological mood disorder, why did I think I could treat depression myself? Why did I think I could balance my own brain chemistry, when I couldn't even see it or measure it? It seems that everyone who wrote about depression said the same thing; they avoided the help they needed. Even Kay Redfield Jamison, who as a psychology student knew medication was available and would help her, decided to self-medicate by buying a horse instead of taking lithium. Diabetics don't do this. Cancer patients don't do this. Yet, depressives do.

It's as if depression is a living creature that, once discovered, fights for its survival by pushing its host deeper into a cave of isolation. That's how mine seemed when I look back at it. I knew I was sick, that I had a physical illness. I knew doctors could fix that. But somehow, I just could not put those two pieces together to form a tangible whole that would allow me to visit a
doctor. Depression wouldn't let me. Somehow, depression twisted my reasoning so that I lived in a false reality. The delusion that I could fix my own brain made perfect sense to me. It was so logical at the time. When someone believes a delusion is reality, then he stands on the threshold of insanity.

I mulled this over with a friend of mine the other day. He said "Well, we may be the top of the evolutionary ladder, but at the end of the day we're still baboons on the savannah. When we're wounded, we still have the instinct to hide so we won't be eaten. What's the difference between hiding in a cave so you won't be eaten by a lion, and hiding in your room so you won't be eaten by society?"

He may be right. I was paranoid on some level. While I didn't think people were out to get me, I did think life was trying its best to kill me. So, maybe I denied my illness, disguising it as just sadness and trying to fake my way through any given day and situation, just so I wouldn't be pounced on by perceived predators. If life was out to get me, then I sure couldn't let it know that I was wounded. This big system of interlocking systems that we call the universe would rend me asunder if it knew I lacked the emotional capacity to flee or fight. I'm guessing now. I really have no idea. People ask me today why for twelve years I didn't catch on to the fact that I had a physical ailment, and once I did why I waited another six years to seek professional help. I am as curious about it as they are.

Being a Southerner may have contributed to my refusal to see a doctor. Other regions probably had a similar form of machismo, but the men in the South of the 1960s and 1970s still had the attitude of "men don't cry." While they showed nearly every other emotion, Southern men from the truck driver living in a mobile home to the scion of the town founder refused to show any sadness in public. They considered it a sign of weakness, and weakness could be
exploited. Women could cry all they wanted, but not men. Women were depressed, but not men. Sadness was not manly.

I never heard that at home. My father was never macho. My friends called him the quintessential Southern gentleman. He laughed at every opportunity, and sometimes created opportunities to laugh. I knew he loved Mom, not because he said so but because he believed in public displays of affection. Still, I think that Dad believed that real men never cried, even if at a subliminal level. I only saw him cry once, after Mom died. I believe that holding his grief inside led to his own death.

When my grandfather died, Dad and I stood at his casket, looking down at his still body. How could such a big heart ever stop beating, I thought. Then, I began weeping. Dad put his arm around me.

"Hold it in, son. Not in public," he said.

I never subscribed to that attitude. People know what I feel because I show my emotions. All of them. When Mom died, I cried for an hour. I screamed. I ripped my shirt. Yet, I think that the old Southern attitude of "man up about it" must have seeped into my subconscious. It surrounded me, so how could it not have. Did depression embarrass me? Did I think I was acting like a woman and not like a man? Did the thought of admitting that I couldn't get a grip on my own emotions shame me? That seems so hypocritical because I weep at Christmas Eve services when we sing "Silent Night" and feel no shame. I don't remember if I felt any embarrassment or shame over depression or not. When depression left in 2007, it took whatever rationale it had with it. All it left behind are questions that I can no longer answer.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe! I am fed up with that word. It seems that every answer I have about depression follows the word "maybe." While I can live with mystery and paradox, and
enjoy them, when it comes to something that dominated 40% of my life, I want fixed knowledge. I want something I can qualify, quantify and hold in my hand with some level of rationality. I feel I deserve that much. If there was a dragon in my living room, I want to know how the hell he got into my house. Is that too much to ask? There are very few concrete answers to any of my questions. Depression still mocks me, as if its parting shot was frustration. Depression refuses to let me wrestle it to the ground and extract any kind of finite knowledge. That disease is as elusive of a defeated foe as it was a conquering tyrant.

A few weeks ago, Trish sat on our black futon, catching up with some online friends on her laptop. I sat across the living room from her in our black wicker chair. She stood up to go to the kitchen for a snack, and grabbed her glass of water. As she walked past the coffee table, she tripped over her computer's power cord, and spilled half her water onto the keyboard of my Sager NP8130.

"Are you all right?" she asked, righting herself.

"I am, but this isn't," I said, watching the water beading on the black plastic.

I jerked the power cord from the back of my laptop and shut down the computer with a hard boot. I don't think I breathed until the screen went black from my deliberate action. Good, I thought. No damage. Then, I took my computer into the bathroom to dry off the surface. Trish walked right behind me.

"What happened?" she asked.

As I dabbed the keys with a towel, I said, "Well, you rather soaked my computer."

Trish gasped and asked, "Is it all right?"
"It was working fine when I turned it off. Now that there's no electricity running through it, it won't short out. I just have to dry it, let it air for a day or two, and it should be perfect. If I can just figure out how to take this thing apart."

I armed myself with a Phillips head screwdriver. Trish raced through Google for a schematic for my model and found one. As she called off the steps to me, I disassembled the Sager. Don't lose the screws! I won't. Do not use a hair dryer; it will ionize the parts! Thanks. There's a tab under -- ! I just found it. Don't bend the keyboard cable! Thanks. You can't separate the keyboard! Slow down, Trish, I'm not there yet. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief when I separated the two halves, and saw all the water swirling around the CPU. I shut it down just in time. Within half an hour, my computer lay on in four major pieces on the coffee table, and two damp towels lay on the floor.

I held up the cooling fins for one of the fans and said to Trish, "Well, you may have just saved my computer. This thing is clogged solid with dust and cat hair. I knew it was running hot. I was probably only a week or two from a major overheating. If you hadn't spilled that glass -- "

I looked at Trish and noticed she stared at me with tears forming in the corners of her eyes. I asked, "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine. The question is, are you? Look, it was an accident. You caught your foot. We saved the computer. No big deal. Would you feel better if I yelled at you?"

"No. But I keep expecting you to break down and scream about how unfair life is."

I said, "I used to do that, didn't I?"

"I know it's been five years since you were like that, but I'm still not used to this new you," Trish said.
"Sometimes, I'm not either."

Trish took off her glasses and wiped her eyes. I sat down by her on the futon and held her. I could not tell if she felt sad, relieved, or upset. All I knew was she felt overwhelmed. For nearly two decades, Trish prayed that I would somehow be cured from chronic depression. Now that her prayers had been answered, she still expected to hear the roar of that dragon.

I think that I do, too. While I have grown accustomed to my responses to life without what felt like eternal grief, I still listen for the familiar footprint of its approach in my mind. I ponder every feeling to see if it is a mere momentary sadness that will pass, or the herald of another three day onslaught. Like a woman who has been raped fears another assault, or a liberated slave listens for the master's bark, I ask myself daily if I am truly safe and free. Just another unanswered question left in depression's wake. Just another riddle I ask, along with why me and why didn't I seek help earlier. The answers never come. Perhaps they never will.
Chapter Two
The Silent Typewriter

Depression is the inability to construct a future.
Rollo May

The Cat Lady lived in a Victorian two-story derelict set further back on Oak Street than the other stately houses in that part of Orange City. Long tags of faded yellow paint hung from the sides of the house, revealing gray wood in patterns like those made by giant claws. No grass grew in the white sugar sand of the yard, and the scraggly azaleas struggled to produce even one bloom each spring. The rusted ornamental wire fence bordering the property looked as gnarled as the oak trees whose branches scraped against the tin roof of the house. Whenever we boys passed the Cat Lady's house on our way to or from Orange City Elementary School, we hummed a happy song to keep up our spirits. The less courageous crossed to the other side of the street.

The Cat Lady was evil, and we knew it. We saw the wraiths of underfed cats lurking under the sickly azaleas or peering around the shattered lattice beneath the house. We knew that every month, the Cat Lady grabbed a cat, decapitated it and put the bloody head underneath her pillow. When the head decomposed to a mere skull, she threw it out and grabbed another cat.

One day in fourth grade, as I passed the Cat Lady's house alone, I lost my senses. I stopped and stared at the house. Curiosity overcame me. I stepped through the open gate into her yard. Shivers like electricity ran up my back as I passed the safety of the sidewalk and entered her domain of doom. If the Cat Lady ever owned a car, it had long since been sold. No tire marks rutted the sand leading to the collapsed garage. A brown tabby skirted across the yard and under
the house. I stepped further into the yard. The front porch beckoned to me. Brown leaves from last fall wafted across my feet and the barren tree branches screeched on the metal roof. I looked up at that moment and saw a curtain move in an upstairs window. I ran all the way home.

By the time I finished embellishing that moment the next day in school, everyone believed I found a pile of sun-bleached cat skulls behind the house and the curtain upstairs had been parted by a skeleton wearing a Victorian gown. Such was the vividness of my imagination in those days, and such was my fondness for spinning tall tales. Even today, in recounting a mere incident of youthful trespassing (into the yard of a house that I later learned had been abandoned since 1960), I cannot help but let my imagination soar and transform an anecdote into a tale of delicious childhood creepiness.

I have always been a storyteller. My imagination runs amuck sometimes and creates the most outlandish stories, many of which I want to write down. I commonly daydream about such things as the starship Enterprise, captained by Bigfoot, chasing Vikings through the void of space only to encounter a nude sorceress who lures them into an orgy of pastrami sandwiches. When I do not have classes to plan or study for, my mind drifts into that direction on its own without any prompting from me. Maybe I inherited that imagination. Dad came from a family of storytellers and self-taught musicians, while Mom's family were artists and inventors.

At age three, I drew my own comic strips. In kindergarten and elementary school, I regaled my classmates with stories of the supernatural mixed with Southern gothic. In high school, having read Ian Fleming, J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard, I wrote my own spy and fantasy stories. So, when I entered college and became an English major and said I wanted to be a writer, my parents were not surprised. After graduation, I took a series of different jobs to pay
my bills and give me the opportunity to write. Mostly, I wrote poetry at the time, with a few short stories thrown in. My day jobs, as a reporter, graphic artist and newsletter editor, gave me the chance to be paid for writing, while developing my own stories.

As soon as Trish and I married, I set up a writing space, usually in the dining room, the only place big enough for my desk. A 400 pound behemoth of a roll top desk, it had been hand-made around 1880 from black walnut for my ancestor, rural Georgia doctor Thomas Redwine. If I looked closely, I noticed the marks of the water-powered saw in the wood. A hutch sat on top of the desk and almost touched the ceiling of any apartment or house in which we ever lived. Whenever Trish and I moved, and we moved often, that desk was the one piece of furniture that I dreaded. We either treated it like a refrigerator, turning it on its side and dollying it out, or walked it onto a blanket and dragged it across the floor. With no runners in the drawers, and the hutch custom built for my ancestor's medical books, the desk was impractical, but I loved it. I always placed my typewriter in the center of the desk.

An iron gray 1920 L.C. Smith, my typewriter looked like a prop in a Humphrey Bogart movie. By 1988, I had owned that typewriter for seven years, using it to write most of my papers in college, the rough drafts to articles when I worked as a reporter, and several unpublished short stories. I split the space bar, knocked off the shift key and lost it, and chipped away half the celluloid letters with my fingernails. The roller had grown hard, the vowels skipped spaces on the page, and even alcohol couldn't clean the decades of old ink off the letters. By then, the Wang word processor dominated writing, but I refused to switch over. The clack-clack-clack of the keys and the zing of the return bar tied me to my heroes Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler and John Steinbeck.
In November, 1988, the fifth chapter of my first novel sat in that old Smith. For a month after work, I spent hours in joyous rapture pounding out word after word of a hardboiled detective novel, letting the clack-clack-clack of the iron keys echo the staccato prose. I remember little about that novel, except that the hero was a nice-guy type gumshoe; I think his name was Joe Hill and more of the Jim Rockford type than a Philip Marlowe.

The Saturday after depression struck, I woke up feeling empty. Coffee held no flavor. The cats irritated me. Even Trish’s cheese and garlic grits tasted like cardboard. The baritone clock on the shelf behind me kept a rhythm similar to those of the hooves of a slow horse on cobblestones. An heirloom inherited through Mom's family, the ancient Hartshorn clock once sat on a mantle in Newburgh, New York. Its silver pendulum kept track of time while the family sat in the living room, waiting for the dreaded pounding on the front door. In the basement below them, tucked away in hidden rooms and closets, runaway slaves rested on that stop of the Underground Railroad. In the 1850s, the old clock marked the passage of the wait for freedom. That afternoon, it marked my first full day under the influence of chronic depression.

The tock-tock-tock of the clock replaced the clack-clack-clack of the typewriter. The sound of whiskey pouring into a glass replaced the zing of the carriage return. I no longer remember what part of the story sat in the typewriter that day. If I followed the standard formula of hardboiled detective stories, Joe Hill stood over the body of the first murder victim. If so, then he stood over the victim all day. Characters in stories can do a lot. One thing they cannot do, however, is pull their writer out of an emotional collapse. The mystery remained unsolved. The villain remained uncaught. The heroine remained un Kissed. For three weeks, I sat down at my desk, thinking I would write more. For three weeks, I limped off to bed, writing nothing. I think I ended up throwing that novel away. My typewriter fell silent.
Some writers state that depression is a numbness, an absence of all feeling. Not for me. I wish I had felt numb. I could have functioned through numb. I could have written through numb. The only numbness I felt during those nineteen years was when I looked at who I was compared to who I had been in a fading memory of years past. The numbness I felt was from exhaustion at the end of a day just trying to work without breaking down, until all I could do was sit on the bed with one shoe off and stare at the wall of my darkened bedroom. I would have welcomed an absence of all feeling. Instead, I felt overbearing grief, sorrow, despair, anguish, isolation, loneliness. Absence of feeling would have kept me from saying the same things every week. Do you love me? Life sucks. Life is too hard. I am a mistake. I shouldn't have been born. I don't belong anywhere. Do you love me?

I developed a pattern to deal with those errant and uncontrollable feelings. Whenever depression wore me down and I could no longer even get out of bed, I blamed my situation on my job. Between 1988 and 2002, I not only changed jobs, but careers, nine times. What amazes me from this vantage point is not the number of times I changed careers. That was nothing but me trying to escape chronic depression. During most of my career changes, I thought the grief was external and if I simply found the right set of circumstances, I would be happy. What amazes me is that in between many of my career moves, I returned to writing. Just as depression would not surrender its claim to me, neither would the desire to tell stories.

