

Snapshots: The First Symptoms of Psychosis

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Episodes of significant depression have been a part of my life for as long as I can recall, but psychosis was unknown to me until I was in my mid-thirties, months after the birth of my second child. At first, all I recognized were the emerging symptoms of postpartum depression in the weeks after the birth: a familiar scenario, since it had also occurred with my first child. My OB/GYN immediately prescribed 50mg of Prozac daily. I took the medication, felt much better, and continued to breastfeed my second daughter with no apparent problems.

In fact, for about four months I felt better than I had in years. My therapist, an LCSW, was thrilled with my progress. She had been treating me with a technique called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) for about a year in order to abate the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and panic attacks I had suffered nearly all of my adult life. The therapy worked; I successfully overcame the anxiety and panic attacks, and the Prozac ameliorated the depression. I felt like I had been healed, cured, was a new person, for the first time truly enjoying the many blessings in my life: two beautiful daughters, a dotting husband, a good income, and a teaching career I loved. But in the fifth postpartum month, and for no apparent reason, something went very, very wrong. The depressive mood returned—despite the Prozac—in a form it had never taken before, with a frighteningly self-destructive severity and a subtle but definite descent into psychosis. No one recognized it at first, although eventually it would be diagnosed by most professionals as schizo-affective disorder. The following essays are my recollections of some of these new, and very foreign, moments in the beginning of that process, as my mind gradually turned from sane to psychotic.

June 2002

Tim is away, traveling on business this week. I don't like it when he's gone. It's not the lack of conversation or sleeping in an empty bed that's the problem. The hard part is that

time in the evening when the girls are in bed and the house is silent and dark. I know this sounds very strange, but I am sensing something awful in the shadows at night. In darkened spaces, I feel a presence is lurking; I fear that it is watching me. I don't like to think about what it might be, but I think it's something dead, something that is alive and yet shouldn't be alive. Something silent, stealthy, evil, made of bones, or bloody, decaying body parts. I am terrified to look in the closets, or behind doors, or in the garage. I am constantly turning my head to look behind me. Even a familiar sound such as the cat jumping off the counter startles me. My heart pounds while the water sprays over me in the shower, for fear that my eyes might be closed or my back turned and my body vulnerable as something advances toward me. I wish Tim would come home. The evil things keep hidden when he is around in the evening. They want me alone.

I told my therapist, Diane, about the evil things in the dark shadows. "I'm really embarrassed to tell you about this," I said. "You're going to think I'm schizophrenic or something." I looked away, rubbing my finger over a small spot on my khaki pants. Even the closet in her office, dark behind folding doors, looked suspicious to me at the moment.

"No, no, it's not that," she said. "I'm not an expert on schizophrenia, but I would recognize it if I saw it. Besides, if you were schizophrenic, it would have developed in your teens and twenties."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"These might be some memories of childhood nightmares," she continued. "We've been digging into your past while doing the EMDR, and all kinds of subconscious thoughts can resurface during the therapy."

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that," I said. "These creepy things have really been scaring me."

"More than likely, you'll find that it will go away now that you've recognized the fear and discussed it with me," Diane said. She smiled, and her clear green eyes looked relaxed.

She's not worried, I thought.

I left her office feeling better, but the evil things in the shadows remained.

August 2002

It was late, past 10:00 P.M., when I went into the kitchen for a glass of water and realized the dishes hadn't been

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done. Tim was hunched over his laptop in the family room, chuckling occasionally at the television. Frowning, I reached under the counter for the dishpan, squirted in some lemon-scented dish soap, and filled it with hot water.

The baby bottles got washed first, while the water was clean. All the pastel-colored plastic caps and bottles of various sizes clunked around in the dishpan as I inserted a bottle brush inside each one and twisted it. Gradually I became aware of a tapping sound on the screen sliding door. *What is that?* I peered over the counter to see if the dog was scratching to go out. She wasn't there.

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap. I stacked the clean bottles to dry and moved on to the glasses and utensils, saving the messy pans for last. My gaze flicked back and forth between the dishpan and the screen door and the tapping sound. Suddenly I understood. Large moths were throwing themselves against the screen in an effort to get in. I could see them now. *Tap, buzz. Tap. Tap.*

But I was not entirely reassured. The tapping sound was creepy, and not just because I didn't want the big brown moths to come in. I rinsed some cooking spoons and placed them in the dish drainer, not wanting to look at the screen anymore. *What if those are fingers tapping on the screen? Long, crusty, brown fingers, not human. Alien. Trying to get in.* Carefully I picked up a crystal wine glass and dunked it in the warm water. The dried purple residue of merlot colored a dimple at the bottom of the glass, just farther than the reach of my fingers.

Tap, tap. Buzz, tap. I had to look. *It's just moths, okay? It's not fingers. It's moths. Look, you can see them.* They were ugly, fuzzy-looking things, some of them walking around on the gray screen that separated the yellow incandescent light inside from the charcoal darkness. I shuddered and felt that anxious tightening in my chest.

Crack. A stab of pain jerked my attention back to my hands. The wine glass had broken in my hands while I was washing it. A half-inch gash on my right hand started to bleed as I held it up, as though it had only just been cut with a scalpel. I stood there and watched the blood well up and run over my water-wrinkled hand; I turned it slightly so that it would drip into the dishwasher and not run down my arm onto my clothes.