In the early 1990s, when I tried to be a farmer, I took the position of editor for the Autry Family Bulletin, a nationally published genealogical quarterly. My job consisted mostly of cleaning up member submissions and laying them out into a print-ready format. Dad and I turned the large formal living room in the farm house into a library. As the Hartshorn clock ticked away the time on one of the bookcases, I sat at an IBM PS2 computer and laid up the Autry Family
Bulletin. The 20th century had caught up with me. Even a primitive desktop publishing program like WordPerfect 4 made organizing the magazine easy. The Smith typewriter sat on the Redwine desk to the right of the particle board computer table I used.

I also wrote a novel. I don't remember writing it on the computer. It was a detective story set in Montgomery, Alabama, at the height of the Great Depression. I remember trying to capture the feeling of the era, so I may have written it on the old Smith typewriter. I called the book *A Darkness on Goat Hill*, after the old nickname for the location of the state capital. When I finished the book, I marched around the house in triumph. I had completed something. I had completed a novel. I was a writer again. Then, I read it and thought it was the most dismal story ever committed to paper. I captured the atmosphere and tone of the South in the Great Depression, but the rest of the story fell flat. I stopped counting plot holes. Character traits vanished only to reappear ten chapters later. At least, I think they did. I no longer remember. I don't even remember the characters' names now. All I recall now is that I threw the manuscript away.

I wrote another novel in 1997. I applied to work at Borders just to be around books, to smell them and touch them. They must have rubbed off on me. I spent that year forging 600 pages of a book on a custom built tower computer. Irritated by its constant ticking, I silenced the old Hartshorn clock. It sat as just another family relic on the bookcases behind me in the spare bedroom. The Redwine desk joined Trish's baby grand piano in the living room, and the Smith typewriter, its keys too gummed up to work, gathered dust in the garage. I remember more about that novel than the other two. I wrote a mock epic of high fantasy. Instead of trying to save the world, my band of heroes simply wanted to negotiate a trade treaty. It featured Ardo and Phargo, the swamp dwelling outsiders; Ellenelle, the cursed and half-crazed wizard's daughter; and
Calliana, the tough as leather warrior. When I finished that novel, I sat down to revise it and realized that the protagonist, Ardo, didn't do anything. He just stood around while everyone else had adventures. Believing I had forgotten what a hero was, and devastated again by my failure, I threw that novel away, too. I never even gave that book a name.

Depression formed a tripartite barrier between the parts of my soul. My mind, my emotions and my will all tried to work together, but could not break through the wall of anguish to create any cohesion. My disjointed soul left me vulnerable to one of depression's most damaging effects, a cosmic sense of defeat, the belief that I was born to fail. Instead of looking at one of my stories and asking how I could make it better, I threw up my hands and walked away. The whole idea of writing was too big. I was too small. It was impossible. I just didn't have any talent. I may as well give up. Those and a thousand other thoughts flooded my mind as I tried to reconcile my love of writing with what I saw as its attempts to slip through my fingers.

People who suffer from chronic depression are their own worst critics. Because of that tripartite barrier, no amount of love or encouragement can break through their misery and convince them to try again. They think they are ultimate failures. The only way for them to persevere and try again is either if they are too stubborn to quit, or have a moment of emotional clarity where they can choose to believe in themselves. In my case, I think I was too stubborn to quit. I certainly didn't believe in myself. It could also have been that underneath the roar of the voice of depression, I still heard a muse whispering. Perhaps I still heard the siren song of the Cat Lady.

Trying to describe my motives and feelings during the years I was depressed is suspect. It isn't just the passage of time, but depression's ability to warp and twist perspective. Sometimes it seems as if what I see is greatly exaggerated. It could not have been that bad. At other times, it
seems as if I understate my feelings. Looking at my years under the effects of chronic depression is like viewing a surrealist painting seen across a smoke filled room through a pair of cracked sunglasses. That is the best way to describe the warped perspective I have now of nineteen years of unsure memories of events that were distorted to begin with. So when I try to describe what depression did to me as a writer, and how I felt writing three novels, I am not convinced of my words. All I know is that I tried three times and I thought I failed three times.

From 2002 until 2007, Trish and I were licensed ministers. The memories of those years are still too raw for me to commit to print. In late 2007, we surrendered our licenses, closed our ministry, and left our denomination in disgust. With both of us needing work, Trish and I talked about what we could do. This wasn't a case of changing careers again in the face of depression. This was a real point of practicality. We didn't make a lot of money as ministers -- to do so would have violated everything we believed -- but we made enough to pay our bills. Now, that source was gone. Trish decided to return to the legal field, and was soon hired as an assistant by a small law firm in Fort Worth. I wasn't sure what to do. Because of all those career changes, my resume was pretty much useless. This time, however, there was a difference. This time, depression had been defeated. For the first time in nearly twenty years, I faced uncertainty without the cloud of sorrow or a non-existent self-esteem. If I am not mistaken, we surrendered our ministry licenses the same month that my doctor took me off Wellbutrin and declared me free of depression.

I found a job editing a family history book for an oilman in Azle. It paid well and it was fun, but I knew it was a short term contract. When I finished the book, I would be out of a job. I needed something more permanent. During that time, I met my friend Mandy Horne at T.G.I.
Fridays in Lake Worth every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. A tall young woman with dark brown hair, and equally dark eyes, Mandy was one of my best friends. We met in Bible school and, being the only two deep Southerners in class, became close. I thought her Carolina accent carried with it the aroma of magnolias. She liked my bawdy, Florida swamp rat sense of humor. Eventually, we saw each other as brother and sister.

Mandy worked nights stocking the warehouses for the same ministry we had just divorced. She hated her job, but it paid her bills. She hated that ministry, but didn't feel qualified to work anywhere else. Being 25 years old, she felt lonely and destined to remain single the rest of her life. In the mornings, she attended class at Tarrant Community College, mostly at her father's insistence. In between class and work, she drowned her sorrows at Friday's. I joined her on those days to keep her from doing anything stupid like drinking too much and giving her phone number to the bartender.

I remember what Mandy wore that afternoon, the first Tuesday of November, 2007. She wore dark blue jeans, a red and white checkered halter top under a white jacquard print long sleeve shirt. She tied her hair back with a white sash, and wore big hoop ear rings. By the time I arrived, she was already finishing her second chocolate martini.

"I like what you're wearing today," I said. "It looks like a cross between gypsy and Bohemian."

"I call it Mandy," she said.

"I keep telling you that you should be a model."

"And you should be an English teacher," Mandy said. "My composition class is terrible! Nathan, if you taught a writing class, I would so take it from you."
I don't know if thoughts really made sounds, but in remembering that moment, I swear I heard a "clunk" in my mind. The only way to describe what I felt is to imagine tumblers falling into place in the lock of a safe. Perhaps that is what happened. My mind, emotions and will were able to work as a team for once, and they joined forces to comprehend what she said and form a plan of action. My thoughts were beyond my control. They just happened.

It made sense. It made sense in a way that nothing had made sense in decades. Of course! I could teach composition in a community college. I had thought about teaching before, but only at the high school level. Not having the patience for teenagers, I always dismissed it. A community college. That was different. The students would be there to learn, because they wanted to be there, not because the state told them they had to be there.

My unified soul took the idea even further. Somewhere, I heard the wafting chime of the Cat Lady's voice, telling me that it was time for the storyteller to awaken. My mind, emotions and will seized on that prospect with a lust that I still cannot comprehend. The thought happened so fast that it consumed me within a second. Writing was not something I did; it was the expression of my state of being. My doing and my being were one, making me one of the few people blessed enough to say such a boast. Now, with a whole being, perhaps I could get the doing moving again. It was time to write again, I thought. Teaching would pay the bills while I wrote. If I made enough from writing to quit teaching, great. If not, then teaching was a good way to earn money while I wrote what I wanted to write.

After saying goodbye to Mandy, I raced home. I am sure I felt excited about something during the years of depression, but compared to that moment on the way back to my apartment, anything that came before it was dour. I had a plan, and not one born out of desperation or a feeble grasp at happiness. This one seemed plausible.
Once I was home, I researched the qualifications to teach in a community college. I needed a master's degree and a year's experience. I had already heard of the graduate program in creative writing at the University of North Texas. That would satisfy the degree requirement, and help hone my writing skills. I told myself that I would figure out the experience part when I needed to. By the time Trish came home that afternoon, I had already sent off for the UNT application and catalog.

I didn't know where that line of reasoning came from. It dumbfounded me, even as I filled out the paperwork for UNT. I wasn't used to thinking in such terms of clarity. I wasn't used to making any sense, even to myself. My motivations weren't those of fear or dread or grief or a desire to get away from something. The whole line of thought was based on rationality and love of craft. It was the first major step I took after being cured of chronic depression. It was the first positive step I took since 1988.

Mandy later asked if I pursued my master's degree because I wanted to, or because it was her idea. I said, "I'm doing it for me. You were in the right place at the right time to say what I needed to hear. And I was able to hear you."

Trish said that she is not accustomed to my new thought patterns; the way I handle stress and respond to life's situations. I am not accustomed to how I write now. With my second and third novels, I created extensive outlines, spending months forming the plot before I ever created a character. The result felt stagnant and forced, with flat characters and no meaning to my words. I am not sure if that was the result of immature skills or the effects of chronic depression. The way I write today brings up even more questions about chronic depression and its aftermath: how can I write like this and where did it come from?
For the past three years, nearly everything I've written has been a class assignment, so they all fell within the realm of literature. There were two exceptions; a short story I wrote from the perspective of a burned out and depressed Satan, and a 3D graphic novel I worked on just to have a hobby. As I entered my last semester of class work and faced graduation, I realized that I needed to write something for publication. It was time to stop being a student and become a writer. Naturally, I turned to a literary short story.

I hated the idea. It seemed to me that literary stories featured miserable characters who only grew more miserable as the writer piled increasing calamity upon them, until they committed suicide. Reading such stories made me feel depressed. That was an emotion I never wanted to feel again. If reading them made me feel depressed, then what would happen if I wrote them. The chance of a relapse filled me with such dread that I felt nauseated. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. There had to be an alternative. That left me in a quandary. If literary fiction was out of the question, then what could I write?

One night in class, my professor said "If you aren't sure what to write, ask yourself what you like to read. What type of books fill your bookcase? That is what you should write. Write what you like to read."

As I drove home from class that night, I thought about what she said. I knew the answer but I wanted to see it with my eyes. I wanted to touch it. Touching it would transform it from theory into reality, and I could work with reality. I walked into our apartment, mumbled hello to Trish, then looked at my bookcases. Curious about why I didn't even kiss her, Trish followed me. I explained my dilemma about choosing a genre, and what my professor said. We examined our bookcases together. In the five bookcases that filled what should have been the dining room, we had everything from theology to history, from William Faulkner to Raymond Chandler, from
cookbooks to comic books. Nothing jumped out at me. I liked those, but not enough to commit my life and talent to them.

Then, we walked into the living room. A shorter bookcase sat underneath a large Japanese fan featuring a painting of cranes flying over a creek. This bookcase held the answer that I knew on my trip home, but I wanted to count the volumes before I made a commitment. I still didn't trust myself, still couldn't trust my feelings. I had been wrong so many times before. I needed the concrete reassurance of something I could touch and see and smell.

That bookcase overflowed with histories of Medieval England and fantasy novels. We had *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, *The Domesday Book* and every book on British castles I could find. We had *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the entire Harry Potter series in hardback, and most of the collected works of Robert E. Howard. Between them lay *The Poetic Edda*, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Bede, and collections of the works of fantasy artists Frank Frazetta and Boris Vallejo. We used to have books by Marian Zimmer Bradley, Terry Pratchett and David Eddings, but sold them back in 2009 to have gas money.

I am drawn to archetypes, myths and heroes; to Boadicea, Robin Hood and King Arthur. I love a time when men were men and women were women, and both were tough and if you challenged them, you could expect a round of skull cleaving to ensue. I admire people who stand for something and do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do. I love magic and swords and dragons. I need a level of mystery and paradox in my life, the feeling that there is something out there that cannot be quantified, examined and categorized. I guess when I was born, I was given an old soul, the soul of some ancient Celtic or Saxon bard. I need one more Icelandic Saga before I head out to face the day. That bookcase existed because of those loves and needs.
"If this is what I like to read, then this is what I should write," I said to Trish, nodding toward that bookcase.

Later that night, Trish and I sat in bed. I think she read one of her Wicca books while I stared at the drawer pulls on my dresser. Sometimes, I have hyperfocus. I think so hard about something that the world around me ceases to exist. Only my thoughts remain. I must have been in that zone, only becoming aware that I had a wife and a home when Trish shook me.

"I've been talking for five minutes," Trish said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'm thinking something crazy. I'm thinking about turning Aura into a written novel."

I called my 3D graphic novel *The Adventures of Aura Lockhaven*. It was just a hobby and never meant for anyone's eyes but my own, although Trish read it too. Originally, the story featured the enchantress Aura Lockhaven from a little village called Manchester, England in the year A.D. 1051. I designed it to satisfy my prurient interests, and planned for her to romp naked through four chapters having sexual adventures. When I stopped working on it after the summer of 2011, the story had grown to thirteen chapters. While it was exploitative and quasi-pornographic, a good story lay beneath all the lasciviousness; a story about a naive and unsure girl becoming confident and powerful woman, of a someone finding her identity. I sat on the bed that night, unable to shake Aura from my mind.

"I think it's a great story," Trish said. "You may have to tone the sex down, but it will be more powerful if you do."

"I'm not sure the story can be written," I said. "That's what concerns me. It's a visual story. How can I capture her facial expressions? How can I transform an action panel into a written fight scene? She breaks the fourth wall. How do I write that? It's easy in a comic book,
but a novel? They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I made three thousand separate
renders for that story so far. That's 300,000 words. And it isn't even finished. That's a blooming
big book!"

"I think you should try it," Trish said. "You'll never know until you do."

I pondered it for another three months. As I did, I made a few one-off artistic renders
featuring Aura either as a heroic warrior or a glamourous enchantress. Those only made matters
worse. Aura began to show me her potential as a heroine, instead of just a sex object. I knew I
wanted to write fantasy stories. I had one already outlined with solid characters and deep themes.
Translating the Aura comic book into a novel only made sense. Yet, I hesitated.

There was something I didn't tell Trish that night we first discussed turning Aura into a
written novel. I had failed three times before. This would be the fourth time I tried to write a full
length story. What made me think this time would be any different from the others? The popular
definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over, expecting different results. I did not
want to prove myself insane by trying to write another book, only to fail and throw it away.

Worse, I held the character of Aura in high regard. I developed her personality so well that both
Trish and I wished she were a real woman and lived next door to us. I felt that Aura deserved
better than to have her story written, then thrown away. She deserved better than have me try to
write it.

The idea refused to go away. It only grew stronger. On the heels of "what makes you
think this will be any different" came a new question. This one entered my head on its own
volition. I asked myself "What makes you think this one will be the same as the others?" I
trapped myself. Why did I think this one would fail? Why wouldn't it be different? The previous
three novels had been written in the shadow of depression, and died from my own sorrow-
induced lack of confidence. This time, no such shadow existed, and while I did not possess full confidence in my skills, two years at UNT had taught me how to bring an artistic aesthetic to a story. Trish was right, and about more than she realized. The only way to find out was to find out. The only way to know whether this novel would end up like the other three was to write it.

With the spring semester over and no more classes to teach and no more to attend, I knew I also had no more excuses. So, on the first day of summer break, I turned on my laptop and typed the line, "Aura Lockhaven lay her book on the ground beside her, settling it between the new blades of grass and the soft quilt of spring's first heather and lupines." It had begun; my first novel, my first full length writing effort of any kind, in fifteen years. Which would it be, the same as the other three, or the start of something new?

Just because the novel existed already in what amounted to a storyboard format did not mean it was easy to write. I worked backwards from the screenwriter's perspective. They believe that many things that work in books do not work in a visual format. I found out fast that many things that work in a single comic book frame do not work at all as a paragraph. Whole panels needed to be reimagined and written fresh. Around the third page, I began to bog down. I wasn't sure what to write next.

This didn't happen, but it seemed like it did. It was as if the little 3D character of Aura Lockhaven stepped out of my monitor and stood on my keyboard. She shook her long brown hair free of the tangles of computerized confinement and flashed her large green eyes at me. In a crisp English accent, she said, "Oh, merciful heavens! I have a fascinating story to tell. Stop trying to force it and do let me tell it." So, I did. Stephen King refers to that style of writing as creating dynamic characters, throwing them into interesting situations, and seeing what they do. I felt like that's what the character wanted and what the story deserved. So, Aura seized control of the
story. While half of the graphic novel needed to be replaced, I knew this character inside and out. I let her tell me what to replace and what to keep, what to subdue and what to enhance. I trusted my character. I trusted myself.

What happened amazed me. The words flowed from my fingers with no effort, in an organic wave, almost as if I merely took dictation as someone else spun the yarn. Sometimes, I felt as if I read the words on the screen before they ever entered my mind to write. My experiment to see if Aura could become a novel reached 5,000 words, then broke into chapter two. Then, 10,000 words and soon, four chapters. Six chapters followed by two more and her story still unfolded, the pornography vanishing in the face of a tale about determination and love. When I reached chapter ten, the first one to be completely scrapped, a new one emerged that was far more powerful than the original. When Trish read that chapter, she wept.

When I saw Trish's reaction, I thought "I wrote this? I wrote something moving enough that my wife cried over it? How is that possible?" I wanted to go to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror and ask "Who are you?" I knew I wouldn't be able to answer. I no longer knew myself. The man who wrote that chapter, the one who listened to the demands of his own creation, was not the same one who threw away two completed novels. This new man has the confidence to believe that he will have a novel ready for an agent by winter, 2013. I may not recognize myself yet, but I like who I see and what I'm able to do. More than that, I know that this time is different from the last three times. I don't know how this happened. All I know is this is what I wanted decades ago, when I told the horror story about seeing the skeletal form of the Cat Lady peering down from her window.
When Trish and I moved to Texas, I sold the Redwine desk to a cousin in Atlanta. It was just too big to haul around anymore. I don't miss it. Memories of it are sufficient. Memories are portable. The Smith typewriter sold for five bucks in a garage sale. I do miss that. While a computer is an excellent editing machine, it lacks something at the initial first draft stage that is only provided by the presence of actual paper and the visceral fight with stubborn iron keys. When I have enough discretionary income, I plan to buy a 1939 Underwood. I still have the Hartshorn clock. It sits silent on top of a bookcase, waiting for the day I can have it cleaned and repaired. I miss its steady staccato rhythm. Today, I write on a Sager NP8130 laptop while sitting in a wicker chair in the corner of our tiny living room. The bookcase containing our English history and fantasy books is close enough to my chair that I can touch it.

It is a small world, but it is my world. It is a good place to start learning to understand my new writing process. It is a good place to continue to let the adventures of Aura Lockhaven unfold. Those who have read the first draft of Aura tell me that it doesn't just have the potential for commercial success, but the potential to launch an entire series. I am not used to such acclaim. Even though I have been free from chronic depression for five years, I still listen for the sounds of its return. When will depression strike and I destroy this novel in a fit of personal doubt? When will Aura become the next victim to the fiend that consumed nearly twenty years of my life and silenced whatever stories may have emerged in that time? As the word count on the story passes the 60,000 mark, the hall has remained quiet. Depression seems to be defeated.

This new world I find myself in baffles me. Sometimes I want to throw the laptop down and storm into the bathroom to face myself in the mirror. I want to shriek at the bastard who denied me twenty years of storytelling because he was too stupid to recognize the grief as an illness and seek treatment. But such actions do not produce positive results. They are but a
remnant of the depression, second guessing myself over a slight that I could not have avoided. I cannot blame myself for the effects of something outside my control, despite my desire to do so. The best I can do is enjoy today and the hope of tomorrow. I must let the ghosts of yesterday remain as just another horror tale to put in the category as that time worn house of my youth. For the moment, I am just content that my laptop is not silent.
"I hope talking about this doesn't make you depressed," Trish said.

My wife Trish is five foot six inches tall, with red hair that has aged from an auburn so dark it was almost black to a modest crimson, making her look the most Irish in her rather Celtic family. Her eyes are the blue of a clear, winter sky in the South. Born on Long Island, she still has a trace of "Locust Valley Lockjaw" in her voice that becomes more pronounced when she's angry or feeling playful.

That night, she felt neither angry or playful. She felt like her heart had been run over by a steamroller. We just finished a grueling two hour long interview. I asked her how my ordeal with chronic depression affected her. I had been asking her that question for five years. I wanted to know. I needed to know. Trish's standard answer was always "I don't want to talk about it."

Chronic depression is not a disease in the same way as pneumonia or even cancer. Most diseases like that cause pain and grief, but the sufferer usually has hope and the disease often causes the patient's family to rally around him or her in support. Depression does not just cause pain and grief; it is pain and grief, sometimes more pronounced for those around the actual patient, the ones who suffer in silence. I knew Trish endured the ripple effects of the depression that attacked me. In moments of clarity, I saw it in her eyes and heard it in her voice. During those nineteen years, however, she never left me. I wanted to know why she remained with me,
and how my depression affected her. I wanted to understand her point of view so I could try to give her the marriage I felt that I stole from her.

"I never wanted to tell you any of this," Trish said. "Dealing with you and the depression made me face a lot of insecurities that I flat out didn't want to face. I didn't want to face them again. Besides, I was concerned that you'd be sad because I was, or angry at yourself that it happened."

I pulled Trish to me and rested my cheek against the top of her head. I did feel sad; sad that forces beyond my control occluded nineteen years of her marriage. Even now, I felt that she wasn't happy, not as happy as she appeared. In many ways, she bears more scars from depression than I do.

When Trish finally agreed to talk to me about her story, we sat on our bed sipping whiskey and trying to relax. The bedroom seemed to be a better place to talk about a grueling subject. It always felt peaceful. We designed it like something from Charleston or New Orleans, with a French style wrought iron queen sized bed that accommodated my height, and curtains made from a red sheet. Late in our marriage, we acquired matching furniture; a dresser, chest of drawers and two nightstands made from yellow pine. On one side of the bed sat a mission style foldable bookcase where Trish kept her Wiccan books. A similar bookcase on my side housed the British history books that overflowed from the living room. Pictures of our parents, a giant Victorian mirror inherited from my grandmother, vases full of silk flowers from the South, and stuffed animals decorated the room. If any room in the apartment reflected us, it was this room.

Our cats, Raven and Belladonna, slept at the foot of the bed. I waited for Trish to finish her first drink, and poured her another, before I asked my first question. I chose to start the
evening on a friendly note by telling her when I first saw her, and asking when she remembered first seeing me. It felt like the best place to begin. Our life is a love affair and our friends have said we have the marriage they hope to have one day. Somewhere in that love affair was something that held Trish together during those dark nights and kept her by my side. Her presence, in turn, held me together.

Most men do not remember when they first saw the women who became their wives, much less what those women wore. I remember both. It was May, 1981. While I no longer remember the exact date, it was a Thursday night and I was a graduating high school senior. Stetson University, the college in my hometown of DeLand, Florida, had recently accepted me as a student, and I was interested in their Forensics program, the extracurricular competitive public speech team. The Forensics Team was giving a "Command Performance" for the locals, and I decided to go.

I cannot recall what anyone else wore or what they performed that night. All I remember is one slender young woman who walked out on the stage of Stetson's Stover Theatre. She wore a navy blue dress with a white collar and a red ribbon tie. Her dark auburn hair was cut in a Dorothy Hamill and glistened underneath the Fresnel spotlights. I thought, "What a cute girl!" and quickly scanned the program for her name. Ah, there it is: Trish Jordan. I told myself to remember that name.

I did not see Trish again until the following September when I joined the Forensics Team. Sometimes, when I remind Trish about that, she finds it hard to believe that I was a freshman and she was already a junior. Trish sat next to me in the Forensics Team's rattling GMC RV on the way to our first competition of the year. Upon seeing her up close for the first time, I noticed the brilliant sapphire quality of her eyes. "Wow," I said to myself. "She isn't cute. She's gorgeous!"
I told her that I remembered her from the Command Performance. We hung out with each other that weekend, eating Whoppers, thumb wrestling and reading Robert Burns to each other in outrageous Scottish accents. Trish was also a little sister in the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity, which I joined as a sophomore. Trish stayed for a fifth year when she switched majors from French to English at the beginning of her senior year. After that, we ended up in many of the same literature classes. So, we spent many evenings over coffee, Shakespeare and formalism.

We never dated until the day after I graduated in 1985. Even then, our dates were more those of two friends hanging out and talking about literature over coffee. Somewhere during that summer, things changed. I don't know when they did, or how they did, but they did.

"I don't remember where I exactly saw you first," Trish told me. "I want to say at Forensics. I do remember seeing you, and you were dressed up very spiffy. I remember looking at you and thinking -- it's more of an impression than a memory -- I saw that awesome blonde hair, your blue eyes, and they were blue that day, and I thought 'he's really cute!' And you smiled. I thought 'Wow!' I was really hoping that I'd see you again."

"Do you remember when you fell in love with me?" I asked.

"I think I'd actually fallen in love with you on one of our dates. You had picked me up and we went somewhere. I came home and I couldn't stop thinking about you. And my roommate said 'You have it bad!'"

Two weeks after that date, we went to Daytona Beach at night. We loved watching the Moon rise over the Atlantic Ocean. We sat on one of the lifeguard towers, looking out at the ocean. I realized how much I loved Trish and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I wanted to kiss her. But how?

"What are you thinking?" Trish asked at that moment.
I sat still for a moment. Then I thought, okay! I turned and kissed her on the mouth.

"I was thinking about how I could kiss you and tell you that I love you," I said. "Thank you for the opportunity."

That was September, 1985. I asked her to marry me in April, 1986. She wanted to wait five years before marrying because that was the practical thing to do. I whittled her down to an nine month engagement. We married on January 24, 1987, in her old Presbyterian church in Eustis, Florida. With Trish smiling over fond memories, I moved toward the harder questions, asking her what she had wanted to do with her life when we married.

Trish took her time answering, finally saying, "My goal has always been to write. What I do with my work life is not what I want to do. It never has been. I was excited when I got married to you. I felt like I gained a playmate as well as a husband. My own self-confidence has gone up and down, so the writing has been in fits and starts. I've never wanted to be like anyone else."

Her answer surprised me. I knew she liked to write, and that her first real job after graduation had been a staff reporter for the Association Executive magazine in Orlando. She never told me that writing had been her life's goal. Even after twenty-five years of marriage, some things remain mysteries. There are things that married people just forget to ask each other. I asked her when she knew she wanted to be a writer.

"It seems like I've always wanted to write my expressions and experiences and impressions down," Trish said. "I think it was 9th grade. I read Leaves of Grass and Walden and I started wanting to write things and when I did I had good responses to them from my journalism and English teachers in school. I never wrote any stories. I always wrote what my teachers called mood pieces. I've never crafted an actual story. Until now."
"How do you think my depression affected that?"

"Your depression derailed me," Trish answered without a pause. I heard the measured tone in her voice, flat as if she held back any anger or remorse that may have been lurking in her mind. "I felt like I had to take care of you and protect you. I was not about to let my family see a failure. I knew how they would see it. No one in my family has ever known any of the problems you've been through. My family is traditional. I was born the caboose. My parents were forty. They had three boys before me. Because of the ten year gap between me and the oldest boy, I was raised as an only child. All three of my brothers became quite successful in what they did."

Her eldest brother, John, was granted a golden parachute at age fifty-five after being the senior vice-president of human resources for Corn Products Conglomerate (later Unilever). Mike, the middle brother, earned a PhD and still works as a consultant to oil companies in Central Asia. Jim, the youngest, is the director of Columbia University Press, following a long stint as vice-president for W.W. Norton and later as head of Johns Hopkins University Press. Her parents expected her to live up to the standard of her brothers. She refused.

Trish continued, "I had absolutely no interest in the business world. People asked me from the time I was nine, what are you going to be when you grow up. I didn't know. I didn't think it was fair of them to ask me. I wanted to live my life, enjoy my life, enjoy the relationships I had, possibly help people in some way, I wasn't sure. By everyone else's definition, I am a flatline at life. As far as I'm concerned, fuck their definitions."

Trish told me that my depression closed her off. Creating anything, much less a story, became an impossibility. She sacrificed herself, her goals, to hold her marriage and her husband together. All her time became bogged down in surfing the emotional cause and effect storming through our home. She never knew what was about to happen. What new hurricane awaited her
inside her front door? Some days, she wanted to curl up in a fetal position and scream. Other days, she just wanted to hide. On still other days, she felt too tired to care. Then, things cleared up and she saw a glimmer of the man she fell in love with, the friend from college.

Trish interrupted our conversation to pull a book off the small shelf in our bedroom. It was a black book, the kind that Borders used to sell in their bargain bins as sketchbooks. She used them for journals. This one had an elven design on the cover drawn with a silver Sharpie, and the date 2007, written in her floral hand, remarkably clear for a left-handed writer. Opening it to the middle, she let me read some of the few thoughts she committed to paper about those nineteen years:

_Sitting with the heart of a heavy load_

_Night dreams waking, day 'mares shaking-

_Sight falls on beauty too smooth to ignore_

_Curved lines enhancing, calm romancing_

_Doorway open beckons, wind's cool promise kiss'd...