It was a very curious sensation, and one I had never felt before. I felt glad. *Look at that. Fascinating, the blood dripping into the water and winding around, like drops of food coloring. This is a good thing, and you deserve such things. Very good. Well done.* The sight of the blood swirling into the water captivated my attention and froze my body for many minutes. *Yes.*

In another moment, or perhaps many, I walked around the counter and closed the sliding door, locking out the moths and whatever else was out there. I forgot about the alien fingers, because I was busy looking at my own hand, which I had just cut wide open but seemed to have healed itself again. It took a few minutes of studying it before I realized, to my disappointment, that I had merely imag-

ined the incident. I hadn't really cut myself. *But now I wanted to.*

September 2002

For as literate as I am, I am having a terrible time coming up with the words to explain what this is like. At first I just thought that it was different moods, but now it's more than that. I feel like my personality is somehow unraveling, and each mood takes on its own personality. There are no names for them, only descriptions: the fearful adult, the cold adult, the caring adult, the teenager, the child, the Others—those are the ones who are not me. They speak inside my head; I don't hear them out loud, and I don't "become" them—they are just there. The milder ones just talk about the way they see my world. The harsher ones, particularly the cold adult and the Other voices, shout and hiss a lot and order me to do things like cut myself. I can't tell anymore if these are my own thoughts, or if they are something else. (But what?) Oh, boy—I told you this was confusing. If you understand this, you are way ahead of me.

Diane looked up after she finished reading the page. "Well, I admit that this seems unusual, and I can understand why you're confused. Maybe we've uncovered some unconscious issues, and when you've worked through them, these 'moods' will disappear."

"I certainly hope so," I said. "They're making me feel awfully strange. I'm still taking Prozac, so it couldn't be depression, could it?"

"No, probably not." She smoothed her dyed-blond hair while she thought for a minute. "Let's not get too discouraged about it, okay? You're working very hard to get through these things, and I have no doubt in my mind that you'll succeed. Just think what you accomplished while you were pregnant! You thought you would never get over those panic attacks, and then one day you did." She paused for a moment to take a drink of water. "I'll bet, by the time I come back from my vacation, you and Liz will have all this figured out, and you'll be just perfect."

October 2002

The craft store had the exact paint set I wanted; it was a portfolio of watercolors in a box, instead of tubes. I opened the box and stared at the colors for what must have been ten or fifteen minutes, captivated by the luxurious sensory impact of each one. My confused, splitting mind was somehow drawn to, connected with colors, lines, and shapes in a very visceral way. Women wheeled their shopping carts past me, laden with eucalyptus-scented dried flowers, decorative pots, and wide cloth ribbons; they looked at me standing there studying the sixteen semi-moist paint squares, and no doubt wondered what I was doing.

After a while my attention broke away from the paint box and I walked down the next aisle, where the paintbrushes and colored pencils were stocked. Adjacent to

the display of paintbrushes, there was a display of carving tools. I selected a detail brush and a mop brush for my watercolors, and across the aisle, several new Prismacolor pencils. That was all I really needed, but my mind turned back to the carving tools. *Just look. You've got time.*

Hanging there on the white pegboard racks were dozens of cutting and wood-carving tools, packaged separately and labeled with sizes and suggested uses. I was as fascinated by all these sharp little tools as I had been by the colors, but for a different purpose; I wanted these to cut *myself*. Instead of resorting to sharp scissors or broken glass shards (Tim had already locked up the kitchen knives), I could have my very own secret sharp tool.

There were all kinds of little knife tools; I only had to decide which one. Some had small blades, and some looked like chisels. One had a two-pronged point. *I could stab myself in the stomach with that one.* Another very tempting choice was a C-curved blade. *I could dig into my wrists and pull out the tendons with that one.* Finally, I decided on a more ordinary Exacto knife, which had a small, fine-pointed blade and a plastic cap that went over the top, so that I could carry it in my purse without cutting my fingers while I was rooting around for stuff. *Sharp, practical, easy to hide, easy to make an excuse for. Oh, that? I need that for the building projects the kids are working on at school. The one I had got lost.*

The knife and its sharp, triangular blade called to me from my purse like a chocolate bar. *I'm here, don't forget me. I'm so easy, so convenient.* The voice in my head, in its low, almost whispering tone so like my own voice, concurred. *Yes, yes, it's a lovely little knife, so simple for you*

to use. Get it out, why don't you? Cut that place on your hand where you burned yourself a couple years ago. You already have a scar there. It'll be quick; it won't even hurt much. There, see? Good girl. Just stick a Band-Aid on it and no one will know except us. Later you can do it again.

I had never before allowed my personal problems to creep into the school day; in fact, I really didn't have time for them. I hardly had time to use the restroom. A fifteen-minute recess in the morning, forty minutes for lunch, and once a week an hour of prep time while the kids went to music or art; that was all I got. Five minutes, even three, or two, was enough time to get out supplies, set up a science project, or grade a few math tests. My prep time was golden, and there I was, using it to cut up my hands and arms. This was not a good sign, and I knew it. The voices were influencing me while I was at school, their commands taking precedence over my attention to the job that I loved and had been deeply involved with for years.

Not good. Not good at all. The knife reminded me constantly of its presence, like the One Ring to Frodo Baggins. The voices spoke softly, giving encouraging reminders. *Let's get out the knife. This is what we want you to do. Don't worry, we are on your side. Think how it will feel. Think of the warm, red blood inside you, and how much we like to see that. Look at your wrists, the inside, where the larger veins are. Think about how much you want to cut yourself there. Think. Think.* I could hear them out loud now, whispering in a chorus of voices. *We will be with you, whenever you are ready.*