_Lips chaste and silent, heart beshred with tears_

_Green vision rises, comforts panick'd thoughts_

_Must follow path, push out of foreign pain_

_Corral mind and let Wisdom reign_

_Step follows step 'round measured path_

_Verdant ways trod inspiration's ancient school_

_Successive rings follow, each tighter be_

_Each one yes and no, and no and yes_

_Till at center come, Wisdom meet, to me._
Depression struck me late in the second year of our marriage. Trish blamed herself at first, trying to figure out what she did to reduce me to tears. She asked herself what she had done to hurt me so deeply. Was she not sexy enough? Was she not pretty enough? Did I blame her for dragging me to Washington? She never understood that my depression came from within, a dragon storming through my brain without any obvious external causes. Even I didn't know that, so how could I explain it to her?

Then, she tried to fix the problem. She is a healer and a diplomat, saying "that is just how I'm wired." She told me that she hit a wall -- the wall being me. Her optimism irritated me. When she tried to do something to help, I barked at her; "Don't try to fix me!" or "Don't coddle me!" or "Don't try to sunshine me out of this!" I told her to just understand me. She never could. Because she never knew which Nathan would rise with the sun -- the happy man she married, or the weeping mass of chaos -- she came up with a phrase during those years; "Sometimes I wake up grumpy. Sometimes I let him sleep." Approaching my mercurial, and still misunderstood moods, through humor helped her navigate her day and her way around my feelings.

In many ways, my depression depressed Trish. She never knew how other people dealt with such a numbing disease in a loved one, and still doesn't. Many mornings, on her way to work, she prayed that God would heal me. On her drive home, she screamed at God for not helping me. God gave her a listening ear, a way of feeling not so alone against some nameless thing consuming her husband.

"I had no friends to talk to, and nobody in my family would understand," she said.
"Certainly, my parents were understanding of my brother's divorce when it happened. I think Mom wouldn't have understood because my parents lived their lives a certain way. You were supposed to act a certain way. No matter what life threw at you, there were certain ways you
responded. You did what was right. I think they would have seen this as a major weakness. I don't think they ever knew anyone who was clinically depressed, much less chronically depressed. They whispered enough about people who had 'family issues' and I didn't want to be the focus of those whispers and I certainly didn't want you to be the focus of those whispers. I didn't trust them to be real with me and not just act as their upbringing dictated. I'm sure that if they were in the room with me today, and they heard that, they would say 'honey, you didn't give us the chance,' but I can't help that."

Trish became more guarded toward her family when we moved back to Orlando in 1994, and depression hit the hardest. Her mother lived twenty miles from us, and Trish developed a screen to cloak the truth about my condition from her. I maintained a good front around Trish's mother, but it was easy. My mother-in-law and I genuinely liked each other. The woman was a proto-feminist and an artist. We had great conversations ranging from literature to the guy in her condominium who drove an old Bentley.

While it was easy for me to hide my depression from Mrs. Jordan, it wasn't so easy for Trish. I didn't make it easy for her. I screamed about not having the tools to do my job, life was out to get me, and I feared going to Hell. I no longer recall saying those things, but Trish told me that they were almost a mantra for me between 1994 and 2001.

When I worked at WorldCom in the mid 1990s, a friend introduced me to gin martinis. He made a drink by pouring a glass full of gin, then showed the glass a bottle of vermouth, then served it. I liked that idea. So, one night, Trish and I went out. I had eight gin martinis, in the space of an hour. On the way home, all that gin hit me on top of the depression.

"You’d be better off without me," I said.

"What do you mean?" Trish asked.
"I mean, you’d be better off married to someone who could take care of you."

"You’re just drunk," Trish said. "I love you. Living with you is exciting."

At this point in the night, my mind began shutting down. Gin and cortisol mixed in centrifuge of my brain, formed by the void of serotonin's absence. My wife was the only one who had a clear memory of what I said and did after that moment. She remembered, and after sixteen years, she opened her heart and her mind to tell me. I trust my wife's memory of that night. She had no reason to lie to me about what happened, except to protect me, and apparently, she felt she had protected me enough.

Trish told me I said to her, "Look at me! I’m 30 years old! I haven’t published a goddam thing. I’m a would be has been! For God’s sake, woman, do yourself a favor. Leave me! Go find some lawyer who can give you the life you deserve. You deserve to be living in a big house with a swimming pool and playing tennis at a country club. I can’t give you that. I never will."

"That’s the gin talking," Trish said. "I’m not interested in that. I’m not going to leave you. I love you!"

"You’re stupid," I said. "You shouldn’t love me. Your brothers don’t respect me, and they don’t respect you because you stick with me. Go do something with yourself."

While Trish drove at 35 MPH down Magnolia Avenue in Orlando, I opened the door and tried to step out. She pulled over to a parking lot and stopped the car. I stumbled out, and wandered around, ranting and flailing my arms in the air. I made it to her window and growled obscenities at her and told her that she did not know me. Somehow, Trish coaxed me back into the car and drove me home.

Once we were home, I said "This is for your own good."
Apparently, I aimed a haymaker at her face. Trish told me that I'm a lousy shot when I'm drunk. I missed her and collapsed on the floor. Then, I crawled to the stairs. At that point, Trish told me the booze and depression left. I fell asleep.

While I slept, Trish drove around our neighborhood, trying to decide what to do. For a moment, she thought about driving to her mother's house. What would she tell her, Trish asked herself. Her mother would not understand the nature of my depression or why Trish put up with it for so long. She had nowhere to go and no one to turn to in that moment. She turned to herself. Remembering who I had been, who she fell in love with, Trish decided to try her best to understand and help me. She came home and led me to bed.

When Trish talked to me about how my depression affected her, it was the first time I ever heard about the rest of that night. To the best of my memory, I paid the tab on those eight martinis, stood up, and then woke up in bed the next morning. It took her sixteen years to tell me everything that happened. She only did so with tears running down her cheeks.

Trish is the reason I found a cure to chronic depression. She insisted that I see a doctor. In 2006, Mom and Dad died within months of each other. Chronic depression became acute depression. Before my parents' deaths, depression kept me in a state of sorrow. Afterwards, it tore me asunder. One afternoon in April, 2007, Trish and I went to Red Robin for lunch. Before we got out of the car, a panic attack seized me. I bent over. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t even cry. All I wanted to do was run away. I hunkered down in the car seat, trembling.

"I’m scared," I told Trish.

"Of what?" Trish asked.

"I’m the last Boutwell left. I’m all alone. What do I do?" I leaned my head back and roared "Isn’t there anyone who can help me?"
"Okay, that's it," Trish said. "I know how you feel about doctors, but this has gone on long enough. You're going to see Dr. Barclay first thing Monday morning. I'll make the call, I'll drive you, I'll sit in the waiting room with you, and if I need to, I'll drag you into his office. You need professional help and you need it now."

When I asked Trish why she forced me to see a doctor, she told me that it was the first time in our whole ordeal that I actually listened to her. Prior to that day at Red Robin, I always ignored her. That was also the first time she had ever seen me break down without the effects of alcohol assisting me. Going to the doctor made sense to me, and Trish refused to let that moment pass.

The Monday following that breakdown, Trish drove me to see Dr. Barclay. She sat next to me in the office as I told Dr. Barclay about how I felt. I asked for a prescription for valium.

"I don’t prescribe valium for depression," he said. "I prescribe serotonin reuptake inhibitors. I’m going to prescribe Lexapro."

For the next five days, I took the pill and nothing happened. Some cure, I thought that Friday night, swallowing a Lexapro pill. The next morning, I woke up. The comforter on the bed screamed its crimson color at me. The cats seemed so warm and fuzzy. Spears of light shot through the openings in the blinds. I leapt out of bed and grabbed Trish by the hand.

"Come on, honey," I shouted. "It’s a glorious morning and the world awaits! I’ll cook breakfast and then we can go for a walk in the park."

Trish rolled over and looked at the clock. Then, she mumbled "It’s 6:30. It’s Saturday. Go back to sleep."

"No!" I shouted. "I feel great. Come on and live life with me."
A few seconds later, Trish’s snoring told me that I was on my own. I wandered into the kitchen, made a pot of coffee, then walked out onto the porch. My Star Fleet mug, shimmering cobalt in the early sunlight, felt warm in my hands. I took my first sip. Was this the same Community Coffee we always use, I asked myself. It couldn’t be. They must be using a better grade bean, I said, shrugging. Several sparrows lit into the feeder hanging from the rafter to my left, their cheerful clucking reminding me of people greeting each other on the street. I settled back to watch the sun rise from behind the apartment building across the courtyard.

Lexapro may qualify as a genuine happiness pill. In the three weeks I was on it, I never had a sad moment. Everything seemed so vibrant and alive! However, Lexapro came with a side-effect that Dr. Barclay never warned me about. A few nights after Lexapro began having an effect on me, Trish came home, looking more attractive than I had ever seen her. The drug negated whatever sexual repression affected me in the past.

We made love, for three hours. At the end of that time, she lay exhausted with pleasure, but I had yet to release. I felt like my heart would burst. The next day was the same. Only at the end of the third day, did I finally release. Many men want to be "sex gods," to make love to their women for hours without end. I had reached that unattainable male goal, but at a terrible cost to Trish’s self-esteem and my own out of shape body. Trish thought that perhaps I no longer saw her as sexy or attractive, and my heart and muscles were just too weak to take the exertion.

After three weeks of that kind of marathon sex, Trish made the connection between Lexapro and the sudden shift in our love life. She realized that the time frame of my sexual problem coincided with the same time frame that I had been taking the medication. Trish called Dr. Barclay’s office.
"Hi," Trish said to the nurse who answered the phone. "This is Nathan Boutwell's wife. He's on Lexapro and I think it has a side effect."

"Delayed ejaculation?" the nurse asked.

"Yes, how did -- "

"It's the most common side-effect, but it doesn't strike everyone. I'll tell Dr. Barclay."

Half an hour later, the nurse called back and said that Dr. Barclay switched me to Wellbutrin. If Lexapro was a happiness pill, then Wellbutrin was more of a mellowness tablet. It had the same effect on me as two glasses of wine. Instead of inhibiting the reuptake of serotonin, Wellbutrin prevented my brain from reabsorbing dopamine, a different type of feel-good chemical. Our sex life returned to normal, and I found myself able to think around problems that crippled me before. During the six months that I took Wellbutrin, I began forming new patterns of responses to life's circumstances. The moments that reduced me to tears now reduced me to hysterical laughter. After Dr. Barclay ended the prescription, I continued to laugh at life's trash. When I earned my first ever speeding ticket in 2009, I chuckled for three days instead of pitching a fit of anger or sorrow. Trish, however, did not change.

Trish finished her drink, and asked for a third. I could tell that she wanted to stop the interview. We couldn't. We had arrived at today, how Trish still feels and responds. I couldn't change yesterday. I couldn't remove nineteen years of misery and fear. I could, however, help her change today and tomorrow, if she would only tell me what she still felt. I pressed her. I pushed her. I felt like I became a tyrant, demanding the truth from his wife. I needed to know, however. She still expected me to break down in tears over dropping a glass on the floor, or to find me huddled in the bed crying for no reason. I wanted to know why and what I could do to help her.
move beyond that into accepting who I was now. If she could accept me today, then she could accept herself today, and become the woman she has always wanted to be.

"I am still learning how to live without your depression," Trish said after some thought. "I guess there is a lot of stuff to undo. There are times when something just gets fixed and you don't sit down and have specific discussions with someone who says 'I won't be doing this anymore or this anymore.' So when the situation comes up you find yourself responding in certain ways, then trying to cover up the stumble."

All those years of watching me etched patterns into Trish’s mind. In 2010, a full two years after being cured, I emailed Trish at work. My email said "I lost one of my 3D models. Bah! And I can’t fix the lawnmower. Went out and got us some beer. See you tonight!" I thought no more about the email. Instead, I went to work on the lawnmower, discovering within ten minutes that the throttle cable had slipped off the linkage. Then, I rebuilt the lost 3D model. Finally, I asked myself, do I want to write a short story or an essay? I sat locked in a deep conversation with my muse when Trish burst through the door that afternoon. Throwing her purse on the floor, she grabbed my face and stared into my eyes.

"What’s wrong?" she asked, tears forming at the edges of her worried eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "The question is, are you all right?"

"What happened with the lawnmower?"

"Nothing," I said. "I fixed it. Why?"

"You haven’t had a bad day?"

"I’ve had a great day," I said.
Trish collapsed against my chest and said "I saw you here, distraught over losing your model, not being able to fix the lawnmower, getting drunk and wanting to hurt yourself."

"I thought we’d like some beer with supper," I said, embracing her. As she cried, I closed my eyes and said "It’s all right, sweetheart. It’s all right."

It isn't all right. It never has been and it never will be. In the process of helping me find myself, Trish lost Trish. She spent so much time holding me and protecting me from myself that she lost sight of her own life. She wanted to write a novel. Two years later, the first word remains unwritten. She has a keyboard in our bedroom. It lays under months of dust, unplayed. Trish said no more that night on our bed. She has still to tell me anything else. No matter how much coaxing or kissing or Scotch I give her, she refuses to talk any further about how she felt during those nineteen years.

The closest she came was the other night. We sat on the porch, watching the moon rise, enjoying a shot of whiskey and just being with each other. Out of nowhere, Trish said, "The reason I don't say anything is I figure you have enough angst for both of us. Why add to that?"

I want her to add to that. I need to know. I believe that I would not be alive if not for Trish and her dogged determination to find the man she married. No, I would not have committed suicide. I am not that courageous. The depression instead would have totally consumed me. I would have let it become my god, allowing the cardboard cutout I became to melt into a puddle of pulp by my own tears. I would have simply faded away into nothingness. Having the love of my wife, and her belief that I could somehow beat this dragon, kept me going day by day.

I need to know how she felt in those years, and how she feels now. I want to restore what she lost in our marriage. We have been married twenty-five years, and have at least another
twenty-five years to go. Why can't those next twenty-five years be the best of her life. She was there for me. Now, it's my turn to be there for her. If she will but talk to me so I know what to do!

Yet, somehow, that night we talked about depression, something broke in her. She changed. It was as if she finally realized that those years were over, and they were not coming back, at least not in that shape. Whatever tomorrow presented, we could fight it together.

She plunged into her study of Wicca, finding a joy in it that I had never seen in her before. While she didn't begin writing her own works, she took an active interest in mine, designing a coat of arms for my main character. She began dreaming of owning our own home again, so she could have a rose garden. It was a start. It was something new.

I noticed other changes in my wife. Sometimes, I described her as a happy cardinal lighting upon a full feeder of seed. That wasn't so much because of her hair color, but because the lilt of her voice seemed to be a cheerful chirp. I hadn't noticed that the lilt had vanished, until it returned a week after our interview. Trish began to wear less blue, and more red. She bought blouses that accentuated her figure. A few mornings ago, I heard a shout of triumph from the bathroom. Trish burst through the door and proclaimed that she had lost five pounds, but didn't know why. I smiled, rolled over, and drifted back to sleep. I was back, and so was my wife.

Two nights after our conversation about how she felt during my ordeal, Trish wrote about it in her online blog. She allowed me to read it and share it here. While it does not answer what she felt during the times of torment, it does explain why she stayed, and why we will defeat whatever new dragon comes our way tomorrow:

*Friends don’t leave friends to face horrible circumstances alone. After each time, each episode, Nathan returned to himself. Well, that’s not really true, because even in the midst of the*
straitjacket of depression, he was always himself. His eyes might have been focused on the oncoming ghost train which was only too real to him and that I could not see, but he was actively present, nonetheless.

We shared, and share, a love that is near indefinable. I think that’s why people wonder at us when we say we don’t fight. They think that makes us somehow ‘not real’ – as if, by saying that we hold ourselves apart from fighting we are simply in denial. Instead it is a very deliberate act of what behavior in which we will (and will not) partake.

I have never known a man like Nathan. I genuinely like him. (How many people married 25 years can say that? I don’t know that many, and that’s sad.) I have fun with him. I treasure waking up to him every day. There are those days that light up my heart, when he wakes up, looks over at me with a big smile on his face, a twinkle in his eyes, and says ‘good morning, gorgeous!’ We laugh together, we solve the problems of the world together and sometimes we resurrect the problems, the ‘dead horses’, just to beat them up and kill them again because bitching together feels so good. We hike together, camp together, and both get tickled by the sight and sound of the sparrows in the bird feeder on the porch. We find new things together, and enjoy talking about them. We share each others’ interests, and genuinely enjoy what each other has to say. We love passionately, gently, romantically. He is the only man I know that is gentle, romantic, and undeniably a strong man at the same time. Even through the long battle with depression he has retained strengths. This is all what I mean when I say those three words: I love him.

How could I ever contemplate leaving, when leaving would be tantamount to physically carving him from my side? He is as much a part of my life as my breath. It was love that made me stay.
One day in the middle of an attack of depression, I slumped on the red brocade couch next to Mom. I stared across the living room, past Dad dozing in his La-Z-Boy, and tried to focus on the front door. This was my house, the first one Trish and I ever owned. It was just a small concrete block three bedroom home on a standard sized lot in Altamonte Springs, outside Orlando. We had St. Augustine grass and three silver maples in the yard, with azaleas and camellias around the house. Trish planted roses in the backyard and I put up several bird feeders and a birdbath. We rented a room to Mom and Dad and they helped us keep the place clean. It was mine; my little world. Yet, I felt like a ghost in my own house, transparent and covered in the dust that settled over the furniture.

"I feel like I'm walking around in a bell jar, unable to touch anyone or be heard," I said.

"I feel like that all the time," Mom said.

"I can't control this sadness."

Mom slumped forward on the couch and sighed. She said, "Neither can I, son. Neither can I."

Mom and I had that short conversation in 1998. I never thought about it until 2011 when the memory of it flashed through my mind as I wrote an essay about depression. I knew those words, those of a fragmented psyche that wants to pull itself together but has forgotten how. I
knew that body posture, that upright fetal slump on the couch. I knew that sigh, that ache rising from so far down that it has to originate deep within a worn out soul. They used to be mine. I never noticed that they belonged to Mom, too.

Through the cataracts of grief that blinded my emotions, I never realized that Mom probably suffered from chronic depression, too. Sure she felt grief, such as when her grandmother and her parents died. That's normal. The more I thought about it though, the more I realized that there was something there in her life, some malignant presence that dominated her the same way chronic depression dominated me. While Mom laughed quite a bit, she also seemed sad, as if some lingering memory kept her hidden in a shadow. She reminded me of an exhausted tiger in a too small cage. I don't recall Mom always being that way. She grew into her cage as I grew older.

As I recalled that conversation, I began to wonder if perhaps I inherited a predisposition for depression from Mom. Many psychiatrists believe that mood disorders such as depression can be inherited instead of strictly caused by childhood events. If both causative agents of heredity and environment are present, then the person runs a great risk of a disorder of some kind, usually depression or its close kin, anxiety. I decided to explore Mom's family to see if I could see any causes or patterns of depression in the past. If Mom had it, and inherited it herself, that would go a long way to giving me closure to my ordeal. It would answer the question that haunts me some nights when I can't sleep, the question "why me?" Why was I singled out for an attack by chronic depression? If I inherited it, just as I inherited my height and eye color, then there wasn't much I could do to stop it.

I didn't like to think about my mother suffering from chronic depression. It was bad enough that she ended her days with diabetes and a heart condition, and there was nothing I
could do about it. To think that she may have suffered from the same invaliding condition I did, one that had a known cure, pushed me to the brink of experiencing a different form of grief -- that of someone who arrived too late to save a victim that he had the power to save. Mom probably would have felt the same way about me, had she known I suffered from a genuine medical malady. I have no doubt that she would have joined forces with Trish and badgered me until I went to a doctor. I don't recall her ever asking about why I looked so sad. She may have just guessed I was lost in my thoughts and too gloomy about the nature of the world to do more than frown. It probably never occurred to Mom that I had a disease, especially if she suffered it herself. Depression blinds people to the truth about themselves and those around them.

Yet, I didn't want to consider that Mom ever felt one second of the depression I felt. She was my mother! She should have been happy. I wanted to protect her, even if all I could protect were memories. Sure, she irritated me during my teen years and the last ten years of her life, but many people say that about their mothers. Many say worse. In the end, I thought I owed it to her to discover myself, even if it meant playing detective with her life and arriving at negative conclusions. So, I plunged into my memories of Mom's stories of her childhood to see what I could unearth.

My mother, Dolores Hartshorn Boutwell, was a small woman. Her kindness reflected in her gentle blue eyes and her amused smile, cocked to the right by Bell's Palsy. Her thick Georgia accent echoed Scarlett O'Hara. Mom even said "Fiddle dee dee," when I exasperated her. She was born three months premature in December, 1930, the coldest month of the Great Depression, in the dirty textile mill town of Griffin, Georgia, a place that I thought always smelled like sulphur and old towels. She credited her survival to the prayers of her maternal grandfather. Her
premature birth gave her scoliosis, shriveling what should have been a five foot seven inch tall frame to five foot four. She once showed me an x-ray of her back. Her spine curved dramatically toward her right shoulder blade like a question mark set on the page of her body.

I knew Mom's mother by the name of Buh. When Mom was a child, Buh neglected her, treating her more as a boarder than a daughter. Mom told me she never remembered being hugged by her mother, much less being told she was loved. Buh seemed more interested in the news she heard on the radio, or in the business gossip of Griffin, than she did her child. At least, that was Mom's perception. I always thought it was interesting that Mom referred to her father by the term of endearment "Daddy," but her mother by the formal "Mother." I never remember seeing Mom or Buh hug, or even show affection toward each other. The only emotion I ever saw pass between them was respect.

Buh told everyone that Mom had a dead liver. I never heard the origins of that story, but it was probably related to Mom's premature birth. Three years into their marriage, Dad finally convinced Mom that she would not be alive if she had a dead liver. As a child, Mom had a pet duck. She never told me the duck's name. She forgot that detail by the time I was born. All she remembered was that she tied a blue ribbon around its neck. Her pet ended up roasted on the dinner table one night in 1937.

When Mom was nine, Buh sent her into the attic to bring down the Christmas lights. While rooting around in a trunk for the lights, Mom found some new toys. She had never seen these before. She raced downstairs to tell her mother.

"Mother, there are toys in the attic!" Mom said.

"Well, I guess you just found out Santa Claus doesn't exist," Buh snapped.
Mom said that was a horrible way for a child to learn the truth about Santa Claus. She told me she felt devastated. Mom believed in Santa and fairy tales, living in a dream world where knights rescued maidens and monsters could be defeated. To have brutal reality forced on her with such alacrity rocked her to her foundation. Mom said that she felt her mother responded with more than just practicality, and the irritation of a parent whose secret is discovered. She felt that her mother responded with a note of cruelty.

Mom felt what she believed to be her mother's cruelty elsewhere, too. Buh tormented her at dinner parties. Buh said to the guests, "I don't know what to do with Dolores. She eats like a little bird. She's so skinny."

Then, Buh laughed. The laugh irritated Mom more than the comment. She said it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard. I heard my grandmother laugh. Her laugh reminded me of the villain in a melodrama. Somewhere around age ten, Mom had enough of that laugh.

At another dinner party, she said to herself, "I'll show you! I will eat."

She piled her plate full that night, going back for seconds. Forcing the second plateful down, she then ate two desserts, just to prove her mother wrong and stop the laughter. The next night, she did the same thing. Mom said that rebellion developed into gluttony, which she credited for the diabetes that destroyed her health in the last decade of her life.

When Mom's brother Tom was born in 1940, Buh cast the care for the boy onto Mom. She raised him almost by herself. When Mom married and left home eleven years later, Uncle Tom fell into a depression that lasted nearly a year, he said. It took him almost a decade to forgive my father for taking Mom away from him. Uncle Tom said that Mom was his mother and Buh was just the ghost in the house.
That's all I remember about Mom's childhood. She told me many other stories, about her aunts and uncles, grandparents and her father. Those were happy, often funny, stories of the kind one associates with Mayberry. The ones she told about her mother, however, were grim and sad, colored with a tint of cruelty. Mom suspected her mother was angry because she was born early in her parents' marriage. Uncle Tom, however, told me similar stories. When Buh died, he said, "Well, that woman can't hurt me anymore."

I don't think Buh ever laid a hand on Mom. That was the problem; she never touched Mom with a hug, a back scratch or to dry a stray tear. According to the American Psychological Association's broad definition of childhood trauma, Mom suffered more than her share of it through neglect, parental detachment, and what I can only classify as emotional abuse. Most children know when something is wrong in their homes. In Mom's case, it wasn't so much that there was something wrong in her childhood home, there simply wasn't enough right.

Psychiatrists state that depressed parents create depressed children. I have no doubt that Mom had to have been a depressed child. I certainly would have been in that environment. Yet, I don't recall her acting depressed as an adult until much later in her life. Dad and Mom were 45 and 33 respectively when I was born, so I grew up in their world, the adult world. I distinctly recall age four, seeing *The Ten Commandments* at a drive-in while standing in the front seat of my parent's 1957 Buick Special. Once a week, Mom and I walked to the corner bus stop near our house and rode into downtown Orlando. We ate lunch, went to the library, and then to the bookstore. Mom let me buy any book I wanted. Even then, my favorites featured magic, knights and dragons. She grew up loving comic books and fairy tales and passed that love onto me. My childhood didn't always center around books. Often, Mom and I spent afternoons sitting on the
terrazzo floor in front of the big black and white television, watching old B-movies such as *Them* and *The Fly*. Then, she helped me run my Lionel model railroad.

That changed when I was twelve. By then, we lived in Orange City. Cable television came to our town that year and my parents were some of the first subscribers. One night, while channel surfing, Mom stumbled across *The 700 Club*. In 1975, Pat Robertson was less interested in politics than in featuring guests who had experiences with God. Mom was transfixed. She grew up Baptist, and we attended the little Baptist church in our town. She never heard of divine healing or speaking in tongues. She watched the show all day, and when Dad came home, asked him to watch it. Dad grew up in Pentecostal churches, so the idea of clapping to the hymns and shouting at the preacher was familiar to him. The following Sunday, we left the Baptist church and visited an Assembly of God. We never returned to the Baptists.

Dad had the attitude that faith made people better people. It taught them how to be kind to their neighbors and get along. I have the same attitude. Mom's attitude was different. Mom always seemed a little ethereal to me, a little otherworldly. I don't think Mom wanted to leave Earth and go to Heaven; instead, she wanted Heaven to come to her piece of the Earth. The Assemblies of God gave her that feeling. Peace, order, holiness, even a taste of supernatural power, all lay within her grasp, or so she seemed to think. Mom plunged into her new denomination with determined fervor.

My life changed drastically. I entered my teen years at that time, and instead of finding the growing freedom those years are supposed to provide -- freedom Dad wanted to give me -- I found myself on the end of a tight leash made from the leather of sermons. My friends were no longer good enough; they weren't "Christian enough." Mom wanted me to spend my time with
the teens in the church. They bored me. If they had a life outside of Sunday School or the Bible, I sure never saw it.

The books I read as a child were now "of the devil" and banned from the house. I was forbidden to listen to anything except classical music. Both rock and country music were "of the devil." The B-movies vanished. When I wanted to see Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Mom refused saying it was "of the devil." I grew to hate that term! Even today, the archaic Jacobean construction of the phrase "of the devil" causes me to wince. I was required to read The Hobbit in tenth grade English class. The night I brought the book home, I fell asleep listening to Mom in her room praying in tongues that I would not be influenced by it.

Before I was twelve, Mom called me easy to get along with and kind. After she joined the Assembly of God church, she started calling me "stubborn and rebellious." I hadn't changed. She changed and I didn't fit her new set of criteria for an obedient son. I wanted to spend Saturday night doing what I had always done, watching a movie, instead of praying. When I wanted to date in high school, Mom pitched a fit. She said "Those girls will just drag you into sin and away from Jesus." Only Dad's intervention allowed me to go out with any girls before I turned eighteen.

I don't know what any of Mom's fanaticism had to do with depression. Some people use religion as a form of medication to help with depression, and for many it works. Having something to believe in helps give depressed people a sense of purpose, perhaps realigning the brain chemicals. For others, the emotional experience allowed in churches like the Assembly of God relieves them of sadness. I can't make any of those claims for Mom. I don't recall Mom being depressed prior to switching churches, or during her time with the Assemblies of God.
Those years may have contributed to my own depression, however. I felt that Mom's fanaticism, as I saw it, denied me any normal teenage life. I didn't want to experiment with drugs or go to wild parties, but I did want the choice to say no on my own and not be forced into the mold of a perfect Christian. I was too young to flee, and had nowhere to go if I did leave. I wasn't permitted to fight. That fight or flight response is controlled by cortisol. If the body can't respond to cortisol's demands, then the chemical builds up and throws the whole brain out of balance. That can cause depression. My teen years and the inability to either fight or flee may have started an imbalance that only grew worse when I was an adult.

My parents left the Assembly of God when I was nineteen. They grew disgusted with the growing emphasis on money, and the pastors' insistence that they had the right to tell the congregation what to wear, what to eat and whom to marry. That was the first time I noticed sadness creep into Mom's face and voice. I knew she felt betrayed by a faith system that she strongly believed in, but had turned sour. She also felt the onset of diabetes. While a disease of that nature will not cause depression, the knowledge of its presence certainly can.

She changed again. She became fearful. Mom's fear during my teen years at least had some element of legitimacy. If a pastor told her that anything not based on the Bible was evil, then she had evidence to believe that demons lurked outside the house waiting to entice her only child into depravation. After that, her fear had no basis. It took on the form of irrational panic that only grew stronger with each year until by the time she was in her 60s, it ruled her life.

In the late 1990s, Mom and Dad lived with us. I had gained weight from having a sedentary job monitoring a computer all day. Mom said she wanted me to start exercising and was afraid I would have a heart attack if I didn't. I knew she was right. So, I started taking walks around the neighborhood and bought a weight set.
"Oh, son, you're overdoing it!" Mom said a few weeks later as I bench pressed sixty pounds in my garage.

"What are you talking about? I'm just following Arnold's recommendations," I said."The book is in the living room if you want to look at it."

"My doctor says that you should ride a bicycle without any tension. That will lower your blood pressure just fine."

"Mom, I don't have high blood pressure. I'm fat! There's a big difference."

"But you're overdoing it! You've lost too much weight."

"I've only lost five pounds. I have another thirty to go."

"You're overdoing it."

"Mom! Stop it!"

Mom actually wrung her hands and said "I'm just so afraid that you're going to get too strong and hurt someone and go to jail."

It seemed like that conversation reoccurred every night for several weeks. I may have understood if I ran five miles a night and tried to be a body builder. My routine, however, consisted of walking one mile and working out with a maximum of sixty pounds. That would hardly turn me into anyone fearsome enough to win a brawl. Finally, though, I had enough. After hearing her fears one time too many, I thought that the only way to win the argument was to quit.

After a week of watching me sit on the couch, Mom said, "Nathan, you need to exercise."

"Mom, please make up your mind!"

After we moved to Texas in 2002, Mom and Dad lived in the same apartment complex that we did. Mom always knew where I was and usually what I was doing. That didn't stop her
from calling me every time she heard a siren. I could be asleep, I could be at work, I could be out on a date with Trish, and she still called me.

"Are you all right?" she asked as soon as I said hello.

"I'm fine. Why?" I replied.

"I heard the siren and I was just so worried. I knew it was you! You didn't break your arm? You weren't in a car wreck? I don't trust you to tell me the truth. Are you all right?"

"I told you, I'm fine."

I told her where I was and that I was not the cause of whatever police, fire or ambulance siren she heard. That usually satisfied her, until the next time. One night, after Mom woke me up at 2 AM, I decided to confront her. I had had enough of her fear.

"Why do you treat me like I'm fragile ornament that needs to be packed away in cotton?" I asked that night.

"Because you're my treasure and I'm just so afraid something will happen to you. If you lived your life like I think you should, I wouldn't worry so," she said.

"What works for you won't work me," I replied.

"Why not?"

"Don't you believe God will take care of me?" I asked.

"I don't trust you to live your life the way I think it should be lived, and I don't trust God to take care of me the way I think he should."

I didn't know how to answer that. Mom didn't trust me. After I hung up, I lay in bed that night, too irritated to go back to sleep. I thought about the conversation. I just wanted her to accept me as a functioning adult, and talk to me like one. At first, I thought she was just being selfish and overprotective. Later, I thought about the second part of what she said. "I don't trust
God to take care of me the way I think he should." We had been talking about me, but she didn't say you, meaning me. She said me, meaning herself. Mom didn't trust God. The most Christian woman I ever knew, the one who memorized half the Bible, didn't trust her own deity. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

Today, I think Mom's slip of the tongue revealed her sense of betrayal. She never found the peace, order or supernatural power she sought in the 1970s. Her feeling of betrayal only deepened as she watched Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and other charismatic preachers descend into scandal, right-wing politics and greed. By 2006, her insulin and blood sugar levels out of control, Mom could no longer ask for divine healing, the one supernatural act she had witnessed with her own eyes in earlier years. She didn't even trust God to help her find the right doctor. The emotional glass jar that Mom and I discussed on my couch back in 1998 became a physical one. She died young at 75, from a combination of congestive heart failure, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Even though Mom had her share of trauma throughout her life, it didn't appear that they caused chronic depression in her. Oh sure, I saw moments of sadness in her -- everyone has those -- but not the perpetual grief that I felt. It looked more like she suffered from anxiety disorder. The two often work side by side, and one can shift into the other and back without warning. Perhaps Mom and I both suffered from the same brain chemistry imbalance, but hers appeared as fear while mine appeared as grief. That meant Mom could have inherited the imbalance from one of her parents. I decided to sift through my memories of my grandparents for any signs of something similar.
Mom's father, Thomas Hartshorn, was the sweetest man I ever knew, despite his intimidating appearance. I have known very few men that I would call barrel-chested, but Granddaddy was one of them. A Greyhound bus driver for 40 years, he developed massive shoulder and chest muscles forcing a Pierce-Arrow bus around the curves of north Georgia roads back in the days before interstate highways, power steering and automatic transmissions. He looked like a bulldog, his nose flattened from losing the cartilage to blood poisoning in 1933. To my young ears, his laugh, a raucous roar of unbridled mirth that began in his toes, shook the room.

Mom was a daddy's girl, and Granddaddy was a daddy's girl daddy. He always lit up whenever Mom walked into their mobile home. Because I was Dolores Hartshorn's only child, and his eldest grandson, Granddaddy doted on me. He gave me a love of the TV show *Star Trek*. We watched it together every week until NBC cancelled it in 1969, then met on his days off when it went into afternoon syndication. It was our personal ritual.

When I was four years old, I walked up to his big console television set, standing between him and an episode of *Star Trek*. I guess I just wanted to get a better view of Spock than I had on the couch.

"Get out of the way, boy!" Granddaddy said. "You've been drinking that muddy water. I can't see through you."

I turned off the television. I looked at him and said "Space!" Then I walked away.

"Come back here and turn that TV back on!" he yelled.

I don't remember that moment at all, but he told that story about me at least twice a year until he died. I think it was his favorite memory of me. Behind Mom's back, Granddaddy introduced me to the joys of *Playboy* and James Bond, and took me to see *Magnum Force*, where
I saw my first nude woman onscreen. He had a different idea about sex and women, coming from an era when women were seen by men as sexual objects. I guess he wanted his grandson to be like him. I never complained. Granddaddy seemed to be the voice of reason against Mom's religious intolerance of anything I wanted to do. He allowed me to enjoy the luxurious taste of forbidden fruit.

If Mom inherited any depression from her family, I didn't think it was from Granddaddy. He seemed to be happy living in his make believe world of tough-guy heroes and spaceships. If anything, Mom inherited her love of fairy tales from him. He bequeathed to me my tendency to be a comic book "fanboy," the kind of adult who goes to conventions dressed as a knight and stands in line for hours just to get Ian McKellan's autograph. Perhaps I owe Granddaddy my fondness for fantasy stories. I am now the age he was when I first remember him, and I've noticed that my laugh is sounding more and more like his.

I turned my attention to Mom's mother, Eva Autry. I already knew that Mom had an uneasy relationship with her mother, and was neglected, but what else could I discover by examining my memories? Mom always said that I had a better relationship with her mother than she did. I called her Buh after my disastrous attempt to pronounce her first name when I was two years old. Mom said I called her "e-Buh," and at some point, dropped the e. My grandmother liked it and told me to keep calling her that. Buh was a distant cousin of the Singing Cowboy, Gene Autry. A small woman with snapping green eyes, she was always sweet to me. She spoke in an older form of a Georgian accent, pronouncing words like porch as "po-ach," and saying "sure 'nuff" when someone told her a new fact. She loved debating me over the policies of Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon.
Buh once said to me, "I wanted to be a politician. I still do. I think I could have helped a lot of people. But women didn't do that when I was young. I reckon I was born too early."

Despite feeling she was born out of time, Buh was a shrewd businesswoman. For 45 years, she held management positions in retail, first for J.C. Penney in Griffin, then Sears in Jacksonville, Florida, and finally herself in DeLand. Few women held management positions in those days, so that said something about her knowledge of merchandise, her ability to encourage the staff, and her finesse with customer service. She took over the management of Volusia Pharmacy, her sister Hattie Lou's drug store in DeLand, in 1965. When Aunt Hattie Lou sold it to Buy-Wise Discount Pharmacy, a chain out of Atlanta, in 1969, Buh stayed on as manager until she retired in 1975.

Mom worked for Buh at Buy-Wise as the unofficial assistant manager. Occasionally, a ghost of a memory crosses my mind from those years. Many of them are of conversations of the type that make a ten year old push himself back a bit further on the couch. Many of them are moments that remind me that behind the magical world of a boy lay a darker place.

"Les Ferrell and Old Man Fountain were in the store today," I recall Buh saying one night, referring to DeLand's jeweler and men's clothing retailer.

"I saw them," Mom said.

"They were talking with Cantrell," Buh said, speaking of the Buy-Wise pharmacist. "I know they were talking about me."

"Now, Mother, you don't know that."

"I do, Dolores! They want to get rid of me. They tried to get rid of Hattie Lou. They want the store for themselves. I will not let those Big Daddies run me out of town."
I wish I could remember more snatches of conversations between Mom and Buh, but I spent most of my time in the world of Archie and Green Lantern and didn't pay attention to what the adults said. I am no longer sure if that was even a real conversation, or a conglomerate of many I half-way heard over the years, pressed into a solitary representation that characterized most nights. Other fleeting recollections cross my mind, such as Buh's numerous whispered conversations on the telephone, or snooping through her sisters' purses. Granddaddy called her "Dick Tracy," and he didn't mean it as a compliment.

Buh had a gambling addiction, often placing bets on Jai A'lai in Daytona Beach or on horse races through DeLand's bookies. She racked up a substantial debt that Mom often paid off herself. To hide her gambling problem from the rest of the family, Buh told Mom's aunts, uncles and cousins that Dad was still married to his first wife when he married Mom. It worked. The rest of the family treated Mom like a leper. When Mom died, Uncle Tom was the only relative who came to her funeral. Perhaps if I could remember more, I could pick up the trail of my depression or Mom's anxiety in Buh. Instead what I remember smacks more of paranoia.

Buh seemed unable to form new relationships, and the ones she had were not stable. If Buh held Mom at a distance, she was downright hostile to Granddaddy. I never saw it, but Mom told me that at least once every four months, Buh had to have an explosion. "Mother just isn't happy without causing Daddy to blow his stack," she said to me. Buh started nagging Granddaddy in the morning, either about his weight, his choice of reading material, or something else trivial, until he erupted in fury and stormed out to his favorite bar for the rest of the day. After that, she was calm.

Before Mom and Dad moved in with Trish and me, they tried taking care of Buh for a year. At 88 years of age, Buh was no longer able to keep a house clean or cook for herself, so
Mom and Dad rented a two bedroom apartment and moved her in with them. Buh spent her days either watching news reports of the O.J. Simpson murder case, or sitting on the porch smoking cigarettes. She started telling us stories of seeing snakes that crawled up onto the slab of concrete to visit her. The snakes wore pink straw hats with flowers in them. Sometimes, the snakes smoked cigarettes with her. Mom thought Buh was just trying to get attention, or that the news of the trial had affected her mind. I thought it was physiological. A doctor told us that only one third of one of Buh's lungs worked. The rest had been charred away during sixty years of chain smoking. I thought she suffered from oxygen deprivation.

So, at the end of my examination of my grandmother, all I could say about her is that she was difficult to live with and had some annoying habits. A lot of people are; that didn't prove anything. Perhaps that sort of opinion is based more on a clash of personalities than any sort of actual mood disorder, and my opinion may be based on my natural desire to protect my mother against all threats, even if that threat was her own mother. My grandmother may not have been easy for most people to get along with, and she lost her mind in her later years, but that had no marks of depression or even anxiety. Even if she did have some sort of mood disorder, I would not have blamed her. Her mother, Alice Avret, was an orphan; both her parents were murdered.

Alice was the second daughter of William and Elizabeth Avret, a middle class couple living in post-Reconstruction Augusta, Georgia. According to family legend, a town doctor tried to talk Elizabeth into leaving her family and marrying him. I have Alice's wedding photograph, and if she looked anything like her mother, then Elizabeth was an extremely beautiful woman. It was easy to understand a man lustling after her to the point of madness. After Elizabeth rebuffed his advances, the doctor poisoned her. A few years later, William, the paymaster and accountant for a lumber mill, was killed during an armed robbery. Buh didn't know what happened to the
doctor, but she said that the shooter, a black man, was lynched by the townspeople of Augusta. I
don't know who raised Alice after her father's murder. There is no one left alive to ask. I suspect
her elder sister Louisa raised her, but Louisa disowned Alice when she married Pat Autry, the
grandson of a textile mill employee. We may see that as preposterous, but it was my great-
grandparents' world of Georgia in the late Gilded Age.

Losing both parents and being shunned by her sister by the time she was seventeen
qualified as childhood trauma in my book. Add to that the fact that Alice's first four children all
died before the age of ten. I wondered if Alice suffered from depression. No, I wondered how
she could not, and wondered what she did to help herself cope. Neither Mom nor Buh ever
mentioned seeing Alice drink, nor abuse laudanum, the most commonly available narcotic at the
time. She went to church, but from what I remember Mom saying, she was not overtly religious.
Either Alice kept her depression hidden, or she was far tougher than her great-grandson.

I tried finding references to the murders in the Augusta newspapers housed at the Georgia
State Archives. Murders of that magnitude, especially if William was killed by a black man,
should have made the news. I found nothing. There were too many gaps in the extant collections.
Many old newspapers crumbled to dust in the primitive archival conditions of the past, or were
lost in the paper drives of the two world wars. The specificity of Elizabeth's murder -- the family
adamantly stated the doctor poisoned her -- implied that there had been some type of official
investigation. Until I have the time to visit Augusta, and look at the police and court records, the
murders will remain in the murky realm of family folklore.

I spent the winter of 2011 trying to fit the pieces together. Many of them formed small
vignettes, showing me personality defects in my mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. I
ended up feeling far more sympathy for Mom and Buh than I did when they were alive and their actions irritated me. Having my own personality flaws, I realized that my mother and grandmother were but victims of some internal mechanism that controlled them without their knowledge. Like I couldn't avoid the depression that mired me for nineteen years, Mom couldn't avoid her anxiety and Buh probably couldn't avoid her relationship issues.

Even though I had these vignettes of my ancestors, the subparts never fit together into a recognizable whole portrait. It was as if the joining pieces were missing. I had four people on the table, but they remained separate. None of us had anything in common, except DNA and blood. I had suffered from chronic depression. Mom had anxiety and had some traumatic moments as a child. Buh had relationship problems and delusions. My great-grandmother certainly had a traumatic childhood, but beyond that, I knew nothing about her. Despite the clarity of those images, they just did not fit together. Despite four clear personalities and common blood, I struck out. My search for a cause through my family failed. At the end of my search, I still wrestled with the question "why me?" It still remained unanswered. I left the puzzle pieces alone, thinking that I didn't inherit depression from my family. That belief changed in the summer of 2012.
Chapter Five
The Dragon Returns

My recovery from manic depression has been an evolution, not a sudden miracle.

Patty Duke

On Friday, May 11, 2012, I thought my life could not be any better. I had just finished my first year teaching freshman composition at UNT, a year that concluded with one student claiming "Mr. Boutwell didn't teach me about writing, he taught me about life." The Aura Lockhaven Chronicles, my first novel in sixteen years, lay on the tip of my mind, ready to be committed to paper. As a graduate student, I had finished my coursework with a 4.0 GPA, a major improvement over my dismal 2.62 as an undergraduate. My thesis was 85% complete. If anything bothered me, it was my neck from the whiplash sustained in a car wreck in February. On that morning, however, my chiropractor said I was cured. No more tri-weekly visits, no more traction. I decided to go to the liquor store at the county line and pick up some bourbon for the weekend. I drove down the backroads because the countryside was pretty and I liked the tall trees by the golf course at the edge of Denton. It was raining.

Somewhere beyond the country club, I noticed that I was driving twenty miles per hour below the speed limit, sitting forward to see through what was just a spring shower. I actually looked at my hands on the steering wheel. I had what some call a "white knuckle grip." I said to myself, out loud, "What the hell is wrong with me?" I am from Florida, and have driven in far more severe storms, even once in a tropical depression. Rain means nothing to me, except on that day it did. By the time I reached Paradise Liquors, my shirt was damp from sweat and I gasped
to catch my breath. I bought two quarts, one for the weekend and one to calm myself when I reached home.

I thought about it for the rest of the day, and the fear didn't make any sense. Driving in the rain was normal for me. I took it for granted. Being afraid of it was as silly as being afraid to put on my shoes. I've been in Texas too long, I thought. I had become accustomed to the arid weather and was simply out of practice.

The rest of the day and most of Saturday passed without incident. Then, around midnight on Saturday, Trish and I went to Wal-Mart to pick up some ice cream. I should have stayed in the car. I don't remember what happened, not clearly at least. It's more like a memory of something I read twenty years ago. At the self checkout, I apparently had a breakdown of some sort. All I recall is storming away from the checkout, screaming at the top of my lungs. It was as if I stood outside my body, watching myself rant and yell, and thinking "I just want to get out of here!" That's all I remember. The rest is just dark. Nothing. A total blackout. Trish said that I did a lot more than just scream my way out of Wal-Mart. She said I terrified the cashiers and customers by shouting like a berserker facing the last battle of his life, hurling vile curses at everyone who stood between myself and my escape from whatever terror I felt.

The next thing I recall is wandering aimlessly by a street light at the edge of the parking lot, while Trish yelled from her car window for me to get inside. I held my arms to my chest and mumbled about wanting to go home. I do remember that as I climbed inside Trish's car, I thought "I've said those words before."

I had two more bouts with abject fear the next day and another the following Tuesday. The terror struck with no discernible triggers. My hands trembled. I couldn't speak a coherent sentence without stammering. I even felt threatened by my cats. I wanted to kill people before
they killed me, and kill myself before I killed them. I only made the problem worse by thinking I recognized the issue.

I had anxiety disorder, unwarranted fear that just appears without cause or motive. Anxiety disorder and chronic depression have the same origin; an imbalance of serotonin and cortisol. After five years of being free, the dragon had returned, only in a different form. Somehow, my brain chemistry was imbalanced again. That meant that depression could return at any given moment. Thinking that triggered the attack on Tuesday. I sat on the edge of the bed, rocking back and forth, sobbing.

No, no, no! Not that slap in the gut again. Not that feeling of being a cardboard cutout that only resembled a vague shape of my identity. I led a happy life now. I wrote. I taught. I enjoyed who I was. I had confidence and self-esteem. I saw all that vanishing in smoke from the fires of depression.

"No," I stammered. "Please tell me it isn't back. I can't live with it again! Please tell me it isn't back. Please tell me it isn't back."

Trish held me and said, "We'll just take you to a doctor again. Wellbutrin helped before and it can help this time. It's nothing to be afraid of."

"You didn't have to live with it."

"Yes, I did," Trish said.

For ten days, I remained locked inside our apartment. I ventured out onto our porch to look at the birds and the trees, but ducked back inside at the first hint of an approaching human being. I never wanted to leave the apartment again. Being a hermit felt safe. It felt natural. The
door to our apartment was metal. I wanted to weld it shut so I would have an excuse to never go anywhere. On the tenth day, however, I had to leave. I had an appointment with my therapist.

Shambhala Wellness Center occupied a white two-story house with a small Greek Revival portico that looked added as an afterthought by a previous owner. Tulips and petunias lined the walk to the rear entry. I waited in the lobby in an overstuffed couch underneath an impressionist painting of a trio of children playing violins and a French horn. Johanna walked into the room and led me to her upstairs office.

I first began seeing Johanna two months earlier in an effort to resolve some recurring anger issues that erupted in the beginning of 2012. I began feeling that people were trying to force me to think like they did, act like they did, and write like they did. I knew that was wrong, and the origins of the anger baffled me. I thought a therapist could help me sort it out and get rid of it. A tall middle-aged blonde woman with a charming Dutch accent, Johanna called herself a naturopath, hypnotherapist and life coach. The drive to her office nearly reduced me to tears. I think I jumped at every car that passed me on the ten minute trip. As I drove through the empty campus of Texas Woman's University, I actually whimpered. When I arrived at Shambala, I was soaked with sweat. Johanna knew immediately that something was wrong. She led me to her office, a room feeling of peace, smelling of sandalwood incense, and flooded with light. I sat in one of her overstuffed chairs while she sat in the other underneath a cardinal red wall. I told her about the anxiety attacks.

"What changed prior to the first attack?" Johanna asked.

"The semester ended," I answered. "That's all that happened."

"What was your life like until then?"
"I taught two sections of freshman composition, I was taking my last class, and I was working on my thesis."

"When did that all end?"

"The Monday before the attack," I said.

"On the same day?" Johanna asked. Her eyes widened in surprise. Then she gave me a knowing smile and said, "You decompressed too fast."

In a way, that made sense. There is a plot device in science fiction stories, where a man in space commits suicide by removing his helmet. The pressure in his skull is far greater than the pressure of space, so his head explodes. That was how I felt. I felt that I had exploded. Johanna suggested that the sudden removal of external structure sent me into a panic. She told me to replace the external structure imposed by my scholarly demands with a new one that was self-imposed. In other words, she told me to plan out my days for the rest of the summer. I did. It didn't help.

Even though I spent my time doing what I enjoyed, writing a novel and making 3D art, I still felt lost. I still didn't want to leave the apartment. The very idea of going anywhere terrified me. Despite a well planned schedule, I had another anxiety attack. Around 2 AM on June 10, I lay in bed next to Trish, dealing with insomnia. As is my custom, I daydreamed about something I wanted to write. There were no triggers; nothing to look at except the shadow cast by the ceiling fan, nothing to listen to except Trish and my cat breathing, nothing to think about except how my heroine was going to get into trouble and then out of it. I had what I can only describe as an adrenaline dump. The need to fight or flee seized me. With nothing to fight, I sat up in bed, determined to run through the house, jump off the porch, and flee. Then, I calmed myself down,
telling myself that there was nothing to be afraid of, just lay back down. About ten minutes later, the anxiety left.

Anxiety altered my personality. In its wake, I suffered from agoraphobia, the fear of open places. I used to enjoy traveling. Nothing thrilled or satisfied as much as driving through unknown parts of the country and seeing new towns and meeting new people. I especially loved taking weekend road trips to different parts of Texas and seeing the remains of the Old West. Until May, at least every four days, I had to get out of the apartment. The walls closed in and I felt stifled. I enjoyed taking my laptop to a tavern in downtown Denton called the Loophole. I ordered a beer and wrote while listening to the people laugh and talk. On other days, I took a book to a local coffee shop. I just loved "feeling other people's souls" as I called it.

After the first anxiety attack, I became more than content to remain in my little apartment for the rest of my life. I daydreamed about buying sixty acres in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and never leaving the place. I felt happy with just Trish, the cats and the trees. I liked having an excuse for staying home and writing. I was happy being a hermit. Unlike depression, I could function with anxiety. It did not cripple me in the same way. Nothing satisfied me like the idea of never coming in contact with another human being again.

That wasn't healthy. It also wasn't very practical. I wanted to sell the novel I wrote, and that required travel: book tours, readings, interviews. I could not do that with agoraphobia. The mere idea of an interview made me twitch with low-level anxiety. It was only a delusion that I enjoyed being a hermit, and I knew that. Nineteen years with depression, and five years without it, proved one thing to me: this was a serious issue and I could not treat it myself. The reality of that settled on me a month after my first anxiety attack.
The more I thought about the dichotomy between my mind and emotions, the more something gnawed on me. A combination of depression, anxiety and anger sounded too familiar. Between an old personality theory class I took as an undergraduate and some friends of mine who had been institutionalized, it began to sound like something drove all three emotions. I began to think that they were not the problems, but symptoms of something larger, something darker and deeper. I wondered if they were the signs of a genuine personality disorder.

Depression, anxiety and bipolar are considered mood disorders. A mood disorder is like a fourth grade playground bully. A personality disorder is the same bully as a high school senior, taller, stronger, meaner. They can be dangerous, and have dangerous sounding names: borderline, schizophrenia, histrionic. They literally do what they sound like they do: a mood disorder changes the victim's mood while a personality disorder affects the victim's entire personality. With probably the greatest trepidation I ever experienced, I decided to find out if I might have one.

One night in mid-June, while Trish slept, I took a few online personality disorder tests. I ignored the first page of my Google search. Most of those tests ended by popping up a goofy picture and telling the test taker "You are Spider-Man!" I didn't need that. I found two that looked legitimate. One was administered by the Mayo Clinic, and the other by the National Institute of Mental Health. I scored the same on both. My scores for disorders such as borderline, histrionic, schizophrenia and others were fairly low. However, I scored 85% on both tests in the area of schizotypal disorder, way beyond the threshold where the test site recommends the taker visit a psychiatrist.

Not exactly sure what schizotypal was, I decided to read the definition on the NIMH website. According to NIHM, schizotypal is a personality disorder of altered perceptions of
reality. It lies between schizoid (the mildest) and schizophrenic (the most extreme). Unlike schizophrenics, schizotypals rarely hallucinate, and they know their perceptions of reality are probably delusions. People with the disorder held a different outlook on life and thought, dressed and acted in odd ways. So far, schizotypal was just a way of clinically describing eccentric people, I thought.

The list of traits began with "magical thinking," a belief in angels and demons, ESP, psychic phenomena and genuine witchcraft. The second trait was "dressing and speaking differently." Well, I certainly had both, I thought. I believed I had some level of telepathic ability, and actually believed in the existence of Bigfoot and dragons. Besides, Trish is a Wiccan, so I lived with magic every day. As for dressing differently, if I didn't fear the ridicule I would go out dressed as a Jedi or in chain mail. Pretty much every nerd or geek I knew had those traits.

Then, the list of traits turned nasty. The next trait was paranoia, the belief that other people were out to force the patient into accepting realities that conflicted with his or her delusion. I hadn't thought about it as paranoia, but believing that other people were trying to force me into following their lifescript was the trigger behind the anger that led me to Johanna in the first place. After paranoia came anhedonia, the inability to experience pleasure. Nope, I didn't have that! If anything, I had the opposite. As I read that schizotypals often fall victim to addictions, I reached for the shot of bourbon on my nightstand.

The following trait was the feeling of being an outcast, that the patient believes he doesn't fit into society. Uh, oh, I thought. I've always felt like an outsider. I even had a bumper sticker on my truck that read "Who Says I Want to Fit In?" Other traits included perceiving slights that were not there, overgeneralizing, and falling back on stereotypes. Everyone demonstrates those traits at least once in a while, the website said, but schizotypals demonstrate them for longer than
six months in duration. Yikes, I thought. I have always been accused of doing those very things. The list ended with the potential side effects of schizotypal disorder: chronic depression, anxiety, rage and agoraphobia.

"Oh, shit!" I yelled.

My outburst woke Trish up, but she fell back asleep before I could tell her about the list. Then, I read the probable causative agents. The causes of schizotypal disorder were still unknown, but psychologists believed that it was caused by genetic factors, childhood neglect or childhood trauma, leading to a permanent imbalance of serotonin and dopamine in the brain. Someone who suffered childhood trauma and had a schizotypal parent was at high risk of the disorder himself.

I took three more online personality tests that targeted schizotypal itself, each written by a certified psychologist. All three indicated the same thing. While I only demonstrated half the traits of schizotypal people, that qualified me for a diagnosis with the disorder and I should seek psychiatric help. I'm not just eccentric, I thought. I don't just have mood disorders. I'm crazy! I am certifiably insane.

I got out of bed, grabbed my pack of cigarettes and the two beers we had in the refrigerator. I wandered out onto the porch. I don't know how long I was out there, but I drank both beers, finished the cigarettes, and the sky was beginning to turn blue by the time I returned to bed. The fabric of my whole life wove itself together into an unbroken tapestry as I sat on the porch that night, stitched together in a seamless picture by the needle of one word, "schizotypal." It explained the chronic depression I suffered for nineteen years. It explained the eruption of anxiety and rage in recent months. It explained parts of my personality that I never understood
before. I felt as if I stared at myself in the mirror for the first time, and didn't like the reflection I saw.

I was insane! They locked up people like me! What if people could tell? Maybe they always could. Maybe that's why they laughed about me. At least I realized that was nothing but the paranoid trait in action, that it was literally all in my head. Nobody could tell I had a personality disorder. If anything, they may have thought I was over-sensitive and had a bad temper at times, like almost everyone else. As for being weird, all of my friends were weird to some degree. That's why we liked each other; we preferred reading Japanese manga to *The Wall Street Journal*. If I did have a personality disorder, then I was letting it get the best of me.

Wandering around on the porch that night, I felt like I was back in my little glass bubble, but this time, the bubble represented overwhelming thoughts, not insurmountable grief. This time, I faced myself, trying to make sense out of my new discovery so I could seek professional help, not hide from the truth in my own self-pity. Pieces of my past, some dating back to 1966, fell into place in a way they never had before, forming a larger picture of who I was in the past and who I am now. The question "why me" resurfaced again, only the answer came without much effort on my part.

I had never considered my own childhood trauma as a possible cause of chronic depression. I just never occurred to me because there was a long gap between the end of the trauma and the onset of depression. What if my trauma did not necessarily cause my depression; what if it instead caused schizotypal disorder, which in turn spawned depression?

I always described my childhood as happy, as long as I could stay home. I felt that actual wraiths lurked outside the gates to beat me without mercy, especially when I went to school. I felt that way before I started school. I wasn't born with the name Nathan Boutwell. My birth
name was Kirk Boutwell. Mom named me for the Scottish word for church so I wouldn't forget about God. I enjoyed the Star Trek references, and in college I nicknamed my 1968 Chrysler Newport "the Enterprise." That was where the fun ended.

When I was two years old, the state of Florida elected a governor named Claude Kirk. He was universally reviled. Everyone, including my parents, said things like "Kirk is a jerk," and "Kirk is an idiot." Being so young, I didn't know what a governor was. I thought they meant me. So, by the time I was six, I had a terrible inferiority complex. When people said "Hey, Kirk," in my mind I heard "Hey, Moron!" In 1999, I legally changed my name to Nathan. It's Hebrew for "gift," not Floridian for "idiot."

Changing my name helped, but it did not cure the results of my childhood. My parents moved from Orlando to Orange City when I was six years old. In Orlando, I lived on a street of NASA scientists whose children formed my ring of friends. We could all read and enjoyed playing together. Orange City, however, was a small town of elderly people. No other children lived on my street. When I entered first grade, I was the only student who could read. So, while everyone else learned to read through the Look-See method, I sat on the porch of the portable, reading third grade books. I don't think that qualifies as neglect, but it certainly started my perception that I was an outcast and didn't fit in. Add that to how I felt about my name, and I became the first grade's loner.

During the summer between third and fourth grade, I contracted a severe case of mononucleosis. I was forced to stay in bed for three months, while my friends enjoyed the warm weather and schoolless days. Dad didn't know what to do with a sickly son, but Mom did. She bought a chess set and a book on how to play, and we spent that summer entertaining ourselves with a classical Medieval game. Those months in bed robbed me of my muscle tone and caused
me to gain fifty pounds. When I returned to school the next fall, I was no longer the powerful boy everyone wanted as the designated hitter on the wiffleball team. I was the obese kid, the weak kid. To hide the rolls of fat that flowed over my belt, I dressed in oversized polyester shirts and white undershirts, and had to wear pants for short adult men because of my waist. The pants were plaid. I looked like the stereotypical chess-playing nerd. I became a walking target for the classroom bullies.

I didn't want to remember my childhood between fourth and ninth grades. I just didn't. I expunged those memories from my mind long ago, as irrelevant to my life. I forgave those people and walked away from the trauma. I had to remember them, however, if I wanted to fully understand the possibility of being schizotypal, to see if that trauma contained enough power to transform my brain chemistry.

I don't remember everything that happened during those years. It was just too long ago, and some memories are best left undisturbed. A few moments stand out that illustrate what I must have faced on a daily basis. When I entered fourth grade, I was too weak to participate in physical education, so I sat in class while everyone else went outside. One day, I drew something. I no longer remember what the picture was about. As he walked by my desk, Gene Castaldo grabbed my drawing and threw it on the floor. He stamped his foot on it, and dragged it out the door with him. He grinned at me the whole time.

In fifth grade, during a free play time, I wandered around the softball field, looking at rocks. A sixth grader cornered me against a fence pole. I didn't even know his name, or what he said to me. All I recall is that he punched me in the stomach and walked away.

In ninth grade, I became the target of a gang of five boys. I don't remember their names nor their faces, nor do I really care to remember. I hated lunch because of them. If they didn't
knock my books onto the floor, they grabbed my tray and threw my food into the garbage can. When I asked for help from the authorities, the gang grabbed me the next day and beat me up in the bathroom. Then, one day, one of them pelted me in the face with a huge spitball. I snapped.

That afternoon, after making sure Mom and Dad were outside, I walked into their bedroom. I opened the top drawer of Dad's dresser and pulled out his .32 Smith and Wesson "owlhead" revolver. A hammerless pistol, it was designed as a policeman's backup weapon. With no hammer, it would not get caught on his jacket pocket, and could even be fired through his clothes. It held five bullets, one for each of my tormenters.

The pistol felt cool and reassuring in my hand. A tingle ran down my spine, a feeling of relief and justice. I test fired it empty, to make sure I understood how it worked. The pistol had a second trigger built into the grip that had to be squeezed with the palm. Otherwise, the main trigger could not be pulled. Once I mastered that, I listened for Mom and Dad. They were still outside, so I reached for the box of bullets.

I loaded the pistol. The sound of each bullet sliding into its chamber sounded like a kiss. Then, I closed the cylinder. I turned to put the revolver in my bookbag. I stopped at the bedroom door. I couldn't do it. Even though I thought the five bullies deserved what I planned to give them the next day, they were still human and I had a high regard for life. The Baptists taught me well; I decided to turn the other cheek. I emptied the gun and put it back in the dresser drawer.

I never saw any of the bullies again after ninth grade. In tenth grade, I found other kids who liked Dungeons and Dragons and dressed funny. I developed a severe crush on the girl who sat in front of me in English. It was so severe that I couldn't eat, and I lost thirty pounds within two months. Encouraged by the weight loss, I stopped drinking two 32 ounce Cokes every afternoon and switched to unsweetened iced tea. I lost twenty more pounds. The pimples on my
face vanished. Girls started paying attention to me. By the end of high school, I was the president of the German Club and Astronomy Club, and won the senior social studies award.

The years I suffered from bullying coincided with the years of Mom's religious intensity. I was beaten up in school only to come home and hear Mom tell me that the book I wanted to read was "of the devil." I felt haunted by enemies in both the dominant spheres of my life then; school and home. Those were my formative years, when I not only developed emotionally, but physically. My perceptions of reality probably changed under the stress of school bullying and Mom's religious fervor, and those perceptions became somehow permanently ingrained in the way my brain receives information and the way the neurons and transmitters respond. In other words, my brain rewired itself.

I stood on the porch, gazing at the stars, and thanked God and every other deity I could name that the stress shifted me into the schizotypal realm instead of one of the others. For the first time, my question of "why me" became one of "why was I so lucky?" Many times, people who are bullied end up with borderline disorder, or worse, they become sociopaths. Despite wanting to take a gun to school in 1978, I avoided that fate. I wasn't dangerous.

Of all the personality disorders, if I had to pick one to have, it would be schizotypal. It contains an element of charm. In its own peculiar way, schizotypal dovetailed with my desire to tell stories. I used to feel as if God graced me with tremendous imagination and a good dose of creative genius, but then balanced it by crippling me with depression and just some weird perceptions. Many cultures believe that there is such a thing as divine madness, so perhaps instead of a curse, my skewed mind was a blessing. Schizotypal could actually fuel my imagination, if I could eliminate the negative traits. I could have fun with this. If nothing else, I at least had a legitimate license to be eccentric.
The psychological websites I visited stated that schizotypal could be caused by childhood trauma, inherited, or both. From the vantage of my age, my childhood didn't seem all that bad, really. What if I was already in the schizotypal spectrum, and my childhood only intensified it? I had to reopen my investigation of Mom's family. I loved these women, and the mere possibility that they suffered from something as heavy as a personality disorder filled me with dread. I wanted to protect them, but there was nothing I could do for dead people. The best I could do for them was learn from their lives. I still had my life to live. Perhaps I could find clues in them to help me understand myself. I had to see if I could spot any trace of schizotypal disorder in Mom, Buh and Alice.

Mom was neglected as a child. She suffered from anxiety and depression. I think she had a form of paranoia, directed at herself. More than I do, she believed in UFOs and the existence of magical beings. Perhaps that drove Mom during her religious phase; it was a form of "magic" that she accepted within a Christian framework. Substance abuse? Mom had been an alcoholic before I was born. Four check marks on the list of traits, plus a known causative agent.

What about Buh? She never talked about her childhood, except to tell me about growing up on a farm and that she picked cotton. So did a lot of people her age. I saw no signs of trauma or neglect, but when I examined the traits, many of them stood out. She was cold and distant to everyone, fitting the trait of inability to form relationships. She was paranoid, believing that people talked about her. Buh was superstitious, which psychologists consider to be magical thinking. She believed in voodoo, witchcraft, curses, and said she had seen ghosts. She was both an alcoholic and a gambling addict. Then, there were those snakes in the pink straw hats who visited her on the porch. Psychologists state that schizotypal can intensify into schizophrenia, which includes seeing animals that are not there.
Mom and Buh showed symptoms of the disorder, at least in the quantity and for the duration that clinicians recommend psychiatric evaluation. It didn't take me very long to spot the probable genesis of the disorder in my mother's family. Alice Avret was orphaned by a double murder. I doubted if it was possible to have a more traumatic childhood event than that, especially at the end of the 19th century, when orphans were not treated with kindness. Compared to my great-grandmother, the trauma I experienced at school was trivial. A horror of that magnitude could easily be the cataclysm that created a personality disorder capable of passing through four generations.

As I shook the box of my family puzzle once again, new pieces fell out that had not been visible the previous winter. These new pieces linked the four vignettes on my mental table into a complete whole. Alice, Eva, Dolores and Nathan were not just related by blood. We looked like four generations of schizotypals. With as many traits as this personality disorder has, it was easy for it to slip from one generation to the next, changing shape and character, without anyone recognizing it as being a psychiatric problem, much less the same one. For instance, my "magical thinking" is totally different from Mom's, and hers bore no resemblance to Buh's, yet all three form part of the definition on most credible websites. On the other hand, my paranoia seems to match my grandmother's.

I don't know how many other traits of the disorder I could spot in my family. I really didn't need to. I didn't need to diagnose my ancestors. I knew enough to understand myself. At last, I had the answer to the nagging question, "why me?" Finally, after five years of wondering, I knew how the dragon entered my life. It wasn't a random attack. Depression had no choice but to strike. Why did I suffer from chronic depression? It was very likely the result of being born, of being who I am, of the way my brain works. Not only did I suffer from an imbalance of
serotonin and cortisol in my brain, but I also had imbalances of endorphins, dopamine and other chemicals that resulted in my synapses not working like other people's. Add to that the stress of 1988, and what happened to me in Washington, D.C. was almost a certainty.

I bring this to a close now; five essays about chronic depression, what it did to me, and where I go from here. It is not the same project that I began in November of 2011. Only one of those original essays remain, and it has been revised to the point that I no longer recognize it as the same. So much has happened since I wrote the first words of chapter one. It would be glib of me to say that the project changed because I changed. The truth is, I changed because the project forced me to examine myself as the changes occurred, something I never would have done on my own recognizance. That, in turn, changed the words as they emerged from my fingertips.

When I first wrote chapter one, I thought I was cured from chronic depression. In fact, I even said "I am one of the lucky ones. I was cured." That was pure hubris. Oh, I may be cured of chronic depression -- it has not returned -- but I am far from well, far from "normal," whatever that word means. Just because the top of the cataclysmic emotional iceberg was sheared off does not mean that I'm cured. The bulk of that cold mountain still lies beneath my surface and apparently it does not need much to upset the ship of my life.

It may seem odd to most people, but discovering that I may have a personality disorder gave me a great sense of freedom and peace. I used to lament that I was not like other men; I cared little for money or status, had no sense of competition, and never understood things such as stock options and football. Many people are like that, but it bothered me. I felt defective. I felt like it held me back, and kept me from achieving my potential. Discovering that I may be schizotypal explains all that. My different perceptions of reality will always cause me to seek out
some things and avoid others. Instead of feeling like it holds me back, I now think that it can
advance me in ways I never dreamed. I'm not defective; this is who I am. Despite psychology's
placement of people like me into a classification of disorder, I see it more as order. My life, mind
and emotions make sense now in a way that they never did before.

Memoir is often called therapy in writing. I don't feel that this project was therapeutic in
the classical sense of the word. It left me with far more questions than answers. However,
because this project exists, I realize that I cannot face tomorrow alone. I am searching for a
psychiatrist, preferably near Denton so I don't have to face Dallas traffic. I'm being picky,
looking for someone with a holistic approach, instead of a Freudian or behaviorist, and someone
who specializes in personality disorders. If I can't find one, however, then even a family therapist
is a great start. The doctor will probably use a battery of tests similar to the ones I already took,
and probably arrive at the same conclusion, but I want to hear it from his or her own mouth.
When one knows the disease, one can deal with it. I also want a psychiatrist, a medical doctor,
instead of a psychologist with a PhD. Psychiatrists can prescribe medication, and I need it.

From what I've read so far, the psychiatrist won't cure me. Most personality disorders are
incurable. The changes in the brain's synapses and neurons have become permanent, especially
when the patient has reached my age. Psychiatrists state that schizotypal people are usually not
dangerous. They may live in a fantasy realm formed from their own delusions, but they know it
and can work with the delusions. Doctors only prescribe medication for schizotypal disorder if
the patient demonstrates suicidal tendencies, or thinks he's the reincarnation of Elijah and forms
a cult. Otherwise, they view schizotypals as high-functioning people of great creativity and
somewhat of a joy to be around, the classic "riot at parties." They treat depression and anxiety
with medication, and some of the negative traits with cognitive therapy. I admit, this time, I am
looking forward to that. I will not let fear destroy me the way grief did. Never again. Committing to paper the horrors grief inflicted upon me made me realize that I am too stubborn now to be as proud as I was ten years ago.

So much has changed since November, 2011. When I began this project, *The Chronicles of Aura Lockhaven* hadn't even entered my mind, much less reached the 95,000 word length it holds today. I don't know that I would have started that novel in the early summer if I had not needed to take time away from depression and its effects upon me, just to clear my mind. In return, writing the novel helped me when I returned to this project by focusing my scenes, sharpening my descriptive narrative and deepening my reflection.

This project forced me to admit things about myself that, frankly, I would rather have left undiscovered. It forced me to admit that I liked being depressed, that it was my narcotic. That sort of admission crushes the ego. While not directly related to these essays, I also admitted that I was an alcoholic. The psychiatrist will help me discover the roots of that. I know that both of my parents, and both sets of grandparents, were alcoholics. I'm not sure at the moment if I self-medicated problems such as depression, anger or fear with alcohol, or if my brain craved chemicals for its neural receptors that I just couldn't give it. All I know is that in two years I went from having one beer on the porch at night to drinking three quarts of whiskey every week. I also quit smoking. As I commit these words to paper, it is the first time in five years that my brain has been free of external chemicals. That will be a different essay; the effects on my life are too fresh to form the questions, much less strive for the answers.

Small moments often reveal larger problems that would not be revealed if not for the small moment. The automobile accident back in February resulted in me suffering from minor lateral whiplash. In the process of examining me for whiplash, my chiropractor discovered that I
had stage one spinal degeneration. As of this writing, she has been able to successfully reverse eighty percent of my structural compromise. With the proper exercise, I can maintain my health. The panic attack I suffered the day my chiropractor pronounced me cured led to the revelation of a much deeper personality disorder, or at least its probable existence. The need for a final thesis to earn my degree ripped the mask from my eyes to reveal a much deeper problem than I knew existed.

If the psychiatrist states that I have schizotypal disorder, then depression was never the dragon in my life. It was the dragon's shadow, and the actual beast is larger than I anticipated. Ultimately, I may have an altered perception of reality, one that is unrecognizable to the majority of people. Perhaps I had an altered perception of reality the day I entered the Cat Lady's yard, and certainly had one the day I succumbed to grief in the mall in Washington. I think I can negotiate with this new dragon, reach an understanding, even if the understanding comes from a pill again. I can still write, I can still tell stories, and perhaps this dragon can help. Perhaps this dragon is meant for me to ride, not fear. So, while I continue to search for the right psychiatrist and know once and for all, I at least have something I never had during the nineteen years I suffered from chronic depression. I have hope for tomorrow.